

# If England refuses to bring in a plastic bag tax why can't London take the lead?



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Carry on shopping: supermarket customers in the UK used almost 8 billion carrier bags in 2011

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Ireland does it, Wales does it, Scotland is on the way to doing it and from today Northern Ireland is doing it - charging for plastic bags. They join a list of countries across the world that have either banned them completely or imposed a tax, thereby drastically reducing them, in some cases by as much as 95 per cent.

This leaves England in the sorry state of being the only UK country unwilling to tackle the scourge of the single-use carrier bag, and lagging behind other countries across the world such as Somalia, Kenya, Bangladesh and Italy.

But if England refuses to address the issue, what about London? London Mayor Boris Johnson publicly called for a ban on single-use plastic bags in his 2008 Environment manifesto. He spoke out against them again in 2011, and announced plans to make London plastic bag-free in time for the 2012 Olympics. He has remained silent on the issue ever since.

Now London Assembly Member Jenny Jones has reminded Boris of his previous commitment and urged him to speak out again and shame the Government over its failure to bring in the tax.

Last year the London Assembly passed a motion to urge the secretary of state for environment, Owen Paterson, to impose a levy on all single-use plastic bags. However, Conservative environment minister Richard Benyon expressed doubts about the scheme in February, saying it may not be "the best option" considering the current financial squeeze on many UK households.

But why is Boris now so disinclined to bring in a scheme in London? On January 30, Jones put the following question to him during Mayor's Question Time: "Do you agree with me that the Government's failure to act on their promise to make a decision in 2012 on a single use plastic bag charge in England is unacceptable?", to which he answered: "My officers meet frequently with DEFRA and raise this issue at senior levels. As I have said repeatedly it is my preference that the Government takes action soon to address this problem. "

Today, Jones points out that: "Free supermarket plastic bags are a myth; they cost us a lot money to deal with as damaging rubbish. Almost 1.5 billion are given out in London every year, most destined to be used for no more than 20 minutes before being thrown away.

"The shame is that discarded bags are one of the easiest environmental problems to solve – a simple levy introduced in Ireland cut their number by 90 per cent – yet in England, the number being given out by the big supermarkets is actually rising."

According to figures from waste reduction body Wrap, supermarket customers in the UK used almost 8 billion carrier bags in 2011, a 5.4 per cent rise on the 7.6 billion in 2010, with each person using an average of almost 11 a month.