

# **ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 28 September 2005

Session 2

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## ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE 24<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2005, Session 2

### CONVENER

\*Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)

### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
\*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
\*Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP)  
\*Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
\*Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab)  
\*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)  
Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

### COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)  
\*Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)  
Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)  
Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

\*attended

### THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD)

### THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Andrea Crump (Marine Conservation Society)  
Allan Dryer (Scottish Environment Protection Agency)  
Superintendent Mike Flynn (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)  
Richard Swannell (Waste and Resources Action Programme)  
Iain Gulland (Community Recycling Network for Scotland)  
Duncan McLaren (Friends of the Earth Scotland)  
Nicki Souter (Waste Aware Scotland)

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Mark Brough

### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Katherine Wright

### ASSISTANT CLERK

Christine Lambourne

### LOCATION

Committee Room 1



## Scottish Parliament

### Environment and Rural Development Committee

*Wednesday 28 September 2005*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:34*]

### Environmental Levy on Plastic Bags (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

**The Convener (Sarah Boyack):** I welcome members of the public, the press and the visiting member to this meeting of the Environment and Rural Development Committee and remind people to switch off their phones.

Under agenda item 1, the committee will take evidence on the Environmental Levy on Plastic Bags (Scotland) Bill. This is the first of five planned evidence sessions for our stage 1 consideration of the bill. Mike Pringle, who is with us, introduced the bill as a member's bill. The Environment and Rural Development Committee is the lead committee at stage 1. Its role is to consider the bill's provisions, to report to Parliament and to recommend whether the bill's general principles should be agreed to.

We have tried to structure our evidence sessions in such a way as to obtain evidence from a range of witnesses who have experience of, and expertise on, the range of issues that the bill raises. We have issued an open call for written evidence and have received a large number of submissions, which will be extremely useful to us as we scrutinise the bill. Copies of those submissions have been circulated to members; they also appear on the committee's web page for the public's benefit. Therefore, if a reference is made to a paper that a person has not seen, they should go to the web pages, where they should be able to find it.

Mike Pringle is not a member of the committee, but, as the member in charge of the bill, he is entitled to participate in our proceedings and to ask questions, although he cannot vote.

As no member has any relevant interests to declare, I welcome the first panel. Duncan McLaren is the chief executive of Friends of the Earth Scotland, Superintendent Mike Flynn is from the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Andrea Crump is the Marine Conservation Society's litter projects co-ordinator.

We have received written submissions from all the witnesses, copies of which have been circulated to members. I thank the witnesses for

getting those submissions to us in advance of the meeting so that we could read them. There is a huge range of issues to deal with, so we will go straight to members' questions.

**Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I have a question for the marine conservation expert and Mike Flynn. I was interested to read in your submissions that evidence had been led about the effects of plastic bags on seabirds and on particular types of whale and dolphin. The submissions include graphic evidence about whales, for example, that have been washed up on the shore; plastic bags have been found in their stomachs when they have been opened up. There are a number of cases involving seabirds that have been damaged by plastic. How would the bill help in such situations? The whales and other creatures seem mostly to have ingested things such as bin-liners, although fishing lines and all kinds of other things have been found.

**Andrea Crump (Marine Conservation Society):** The evidence that we have provided shows that items such as supermarket bags account for much of what has been found in creatures. Many small plastic bags as well as black bin-liners have been found. Any measures that are taken to reduce the number of plastic bags that are inappropriately used and disposed of will obviously help in such situations.

An extensive list of examples was not given—there are many other examples of supermarket plastic bags being found in marine organisms, for example. Only a few examples were given to illustrate the point.

**Mr Brocklebank:** I accept that such bags have been found; indeed, the evidence includes fairly graphic photographs. There are photographs of a sample of the plastic bags that were found inside the stomach of a leatherback turtle and of the stomach of a minke whale with plastic bags still inside it. You refer to the fact that many of the bags are bin-liners—which seem to be the major problem—and fishing line is mentioned, but we have no real evidence for what was responsible for the deaths of those creatures, although it is clear that something that they ingested was responsible.

Evidence has been presented that birds have been damaged, but I was surprised that there have been very few reports of incidents involving plastic bags—you mention nine incidents in one year and 12 in another year. The numbers seem to be very small.

**Andrea Crump:** You are referring to the SSPCA's submission. I will let its representative speak in a second.

You asked about bin-liners. Our submission mentions a Cuvier's beaked whale that was washed up in Scotland in which fishing twine and black bin-liners were found. The other examples that we provided to the committee involved supermarket plastic bags, not black bin-liners. Plastic bags accounted for the majority of what was found, although with marine animals it is difficult to say exactly what killed the organism in each case. The bodies of many that are found are very decomposed. If we think about a large amount of plastic bags in an animal with a relatively small stomach, it is not difficult to imagine that a bulbous amount of plastic in a stomach is not going to help the organism survive.

**Superintendent Mike Flynn (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals):** Mr Brocklebank asked a very good question. In our view, carrier bags are just part of the problem. It is correct that fishing line causes tremendous problems, even these days. The nine and 12 instances to which Mr Brocklebank referred would have probably numbered 10 times that many 10 years ago. Landfill sites used to cause us a really big problem, mainly connected with gulls. Gulls and crows will end up getting caught up in anything that is left with food in it.

Our biggest problem is at places such as Linlithgow loch, where bags find their way into the waterway and swans get caught up in them. Many such instances are not even reported to us, but are dealt with by the public. Our biggest concern with smaller plastic bags is their effect on horses and cattle. If they are eaten, they block the animal's rumen and kill them almost instantly. There are no symptoms to see, unless the bag is actually showing. That will kill them very quickly. It is all down to the responsibility of the people who use the bags.

**Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab):** Do you agree that the problem is not really to do with the bags, but with the people who buy them and dispose of them recklessly?

**Superintendent Flynn:** It is about how the bags are disposed of. About 10 years ago, we had 10 times the trouble. Even the refuse people put the bags on landfill sites. Gulls would come in and land in an area before it was filled in, and they would get caught in the bags. If a large seagull has a plastic bag stuck on it, the bag will eventually drag it down, but it is damn near impossible to catch it while it is still able to fly. It can be a long, slow process. If the bag is not dumped in the first place, it will not get on the gull. Alasdair Morrison is right in what he said.

**Mr Morrison:** Would the panel say that a programme of education, as opposed to taxation, would be more beneficial?

**Duncan McLaren (Friends of the Earth Scotland):** Alasdair Morrison is absolutely right to highlight the importance of how bags are used and disposed of. That is why we believe that a levy is exactly the right tool. It would put a value on the bags and educate the general public into thinking that the bags cannot be disposed of without thought or care.

Comparable experiences in countries where only educational activities and voluntary measures have been used to promote better use and disposal of bags have demonstrated a fall in bag use of perhaps 20 per cent. Where levies have been used, the impact has been at least 65 per cent. In Ireland, where the levy was put on the consumer—and was therefore an educational levy—that decrease in use rose to 95 per cent. We think that the levy is exactly the right tool to provide the educational spur.

**Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** We have received a lot of conflicting evidence about what the true environmental impact of the levy would be. I have just been reading through the submission from Friends of the Earth Scotland, which comments in particular on the Executive's take on the matter. The Executive published a report by AEA Technology Environment, which suggested that the levy could lead to an

"increase in the use of paper bags."

You suggest that that is misleading. Can you explain why? Do you wish to raise any other issues from that AEA report?

**Duncan McLaren:** That was a helpful question. I have been concerned by the way in which the AEA report has been represented and interpreted by a number of bodies, including some from which you will be hearing evidence later. The best way to view the AEA report is summed up in *The ENDS Report*, which is a highly respected environmental journal. It announces that the

"Report sees only 'modest' benefits in plastic bag tax".

Anyone who claims that there are massive benefits would be overestimating the benefits; we do not claim that there would be. However, anyone who claims that the report says that there are disbenefits—as Lord Bach apparently said in the House of Lords—is being deliberately misleading. I draw the committee's attention to the AEA annex and figures A3.4 and A3.6, which look at scenarios that AEA says better reflect reality in Scotland; for example, the real weight of plastic bags is given. The figures show that according to seven out of eight environmental indicators, the levy would be beneficial. Even in the base scenario, AEA suggests that the levy would be an improvement according to five out of eight indicators.

10:45

There are some weaknesses in the report. Some of them play in each direction, but some that are partly related to paper provide a view that is more disadvantageous to the levy. The assumptions about paper are particularly out of date and if one looks at the detail in the report, AEA acknowledges that the impact of paper bag manufacture on eutrophication, for example, is now likely to be less. It also acknowledges that it depends on where the emissions happen and that it has been unable to assess that.

The data that were presented in the report mention zero recycling of paper bags, although we know that about 15 per cent of paper bags are recycled in Scotland at the moment. Indeed, the Executive is currently raising rapidly the recycling rate in Scotland. We suggest that it is more likely that the paper recycling rate is well over 15 per cent and that 30 to 40 per cent is a realistic estimate. If those figures were included, the negative impact in the AEA calculations, which relates primarily to decomposition of bags in landfill sites and the possible associated methane emissions, would be significantly less.

The AEA report has overstated the negative impacts of paper bag use. We also believe that it has overstated the likely substitution rates. Those appear to have been based on one piece of anecdotal evidence from the Next chain of stores in Ireland. I cannot see any other evidence that AEA used. On the other hand, a University College Dublin report states that retailers are making significant savings in their expenditure on bags, which implies that they are not buying more expensive paper bags as substitutes. Therefore, we cannot demonstrate the assumed substitution rate of 25 per cent. That would be demonstrable only by doing a good quantitative study in Ireland, but our evidence suggests that AEA has overestimated the rate. I am sorry about the length of that answer—I hope that it was useful.

**The Convener:** You are saying that the evidence about paper bags in the AEA report is a bit of a red herring because the research was not rigorous. When you commented on paper bags being recyclable, did you mean that we could just put them in the normal paper recycling bins?

**Duncan McLaren:** Exactly. In particular, paper bags can be used as containers for other paper for recycling. There is a problem with plastic bags being treated in that way because the plastic contaminates the paper waste stream.

**The Convener:** What is your desired outcome from the bill? What do you want consumers to use when they carry their shopping home?

**Duncan McLaren:** We anticipate that the majority of consumers, as appears to be the case

in Ireland, will use reusable bags, both the high-density plastic bags that have somewhere between 20 and 50 reuses in them, or cotton, jute or other forms of reusable bag. The educational effect in Ireland has been that the average consumer carries one or more bags with them daily so that even if they make ad-hoc purchases, they have an available bag.

There is some argument about the replacement rate in other non-supermarket sectors. The evidence is clear that, because their trips are planned, people take their own bags to supermarkets.

Another side benefit of the proposed legislation is that, on an average shopping trip, a consumer will start to share bags more often. How often do we see a consumer carrying five or six bags from five or six different shops, each of which contains only one item? If they have to pay a levy on each bag, they will say, "I don't need a bag; I'll put it in the one I've already got". Consumers will still use some plastic bags, but they will reuse them much more intensively and they will also use non-plastic recyclable bags.

**Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab):** I take the witnesses back to what should have perhaps been the first question. If the bill is an attempt to deal with litter in Scotland, would you have chosen to tackle that problem first by targeting the use of plastic bags either by levy or through voluntary measures?

**Andrea Crump:** Any tax that helps to reduce litter is beneficial. If the bill had been extended to include other items of plastic packaging, it would have been even more of an improvement. That said, even though the bill covers only one type of litter, it will help to reduce the amount of at least one type of litter that we are creating.

A plastic bag levy will increase consumers' awareness of their actions. After all, plastic bags are ubiquitous and easily recognisable and, with such a levy, people will have immediately to switch on to the issue and rethink what they do. However, as I have said, it would have been a good thing if the provisions had been extended to other forms of plastic packaging.

**Duncan McLaren:** I am afraid that I do not agree with the ground of the question—the bill is not and should not be seen as a measure that deals purely with litter. Instead, it seeks to address Scotland's excessive resource consumption and to educate consumers in that light. As far as litter is concerned, the bill will have benefits, particularly with regard to litter that blows into the sea and all the impacts there that we have heard about, or into hedgerows and fences. As the data on the bill's impact on littering focus mainly on litter on the ground rather than on litter that is blown

around, I feel that its impacts on the problem have been slightly underestimated.

I do not think that the bill would have been my first choice of measure to deal with litter. However, it has so many benefits in other areas that it is well worth pursuing.

**Superintendent Flynn:** Years ago, I would have said that angling material should have been the subject of such a bill. However, a tremendous amount of education has been done with all the national angling associations, and there is now far less discarded fishing line. The same is true of lead weights.

The problem is that if animals ingest plastic it is invariably fatal. The other item of plastic that has caused a lot of damage is the traditional six-pack beer can holder. Birds do not ingest that; it is usually caught around their heads. Recently, McFlurry cartons were withdrawn after a major campaign, because hedgehogs were getting their heads stuck in them and starving to death. Obviously, education had worked, so perhaps I should congratulate McDonald's on its decision.

**Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** What do the witnesses think about the suggestion that, given that plastic bags are a by-product of oil, cutting down on their use might be an attempt to hold on to what oil reserves we have? How much do you think a change in the attitude to plastic bags has to go back to a change in attitudes to manufacturing receptacles from a by-product of oil?

**Duncan McLaren:** That question touches on one of the educational benefits that could be a spin-off from the bill. People are used to disposing of goods that come from that finite resource, albeit that those goods are a by-product of the production process at the moment. Oil is a finite resource that Scotland, fortunately, is quite rich in; however, it is set to run out. There are probably good reasons for saying that we should use oil for other functions rather than burning it, but I do not think that one of those functions needs to be the production of one-use disposable consumer items—whether plastic bags, disposable razors or disposable pens. That brings us back to what I said about the need for consumer education about the overall impacts of consumer behaviour on resource use.

**Rob Gibson:** But does it? The use of plastic is instituted by the oil industry and propagated by the people who sell to consumers. The bill will not tackle either of those two groups, will it? It is not designed to educate them.

**Duncan McLaren:** The bill is designed to educate those groups in the way that evidence suggests they listen to most—through a financial impact on the sale of their products.

**The Convener:** Perhaps we can return to that issue when we have retailers before us. We can talk about the impacts of similar levies in other countries, as well.

**Superintendent Flynn:** I have friends who work in B&Q. Several months ago, B&Q started charging 5p for a plastic carrier bag for people to put their screws or whatever in. That money all went to charity and it stopped a huge amount of bags being used. Instead of people using a plastic carrier bag for one little bag of nails, they are carrying the nails out. That was B&Q putting a tax on the bags, but it worked. People started to think, "I don't need a bag." I was one of them—not that I was not happy to give 5p to charity.

**The Convener:** That is now on the record.

**Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** The Co-op uses biodegradable bags. I am not sure whether there are different kinds of biodegradable bags. Do you think that it would go some way towards solving the problem if all supermarkets moved to use biodegradable bags?

**Superintendent Flynn:** It probably would in the longer term, but it would not help any animal that ate one. The bag would still cause a blockage.

**Duncan McLaren:** I will be rather less sanguine. The majority of so-called biodegradable bags are, in fact, bio-erodable. They are made of the same plastics as ordinary plastic bags, but with added contaminants to ensure that they break down into smaller particles. In the medium term, that means that there is less of a trapping risk for animals; however, the particles will survive as long as the parts of plastic bags do now. They could still be ingested by sea creatures and other creatures.

Genuinely biodegradable bags, which are made from renewable resources such as corn starch, are used in a very small minority of cases. If—to take a hypothetical scenario—they were more widely available, that might be beneficial and that might be one result of a levy. However, that would not help to educate people and promote recycling. If there is to be a substitution, it would be a positive step to make that a substitution with a substance that is currently and easily recyclable—paper.

**Maureen Macmillan:** Going back to the point about education, I have a slight worry that if we enact the bill, people will say, "That's fine, we're now educated not to ask for carrier bags at the checkout," and will think that it is all done and that we do not have to worry about polystyrene or other materials. I have actually seen a seagull trying to feed its chick a plastic fork, so there are many other materials that we have to deal with. Is the scope of the bill far too narrow?



11:00

**Duncan McLaren:** The bill is relatively unambitious, but I suggest that the struggle that has happened in trying to get the bill past the vested interests of a small group of producers and distributors of mainly Malaysia or China-manufactured plastic bags demonstrates that it is difficult to impose such measures swiftly. The experience of considering the bill should be seen as the first step of many, rather than risking the impression that the whole problem has been solved. The modest benefits that the bill would bring will clearly not solve all our problems, but the large steps that will need to be taken in the future will come up against greater resistance from vested interests and business interests, and we can learn from the process how to negotiate and overcome those concerns.

**Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD):** Superintendent Flynn mentioned money, and I would like to move forward to what may happen after the bill is passed, if it is passed. How do witnesses think that money from the levy could be spent? It will be ring fenced for spending on environmental projects, so it would be interesting to hear how you think other ring-fenced money for environmental projects—such as landfill tax credits—works and whether you think that there should be parameters around the environmental projects that we might spend the money on. I suppose that we should also bear in mind that it will, we hope, be a diminishing resource.

**Superintendent Flynn:** The sensible thing would be to do what Maureen Macmillan suggests, which would be to target the money raised from the levy at improvement of recycling facilities for other waste products of plastic or polystyrene origin.

**Andrea Crump:** I hope that some of the income would be spent on education, as Maureen Macmillan suggested, so that the benefits of the plastic bag tax would be increased through positive use of the money.

**Duncan McLaren:** Our experience of similar levies, particularly the landfill levy and the aggregates levy, is that targeting and hypothecation of the money is beneficial, but it is important that it is targeted in such a way that it starts to address the root causes of the problem. The landfill levy has done that by effectively putting money towards waste reduction and recycling. Sadly, the aggregates levy has dedicated most of the expenditure to mitigation of the direct impacts of quarries, rather than to reducing our demand for, and use of, aggregate. There is a lesson there; we must ensure that we do not simply deal with the symptoms.

**The Convener:** There has been a bit of intermittent electronic noise, as if a pager was

going off at the back of the room. It seems to have stopped, but I ask everyone to check that their phones are switched off.

**Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP):** My question is for Duncan McLaren. We received a short briefing paper from the carrier bag consortium, which clearly opposes the levy. It makes the interesting point that paper bags take up 35 times the volume that is taken up by plastic bags, which would lead to 23,000 extra heavy vehicle loads on Scotland's roads. It also says that using paper bags has environmental consequences, because they degrade and produce CO<sub>2</sub> and methane. The consortium argues that there are two threats from paper bags: the impact on the environment of extra road journeys and the fact that paper bags degrade. Will you respond to those two arguments and comment on the impact of paper bags on the environment?

**Duncan McLaren:** Yes. I have said some things about the comparison between paper and plastic, so I will try not to repeat myself. I have not seen the briefing to which you refer, but the claims that the proposal would lead to massively increased road transport appear to be based on an assumption of a paper-to-plastic substitution rate of one-to-one rather than at most one-to-four, or a much lower rate, which we believe would be the case.

Further, no account has been taken of the distances involved. Something in the order of 99 per cent of plastic bags are imported into Scotland. Therefore, not only do they do a lot of miles in a ship, but they do the full mileage from the port, at the fringes of the country, to where they are used. However, 80 per cent of the UK's paper bags are manufactured in Scotland and 99 per cent of the paper bags that are used in the UK and Ireland are manufactured in the UK. Therefore, if the proposal is accepted, the travel distances involved will be shorter and, if there are high rates of substitution, the economic benefits will accumulate in Scotland rather than in China or Malaysia. As a believer in the proximity principle, which states that we should deal with our environmental impacts locally, I think that that is a good thing.

I think that I have largely covered the issue of the environmental impact of paper bags and their degradation. It would, however, be useful to note that there is an appendix in the AEA Technology report that suggests that the carbon emissions that are associated with paper bags are part of the carbon cycle, as they come from a renewable rather than a non-renewable resource—that is to say, from timber instead of oil—and should, therefore, not be accounted for in the same way as the carbon impacts of plastic bags are.

Finally—I know that I am repeating myself—the degradation of paper bags will occur only if they go into landfill. As I noted, the Executive has been successful in starting the process of rapidly increasing recycling rates and diverting products—particularly paper products—away from landfill. The assumption about the degradation of paper bags is no longer valid.

**The Convener:** We have received a couple of submissions that challenge what you have said. They assume that we will have more paper bags and that they will go into landfill. The worry that is expressed is that it will become more difficult for Scotland to meet its landfill targets. Do you think that that is a red herring or is it something that is capable of being influenced by public information and recycling targets?

**Duncan McLaren:** It is a concern to which we should be alert. If we monitor substitution rates and find that they are running quite high, we should track whether the bags are ending up in landfill.

The AEA Technology report assumes a level of 25 per cent substitution, which is likely to be as high as it will get, based on some limited evidence; it also assumes 100 per cent landfilling, which is patently wrong. However, even with those assumptions, it suggests that the overall net impact on waste is positive in the Scottish situation in which plastic bags weigh 8g not 6g, as is pointed out in figure A3.4.

If we say that our ability to deal with the waste that we generate should be based on our ability to displace waste generation to elsewhere in the world, that is a red herring. The appearance is given of an increase because the waste that is associated with the manufacturing process of the plastic bags that we import arises elsewhere and the waste that is associated with the manufacture of paper bags, which we do not import, arises here. If one factors that in, the suggestion that waste will increase becomes a red herring. However, the issue should be monitored because it is important—indeed, it is critical—that Scotland meets its obligations under the landfill directive.

**Mr Brocklebank:** We received a large number of submissions, most of which are in favour of the bill. Some submissions were from the usual suspects, who said what we would expect them to say, but I was surprised by the submission from the Waste and Resources Action Programme. I expected WRAP to be much more positive towards the case that the bill espouses, but it does not make that judgment. It comes out against the bill, arguing that just as much could be achieved by voluntary means. WRAP comments on the bags for life experiment that has been carried out by the major supermarkets, which seems to have produced good results. It goes on to say that the

levy would be extremely difficult to administer, that it would have high administration costs and that it would not

“produce a net environment benefit or a noticeable improvement in the overall waste or litter situation.”

Does that surprise you?

**Duncan McLaren:** WRAP’s submission surprised me significantly. To be frank, I think that it has misinterpreted the findings of the AEA report in a way that is inappropriate in evidence submitted to a parliamentary committee. I suspect that WRAP finds itself in a difficult position. It is set targets and given aspirations that it can meet only through negotiation with the businesses involved. It is in WRAP’s interest to advocate a voluntary solution, because it is under pressure from businesses, who are saying, “We don’t like the idea of a tax.”

In reality, the evidence suggests that a voluntary solution would be entirely inadequate. The evidence from Australia shows a positive response to the voluntary measures in the first few months, with bag use reduced by nearly 30 per cent, but in the following 18 months the effect of the voluntary measures fell off, leaving bag use reduced by only 20 per cent after two years of effort. I do not regard that as a success and neither do the Australian authorities, which are threatening to move to a levy.

Both the Irish experience and the Danish experience—with its upstream levy, which I mentioned earlier—generated much greater reductions in bag use. Perhaps it is useful to add that the only cases in which voluntary action has led to equivalent reductions are those in which the retailers have voluntarily put a levy on bags in stores. If we could be confident that all retailers would do that, voluntary schemes might be adequate. However, the evidence that has been presented to the committee by the CBC and others leaves us with no confidence that the reduction can be achieved without a levy.

**Andrea Crump:** The bags for life scheme has been around for a number of years but, as far as we can tell, it has not shown any benefits. I understand that WRAP is undertaking some more pilot studies on better ways in which to promote the scheme, but as it stands the take-up has been small.

**The Convener:** WRAP is represented on the next panel of witnesses, so we will be able to ask some of those questions.

**Rob Gibson:** Does any of you have an impression that the collection of farm plastic has had any impact? The SSPCA might have a view on that—indeed, you might all have a view on it. In remote and rural areas, waste from that source

might be a bigger problem than the polythene bags that people take home from the supermarket. Schemes have been set up to try to collect farm waste. I wonder where we are with that, and how that issue impacts on the overall picture.

11:15

**Superintendent Flynn:** The further north we go, we get problems that are caused by traditional wrapping for silage and bales, because it bursts open and breaks up into smaller pieces. Collection schemes get 90 per cent of it, but when the wrapping is opened up fragments are released. That happens from Shetland down to Perthshire, which is where we have problems.

**Duncan McLaren:** It is a problem, but it is also a slightly separate problem. One of the key issues is that such waste has at times been incinerated in open drums on farms. The collection scheme is a positive way of preventing that. We could find many more significant issues, but that does not make the issue irrelevant or unimportant.

**Rob Gibson:** I was just trying to establish that it was a significant issue, and you have confirmed that. How significant is it in terms of all the plastic that we are talking about? Is it a far bigger problem than the domestic plastic bag issue?

**The Convener:** You can leave that question hanging and we might come back to it.

**Duncan McLaren:** We can probably find the data, but I am not aware of it. However, it is clear that domestic plastic bags are going into the waste stream and litter stream from a multiplicity of sources.

**The Convener:** Those questions focused on rural areas, which might have a different experience of plastic bags. We might want to come back to that.

**Mr Morrison:** The issue is relevant, because we are talking about animals eating plastic. I will happily bring the rest of the committee up to speed with what is happening in the Western Isles to deal with waste from crofts. Waste silage bags are being dealt with sensitively in terms of the environment. That is in the Hebrides, where I am glad to say that things are done properly

**The Convener:** We will take that as a general statement for the record. I thank the three witnesses—

**Mike Pringle (Edinburgh South) (LD):** May I ask two brief questions, convener? Is that allowed?

**The Convener:** Yes, it is allowed—it is just that I was wrapping up this session. Keep it brief.

**Mike Pringle:** First, Friends of the Earth

Scotland referred in its evidence to a MORI poll from 2003. Can you give us more information on that?

**Duncan McLaren:** I cannot give you much more than is in our submission. The poll indicated that there was a high level of public support for a levy. The measure would be popular, and it is important that that is on the record. Our mailbox and conversations that we have with the public indicate that that MORI poll is in line with reality—that is, that people support the measure. The Irish situation also shows that people supported the levy almost universally.

**Mike Pringle:** My last question is for all three witnesses. Can you explain why an increase in the sale of plastic kitchen tidy bags or bin bags will result in a decrease in the number of plastic bags that are in circulation? The opponents of the measure that I propose place great emphasis on the fact that there will just be a substitution. Is that the case? What would the actual reduction be?

**Duncan McLaren:** It is an interesting matter of calculation, and another area in which things have been misrepresented. In some of the material that I have read, people have indicated that because plastic bags are replaced by kitchen tidy bags, there is no net benefit. Our evidence gives the figures from Ireland, where there was a 77 per cent increase in sales of plastic kitchen bags, which equates to 70 million bags. The 90 per cent reduction in checkout bags equated to a reduction of 1 billion bags, leaving a net reduction of 930 million bags. There are questions about the exact volume of each bag to be factored in, but that is why even a significant increase in the use of kitchen tidy bags would not overwhelm the benefits of the levy.

**Superintendent Flynn:** I am not sure that I fully understand the question. Putting plastic carrier bags or kitchen tidy bags that are filled with rubbish into wheelie bins does not cause us problems. The problem is discarded empty bags or discarded bags with a tiny bit of food in them.

**Andrea Crump:** That is generally the situation on the coastline as well.

**The Convener:** I thank the first three witnesses for answering our questions and for giving us their written evidence in advance. It has been extremely helpful.

We will have a short suspension to allow this panel to leave and the next panel to come forward.

11:20

*Meeting suspended.*

11:23

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I welcome our second panel of the morning. We have with us Richard Swannell, the head of innovation at the Waste and Resources Action Programme—WRAP—which has already been mentioned in dispatches; Allan Dryer, a senior policy officer on life-cycle assessment with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency; Iain Gulland, the network director of the Community Recycling Network for Scotland; and Nicki Souter, the campaign manager for Waste Aware Scotland. I thank you all for coming and for giving us written evidence in advance, which is extremely useful because we are comparing and contrasting and we have rather a lot of information. Mark Ruskell will kick off the questions.

**Mr Ruskell:** The bill tries to address the particular problem of plastic bags and seeks to introduce a levy to do that. It also promotes a wider cultural shift towards waste minimisation, which we would all support. How significant will the bill be in contributing to that cultural shift?

**Iain Gulland (Community Recycling Network for Scotland):** The bill would create a precedent for a tax at that level. It would certainly raise public awareness of waste prevention, waste reduction, litter and wider environmental stewardship issues. We believe that the bill will provide a significant wake-up call to the public.

**Nicki Souter (Waste Aware Scotland):** I agree that the introduction of a plastic bag levy would further increase public awareness of waste, but the process of waste awareness raising is already under way and well established. Through the provision of the strategic waste fund and the delivery of phase 1 of the national waste plan, there have been significant changes in public attitudes and behaviour towards waste. The first part of that strategy focused on recycling and we are now starting to focus on other aspects to include reuse, reduction and prevention. The plastic bag levy would be of small benefit by not increasing resource use, but it must be seen in the bigger context, and I am confident that waste awareness raising among the public is already happening throughout Scotland as part of the national waste plan.

**Richard Swannell (Waste and Resources Action Programme):** There is no doubt that the bill could lead to a reduction in waste and could raise awareness of waste minimisation. Our concern is that when the consumer starts to see any unintended consequences of the bill's particular approach that do not lead to the environmental benefits that people are hoping for, it could undermine the benefits of a levy. People

will say that although we have imposed a levy, it has not led to overall environmental benefits, or that they are concerned about the environmental benefits. WRAP's concern is about unintended consequences that might undermine the waste minimisation message that we all want to support.

**Allan Dryer (Scottish Environment Protection Agency):** Generally, SEPA agrees that the bill would raise awareness. As Friends of the Earth said, the issue it addresses is not a big one and the direct environmental benefits would be moderate. However, the issue affects just about every member of the public, so it would get the message into every household. That can only be useful, but it is just a start and unless it is accompanied by a wider waste awareness message, which must include the fact that the levy is just one small part of the whole story, then the opportunity could well be lost.

**Mr Ruskell:** Clearly, there are issues and concerns about unintended impacts and there is debate about the exact nature of those and how extensive they might be.

SEPA's submission mentioned that the bill's overall impact on the environment will be neutral. Is it not worth taking into account the fact that the bill is part of a package of measures that would promote a culture of waste minimisation and recycling?

**Allan Dryer:** Definitely. We say that the effect will be neutral because, in environmental terms, the issue is very small. I am not denigrating the effect that it has on wildlife, but it accounts for less than 1 per cent of the Scottish contribution to global warming.

The issue is very small, but it affects everyone, which is why SEPA took the route of saying that if there is to be a levy, it should be applied to all disposable bags and not just plastic bags. The switch to paper is controversial. It is generally accepted in life-cycle assessment that the impacts from paper are worse than those from plastic. It is almost a mixed message if we put a levy on one form of disposable bag and not on another. If we are going to do it, let us do it properly and go down the route of putting a levy on all disposable bags.

**Mr Ruskell:** I want to follow up that point with Richard Swannell. How robust are the estimates of paper bag usage? We have heard Duncan McLaren's concerns. Is the 25 per cent figure robust? Could some of that go to recycling? What will happen if we implement the bill?

11:30

**Richard Swannell:** I support Allan Dryer's point—and WRAP takes the same position—that a tax on all bags might send a clearer message. The

fact that there would be a move towards paper bags and an increased consumption of bin-liners is not in dispute; the only thing that is in dispute is the extent to which that would happen.

We have already heard the discussions about 25 per cent and how many millions of bags there are in Ireland. WRAP's submission suggested that a full life-cycle assessment analysis, based on the Irish experience, could be pertinent in considering the bill. All of us are a bit unsure about how much of a shift there would be. One thing that has come out of the Irish experience is that there has not been much of a shift towards paper in supermarkets, although there might have been a shift in the non-food area where a free bag is regarded by retailers as something that they offer to consumers.

The fact that there would be some form of shift is not in dispute, and that is one of the unintended consequences about which WRAP is concerned.

**Maureen Macmillan:** We all seem to agree that the plastic bags that we get at the checkout are just the tip of the iceberg of plastic waste. I am concerned that we do not seem to have progressed very far with recycling plastic waste. We have bottle banks, clothing banks and paper banks but, where I live at least, there does not seem to be any way of putting plastic packaging to recycling, although some of the supermarkets have recycling points for their own plastic bags.

There might be frustration in the public mind because people cannot get rid of their plastic. I did a survey of waste from my household and plastic packaging was by far the biggest part of it, but we do not seem to have found a way of dealing with it yet. If we had another way of dealing with plastic, and if people could access recycling more easily, would there be no need for the bill?

**The Convener:** Can all the panel members answer that question? It is really about how we recycle plastic generally. Everyone seems to be looking at Iain Gulland.

**Iain Gulland:** I had a conversation yesterday about the difficulties of recycling plastic. Access to markets is the most difficult aspect because of the distances from markets and the price. The rate per tonne and the cost of transporting waste to market, particularly in places such as the Argyll peninsula, where we were talking about the issue yesterday, are serious problems.

There is a value to recycling plastics as there is to recycling other commodities. The collection of plastics through kerbside programmes or plastic bottle banks at supermarkets is logistically easy and several of our members do it, but there are problems with getting the stuff to market. In other parts of the world, such as one of the Scandinavian countries and New Zealand, they

land bank plastic bottles once they have been collected because there is no market. Because of concerns about the planet's oil resources, countries separate plastics at source and stockpile them in corners of landfill sites, hoping that one day they will be economic, people will pay for the stuff and local processing will be available. Plastic is a resource and it should not be treated as waste. We should be looking for innovative ways to recycle plastic bottles now and in the future. To say that they are not worth recycling is very negative.

**Nicki Souter:** During the past two and a half years, we have seen a huge increase in facilities that allow the public to recycle plastics in Scotland. Those are for two types of plastic bottle—those made of high density polyethylene and those made of polyethylene terephthalate. Almost 68 per cent of Scottish households now have some form of access to kerbside recycling facilities. Although a large number of those facilities cater for plastic recycling, they are limited to HDPE or PET products, and I know from public information provision that many members of the public are frustrated about that. Now that people are able to recycle more easily and there is more ready provision of recycling infrastructure, the public are frustrated that plastic recycling has not expanded to include other types of plastic, including plastic bags, that make up the range of plastic packaging in its broadest sense. I think that that is down to market development. If the demand is there and outlets exist, the law of supply and demand means that there is the potential for market development. I will hand over to Richard Swannell to speak about market development for plastics.

**Richard Swannell:** There is no doubt that, historically, the recycling of plastics has been poor, but the good news is that it is increasing rapidly; the production of plastic recyclates is probably growing faster than is production of all other recyclates.

To build on Nicki Souter's point, WRAP has been working with retailers to get them to incorporate more recycled plastic in new bottles. A project with Marks and Spencer is incorporating a high percentage of recyclate in the products in its food to go range, so there is a draw. That means that material is recycled here and put back into bottles here, which creates a closed-loop system. That is certainly something that we are keen on.

It is worth while bearing in mind the fact that, in weight terms, plastic bags are a small component of the overall amount of plastic that is recyclable in the United Kingdom. That has meant that the focus of a great deal of activity has been on bottles rather than on bags. The provision of recycling points for bags within supermarkets has improved fairly rapidly—many supermarkets now

collect bags at the front of their stores, bale them with back-of-store plastic film and take the material away for recycling. That is happening more and more. An interesting finding from some recent research that was conducted in England was that people do not necessarily look for recycling points inside supermarkets. When bag recycling facilities were provided next to existing recycling points in supermarket car parks, many more bags were collected. There are some issues about precisely where bag recycling points are located.

A final point is what to do with the plastic film once it has been returned. Something can be done with bottles, but what can be done with film? BP is conducting work to investigate ways of getting valuable material out of film and turning it into new polymers or other materials. One option would be simply to convert it into more bags, or into wood substitutes or playground materials, but research is being done on whether other, more valuable, products could be made.

**Maureen Macmillan:** Has there been an increase in people's recycling of plastic bags?

**Richard Swannell:** Definitely. There has been a strong increase both in the availability of collection facilities and in people's use of those facilities. When I have gone to supermarkets recently, I have seen piles and piles of plastic bags being put into their recycling points.

**The Convener:** Does SEPA have a perspective on the issue?

**Allan Dryer:** All that I would add is that the increase in the recycling of plastics could have an effect on the need for the bill, but that that will take time. Plastics recycling is expanding quickly, but there is still a long way to go.

**Nora Radcliffe:** I want to follow that up. Do the people who recycle used plastic bags on the way into the supermarket pick up new ones on the way out?

**Richard Swannell:** That is an extremely good point. The choose to reuse campaign is encouraging people to reuse bags for shopping. We do not want people to recycle their used bags and then pick up new ones; we want them to make the fullest use of the bags that they have and to reuse as many of them as they can before recycling them when they have reached the end of their life or using them for another purpose in the home.

**Nora Radcliffe:** Is there any evidence on whether that is happening?

**Richard Swannell:** Projects are going on in Edinburgh and Bristol, but it is too early to say because they have been going for only two weeks. As you heard from Friends of the Earth, a public awareness campaign was tried in Australia, which

was done slightly differently from such campaigns in the UK, which have been based on UK consumer research on what might work here. The Australian campaign resulted in a 29 per cent reduction in the amount of carrier bags used. That figure then fell back, and the figures that I have show that it fell back to 26.9 per cent, but that at least means that a fair percentage of people had changed their behaviour. Frankly, this is all about changing behaviour and getting people into the habit of taking bags and reusing them again and again. Still, a reduction of a quarter, for very little cost to the taxpayer, is a reasonable result.

**Nicki Souter:** We are conducting a national survey at the moment, and we conducted one in 2002, on public attitudes towards reducing, reusing and recycling. In the current survey, a series of questions asks specifically what the public are doing with regard to using bags for shopping. We have gone to only four local authorities, but we have found that although, as I said in my submission, the majority of people in Scotland—around 70 per cent—still use disposable plastic bags, 23 per cent of the public are already using stronger reusable bags, 15 per cent are reusing disposable plastic bags and 11 per cent are using their own bags. There is already a baseline of people who are aware of other options, so it is time to educate, to inform and to channel that, as exemplified in the Australian study. We may already have a baseline level that we can work with.

**The Convener:** That is a useful piece of research on which it might be worth reflecting after today's evidence.

**Richard Lochhead:** I sense that a couple of the witnesses would prefer a bill that covered all disposable bags, and I am trying to get my head around what the best outcome for the environment would be in the short term and in the long term. If the committee supported the bill, which covers only plastic bags, would that have a negative or a positive impact on the environment? Somewhere down the line, should we introduce more legislation that covers other disposable bags? Should we encourage Mike Pringle to withdraw his bill and to introduce one that covers all disposable bags?

**The Convener:** That cut to the chase. Who would like to answer that question?

**Allan Dryer:** There will undoubtedly be benefits from the bill. If, as experience in Ireland has shown, it reduces the amount of disposable plastic bags by up to 95 per cent, resources and energy will be saved. SEPA has two or three concerns about that. There is the contentious issue of the switch to paper, whether it is 1 per cent or 100 per cent. We agree that the chances are that the shift will be low rather than high, but nobody knows

what the extent of the change will be. Paper is energy intensive to make and transport. Some of the paper material is part of the natural carbon cycle, but the energy that is used to transport and create it is not part of the natural carbon cycle, so more use of paper bags would result in increased carbon dioxide emissions. There is a risk with the switch to paper.

There is also a mixed message. As I said before, if we are going to put a levy on a disposable bag we should put it on all disposable bags. There are environmental impacts from any bag. If we want to educate the public and to move them away from using disposable bags in the long term, SEPA would strongly support the idea of putting a levy on all bags as part of a package that includes public awareness raising.

**Richard Swannell:** The environmental case for a levy only on plastic bags is unclear, and WRAP's submission states that we are not convinced that the environmental benefits are definitely there. That is why we have suggested a life-cycle assessment analysis to confirm whether there is indeed a benefit.

I support what my colleague from SEPA has said. There is more of a case for a tax on all bags, as that would send a clear message to the public about this being a waste minimisation measure to try to stamp out the use of all disposable bags. That would remove the questions about how much shift there would be to paper bags and whether they are heavier and less reusable, which are issues that other witnesses have raised.

The key risk of going with just plastic bags is the mixed message that it gives on waste minimisation, as Allan Dryer has just said. It is like saying, "We don't like plastic bags, but other disposable bags are fine." That is a bit confusing. Going for all bags might be more likely to have the impact that the bill is trying to achieve.

**Nicki Souter:** I agree with that.

11:45

**Iain Gulland:** There is an argument for that. Our reaction is that we have to start somewhere. We could be debating the scope of the bill for the next few years. As the previous panel discussed, we could throw in container legislation as well as legislation on plastic bottles, plastic farm film and angling litter. A range of issues could be discussed. The bill is a starting point, to which provisions could be added once other issues are clearer.

The other point that I picked up from the previous panel was about the environmental impact. We would like to have considered the idea of using the money that is raised through the tax

specifically to improve other waste reduction practices. The LCA measures that have been proposed do not really take account of this, but if the money were to be spent specifically on local waste awareness programmes, linked to other waste issues, when those programmes were evaluated, we would see a far greater environmental impact than studies so far have detailed. That should be taken into account when we are considering the bill.

**Mr Brocklebank:** Quite a lot of the submissions that we have received have been from people who are employed in the sector—they run companies or work for companies. Between 300 and 700 people are involved in the plastic bag industry in Scotland; if we were to consider paper bags as well, the number of people involved would be very large, because most of the paper bags in Scotland are produced in Scotland. How might those people seek alternative employment if they suddenly found their jobs drying up because of the bill?

**Allan Dryer:** That is the biggest problematic aspect of the bill, which is why SEPA has said that, whatever the bill covers, there will have to be an interim phase to give industry the opportunity to adjust its production processes. If Scotland is serious about going down the route of sustainable development, this is one small example of the problems that we will come up against on a bigger and bigger scale. If we cannot get over this hurdle and find a way to remedy the employment consequences in this case, we will have serious problems in future.

**Iain Gulland:** I echo that, especially if the Scottish Parliament is committed to moving to more sustainable resources and so on. What we do now in production and manufacturing will have to change—that is a given. Whether through the Scottish Executive's green jobs strategy, enterprise and business development or successful sustainable Scotland initiatives, we should be considering the issue in the round. We should not just consider environmental legislation; we should be considering the future of Scotland and where our manufacturing and our service industry will be based. We should be taking the opportunities that new, sustainable design and production afford across the piece, not just looking at the bill and saying, "Oh! There's going to be job losses." We would welcome it if this committee, the Enterprise and Culture Committee and other committees joined up the different departments to consider the matter more strategically.

**The Convener:** Trish, do you have a follow-up to the question that you asked the previous panel?

**Trish Godman:** No. I am interested in what Mr Gulland says because the issue concerns me. He is right that there is a bit missing; it is an important bit, because there would be job losses, and we do

not want that to happen. The information that I have is that we cannot change from producing one kind of plastic bag to producing another kind, such as biodegradable bags. I do not know why that is, but it gives me some concern about jobs.

Do you want me to ask my next question, convener?

**The Convener:** No, because there is a list, and you are not next.

**Rob Gibson:** If the levy succeeded in reducing the amount of plastic bags, there might be only a short-term stream of cash for the administration of the levy. Indeed, WRAP has estimated that the start-up and administration costs could amount to a large percentage of the expected income. Given the experience in Ireland, where there appears to have been a large drop in the use of plastic bags, would revenue from the levy be worth collecting by local authorities for more than a couple of years?

**Richard Swannell:** We pointed out in our submission that the Executive's extended impact assessment suggested that 45 per cent of the levy's revenue would be taken up in administration costs—that seems a lot—and 5 per cent would be available to spend. The evidence suggests that we cannot confidently expect the levy to have a net environmental benefit. The extra resources from the levy could be used for other recycling purposes, which would be a positive move, but we are concerned about whether there would in fact be a net environmental benefit. More work must be done to confirm that.

It would be useful if we could link in people's minds the levy with a specific outcome. For example, receipts from the levy could be used to focus on waste or litter issues and consumers might accept the levy if it seemed to make their streets cleaner. That would be a nice link to make and WRAP's submission proposes it. It would be good to make transparent where resources from the levy would go.

**Iain Gulland:** Our view is that targeting money from the levy on further waste reduction would have a positive impact, particularly if that was delivered at a local level. The infrastructure or mechanism for the collection of a local tax could be rolled out for other materials, such as paper bags, which would increase revenue generation. Other things could be targeted once the infrastructure was in place.

**Rob Gibson:** I have a short follow-up question. SEPA told us about the costs for paper bags compared with those for plastic bags, but has anyone worked out the environmental costs of setting up an administrative structure?

**The Convener:** We can return to that question later with the bill's proposer. I believe that Dr

Souter wants to respond to Rob Gibson's previous question.

**Nicki Souter:** Mr Gibson referred to the longevity of funding and major moneys being required to set up the administration of the levy. A voluntary levy exercise was run with B&Q plc and Keep Scotland Beautiful that led to an 85 to 90 per cent reduction in the uptake of plastic bags. If there were a sudden shift away from using plastic bags, as there was in Ireland, only a limited amount of moneys would come back for environmental improvements. A cost-benefit analysis of that should perhaps be done.

**Trish Godman:** This panel and the previous one want to send out the recycling message to the public. However, if I walked out of here and spoke to the first five people whom I met in the street, I wonder whether they would know where the message was coming from and what it was all about. Where are they getting the message from? Australia has a scheme that is similar to the proposal in the bill, but it is voluntary. The Australians used television, radio and advertising to get the message over, and there has been a change there.

In Scotland, some local authorities try to get over the recycling message in a council newspaper that comes through the door. It tells people to recycle and indicates where recycling points are for this, that and the other. As legislators, we learned from the Smoking, Health and Social Care (Scotland) Bill that children were keen for us to do what we did. However, for this bill, nobody has mentioned anything about going into schools and educating children. Are we putting the cart before the horse? Should we be seriously examining first how we get across the message to Joe and Jessie Public that reusing bags is a good thing to do? I do not recall seeing that message on the television, although the local authority where I live sometimes puts out that message.

I am talking about straightforward education in schools about litter. Some schools in the area that I represented as a councillor kept the area around the school beautiful because they could win a prize at the end of the year, but if you stepped outside that area—wow, it was bad news. Where are people learning about the issues that we are discussing?

**Nicki Souter:** The waste aware Scotland programme is a national campaigning programme that is deliverable from the bottom up by local authorities and community sector organisations. The primary focus of the programme has been on the recycling infrastructure, which is being rolled out as phase 1 of the national waste plan. Effectively, people are being told, "Here is your box, here is your bin, and here is how to use



them.” As part of that, we have been taking people on waste journeys.

Alongside that, a programme of education and awareness raising has been going on in schools via local authority and community sector education officers and under the umbrella of the eco-schools programme, which has a waste remit.

As an extension of what has happened on the ground, we should be looking outward to start promoting reduce-and-reuse messages and building them into the waste education resources that are already being delivered by local authorities and community sector organisations.

**Trish Godman:** That sounds good and I understand what you are saying, but I do not think that Joe Public on the streets of Edinburgh knows anything about it.

Your final comment was good because you are talking about the next step that you have to take. It is important that people know about the infrastructure that is in place and the work that is being done. However, that does not seem to have happened so far.

**Richard Swannell:** We are trying out such an approach in Edinburgh with the choose to reuse campaign, which—picking up on the Australian example—is an in-store campaign that works at checkout level, with people being asked whether they have brought a bag back with them. The idea is to try to get people to remember to bring their bags back so that it becomes part of their normal way of life. Like a lot of behavioural change that has happened in the past 10 years—everything from seatbelts onwards—the issue is to change the way in which people do things.

On what you said about schools, I should say that part of the campaign's effort is on holding competitions in schools to engage children in trying to encourage their parents to take bags with them when they go shopping. When we go out, one of my son's tasks is to say, “Daddy, remember to take the bags,” because I forget to take them. I have got to the stage at which I leave bags in the boot of the car and carry them around with me so that I do not forget. He is good at prompting me, however. The role of children is important and we are going to try to incorporate that in the choose to reuse campaign and see how it goes.

**Iain Gulland:** The focus of local authorities and the Government has been on increasing the recycling infrastructure and the promotion of the schemes that are available, as Nicki Souter pointed out. That is one level, but there needs to be more direct social and community action with people on the ground to complement the poster campaigns. Projects such as the Ross-shire waste action network—ROWAN—project in the Highlands recruit volunteers from within the

community to act as mentors in relation to waste prevention. I do not have the figures to hand, but that project has been successful in greatly reducing the amount of waste that is produced by households in a community in the Highlands—the amount can go down from around 25kg a week to around 5kg or 6kg a week. That is done through peer support within a community, which complements leaflet drops and bus adverts. As the member said, it can be difficult to get the message to everyone in the community through normal media channels, so we think that the sort of work that I have outlined should be given more financial and political support. We would like to see more such work to complement what is happening at the moment, but we would also like to take it to another level.

12:00

**Maureen Macmillan:** It has been said that if there were a levy on plastic bags, people would move to paper bags, and the environmental concerns that might then arise have been mentioned. What about corn-starch bags? We heard from the previous panel that such bags are biodegradable. Do the witnesses approve of them as a substitute?

**Allan Dryer:** I do not know a great deal about them, but I looked at a study from France yesterday afternoon that included the use of corn-starch bags. Although the bags are made from corn starch, they are also strengthened by a polymer that is made from oil and which makes up 50 per cent of the bags. They are not necessarily what they seem. Even if they were 100 per cent corn starch, that would still convey the message that they can be bought and then disposed of, which is what we are keen to get away from.

**Richard Swannell:** Using materials from crops is not without environmental impact because crops need water and fertiliser, and pesticides are used in growing them. That takes us back to the life-cycle analysis. We would need to make a careful study to determine whether corn-starch bags were better and whether there would be a clear net environmental benefit from using 100 per cent corn-starch bags.

It is worth pointing out that biodegradation is about trying to achieve something at the end-of-life stage, whereas reusing will definitely bring more benefits. One of the other problems associated with biodegradable bags is that if they go into the recycling stream, they can affect the efficacy of the recycling process and contaminate it. There are problems with introducing biodegradable bags, and one reason why we try to encourage people to reuse their bags is that that brings the biggest environmental benefit.

**Iain Gulland:** What we are really trying to do through the recycling message is change people's mindsets from thinking that it is okay to do what they like with a particular product because it is good for the environment to taking an approach that is more to do with waste prevention and better resource use.

**Nora Radcliffe:** I was going to ask the same question. It would be interesting and useful to consider the report that Allan Dryer referred to.

**Allan Dryer:** The environment agency is doing a study on the environmental impacts of plastic bags and their replacements in the UK, but as far as I am aware, it kicked off not long ago so I suspect that it will not be available to inform the committee's considerations.

**The Convener:** A couple of colleagues raised points earlier about the administrative process that is proposed in the bill. The analysis says that 45 per cent of resources would be taken up by administration. At first reading, it seems cumbersome to get every local authority to run its own scheme. What is SEPA's view of that, given that it deals with a lot of regulation?

What about smart regulation? The committee looks at an awful lot of statutory instruments and one of the responses that we get from people is that although they are not against the principle of regulation, it should be done better and more efficiently. We have had strong feedback from different companies that they do not like the administration process that is attached to the bill. Is there a smarter process that would take up fewer resources?

**Allan Dryer:** As far as I am aware, we have not looked in any great detail at the matter; we have concentrated on the environmental impacts. However, in purely financial terms, it seems wasteful for every local authority to duplicate the same function. It would probably be more efficient if administration could be done centrally and the money disbursed to local authorities. That would save at least some of the resources that were collected.

**Iain Gulland:** I am not sure about the legislation and exactly how local taxation works, but it would seem to make more sense to have the levy collected or administrated centrally. There might be issues about spending the money locally, but the CRNS would certainly be willing to be part of the programme. If we could use the money to support groups such as the ROWAN project in furthering environmental benefit at a local level, we would be happy to be involved.

**The Convener:** The way in which the bill has been constructed and the Executive's analysis point to local authorities being encouraged to work together. It is a question of whether we could be

more proactive through the bill and determine that the levy should be a local levy, in the sense that the money should go back to the local authorities, which will be involved in the process. Setting up 32 different ways of doing things, with some retailers spanning two or three local authority areas, would be quite a complex way to administer the process and could soak up money that might otherwise go back into waste awareness, which I know is a key purpose of the bill.

**Iain Gulland:** We would support that. That is an issue for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to consider.

**The Convener:** We will come back to issues concerning local authorities.

Does Trish Godman have a brief point to make?

**Trish Godman:** It is so brief, it is unbelievable. Did the witnesses' mothers take a message bag with them when they went shopping?

**Iain Gulland:** A van used to come round to us. In fact, we always used cardboard boxes. That is another issue, perhaps.

**Allan Dryer:** I have asked a lot of people what happened to the good old-fashioned string bag.

**Trish Godman:** Exactly. That was all.

**The Convener:** That was a very effectively put, quick question.

**Mr Ruskell:** I have been sitting here imagining that I am the chief executive officer of a major supermarket. What incentive is there for me to follow a voluntary scheme? As CEO of Sainsbury's, I will be at a competitive disadvantage if I introduce such a scheme. Is there not a case for levelling up the playing field, so that everybody is operating at the same level as B&Q?

**Richard Swannell:** That is an interesting question. Supermarkets spend a lot of time talking to their customers and finding out what is important to them, and the environment is very important to customers—depending on the supermarket, but it is usually among customers' top five concerns. If you are a CEO, you might start to think that you could differentiate your company by having a proactive attitude.

When we were developing the choose to reuse campaign, we detected significant interest among retailers to try to do something about the problem, especially when we consider the sheer number of bags that are thrown away every year. There is a rationale behind the initiative, and it is to do with what customers want.

**Mr Ruskell:** The big four are not moving on any sort of—

**Richard Swannell:** Three of the big four are involved in the choose to reuse trial. I beg your pardon—Tesco, Asda and Scotmid are in there, so it is three of the top five.

**Mr Ruskell:** I was going to say that they are not moving on a charge.

**Richard Swannell:** They are not introducing a charge; they are encouraging reuse.

**Iain Gulland:** I have an anecdotal example from an e-mail that one of my members sent me just the other day. They said that they had heard that Asda had spent in the region of £14 million last year on disposable plastic bags but that this year, because of the price of oil, the figure is £30 million. If I was a supermarket CEO, I would be looking at that figure and thinking about the impact on my bottom line. Do not quote me on those figures—as I said, they are anecdotal.

**The Convener:** They are anecdotal, but they are now on the record.

**Iain Gulland:** Everything that I say is anecdotal.

**Mike Pringle:** If Asda is spending that amount of money—and it is not the biggest player in the market—imagine what the other supermarkets are spending and what the total costs are for the whole of Scotland.

I have a couple of questions for Nicki Souter. You have spoken about plastic being recycled. Which local authorities collect plastic? In Edinburgh, I cannot put any of my plastic out on the street—no plastic bags and no plastic bottles—because, according to Mike Drewry, director of environmental and consumer services with the City of Edinburgh Council, it is far too expensive to collect. Somebody said earlier that, in some places, people are stockpiling bottles because they think that there might be a market for them at some point, presumably because of the rising price of oil. In Edinburgh, we do not recycle plastic at all at the gate. Which would you support more: recycling or a reduction in use?

**Nicki Souter:** On what is happening where in Scotland, the easiest thing is to signpost you to a tool that we have developed called sort it. If you go to [www.wasteawareScotland.org.uk](http://www.wasteawareScotland.org.uk) and click on the button that says “sort it” you will see a list of the recycling facilities that are available in each local authority area. You can search by material or by system. People can recycle some types of plastic bottles at some packaging recycling points in the City of Edinburgh Council’s area. That service is being introduced slowly in Edinburgh as part of the waste aware Edinburgh programme.

The ultimate goal is waste prevention. Recycling is obviously something that the public can engage with through infrastructure provision, but we need to apply the concept to reuse and reduce so that

we can pragmatically signpost the consumer to something else that they can engage with. As I said, the ultimate goal is waste prevention but recycling is one part of the hierarchy.

**Iain Gulland:** I want to make a point about recycling, although it is probably outwith the scope of this meeting. Recycling costs money, but the important question is where the material goes after it has been collected. We pay for it to be collected but the value of the product is realised in some other community outwith Scotland and perhaps outwith the UK. The development of that market should be considered. We should seriously consider the job opportunities in the new sustainable resource management industry that we are trying to create here in Scotland.

**Mike Pringle:** That leads me quite nicely to my next question. Some people have said that job losses are inevitable if there is a switch to paper. How do you think that that switch would benefit other Scottish industries? Will the jobs be replaced? What is your view? Do you have a view?

**Richard Swannell:** The short answer is that I do not know.

**The Convener:** No one on the panel can answer that question, but we can ask other panels.

**Mike Pringle:** I have a question specifically for WRAP. In your submission, you state:

“Plastic carrier bags are widely perceived to cause environmental problems. However, the available data suggest that these perceptions may be exaggerated.”

Where did you get those data? What were you referring to?

**Richard Swannell:** We were trying to make the point that Allan Dryer made earlier about how plastic bags fit into the overall waste stream. The UK household waste stream is about 30 million tonnes. Of that, carrier bags account for about 100,000 tonnes. We were trying to put the matter in perspective. The aim of the bill is waste minimisation, but carrier bags form a small component of the overall amount of waste. We were trying to make the point that we should consider other measures that would have a bigger impact on waste.

**Mike Pringle:** Some of the witnesses have said that they are worried that the bill would send out mixed messages, but surely it would be a peg on which to hang a national educational programme. Raising awareness will not take long; if the experience of Ireland and other countries is anything to go by, that will happen quickly. I asked a civil servant in Ireland how long it took for awareness to develop there. I thought that his answer would be in months, but he said that it took

three and a half weeks. Do you agree that, if we hang a national strategy on the provision and use it as a catalyst, that will make it happen quickly?

**Iain Gulland:** Yes. It will catch fire.

**Nicki Souter:** I return to what I said at the beginning. There is already an integrated communication strategy throughout Scotland and part of that process involves encouraging the reuse of resources. The bill's provisions would be one part of that process and would bring a benefit in that sense.

12:15

**Richard Swannell:** At the risk of repeating myself, the bill will undoubtedly reduce the amount of plastic bags that are used, but we are worried about its being sold to the public as an environmental measure when it may involve an increase in the amount of paper bags and in sales of plastic bin-bags. If there is no clear net environmental benefit, the public may start to get confused. They may say, "We are doing this for the environment, but it is not abundantly clear that there is a real, positive outcome." That is why we say in our paper—and this echoes what Allan Dryer said—that if we are to go down this line, an option would be to have a levy on all disposable bags, which would send out a consistent message.

There are other options, including the use of technology and the campaigns that Nicki Souter has talked about, which could rapidly make a difference. If people take their bags back to the shops and reuse them, they will reduce the amount of waste that they produce today. That is one thing that we could all do today. If we reuse our bags, that will make a difference straight away.

**Allan Dryer:** We regard this as a long-term issue, with the levy as the starting point. It is very much about resource use and public education. If this is going to be done, it should be done properly and the same message should be attached to all bags, not just plastic bags. We are told that awareness raising in Ireland took three and a half weeks, or whatever. Does that mean that it took three and a half weeks for people to become aware of the fact that they had to pay to get a plastic bag, or did it take three and a half weeks for them to become aware of the environmental issues and concerns behind the levy?

**The Convener:** That is a good question for us.

**Nora Radcliffe:** I have a very brief question about interpreting the statistics. The statistics on plastic bags as a component of the waste stream show that their contribution is very low in terms of volume and weight. Is that a realistic expression of

their significance as part of the waste stream, or does it downplay their significance?

**Allan Dryer:** It is a real perception thing with plastic bags. They do not biodegrade, or it takes them a long time to do so. If a plastic bag gets caught in a tree, it could sit there for years. A lot of the concern about them comes from the fact that when they escape into the environment they do not go away quickly. When paper bags escape, they can disappear in a few weeks; when plastic bags escape, they can be there for years.

**Nicki Souter:** The Keep Scotland Beautiful litter surveys show that plastic bags have not been found to be a significant source of street and pavement litter. It is their longevity in the environment—their persistence—that creates the public perception that associates them with litter. However, they are not a significant element of litter—at least, not street and pavement litter—at present. Other types of litter have much greater impact.

**Richard Swannell:** It is worth mentioning that plastic bags constitute only a modest proportion of the total waste and only a modest proportion of the total plastic waste that goes into people's bins.

**Nora Radcliffe:** That is, measured by weight and volume, but not by nuisance value, or whatever. I just wanted your comments on how you interpret the statistics.

**The Convener:** Right. We end on a high point—how we interpret statistics. I thank all the members of the panel for providing written evidence in advance and for coming and answering our questions this morning.

We will continue to take evidence on the bill at our next meeting, on 5 October, when we will talk to retailers, consumer groups and local authorities. There are a large number of issues to do with responsibility, the purpose of the bill and its impact that we will be able to raise with them.

I suspend the meeting briefly, to allow our witnesses to leave.

12:19

*Meeting suspended.*

12:20

*On resuming—*

## **Subordinate Legislation**

### **Registration of Fish Sellers and Buyers and Designation of Auction Sites (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/438)**

**The Convener:** Under agenda item 2, we have one instrument to consider under the negative procedure. The regulations amend an instrument that the committee considered in June. The Subordinate Legislation Committee has considered the regulations and has nothing to report. Do members have any comments?

**Members:** No.

**The Convener:** I merely welcome the regulations. We discussed subordinate legislation last week in the context of the committee's report for the Subordinate Legislation Committee's inquiry. Although it is slightly awkward that we are considering an amendment to an instrument that we dealt with so recently, the information that we have received from the Executive is useful and informative. It tells us what the fishing industry thought and how its views have been taken on board by the Executive. The regulations are exemplary in that respect, and it is good to see matters being dealt with in that way. Does anyone have any problems with the regulations or any other comments to make?

**Members:** No.

**The Convener:** Can I take it that members are content with the regulations and are happy to make no recommendation to the Parliament?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

12:21

*Meeting continued in private until 12:42.*



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