Extract A: How plastic bags were supposed to help the planet

Despite plastic bags being one of the most hated products on earth, they had noble beginnings. Sven Thulin, a Swedish inventor, created a lightweight, low cost, re-usable bag in 1959 that was supposed to help save the planet. At the time, most bags were made of paper and many millions of trees were being cut down to make them. Paper bags use more water and energy to make, and are heavier than plastic bags, creating a greater environmental impact when transporting them, and need to be used three times to match the environmental impact of a reused plastic bag. The other alternative, cotton bags, take enormous amounts of water to produce and would need to be used 131 times to match the reused plastic bag. Plastic bags are incredibly efficient to make, taking just a tiny bit of oil and very little energy, and if reused four times, they have minimal environmental impact.

Source: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07r9lqb/the-news-explained-how-plastic-bags-were-supposed-to-help-the-planet

Extract B: Bags for Life

In 2015 the government introduced a 5p charge on plastic bags used by large retailers to help tackle plastic pollution with spectacular effects in the short run. The number of plastic bags per household reduced from 140 per year in 2014, to just 10 per year in 2016. Many supermarkets began phasing out the 5p bags in favour of bags for life costing 10p, stating that this was more of an incentive for consumers to remember to bring back the bags for shopping. However, in 2018 1.2 billion bags for life were bought, and in 2019 Greenpeace conducted a survey concluding that households were now buying an average 54 bags per year, indicating they had become a disposable option for many. Greenpeace research has shown that plastic bag purchases were reduced by 90% in Ireland when the price was set at 70 cents (approximately 60 pence). In January 2020 the compulsory charge will rise to 10p per bag and all retailers will be subject to the charge. The charge is not a government tax: the retailers are given a choice about what to do with the money raised from the charges, although there are considerable expectations on large retailers that they donate some of the charge revenue to charitable causes. According to Defra, approximately £51m was donated in the year 2017-2018.

Sources: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46689684
https://thinkprogress.org/bag-elasticity-eeb0411b89d/
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50579077

Extract C: Irreparable damage

Marine life is facing irreparable damage from the millions of tonnes of plastic waste which ends up in the oceans each year according the United Nations Chief, Lisa Svensson. Nearly all the plastic that has ever been created still exists in some form today because it was designed to last for a very long time. Only 9% of the plastic created is recycled, 12% is incinerated and 79% of it accumulates in landfills and the natural environment. Drinks bottles is one of the most common types of plastic waste, with around 500 billion plastic bottles sold globally in 2017, which equates to a million bottles per minute. Of these, 110 billion were made by drinks giant Coca Cola.
There have been many proposals to reduce consumption of single use plastics, include deposit-return schemes, free drinking water in major cities, ocean clean up schemes and information campaigns. In the UK, shoppers continue to put pressure on supermarkets to reduce over-packaged food and to provide refill stations for basic food goods and detergents in-store.

Source: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-42264788

Edexcel Style Question

With reference to the information provided, discuss the policies businesses and governments may implement to reduce the use of single use plastics.

(15 marks)

AQA Style Question

Extract C states ‘nearly all the plastic that has ever been created still exists in some form today because it was designed to last for a very long time.’

Using the data and your knowledge of economics, discuss the effectiveness of policies that businesses and governments may implement to reduce the use of single use plastics.

(25 marks)