



ASH Wales and the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) share a growing concern regarding the impact of smoking related litter and, specifically, single-use plastic cigarette filters, and are now working together to tackle the issue.



The Problem

Cigarette litter is one of the most visible and prevalent forms of litter throughout Wales from its beautiful beaches and parks to busy streets and roadsides.

In a study carried out by Keep Wales Tidy in 2018, cigarette butts were found on 80.3% of streets across Wales¹, making them the most common form of litter in the country. On Welsh beaches surveys during the Marine Conservation Society beachwatch event in September each year show that cigarette butts are typically in the top five items (number 5 in 2020).

Cigarette butts are the most littered item in the world and across the UK alone it is estimated that 122 tonnes of smoking related litter are dropped every day. The International Coastal Clean-Up 2019 report, to which MCS contributed data, revealed that cigarette stubs were the top item found by volunteers around the world ahead of even food wrappers and plastic bottles.

They may be small, but the potential cigarettes have to damage the environment is huge. Cigarette stubs are found to take around 14 years to degrade², during this time, thousands of chemicals are released into the environment as well as micro plastics. The cigarette filters also contain a cocktail of harmful chemical ingredients including arsenic, lead and nicotine.

Many of the cigarette butts dropped in the streets end up in our ocean and waterways after being washed down drains. The chemicals contained in these cigarette butts pollute our waterways, endangering any animals that ingest them – one cigarette butt left to soak in water for 96 hours will release enough toxins to kill half of the salt or fresh water fish that are exposed to it.³ The environmental campaigner Sir David Attenborough has described how pollution has turned parts of our oceans into a ‘toxic soup’ and cigarette butts are a key ingredient of that soup.

Despite the devastating impact cigarette butts have on the natural environment however, they are not widely regarded by the public as part of the pollution problem or as a form of single use plastic.

According to a study carried out by Keep Britain Tidy in 2018, one in ten smokers do not consider cigarette butts to be a form of litter and 10% think they are biodegradable. Meanwhile less than half of smokers know that cigarettes contain plastic.⁴

ASH Wales has long been aware that cigarette filters do not benefit health, although two thirds of smokers think that they do.⁵ Instead they act to make smoke smoother and more palatable. By giving the impression of reduced harm, and by making the experience of smoking less harsh, plastic filters make it easier for young people to take up smoking. This is of particular concern in Wales where, according to ASH Wales’ latest YouGov survey, 51% of current smokers were 16 or under when they tried their first cigarette and over 80% under 18⁶.

The Solution

The European Union, through the Single Use Plastics Directive (“Reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment”), has recognised cigarette stubs as one of the top 10 most commonly found items on our beaches.

Yet single-use cigarette filters have been a neglected element of the plastics and single-use debates, unlike some other single use plastic items which have been subject to a ban or reduction.

The truth is that cigarette filters count as single use plastic consumer items in exactly the way as drinking straws, cotton bud stems or plastic bags do. And, because of the impact they have on the natural environment ASH Wales and the Marine Conservation Society believes that cigarette filters should be on the list of plastic items considered by the Welsh Government for regulatory action.

We recommend that regulatory action should include a ban on plastic cigarette filters, Extended Producer Responsibility duties to be imposed on tobacco manufacturers and awareness raising of it being a plastic product.

EPR has the benefit of transferring costs to the producer, however it is unlikely to result in reduced littering (it has been shown to be ineffective in reducing the amount of marine litter found⁷) nor mitigate against the health crisis. Therefore, EPR must be accompanied with a ban on plastic filters, a review of other single use filters and an ongoing national campaign aimed at raising awareness of the impact of cigarette litter on the environment.

These actions help to reduce smoking prevalence in Wales which currently stands at 18% of the adult population according to the latest National Survey for Wales⁸ and poses a major threat to the public health of the nation, particularly as smokers have been identified as being more at risk from Covid-19.

We are therefore calling upon on Welsh Government to ban plastic based single use filters and review the need for other single use filters.



Protecting Health Policies from the Tobacco Industry

The UK is a party to the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control which obliges government to protect policy from the commercial and vested interests of the tobacco industry. This includes CSR activity and partnerships and means that local authorities should not work in partnership with tobacco companies to clean up smoking-related litter.

1. Keep Wales Tidy Street Cleanliness Survey 2018 <https://www.keepwalestidy.cymru/news/smoking-litter-still-a-big-problem-in-wales>
2. Joly & Coulis 2018 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0956053X17308474> “conventional plastic filters take 7.5–14 years to disappear, in the compost and on the soil surface, respectively...cellulose filters take 2.3–13 years to disappear, in the compost and on the soil surface, respectively”.
3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3088407/>
4. <https://www.keepbritaintidy.org/news/its-flicking-blue-murder>
5. <https://bmcpublihealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-015-2643-z>
6. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-11/adult-smoking-and-e-cigarette-use-national-survey-wales-april-2018-march-2019-437.pdf>
7. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X20309660?dgcid=author>
8. <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2020-07/adult-lifestyle-national-survey-wales-april-2019-march-2020-390.pdf>

