

Marine Conservation Society Policy Paper on: Smoking Related Litter

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Geographical Context: UK

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Over 24,000 items of smoking related litter found on UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2025. We are therefore calling on the governments of the UK to;

1. Ban the sale and manufacture of single-use plastic cigarette filters
2. Introduce an extended producer responsibility scheme (EPR) for vapes and cigarette filters not covered by market restrictions
3. Ban the manufacture of disposable vapes following the ban on sale and supply that came into force on the 1st of June 2025
4. Increase awareness and enforcement of existing Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment and the Waste Batteries Regulations for producers, distributors and retailers of vapes including disposal and recycling
5. Require businesses to report on the number of vapes (as a percentage sold) that are returned for recycling under WEEE

Introduction

Smoking related litter is one of the most visible and prevalent forms of litter throughout the UK from beautiful beaches and parks to busy streets and roadsides.

Over half of UK beaches surveyed by Marine Conservation Society Beachwatch volunteers had smoking related litter in 2025. The International Coastal Clean-Up 2024 report, to which Marine Conservation Society contributed data, revealed that cigarette stubs were the third top item found by volunteers around the world behind food wrappers and bottlesⁱ.

They may be small, but cigarettes have the potential to damage the environment. Cigarette stubs take around 14 years to degradeⁱⁱ, during which time thousands of chemicals are released into the environment as well as micro plastics.

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

Vapes, including disposable vapes, were found on 59% of inland Source to Sea Litter surveys by Marine Conservation Society volunteers in 2025, marking a 16% decrease from 2024 suggesting the ban that came into force in June last year started to have an impact straight away.

The solutions

Instead of finding more cost-effective ways to clean-up smoking related litter, the focus should be on preventing these plastics or any other single-use alternatives from polluting our environment in the first place.

Vapes

Following a campaign led by Laura Anderson, also known as Less Waste Laura, which the Marine Conservation Society supported, disposable vapes are now banned across the UK, a fantastic first step to tackling smoking related litter. However, legislation only banned the sale and not the manufacture of vapes meaning the UK could still make vapes and sell them to other countries. We would therefore like to see the ban extended to a ban on manufacture as well as sale.

We also need to ensure that reusable vapes are not continued to be treated like single-use or disposable vapes and end up either in the general waste stream or as a litter.

Vapes are considered e-waste under the WEEE Regulationsⁱⁱⁱ. All retailers selling e-cigarettes must provide a free in-store take-back service or set up an alternative free take-back service for environmentally sound disposal^{iv}. Under these regulations similar responsibilities exist for producers and distributors. Enforcement and awareness of these responsibilities should be increased.

Cigarettes

Single-use plastic cigarette filters should be categorised alongside other single-use plastics, like plastic cotton-bud stems, straws and cups as optional consumer choices, and be the subject of appropriate regulatory action.

In liaison with health charities ASH, ASH Cymru and ASH Scotland they have highlighted that cigarette filters do not benefit health and instead they act to make smoking smoother and more palatable. ASH further highlight that by giving the impression of reduced harm, and by making the experience of smoking less harsh, filters make it easier to take up smoking.

The precautionary principle must also be applied if an 'alternative' filter not made of single-use plastic is proposed. Issues linked to littering and the leaching of chemicals into the environment as a result would not be solved through a switch in materials.

Progress

In April 2026 the Tobacco and Vapes Bill passed in the UK Parliament which includes the powers to ban single-use plastic cigarette filters. This marks a significant step towards our key ask for a ban and we will continue to work with our partners to ensure those powers are used as soon as possible.

References

1. https://oceanconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/FINAL_ICCAAnnualReport_Digital.pdf
2. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0169534721002755>
3. The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2013, Schedule 3-4
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2013/3113/contents/made>
4. The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2013, S42 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2013/3113/contents/made>

ⁱ https://oceanconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/FINAL_ICCAAnnualReport_Digital.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0169534721002755>

ⁱⁱⁱ] The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2013, Schedule 3-4
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2013/3113/contents/made>

^{iv} The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2013, S42
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2013/3113/contents/made>