

General debate: Electronic cigarette use

Westminster Hall debate briefing

29 June 2023



Background

- In 2019 the government set a target to achieve a smoke-free generation by 2030. Vaping has become increasingly popular among young people. Since 2021, there has been more than a sevenfold increase in the proportion of 11- to 17-year-olds who vape using disposable vapes rather than reusable. The rapid rise has so alarmed Javed Khan, author of the government's review into [Making smoking obsolete](#), that he [recently said](#): "If I knew then what we know now, I would have been stronger in calling for an outright ban."
- Multiple health professionals warn that instead of helping existing smokers to give up the habit, vapes could create a whole generation of young people hooked on nicotine and has the potential to become a health crisis. In June, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Children's Health (RCPCH) called for the government to issue [an outright ban on disposable e-cigarettes](#), with the RCPCH VP for policy warning that "youth vaping is fast becoming an epidemic" and we are "sleepwalking into a crisis".
- As well as the emerging health impacts, this is an emerging environmental problem with disposable vapes being unnecessary single use plastic items that encourage a throwaway culture. Along with the batteries and nicotine contained within, the plastic casing is hazardous to the environment and wildlife when littered. Last year, a coalition of environmental and health experts led by environmental think tank Green Alliance issued [a joint letter calling for them to be banned](#).
- The government has committed to tackle the scourge of plastic pollution and most recently in April 2023 launched a [call for evidence on youth vaping](#), which covered themes including education, the vape market and the impact of vapes on the environment (particularly disposable products). The PM has said he will close loopholes which allow free samples of vapes to be given to children.
- However, there is concern that immediate action is needed to consider a ban on disposable vapes to prevent the associated health and environmental impacts escalating further.

Is this a live issue in Westminster?

- Health select committee member Dr Caroline Johnson MP introduced a [Ten Minute Rule Bill](#) in parliament to prohibit the sale of disposable vapes, which had its first reading in February 2023.
- In the same month, Dr Chris Whitty contributed to an evidence session and said some products were deliberately intended to appeal to underage children and more must be done to rapidly reduce vaping among under-18s.
- Kirsten Oswald MP also previously sponsored a [Westminster Hall debate](#) on the environmental impact of disposable vapes in November 2022.
- On Monday 17 April, the Environment APPG held a [parliamentary panel](#) on the banning of disposable vapes with speakers including: Selaine Saxby MP, Libby Peake (Green Alliance), Laura Young (Marine Conservation Society volunteer), Alexandra Heal (Financial Times), Dr Caroline Johnson MP, John Dunne (UKVIA) and Minister Pow provided a response.

- At Westminster Hall debate on smoke free 2030 target in June, MPs from across parties called for a ban on disposable vapes on child health and environmental grounds.

What are the environmental concerns?

- The market for disposable vapes is growing at an astonishing rate. Research by Material Focus in July 2022 found that [1.3 million disposable vapes were being thrown away every week](#), equating to two vapes every second. This figure has likely more than doubled over just 8 months as, as of March 2023, the [market for disposable vapes stood at 138 million a year](#), equivalent to 2.7 million bought each week.
- Recycling of these materials is unlikely to provide as scalable solution. Initial recycling schemes have indicated [takeback of less than one per cent](#) and it is unrealistic to expect youths who illicitly smoke these devices to go to correctly dispose of them. Their complex material composition will always mean they are logistically difficult, labour intensive and expensive to recycle.
- This means that the precious metals they contain will continue to go to waste. This include lithium and copper, which are critical materials for our green transition. According to [research from Material Focus](#), the lithium used in disposable single-use vapes sold in the UK each year is equivalent to that needed by 2,500 electric vehicles, while the copper they contain could instead power more than 370,000 home electric vehicle charging stations.
- Lithium-ion batteries, used in vapes and other electronics, cause fires if broken, a phenomenon which is becoming [more frequent](#) according to waste processors. Research by consultancy Eunomia in 2021 estimated that lithium-ion batteries, found in vapes as well as other electronics, are responsible for around half (48%, or 200 incidents) of all waste fires occurring in the UK each year. This costs the industry around £158 million annually. More recent research from Material Focus has suggested lithium-ion batteries could actually cause around 700 fires a year. If disposable vapes are not banned, these figures are likely to climb higher.

What needs to be done?

- Given the rapid and dangerous rise of disposable vape use amongst children and availability of reusable vapes that are more suited as smoking cessation tools for adults, the government should ban disposable vapes. Javed Khan, author of the government's review into making smoking obsolete [now recognises](#) the need for this step.
- Swift action from government now would curtail a rapidly growing health and environmental crisis, without jeopardising Britain's ambition to be smokefree by 2030.

What do voters think?

- In a [YouGov poll](#) commissioned by the [Marine Conservation Society](#), 75% of people agree that disposable vapes should be banned.
- A [survey](#) by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI) found 60% of local Trading Standards services are concerned about high street shops selling illicit vapes or vaping products to children.