

## General debate: Smokefree future

### Westminster Hall debate briefing

11<sup>th</sup> January 2024



#### Background

- In 2019, the government set a target to achieve [a smoke-free generation by 2030](#). Last year, the Prime Minister pledged that he would raise the smoking age year-upon-year from 2027 to stop those aged fourteen or younger from ever purchasing tobacco products legally.
- Alongside this, the government has announced a crackdown on youth vaping, [consulting on](#) measures to restrict sales and regulate flavours and packaging, building on headline commitments made at the Conservative Party Conference and in the King's Speech.
- 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. Vaping has [risen rapidly among children](#), with one in five now using disposable vapes.
- In the general population, since 2021 the number of vapes thrown away each week has quadrupled and now stands at [5 million](#). This is likely an underestimate as 7.7 million are bought each week and [recycling rates are below 1%](#).
- 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. In June 2023, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Children's Health (RCPCH) called for the government to issue [an outright ban on disposable e-cigarettes](#), warning that "youth vaping is fast becoming an epidemic".
- A full prohibition on the sale of disposable vapes is also supported by the [Local Government Association](#) and [leading environmental and health groups](#). Similar policies have gone ahead in the EU, New Zealand, Australia, France and Ireland.
- As well as the health impacts, this is an emerging environmental problem with disposable vapes. They are 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, [leaching toxic compounds](#) into soils and waterways.
- Immediate action is needed to ban disposable vapes, to prevent the associated health and environmental impacts escalating further.

#### Is this a live issue in Westminster?

- In November 2023 parliamentarians, coordinated by the Environment APPG, wrote to the Prime Minister to call for a complete ban on the sale of disposable vapes.
- At a Westminster Hall debate on the smoke free 2030 target in June 2023, MPs from across parties called for a ban on disposable vapes on child health and environmental grounds.
- In May 2023, the government announced that it would [close a loophole](#) that allowed retailers to give free samples of vapes to children.
- 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.

### What are the environmental concerns?

- The market for disposable vapes is growing at an astonishing rate. Research by Material Focus shows a staggering increase in the number of single use vapes thrown away, having soared from 1.3 million to nearly 5 million per week, which is equivalent to about 8 vapes thrown away per second.
- Recycling of these materials is unlikely to provide a 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 includes lithium and copper, which are critical materials for our green transition. According to [research from Material Focus](#), over 10 tonnes of lithium was thrown away in disposable vapes in the UK in 2022, enough to make 1,200 electric vehicles.
- 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 with local authorities found that [over 700 fires](#) in bin lorries and recycling centres were caused by batteries, reinforcing Eunomia's 2021 finding that lithium-ion batteries are responsible for around [half of all waste fires](#) occurring in the UK each year. This costs the industry around £158 million annually.

### What needs to be done?

- Given the rapid and dangerous rise of disposable vape use amongst children, the government should ban disposable vapes. Reusable vapes will still be available as smoking cessation devices for adults.
- Swift action from government now would curtail a rapidly growing health and environmental crisis, without jeopardising Britain's ambition to be smokefree by 2030.
- Banning the use of disposable vapes will encourage people to use reusable and rechargeable vapes, which are a much better alternative environmentally and would avoid the vast amounts of harmful waste produced by disposable vapes.

### 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.

### Suggested interventions

- When will the government publish its response to the consultation on 'creating a smokefree generation and tackling youth vaping'?
- Will the government commit to a full prohibition on the sale of disposable vapes?