

Smoking Litter Guidance

Summary

January 2022



Why does smoking related litter matter?

Annual Litter surveys across Wales have shown that smoking-related litter (principally cigarette ends) is the litter type found most commonly littered on our streets. In 2018-19 there was smoking-related litter (SRL) on an average of 79.6% of streets across Wales.

While less visible than some types of litter, SRL causes multiple environmental problems. It degrades slowly in the environment and can pose a fire risk if not fully extinguished. The cigarette ends remain in the environment for years, turning into microplastics which can be transferred to rivers and the sea. They contain toxins and can easily be eaten, with deadly effect, by wildlife. The small size means that they are transported far from their origin and are not cleaned up quickly or easily.

How does local infrastructure affect the problem of SRL?

Research has shown that local authorities rarely apply strategic thinking to where to place bins. Smokers look to dispose of cigarette ends rapidly and placement of adequate disposal facilities is a key factor in reducing littered butts. Suitable bins should be prioritised in areas with a high footfall and where the public congregate outdoors. Cigarette bins should include a stubbing plate. Many cigarette bins are designed to be 'hidden' or to blend in with the environment but increasing visibility is important and a consistent use of colour and text is recommended. Novelty bins, whilst they can be very effective need regular and consistent updating (possibly as much as every two weeks) or risk exacerbating the issue. Additionally, the promotion of pocket ashtrays helps smokers to dispose and take away their cigarette ends responsibly when there isn't a bin nearby and tend to be popular choices, especially if they are readily available from a wide range of places.

What other approaches can help tackle SRL?

Enforcement

Enforcement to prevent littering only works when perpetrators believe they are likely to be caught and needs to be consistent in message and approach. Previous use of private companies for litter enforcement has demonstrated the danger that this is perceived by the public as unfairly targeted. Smoking is a habit which tends to occur more commonly in areas with socio-economic problems and fines are thus more likely to be levied on those who will find it difficult to pay.

Interventions and innovations can assist with reducing the problem of SRL

- “Nudge” people towards the bins – coloured footprints leading them to the bin. Use bins that unlike many conventional bins are bold, colourful and fun.
- Partnerships, including engagement with businesses where smokers congregate.
- Education campaigns with messages about the damage caused by Smoking litter such as the impact on wildlife and waterways
- Community action can also help target areas with particular problems with smoking related litter. Keep Wales Tidy supports community groups and Litter Champions across Wales.
- Keeping an area clear of litter discourages more being dropped. It can be challenging to clear smoking litter though there is some cleaning machinery being developed which may help. This is potentially expensive. Another approach is to “design out” the places where cigarette ends are particularly liable to get trapped.
- Business engagement is key and the adoption of Litter Free Zones could support areas where smoking litter is persistent.

Keep Wales Tidy has run a smoking Litter trial based on “nudge” principles and several other interventions. A full report is available. Where interventions and innovations are tried it is important that monitoring and evaluation of the before and after of these are carried out in careful manner. Monitoring smoking Litter can be challenging and Keep Wales Tidy have experience and guidance which can assist with this.

What messaging can be used?

Good messaging needs to tie in with all the above approaches. Littering cigarette ends can be seen as less socially unacceptable than other items because of their small size and false perception that they biodegrade. Messaging about the impact of SRL on bins and pocket ashtrays should be used more.

The majority of messaging aimed at smokers is negatively focused or is aimed at health impacts of smoking. Whilst supporting all efforts to promote smoking cessation, it is important to note that the drivers of smoking litter are very different and therefore need to look and feel separate from any public health messaging.

Keep Wales Tidy would recommend focusing smoking litter messages on one of the following drivers:

- Despite their small size, they are litter
- Cigarette filters are made of plastic and are not biodegradable
- Littering them has serious consequences for wildlife and the environment
- Drains are not disposal facilities
- They can be safely disposed of in litter bins



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