

House of Commons address the environmental impact of disposable vapes

On 29th November, the House of Commons was asked to consider the environmental impact of disposal vapes. The motion was brought by the MP for East Renfrewshire, Kirsten Oswald, who expressed concern over the environmental impact of the disposable vape industry. Ms Oswald spoke of the large numbers of disposable vapes being littered across our streets, beaches and countryside and a lack of action from Government in addressing the issue. A request to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, as to what assessment had been made of the environmental impact of vaping products, she stated, had revealed that there had been no environmental assessment at all. Ms Oswald suggested that this was not acceptable and that 'we need to up our game quickly.' The lithium in disposable vapes, she stated, 'is a critical material for our green transition, but it is simply going to waste in devices that are not being disposed of properly.' A lack of understanding surrounding the correct disposal of vapes and the difficulty in recycling them, she indicated, has led to discarded disposables containing 10 tonnes of lithium, ending up at landfill each year. To give a scale of the problem, Ms Oswald stated that this level of lithium is 'a level equivalent to the lithium batteries inside 1,200 electric vehicles.' Ms Oswald criticised manufacturers of disposable vapes, who she said were aware that their products which are 'meant to be disposable items of convenience—that is their unique selling point—is actually a monumental inconvenience to their users.'

The MP for Falkirk, John McNally, agreed with Ms Oswald, stating that 'vape waste products have now added even more to the national embarrassment of litter on our streets and cycle and canal path networks.' Mr McNally called for Rebecca Pow, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to speak to 'the relevant authorities-the devolved Parliaments, local authorities, regional Mayors, courts, judges and police-to ask if they could agree on a more meaningful deterrent.' He suggested that the introduction of 'something like an automatic three points on the driving licence of anyone who discards any of those products' may be an appropriate deterrent. He urged the Government to take action before it is too late. The MP for Newport West, Ruth Jones, referred to research carried out by Material Focus, which suggests that at least 1.3 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week, which equates to two vapes being thrown away every second. Around 1 million of those disposable vapes are not recycled. Ms Jones asked Ms Pow to 'outline, in precise terms, what is being done to tackle the issue.'

Responding, Ms Pow stated that the statistic showing that 1.3 million disposable vapes are thrown away each week 'is pretty shocking.' She agreed that vapes containing lithium ending up at landfill meant that 'a huge amount of a critical material that is being thrown away.' Ms Pow stated that the findings of the Material Focus report highlight 'the importance of ensuring that the vaping sector, its products and those that sell them are fully compliant with the obligations set out under key pieces of waste management legislation.' She went on to explain the steps being taken to address this issue. Ms Pow explained that disposable vapes fall within scope of the UK's waste electrical and electronic equipment regulations (WEEE regulations), which require importers and manufacturers of vapes and other electrical equipment to finance the cost of collection

and the proper treatment of all equipment that is disposed of via local authority household waste sites and returned to retailers and internet sellers. Retailers and internet sellers of vapes also have important obligations under the WEEE regulations to take back used vapes on supply of new vapes to their customers. Retailers must also provide their customers with information about how to recycle vapes. Whilst smaller retailers, such as corner shops, can opt out of the take-back obligations, they must pay into a scheme that supports local authority electricals recycling. Ms Pow confirmed that her Department has engaged with the Environment Agency and the Office for Product Safety and Standards, which is the enforcer of the retail take-back obligation, and that these bodies are 'putting together a programme to drive up compliance, and are looking at what more can be done.' She reported that representatives of the WEEE producer compliance schemes 'are meeting and discussing what they can do as a sector to proactively encourage producers of all types of vapes to fully meet their obligations under the regulations.' Additionally, Ms Pow advised that the Government is 'reviewing the current producer responsibility system for waste electricals and batteries, and plan to publish consultations on both areas next year.'

The full debate can be viewed on Hansard's website. A press release summarising the findings of the Material Focus report, published in July of this year, referred to by MPs in the debate, is available at <https://www.materialfocus.org.uk/press-releases/one-million-single-use-vapes-thrown-away-every-week-contributing-to-the-growing-e-waste-challenge-in-the-uk/>