

the little book of

# Litter

an essential guide



**KEEP  
BRITAIN  
TIDY**

the little book of  
**Litter**  
an essential guide

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# Contents

Litter .....	5
The history of litter .....	6
What is litter? .....	10
Litter and the law.....	27
The impact of litter .....	35
Littering Behaviours .....	39
What is littering? .....	40
Who drops litter? .....	46
Behaviour types of people who litter .....	49
What else affects littering behaviours? .....	63
The impact of litter type on behaviour .....	79
Final Thoughts .....	87

# Introduction

Using the latest research and insight, Keep Britain Tidy has brought together in one place everything you need to know about litter, littering, who does it and why. *The Little Book of Litter* will be useful to anyone wanting to understand or address the problem of litter. In particular, it will be useful to those working for or with local authorities, social housing providers and other land owners or management organisations in tackling the issue of litter, both in terms of addressing residents' perceptions of the issue and the issue 'on the ground'. It also forms useful background for the Love Where You Live campaign led by Keep Britain Tidy with a range of partners.

# 2.25m

pieces of litter  
are dropped on the  
streets of the UK  
every day

# 4,927

people volunteered in  
2010 to clean rubbish  
from 376 beaches

# £885m

is the cost to taxpayers every year  
to clean up litter from our streets

99%

of streets in town  
centres in England  
have cigarette litter

7 out of 10  
people say they would feel guilty  
for dropping some litter

£20,000

is the average cost of  
cleaning up chewing gum  
from a town centre

Litter

# The History of Litter

During the second half of the 20th century, there was a notable rise in the amount of litter in England. This was due to the post-war boom of the 1950s, when western countries experienced a period of unprecedented economic prosperity, which led to a rise in consumerism.

Many people had a disposable income for the first time, which meant that they were able to buy more – but this also meant that they could throw more away. More and more everyday items, such as pens, razors, and lighters were even being designed to be disposable, which had never been the case before.

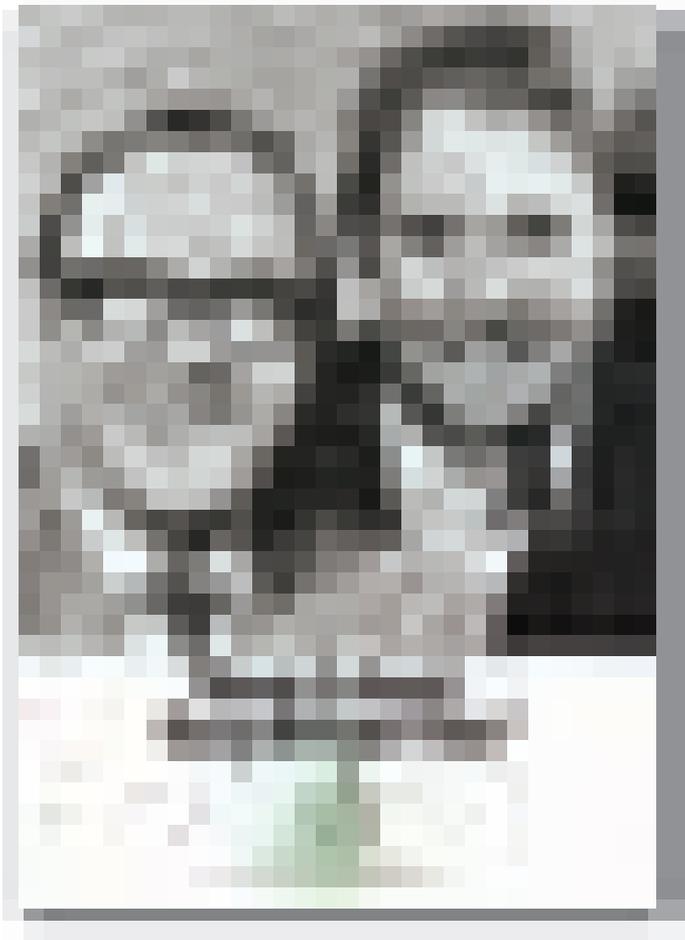
It was during this period that the quality of the local environment in England really began to suffer. The creation of this throwaway culture, meant that litter became a real problem in many parts of the country. As a result, people became increasingly concerned about the quality of their local environment.

It was because of this increasing litter problem that the Women's Institute (WI) decided to start a national anti-litter campaign in 1954 to tackle the poor quality of the local environment and to encourage people to take pride in local places.

The campaign was very well-received by both the public and the government and it succeeded in raising awareness of the growing litter problem. Momentum on the cause began to gather, which eventually led to the birth of the national 'Keep Britain Tidy' campaign a year later, and directly contributed to the first piece of anti-litter legislation, the Litter Act, in 1958.



An early Keep Britain Tidy poster from the 1960s



Keep Britain Tidy has worked with many celebrities over the years to promote an anti-littering message

This very first Litter Act aimed to “make both urban and rural England a better, more pleasant, and more beautiful place in which to live.”<sup>1</sup> It specifically gave local authorities powers to tackle littering, making it possible to fine people £10 for dropping litter in any place open to the air to which the public had access.

This new power received widespread support from the public and from local authorities in England and Wales, particularly because of the use of fines. After its introduction, 754 people were prosecuted under the new act for dropping litter in just the third quarter of 1959.<sup>2</sup>

In the 21st century, having clean streets and a good quality local environment have remained important concerns for the public.<sup>3</sup> For example, research carried out in 2002 noted that over half of the people asked would be willing to pay extra council tax per year to improve their local area and that general cleanliness was the issue that respondents would most like to change about their local area.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the *Place Survey*, which was carried out in 2008, underlined the importance of the quality of the local environment for the public. It showed that although 80% of the population were satisfied with their local area as a place to live, only 57% were satisfied with the cleanliness of public land.<sup>5</sup> This underlines the importance of keeping local areas clean; street cleansing alone has been found to have the biggest impact on the overall reputation of councils.<sup>6</sup>

1. HC Hansard: Sir Rupert Speir, House of Commons debate, vol 677 cc1742, (17 May 1963)

2. Sir K. Joseph, Parliamentary Questions (9 February 1960)

3. *Where are we now? A reflection on 60 years of Keeping England Tidy*, Keep Britain Tidy (2010)

4. *Streets of Shame*, CABE, (2002)

5. *Place Survey England: Local Government Statistical Release*, Department for Communities and Local Government (2008)

6. *New Reputation Guide*, Local Government Association (2011)

# What is litter?

Litter can be generally described as waste which has been improperly discarded by people and left in the wrong place. It can be as small as a sweet wrapper, as large as a bag of rubbish, or it can be lots of items scattered about.<sup>7</sup> Litter is a problem which affects many areas in England; not only does it make an area look unsightly and uncared for, but we know that litter can actually reduce quality of life for local people and communities.<sup>8</sup>

At Keep Britain Tidy, we believe that everyone has the right to live in a clean, well-maintained and attractive environment, free from problems such as litter, dog fouling, graffiti, fly-posting, vandalism and abandoned vehicles that reduce the quality of our local environments and directly or indirectly affect our quality of life.<sup>9</sup>

People care deeply about the way their local environment looks, and many individuals find littering particularly offensive; when rubbish and litter is left lying around, it shows that people don't care for an area. It also suggests that no one is taking responsibility for the area's upkeep and general maintenance, leading to a reduction in pride in the area and giving rise to a fear of crime.<sup>10</sup>



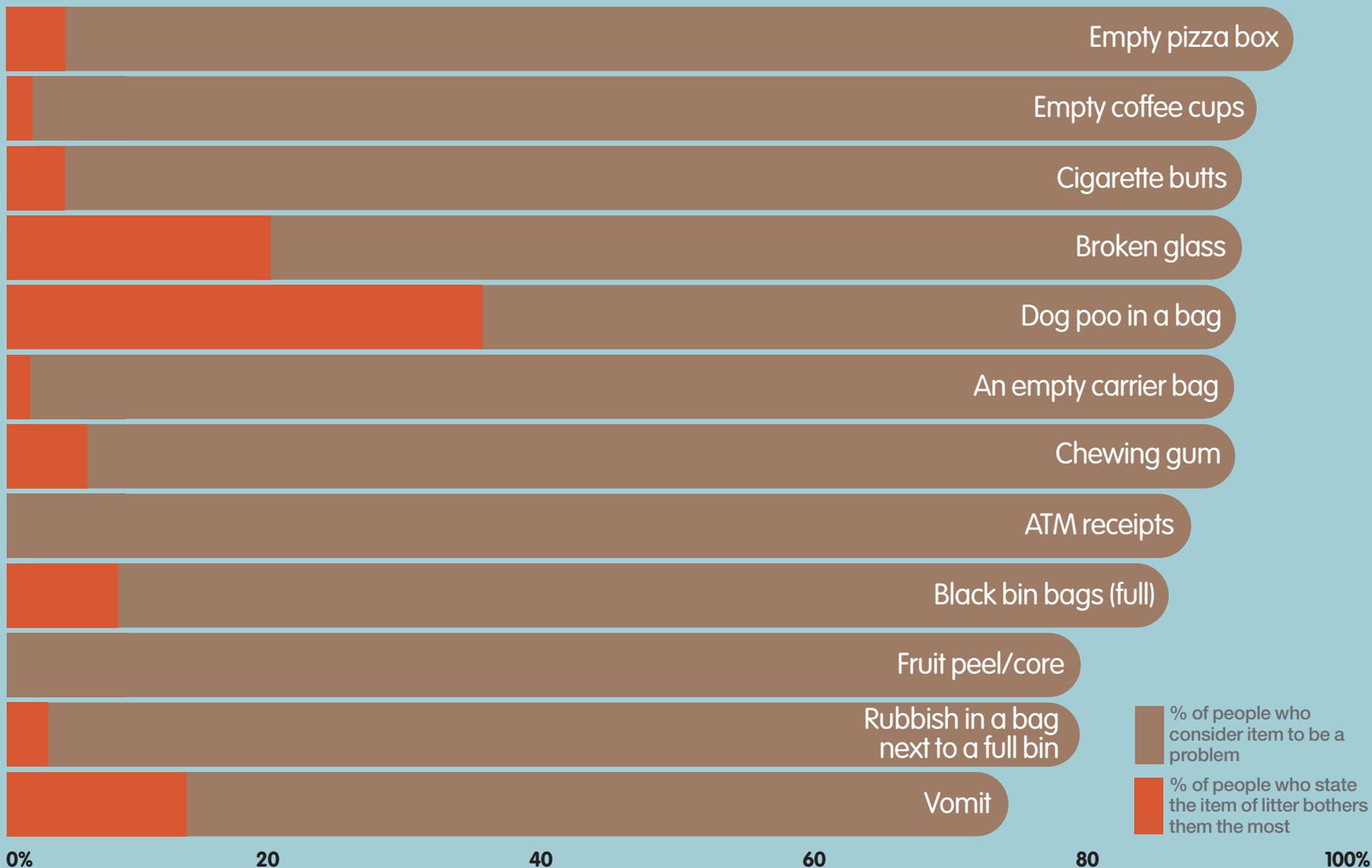
7. *Litter and the Law: A Guide for the Public*, Keep Britain Tidy (2006)

8. *Measuring Quality of Life: Does Local Environmental Quality Matter?* Keep Britain Tidy (2007)

9. *This is Our Home: The Economic Value of Local Environmental Quality*, Keep Britain Tidy (2010)

10. *Living Places: Cleaner, Safer, Greener*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2002)

Figure 1. Perception of what constitutes litter and the **most offensive litter items**





Our research shows that although people do consider many items to be litter, they are much more concerned about the presence of some litter items than others.<sup>11</sup> We showed people a list of items and asked them which they would consider to be litter, if they saw them on the street and then which would bother them the most. Figure 1 (previous pages) shows the results.

The largest proportion of people said that bagged dog poo would bother them the most (37%), if they saw it on the street. This is most likely due to the health risks that are associated with dog fouling, which have been brought increasingly to public attention over the past ten years. Broken glass and vomit were also noted as offensive items.

Even though 78% of people consider fruit peel/cores to be litter, no one perceives them as the litter item that bothers them the most. Perhaps this is because fruit peel/cores are biodegradable and therefore they do not perceive them to cause as much offence as other discarded items of litter. Similarly, whilst 87% of people consider ATM receipts to be litter, no-one has identified them as the item of litter that bothers them the most. Interestingly, this ties in with our *Local Environmental Quality Survey of England* data which shows that ATM receipts are most often found on sites where a bin is present.<sup>12</sup> Combined, these findings suggest that because people are not overly bothered by the presence of ATM receipts on the street, they may be less inclined to dispose of them in a bin.

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11. Omnibus Survey, 829 adults surveyed across England, conducted by TNS (February 2012)

12. *Local Environmental Quality Survey of England*, Keep Britain Tidy (2010/11)

## How an area looks can affect feelings of safety

We asked members of the public in England about their feelings of safety when they went out and then we compared this with how satisfied they were with the appearance of their local area.<sup>13</sup> The results show that people who are satisfied with the look of their local area are significantly more likely to feel safe in that area. However, despite the importance people place on the appearance of their local area, approximately 2.25m pieces of litter are still dropped in the UK every day.<sup>14</sup>

## Litter costs English taxpayers £885m a year

The majority of litter is caused by people and their activities and the cost and effort of cleaning up is huge. Over 30m tonnes of litter are collected from our streets every year, costing taxpayers in England £885m in clean up fees. In fact, it is estimated that this cost will rise to £1bn by the year 2015.<sup>15</sup> These figures exclude the costs of cleansing by public bodies other than local authorities or by private landowners and managers.

However, it is not just litter on our streets that is a problem in England; the amount of litter on UK beaches has almost doubled over the last 15 years and the largest proportion of this litter (37%) is items that have been dropped or left behind by the public on the beach itself.<sup>16</sup> The rest of the litter found on

beaches washes up from the sea, and although it is not directly left on the beach by people, it is a result of human activities such as fishing, shipping, and flushing items down the toilet.<sup>17</sup>

## Litter over the decade

On behalf of the government, we conduct an annual survey of England's streets and open spaces. This 'state of the nation' report looks at litter types, graffiti, fly-posting, staining and detritus to name a few. The data shows levels of litter have fluctuated over the past 10 years, and though they are now lower than they were at the start of the survey (2001/02)<sup>18</sup> there is still much work to do.

It also shows that the occurrence of certain types of litter has been increasing. Smoking-related litter was by far the most common type of litter on our streets last year, appearing on a massive 83% of sites surveyed. This was followed by confectionery packaging and litter from non-alcoholic drinks.

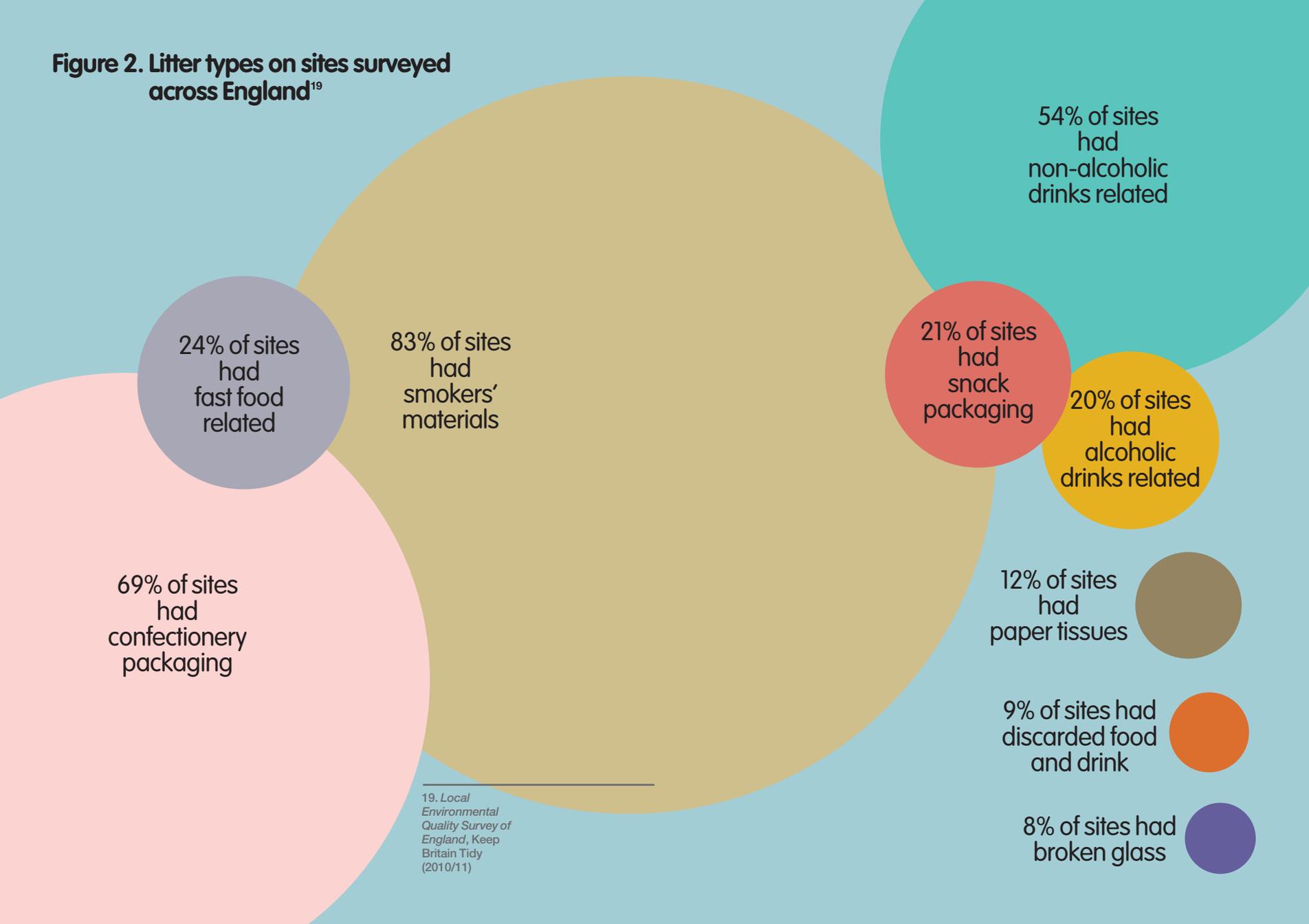
This data is very valuable because it helps us to understand trends across the country and also helps to inform us of any changes in littering behaviour that may be occurring. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of this litter data in more detail; it gives the percentage of sites surveyed that contained each litter item.

13. *The Word on our Street*, Keep Britain Tidy (2011)  
14. *Symphony Environmental Study*, Symphony Environmental (2005)  
15. News Release, Campaign to

Protect Rural England, <http://kbturl.me/1u> (27 May 2011)  
16. *Beachwatch Big Weekend 2010 Summary Report*, Marine Conservation Society (2010)

17. *Beachwatch Big Weekend 2010 Summary Report*, Marine Conservation Society (2010)  
18. *Local Environmental Quality Survey of England*, Keep Britain Tidy (2010/11)

**Figure 2. Litter types on sites surveyed across England<sup>19</sup>**



19. Local Environmental Quality Survey of England, Keep Britain Tidy (2010/11)

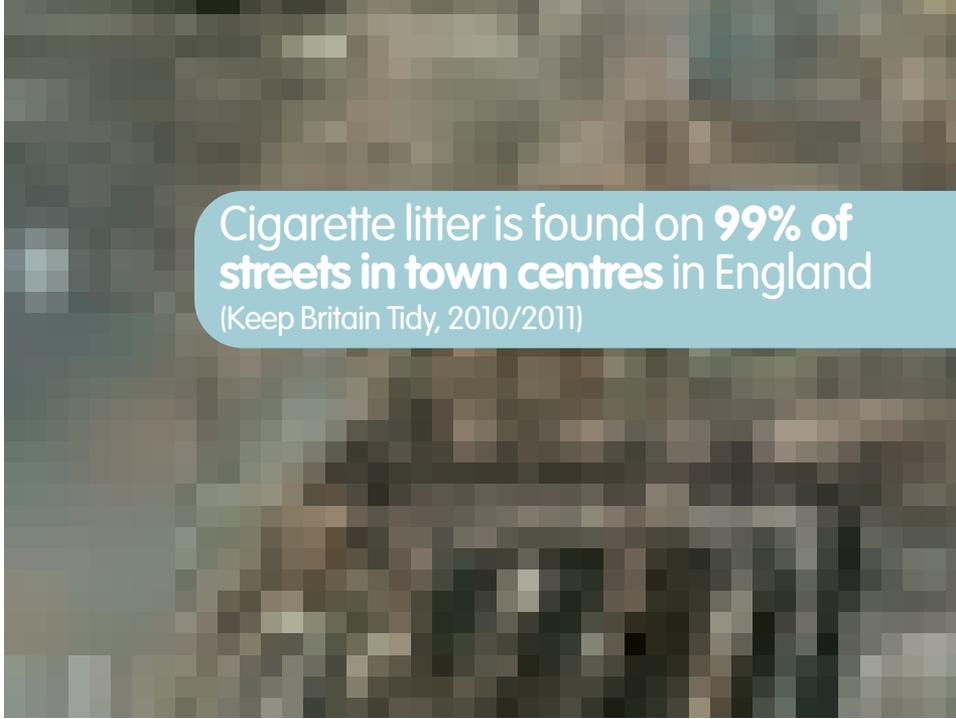
Keep Britain Tidy also tracks public perception of the local environment across England. We ask members of the public which types of litter they consider to be a problem in their local area. The most commonly mentioned item is cigarettes.<sup>20</sup> We also know that since the introduction of the smoking ban, around eight in 10 local authorities in England (85%) believe that the amount of smoking-related litter in their area has increased (to some extent).<sup>21</sup>

## There is no legal definition of 'litter'

The composition of litter is different in every location, but it generally tends to include materials that come from eating, drinking, and smoking.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, there is no legal (statutory) definition of litter, because this would be far too prescriptive. In fact, it is by *not* having a legal definition that the term 'litter' is able to encompass a very broad range of discarded items and fortunately this means that powers to tackle litter can be used in virtually every situation or circumstance.

20. *The Word on our Street*,  
Keep Britain Tidy (2011)  
21. *The Impact of the Smoke  
Free Legislation on Litter*,  
Keep Britain Tidy (2008)

22. *Local Environmental  
Quality Survey of England*,  
Keep Britain Tidy (2010/11)



Cigarette litter is found on **99% of streets in town centres** in England

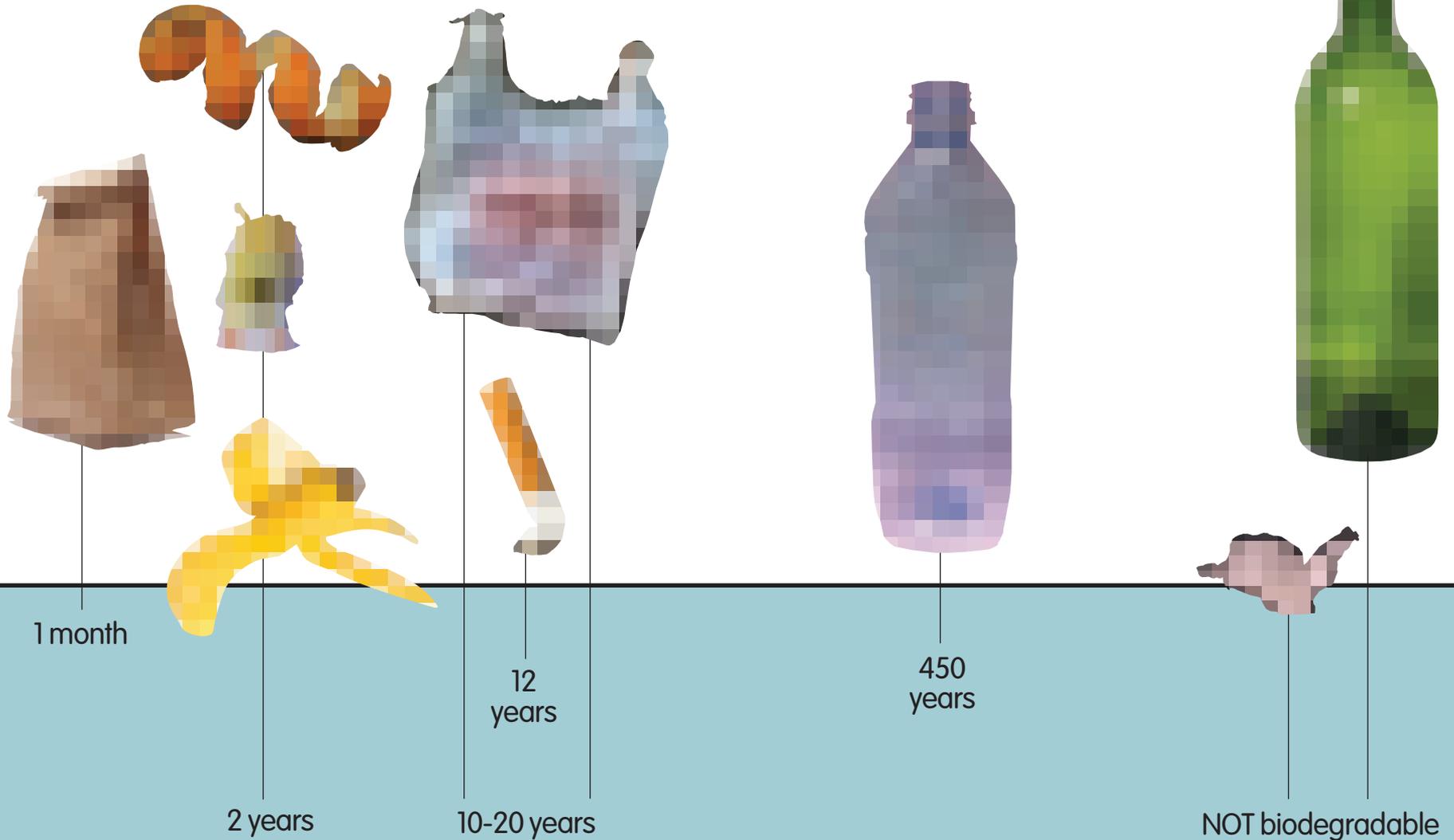
(Keep Britain Tidy, 2010/2011)

## It can take years for litter to biodegrade

If litter is not cleared away, it can take years for it to break down. For example, discarded orange peel can take up to two years to biodegrade, and cigarette butts that have been dropped on the ground can take up to 12 years to break down. Not only does this harm the environment, but dropped food can attract vermin such as rats or pigeons. In many towns and cities, urban seagulls and foxes are becoming an increasing problem, attracted by scraps of food and other rubbish that is left lying around. Figure 3 overleaf shows the approximate length of time it takes for various items of litter to biodegrade.

**Figure 3 Approximate length of time taken for litter to biodegrade\***

\*Dependent on where the item of litter is dropped and the conditions there.



A photograph of a park scene. In the foreground, a large, leafy tree with yellow-green foliage is partially visible. In the background, a person wearing a blue shirt and dark trousers is walking away from the camera. The overall scene is outdoors with green grass and trees.

In 2011/12 The Royal Parks spent £300,000 removing litter from Hyde Park  
(The Royal Parks, 2012)

In 2011/12 The Royal Parks spent more than 20% of its annual budget on cleaning the parks – more than it spent on flowers  
(The Royal Parks, 2012)

## Litter and the law

The growing concern about the environment over the past 60 years has also been characterised by an increase in litter legislation, which aimed to provide the means for both tackling the problem of pollution and improving the quality of the local environment. In 1971, the Dangerous Litter Act became law, increasing the maximum fine for dropping litter from £10 to £100. Then in 1983, the Litter Act was updated to place a duty on local authorities to provide litter bins and arrange for their emptying and cleaning.

Although these acts were introduced in the UK to tackle individual environmental problems, it was only when the landmark Environmental Protection Act (EPA) was introduced in 1990, that all regulation for air, water, and land pollution was brought together in one place. The EPA also updated the existing litter legislation and in doing so, defined more clearly the offence of leaving litter.

In 1983 a duty was placed on local authorities to provide litter bins and arrange for their emptying and cleaning  
(Litter Act, 1983)

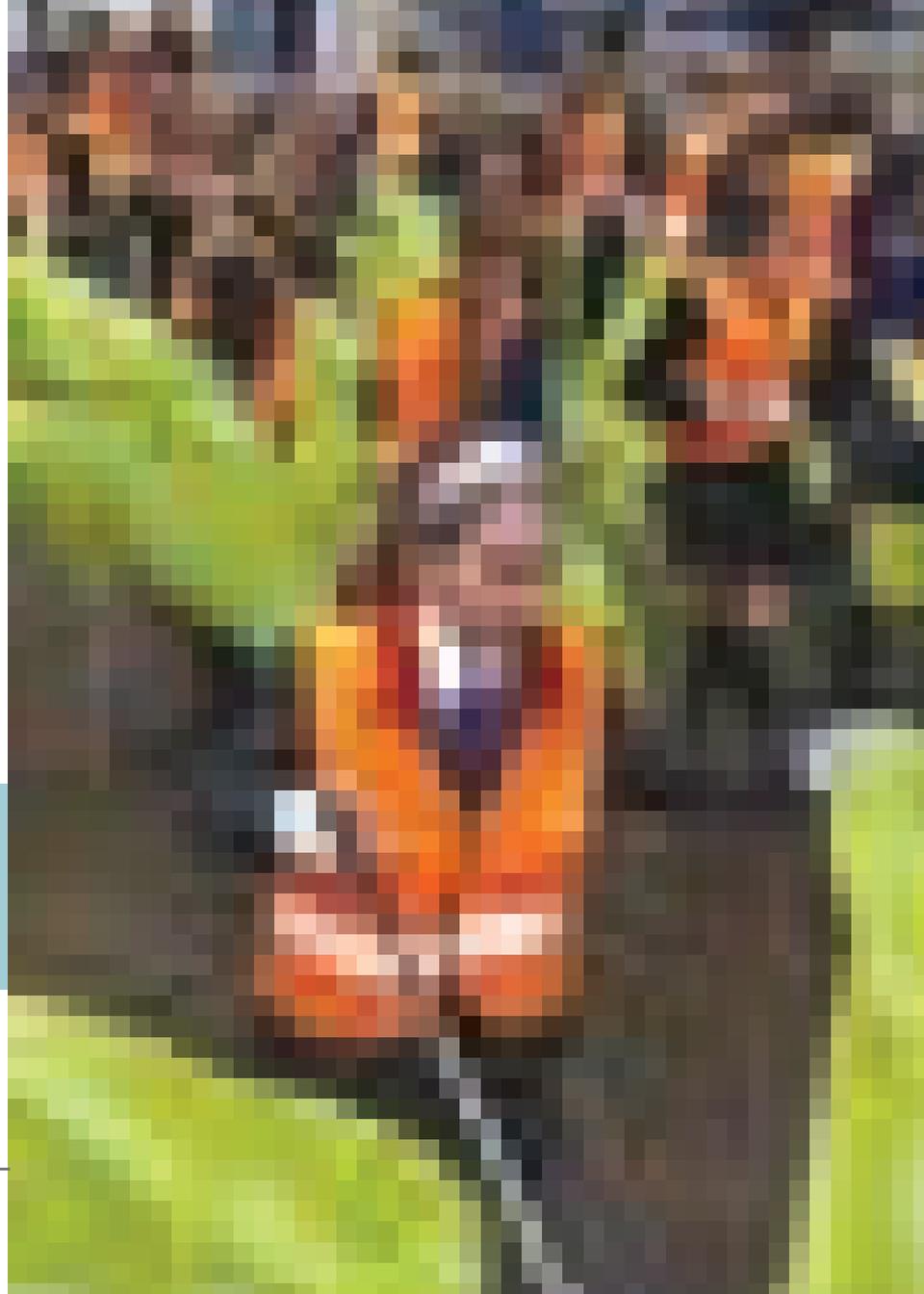
Most recently, the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 (CNEA) has given even more powers to land managers, allowing them to deal with a broader range of littering offences. In particular, it has given local authorities more powers to tackle problems with litter on both public and private land.

While the CNEA did lead to an increase in the range of powers that local authorities could use to tackle environmental problems, six years on from its introduction, there are questions as to whether local authorities are fully utilising these powers.<sup>23</sup>

Despite this, they are still seen by many local authorities as vital tools for dealing with the environmental problems and offences that they encounter on a daily basis.

It is an offence to drop litter. If caught, you can be issued with a fixed penalty notice of up to £80 (Clean Neighbourhood and Environment Act, 2005)

23. *This is Our Home, Keep Britain Tidy* (2010)





The main changes to existing litter legislation that were introduced by the CNEA are:

- Extending the scope of the offence of littering, so that it is no longer necessary for the act of littering to cause or contribute to defacement; the offence is simply the act of leaving or depositing litter.
- The offence of littering was also extended to include dropping litter in water and aquatic areas, including beaches anywhere above the low-water mark.
- Local authorities were given powers to issue Litter Clearing Notices to the occupier or owner of land that is defaced by litter or refuse. This offers a key tool for dealing with litter on private land which may potentially be blown or carried into neighbouring areas.
- Amending Street Litter Control Notices to make them applicable to vehicle stalls and other moveable structures used for street vending. This also means that mobile vendors can be required to minimise and clear up any litter or refuse that results from their commercial activities.

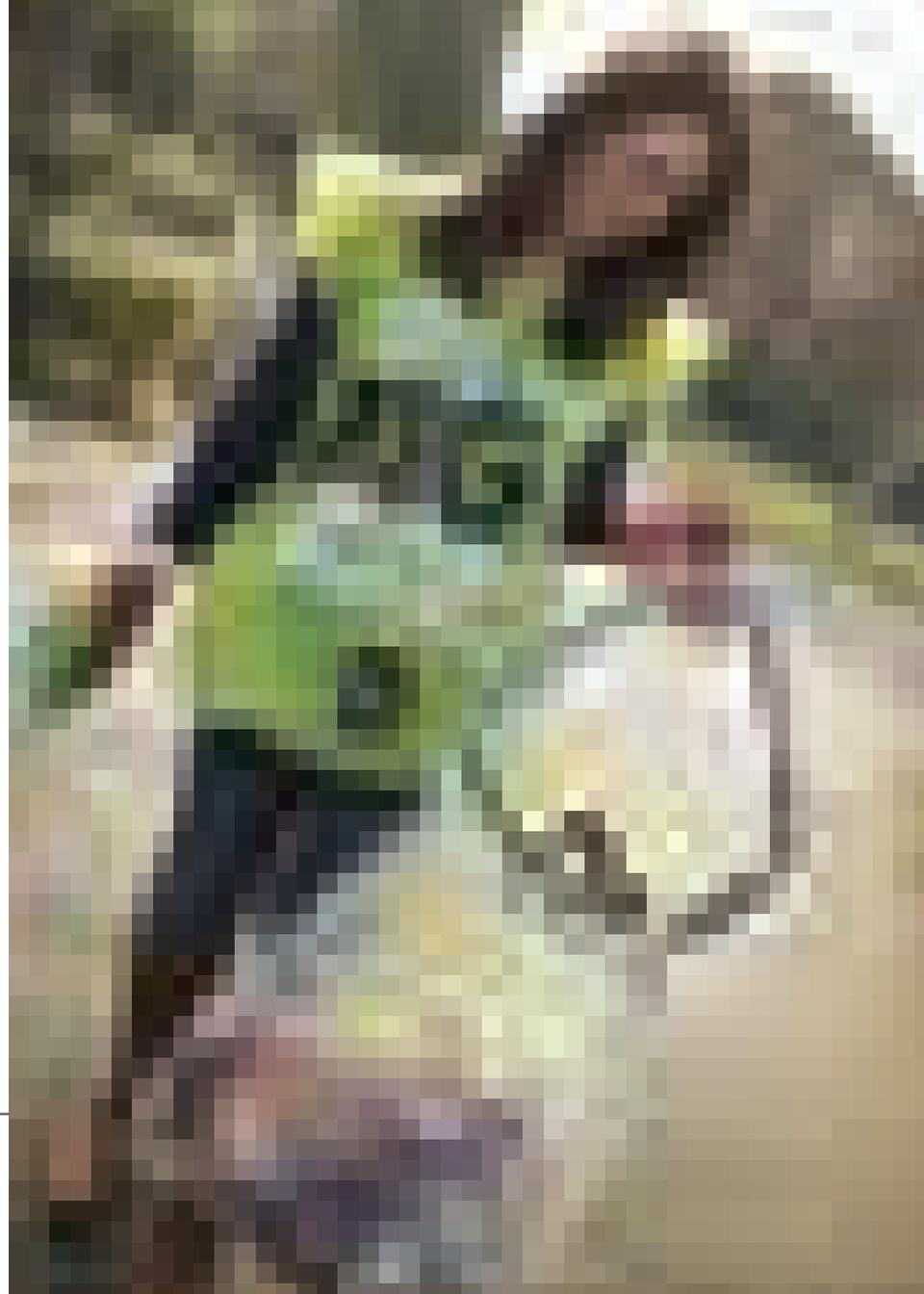
Although legislation is a very important tool that local authorities and other land managers can use to improve the quality of local environments, our research shows that using enforcement alone does not bring about real, lasting changes in people's behaviours.<sup>24</sup> Instead, a much broader approach is needed, which includes elements of education and engagement to raise awareness of the importance of caring for the environment and explain what positive actions this can involve. Effective campaigning and providing opportunities for people to do the right thing are key parts of this. It is also essential that litter bins are well managed as overflowing bins attract more litter.<sup>25</sup>

It is because of this that Keep Britain Tidy has a long history of campaigning against litter and for cleaner, greener local environments. Over the past 58 years our anti-littering messages have appeared across every part of the country, aiming to raise awareness of the litter problem and to encourage positive behaviour change and we know that they work, at least in the short term. For example, in 2009 when we campaigned on fast food litter, we recorded a 31% reduction in key locations monitored throughout England. Similarly in 2007, when we campaigned on cigarette litter, we observed a 23% reduction in monitored areas, despite the introduction of the smoking ban inside public buildings.

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24. *The Effectiveness of Enforcement on Behaviour Change*, Keep Britain Tidy (2011)

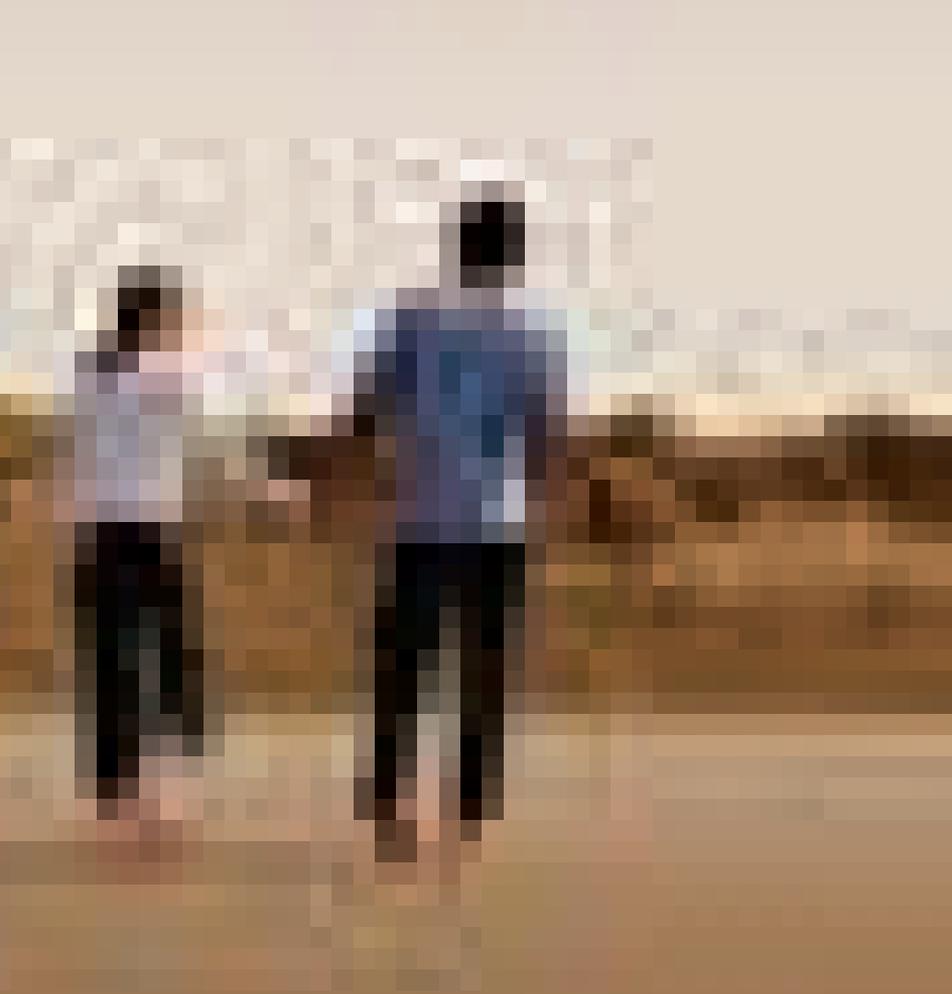
25. Hyde Park Experiment, Keep Britain Tidy (2011)



## The impact of litter

The consequences of litter being dropped are far ranging and go much deeper than the basic appearance of an area and an increase in street cleansing costs. As well as the social and wellbeing costs that are associated with littering, there are also implications for the local economy. The impact assessment that was carried out for the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (2005) highlighted considerable economic benefits for businesses that are located in cleaner neighbourhoods. These benefits were shown to include: attracting more customers, increased levels of tourism, more investment in local enterprise, an improved range of businesses in the area, improved staff retention and increased house prices.

Similarly, a 2005 study found that the single, most important factor influencing people's decisions about which beach to visit, was the beach's cleanliness.<sup>26</sup> When we consider how important tourism is to local coastal economies, the potential impact of littering becomes clear. Litter also poses a significant threat to animal populations; the RSPCA receives over 7,000 calls about litter-related incidents annually.<sup>27</sup>



The single, most important factor influencing people's decisions about which beaches to visit is the beach's cleanliness

(Keep Britain Tidy, 2005)

26. *Beach and Surrounding Area User Segmentation*, Keep Britain Tidy (2005)

27. *Litter Costs Lives*, RSPCA <http://kbturl.me/1w> (2011)

Finally, research has shown that people's overall satisfaction with their neighbourhood is the product of their visual assessment of it,<sup>28</sup> and once an area has become littered, the perceptions held by those who use or 'experience' the area can be influenced by the levels of this litter.

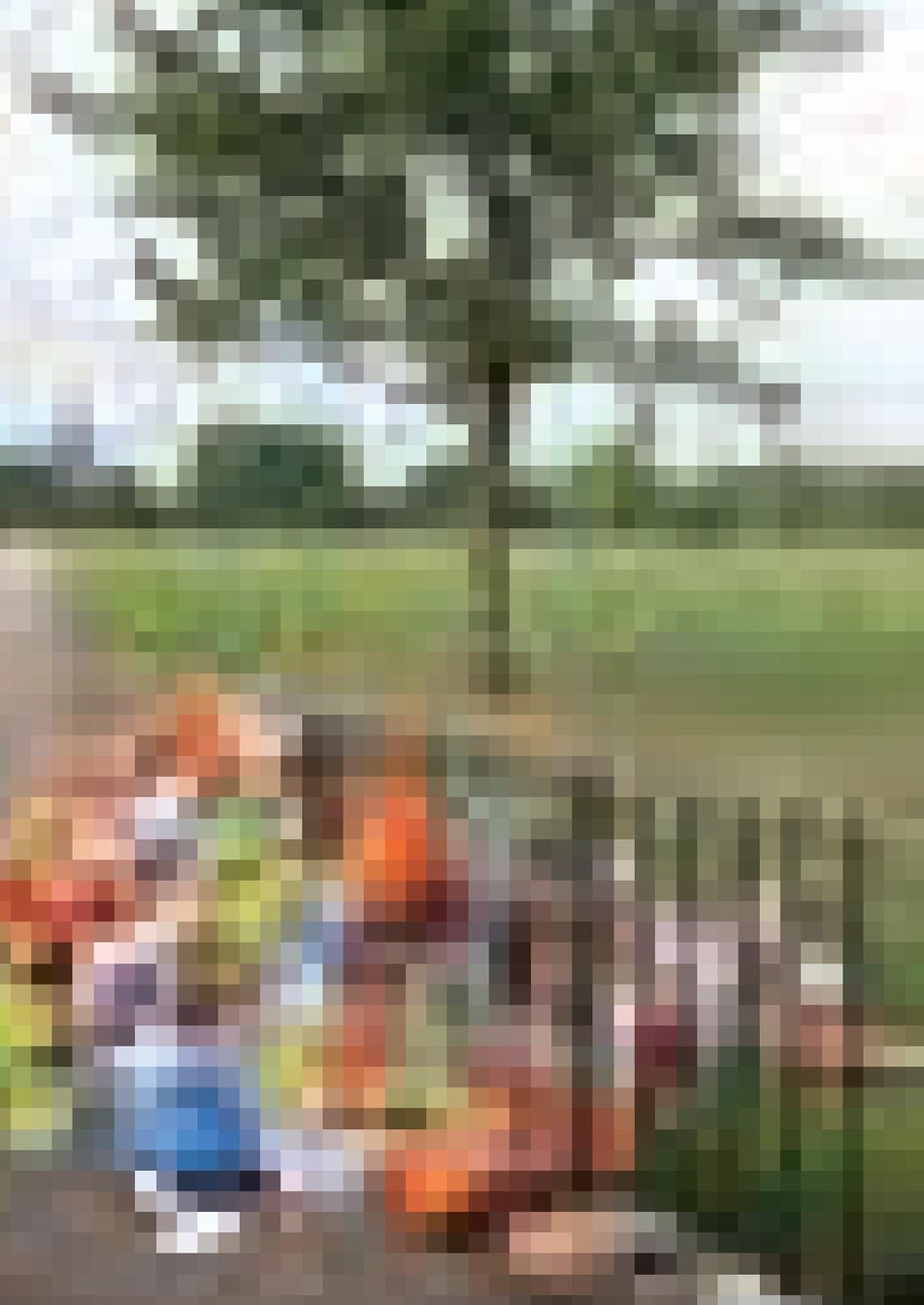
Indeed, the very presence of litter is enough to persuade or dissuade someone from creating even more litter. For instance, a person is more likely to feel guilty about dropping litter in a clean and well maintained area than they are in a dirty and littered area in which they may feel that the addition of one more piece of litter will make little difference to the overall appearance of the area.<sup>29</sup> Litter can impact on people's behaviours and understanding people's behaviours is key to tackling the litter problem. So let's look at these behaviours in more detail.

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28. *Physical Capital: Liveability in 2005*, MORI for CABI (2005)  
29. *People Who Litter*, Keep Britain Tidy (2007)



The presence of litter is enough to persuade or dissuade someone from creating even more litter  
(Keep Britain Tidy, 2007)



# Littering Behaviours

## What is littering?

We know that that seven out of 10 people in England say they would feel guilty for dropping some litter.<sup>30</sup> However, we wanted to better understand what actions and behaviours people actually consider to be 'littering'. We also wanted to know whether there were any occasions when the general public would find it acceptable to drop litter.

We gave people a list of actions and asked them to tell us which, if any, they believed were *not* littering behaviours.<sup>31</sup> Of these, two actions stand out more than the others – leaving a newspaper on a train and placing items on the floor next to a full bin. Almost four in 10 people think that leaving a newspaper on the train is not littering (38%) and almost three in 10 believe that placing items on the floor next to a full bin is not littering (29%).



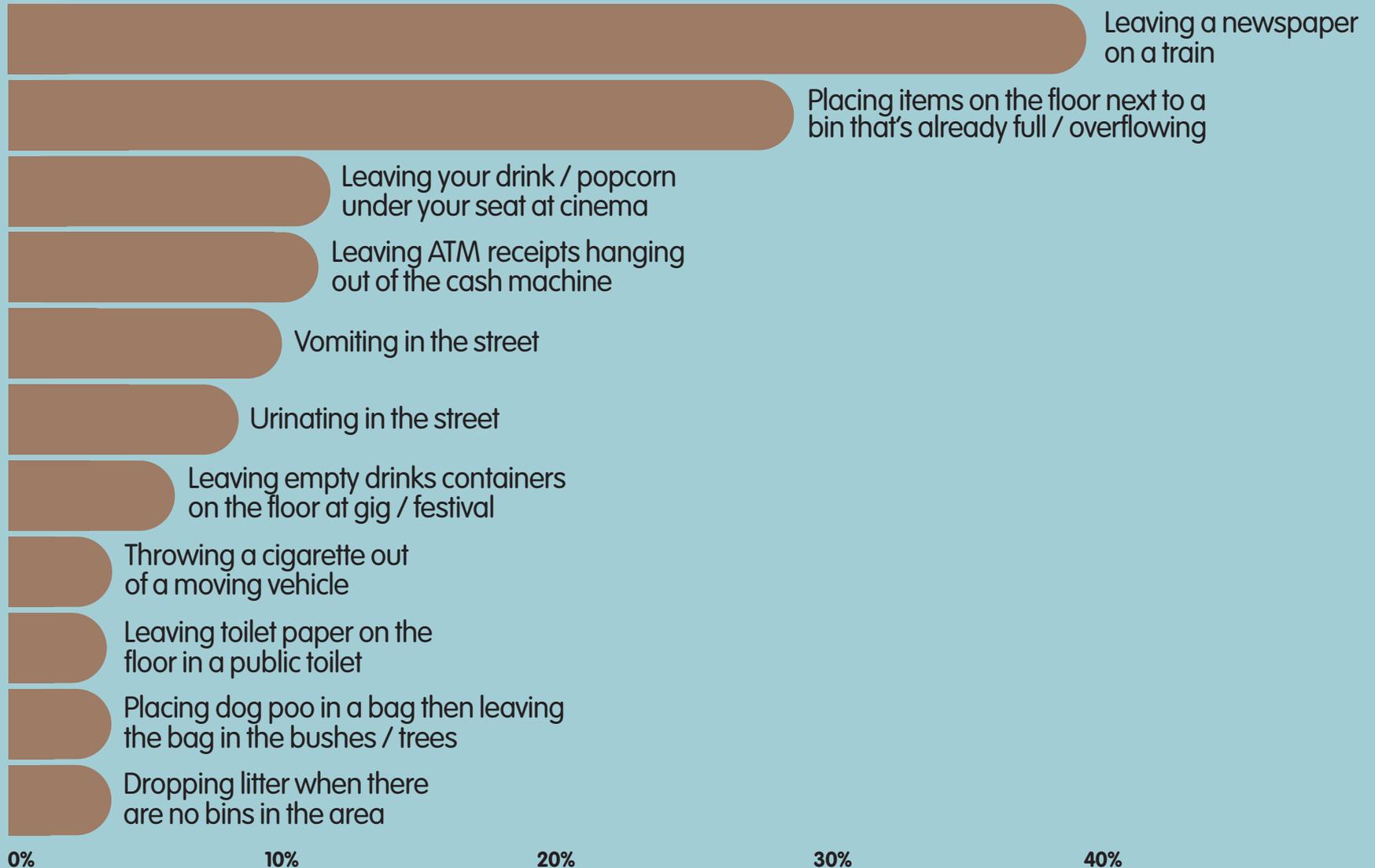
People's own littering behaviours are influenced by the actions of others  
(Keep Britain Tidy, 2012)

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30. *The Word on our Street*,  
Keep Britain Tidy (2011)

31. Omnibus Survey, 829 adults  
surveyed across England,  
conducted by TNS (February 2012)

**Figure 4 Actions that people believe are not littering behaviours**



Other actions score much lower than these, perhaps suggesting that the public find them far more offensive. For example, only 3% of people think that placing dog poo in a bag then leaving the bag in the bushes or trees, or throwing cigarettes out of a moving vehicle are *not* littering.

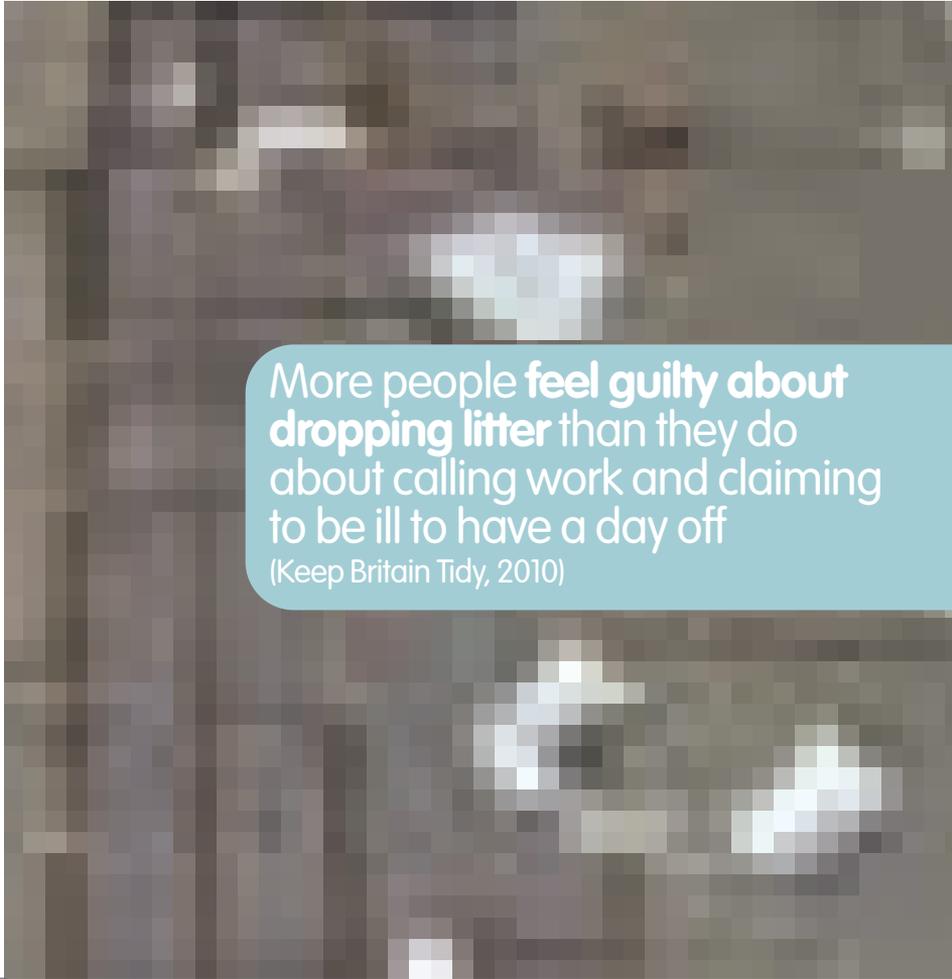
We also asked the public in which situations they thought people would be most likely to drop or leave litter. The two most common responses were, when people are drunk (70%) and when there are no bins nearby (67%). The results also show that the presence of other people also plays an important part in whether or not people will litter; 58% of us believe that people are more likely to leave litter when no-one can see them. This supports our previous work on littering behaviours, which shows that our actions are very often influenced by others.

**31% of the general public  
admit to littering from a car**  
(Keep Britain Tidy, 2010)

## Who drops litter?

Litter would not exist without people, and because of this, litter problems can be directly linked to people's behaviours. Our research at Keep Britain Tidy shows that despite the appearance of local areas being vitally important to people, 62% of the English public still drop litter.<sup>32</sup> We wanted to try to understand why, if so many people find littering offensive, do they still drop litter? Why do people think one way, yet *behave* another?

In order to better understand people's attitudes towards littering and their littering behaviour, we carried out a large scale behavioural segmentation study. This type of research divides the general public into different groups or 'segments' of people, based on certain characteristics. It is a technique widely used by commercial businesses to identify consumer groups to better target communications.<sup>33</sup>



More people feel guilty about dropping litter than they do about calling work and claiming to be ill to have a day off  
(Keep Britain Tidy, 2010)

32. Litter Segmentation, Keep Britain Tidy (2010)

33. *People Who Litter*, Keep Britain Tidy (2007)

## Behaviour types of people who litter

All our campaigns are based on research into littering and littering behaviours. Understanding the attitudes and behaviours of litter droppers allows us to highly target our campaigns to specific audiences. In this way, we can ensure we are educating and engaging with the public in the most effective ways possible, to bring about positive changes to people's behaviour.

Keep Britain Tidy first carried out this segmentation in 2001 to better understand litter droppers. We repeated the process in 2006 to establish whether there had been any changes in the segments, in terms of people's litter dropping behaviours. We identified five distinct groups of litter droppers. We have given each segment a name which we feel best represents their attitude towards dropping litter, and they are described overleaf. *(Remember that non-litter droppers account for 38% of the population.)*

**94%** of people think that roadside litter gives a bad impression of Britain

(AA/Populus panel, 2009)

**62%** of people in England drop litter, though only **28%** admit to it

(Keep Britain Tidy, 2010 & 2011)

"A spray of  
**chips**  
 along the road,  
 that's grim"

## 'Beautifully Behaved'

This group makes up **43%** of the population. It consists of people who say that they don't drop litter, but they might drop apple cores/fruit peel and small pieces of paper. However, they don't see their behaviour as a problem. Members of this group are more likely to be female, under 34 years of age.

This group tends to consider litter to be something dirty, and they are quite 'visual' in their feelings towards litter; the appearance of it and any related hygiene issues are particular

concerns. They can't understand why dropping apple cores is littering, but they are willing to rethink their behaviour once they know.

The Beautifully Behaved group also think that people who litter have no respect or are lazy, whereas people who don't litter (remember they consider this to include themselves) have been "*brought up properly*". This group feel that it is more acceptable to drop apple cores in the countryside than in the city because "*apple cores fit in with their surroundings in rural areas.*"

"How can  
**apple cores**  
 be a problem?  
 They feed the birds"

## 'Guilty'

This group know that dropping litter is wrong, but find carrying litter around inconvenient, so instead they drop it furtively. This group comprises **7%** of the population. Members of this group are more concerned with the inconvenience and visual impact of litter and the hygiene issues associated with it.

They are also concerned with the amount of fast food litter and they feel that it is more due to the volume of fast food outlets and people dropping litter at night.

Members of the 'Guilty' group drop litter with more feelings of guilt than the other groups, hence their name.

"If nobody  
**sees you,**  
you can pretend  
you haven't done it"

"If people are  
around, you're  
**far less**  
**likely**  
to litter"

Compared to the other groups, they feel that dog mess is less of a problem than it used to be, and they also consider that littering is lazy and down to a lack of parental education.

The 'Guilty' group like being in public gatherings such as concerts where they feel they have an excuse to litter, and when they are drunk their feelings of guilt for littering are diminished. They are also far less likely to drop litter themselves if there are other people around and would never drop litter in front of their children. Members of this group are more likely to be female and aged 18-24 or 45-54.

“Bins are so  
**shallow...**  
things get blown  
out of them”

## ‘Blamer’

This group makes up **6%** of the population. They blame the council for inadequate bin provision, as well as fast food outlets, teenagers, and packaging manufacturers. This group also has a very ‘visual’ response to litter, finding it offensive to look at. They would be embarrassed if someone caught them littering and would pick it up whilst making excuses for their behaviour. They think that people who litter are lazy, but if there aren’t any bins, if the bins are full/overflowing or if there is

already a lot of litter around then it is okay to litter. However, several people in this group also feel that councils’ hands are tied in terms of bin provision, because of the terrorism and security threats they potentially pose.

Members of this group are more likely to be male and aged 25 or under. They also feel that people would not litter if they have a good upbringing.

“People would  
**drop less** litter  
if there were  
**more bins**”

## 'Justifier'

This group makes up **4%** of the population. They justify their littering behaviour, saying that everyone else is doing it. Members of this group are more likely to be concerned with the dangers or hazards that litter poses, rather than its appearance. They use this to justify their littering behaviour, saying that their actions don't pose any danger, and that there are often no bins around to put their waste in.

"It's not  
**dangerous,**  
so I drop litter"

"An apple core  
or a cigarette  
**isn't as bad**  
as a can"

This group feel it is acceptable to leave litter behind on a train, on the floor at a football match, or on the ground at a taxi rank because they feel there is nothing else to do with it. They also think it is acceptable to drop cigarette butts out of a car window because of the fire hazard they pose if left inside the vehicle. They are also happy to litter small items, such as cigarettes, on beaches and in the countryside. Members of the justifier group are more likely to be males and aged 25-35.



## 'Life's Too Short' and 'Am I bothered?'

The 'Am I Bothered?' group is a sub-group of 'Life's Too Short'; they both show a disregard for the consequences of littering and so the marketing strategies used to engage with them are very similar. Together they make up just **2%** of the population.

The 'Life's Too Short' group are concerned with the impact that litter has on themselves and the level of inconvenience it leads to. They do not see apple cores as an issue and they think that paper just biodegrades in the wet weather. However, plastic bags and "*bigger*" types of litter are slightly higher concerns due to the associated safety risks.

Members of the 'Life's Too Short' group have a sense that although dropping litter is 'wrong' it still needs to be disposed of, so they want immediate access to a bin, otherwise they are highly likely to drop it. They are also quite likely to drop litter in a place that is already messy; they won't drop litter if an area is spotlessly clean. Members of this group also consider it acceptable to leave litter at football matches and other public gatherings, where they think that the mess will be cleared up by event organisers.



The 'Am I Bothered?' sub-group tend to view litter by its visual impact and biodegradability; they feel that packaging is more biodegradable nowadays, and consequently they can drop it without consideration. Although they happily discard chewing gum, they do not like the appearance of it. They do not consider apple cores to be litter, and they litter them automatically without any thought.

**“It’s easier  
to chuck it on  
the floor than  
look for a bin”**

**“ I drop litter  
anywhere,  
I wouldn’t give it a  
second  
thought ”**

Members of the 'Am I Bothered?' group don't want the inconvenience of holding on to litter; once they have finished with it, they want to get rid of it as soon as possible. They consider it much more acceptable to throw litter from a vehicle, or bury cigarette butts in the sand at a beach, though they generally tend to drop litter in areas where fewer people are present.

Members of the 'Life's Too Short' and 'Am I Bothered?' groups are more likely to be male, aged 25 or under, smokers, unemployed, and have a low level of guilt for other socially unacceptable behaviour.



People don't like to use bins that are full or that look dirty  
(Keep Britain Tidy, 2006)

## What else affects littering behaviours?

We asked members of the public to share their views on litter: what do they think it is, who do they think drops it, where and when.

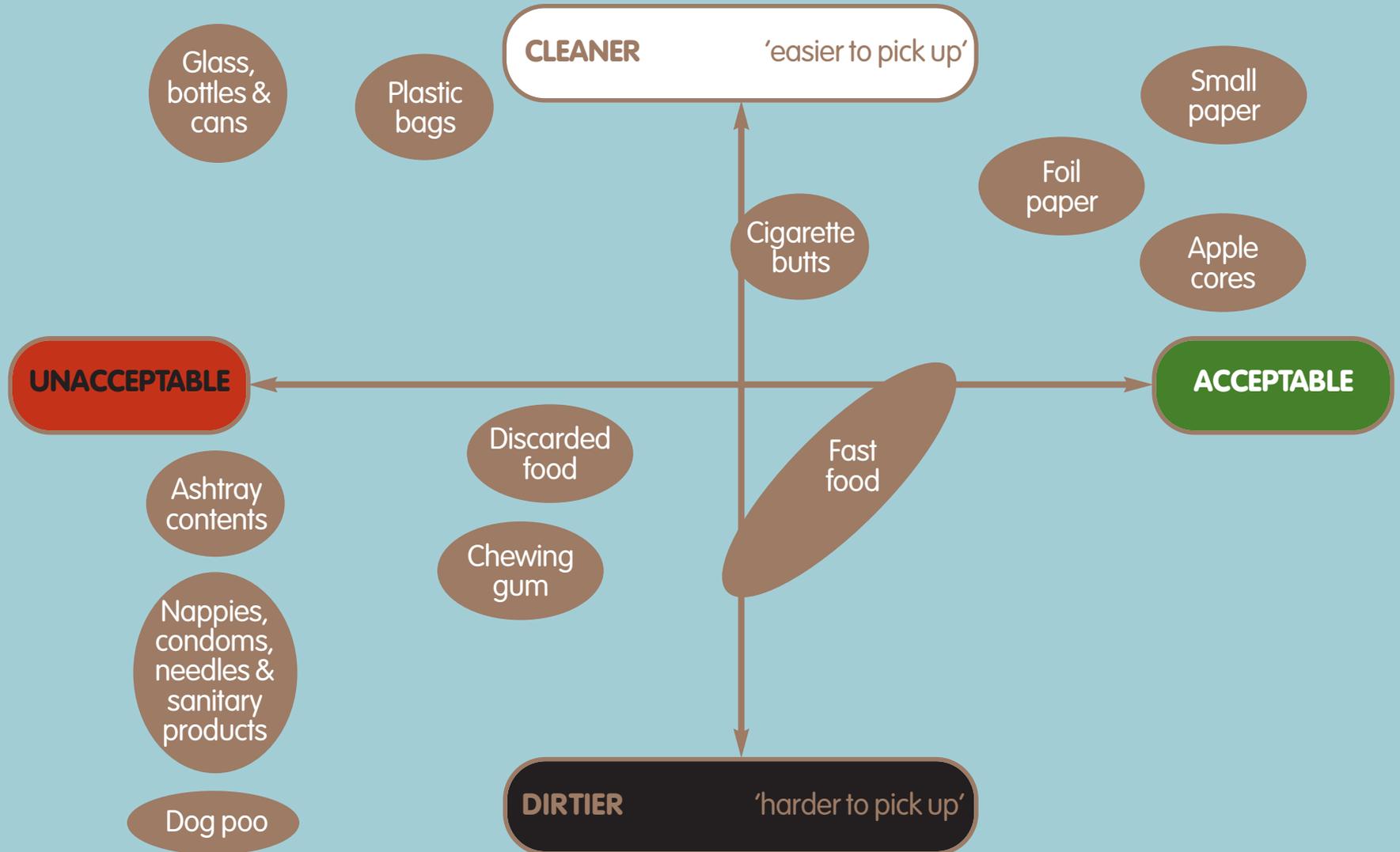
### People categorise litter by its cleanliness and dirtiness

We observed that people tend to classify items of litter according to their size, frequency, biodegradability, likelihood to be hazardous, and cleanliness.<sup>34</sup> From this, it could be seen that the two most important dimensions were how acceptable or unacceptable the litter was, and how clean or dirty it was deemed to be. Using this data, we have been able to create a litter map (Figure 5) to show how people categorise different types of litter.

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34. *People Who Litter*,  
Keep Britain Tidy (2007)

**Figure 5 Litter mapping: Acceptability of litter versus its ease of cleansing**



This litter map shows that the public believe small pieces of paper are the most acceptable type of litter and the easiest to clean up. Interestingly, the results of our latest *Local Environmental Quality Survey of England* also shows that small pieces of paper were most often found littered in areas where a bin was actually present!<sup>35</sup> This further suggests that the public are more likely to drop items of litter that they consider to be easy to clean up.

Our research also showed that people rationalise littering behaviours; they consider some reasons more acceptable and excusable for dropping litter than others. This is characterised in the model overleaf.

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35. *Local Environmental Quality Survey of England, Keep Britain Tidy* (2010/2011)

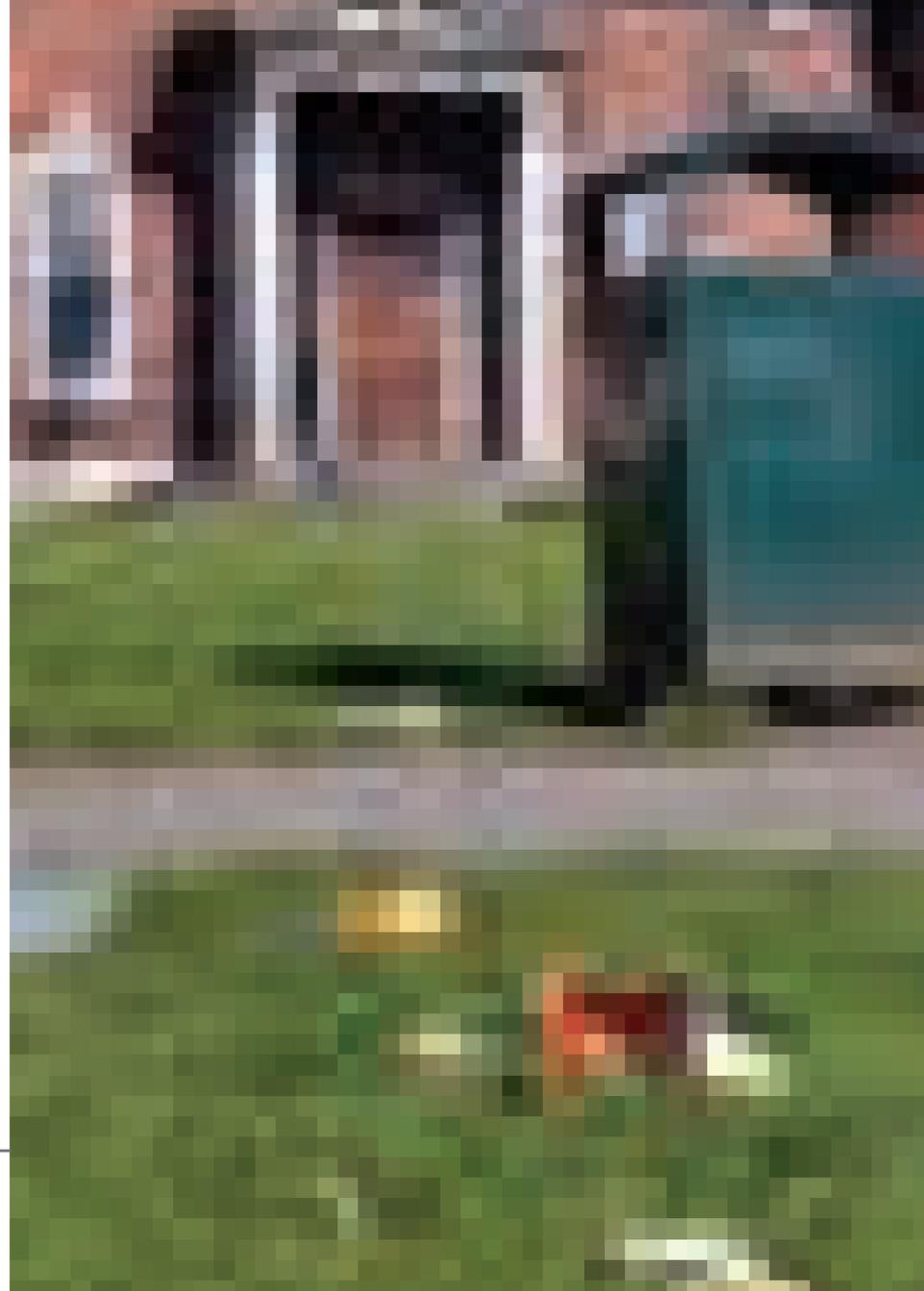
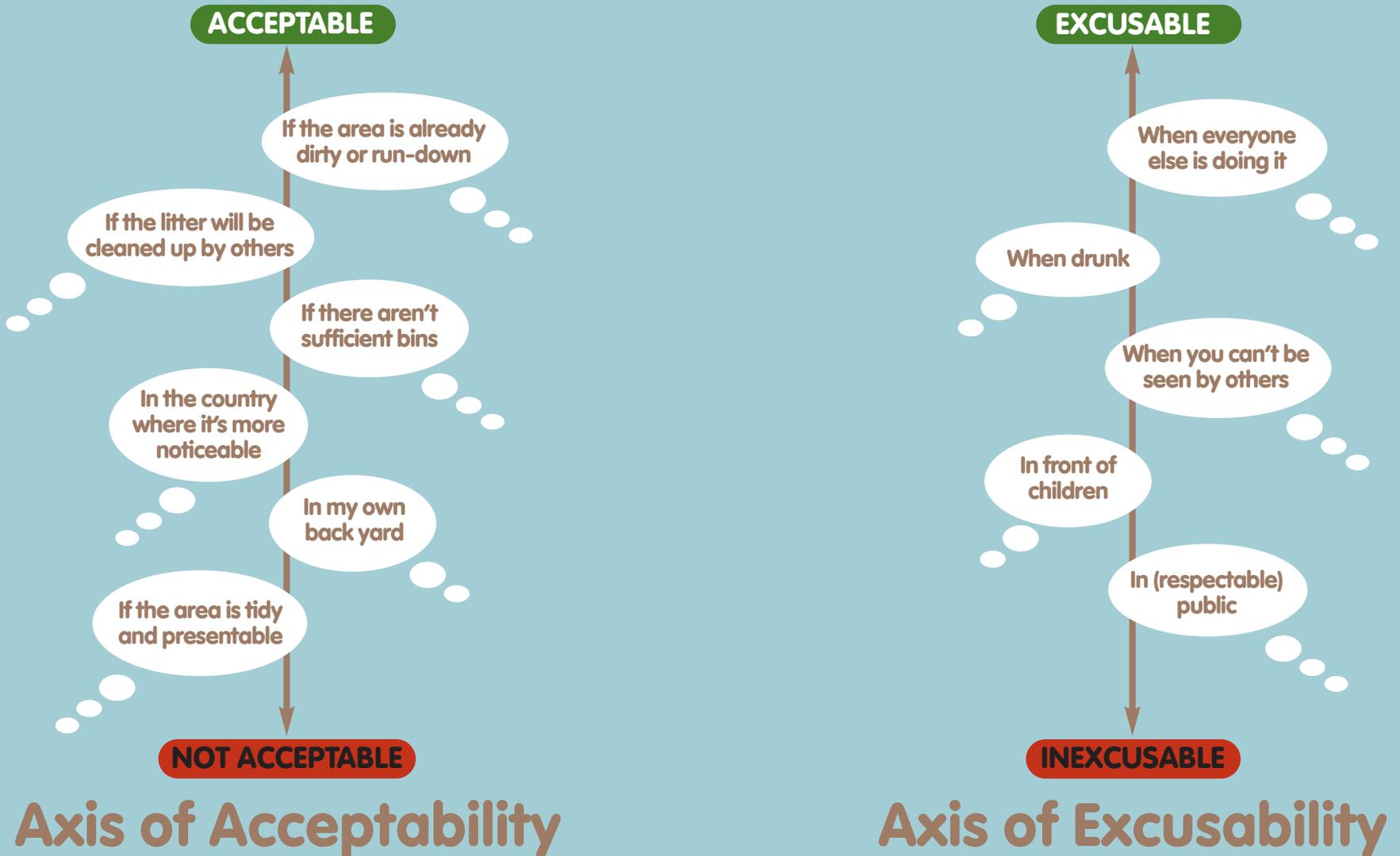


Figure 6 The axis of acceptability and excusability



## People's littering behaviour depends on where they are and who they are with

The axis of excusability suggests that the wider influences of society and culture play an important role in influencing people's actions. Indeed, we can see how people actually alter their littering behaviour depending on different circumstances such as who they are with, or where they are at the time. For example, our research has shown that most teenagers appear to have a total lack of guilt when it comes to littering and they admit to dropping litter almost on a daily basis.<sup>36</sup> They told us that being around their friends influences their littering behaviour – *“you wouldn't really put litter in a bin at school with your mates, it's a bit embarrassing.”* Parents and school, perhaps unsurprisingly, have the greatest impact on teenagers' littering behaviour – *“My parents are very strict, so I wouldn't drop stuff on the floor if I was with them, otherwise I would.”*

**7 out of 10** people say they would feel guilty for dropping some litter and they are more likely to feel guilty dropping litter in an area that is clean and well-maintained

(Keep Britain Tidy, 2010)

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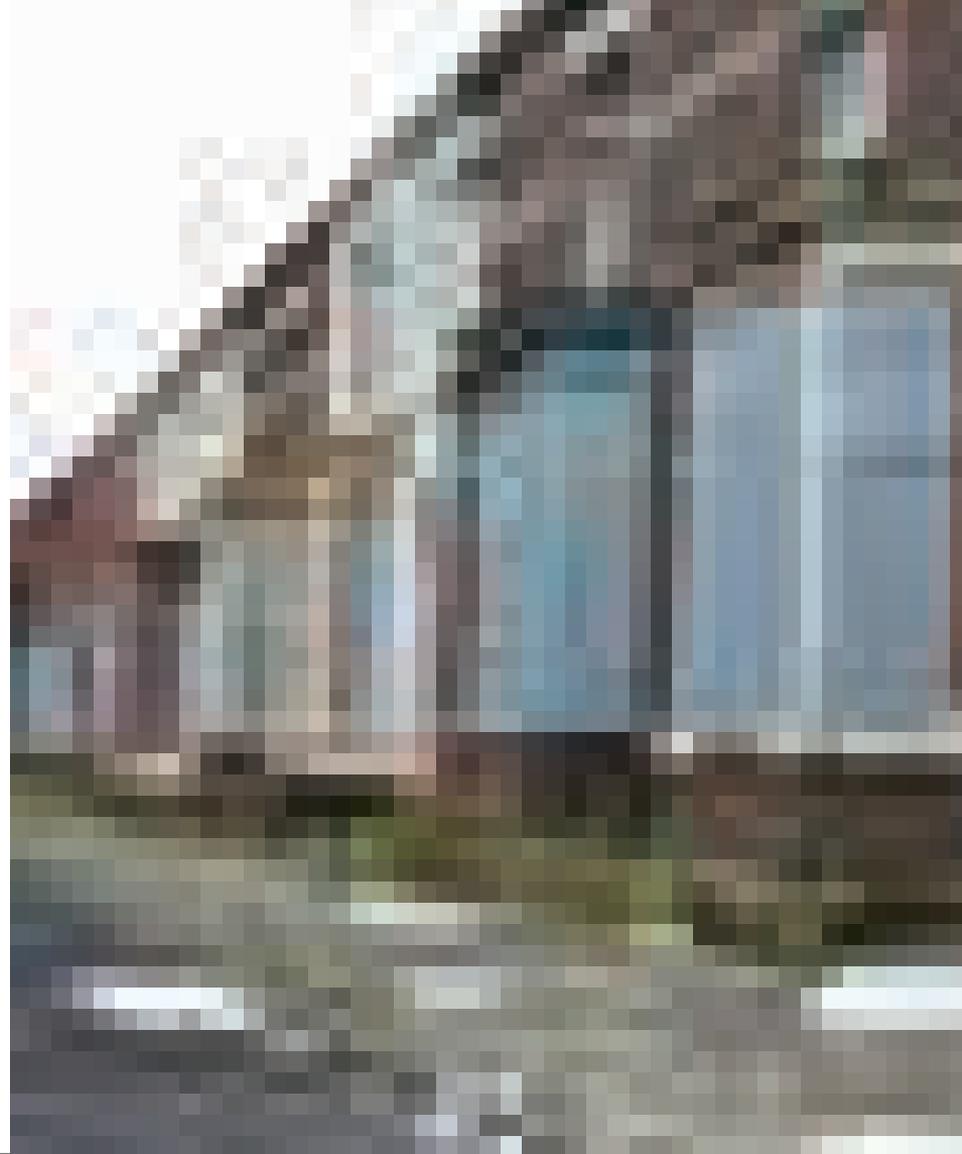
<sup>36</sup>. *I'm Just a Teenage Dirtbag, Baby!* Keep Britain Tidy (2004)

## The existing environment affects people's littering behaviour

People's littering behaviours are not only influenced by their peers, but they can also be affected by the existing condition and quality of the local environment. For example, our latest research shows that 49% of us believe that people are more likely to drop litter when there is already lots of litter lying around.<sup>37</sup> The well-known 'Broken Windows Theory'<sup>38</sup> also suggests that if a neighbourhood is already covered with graffiti and litter, then it not only encourages people to litter even more, but it can even encourage low-level criminal behaviour.

The principles behind the 'Broken Windows Theory' centre around the idea that people's own behaviours are influenced by the actions of others. In our field, this was first researched in 1982 by social scientists Wilson and Kelling, who found that people were more likely to exhibit positive environmental behaviour in neighbourhoods that they believed were more clean and safe, compared to those areas that were not. In fact, this was found to undermine the strength of the local community and it was predicted that a clear spiral of decline may easily start, leading to deprivation at a local level.

This understanding of how human behaviours are greatly influenced by low-level environmental problems has been successfully used to tackle crime in many cities such as New York, Rome and Vancouver, with police officers ordered to make arrests for even low level crimes such as drinking in the streets.<sup>39</sup>



37. Omnibus Survey, 829 adults surveyed across England, conducted by TNS (February 2012)  
38. Broken Windows, Wilson, J.Q., and Kelling, G.L. The Atlantic

Monthly (March 1982)  
39. Broken Windows Theory Boosted by New Study, Canwest News Service. <http://kbturl.me/1x> (2008)

## Other people's behaviour matters

The idea that people do things by observing and copying others has been successfully demonstrated in much of the research carried out in the field of behavioural economics, one of the principles of which is that other people's behaviour matters.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, people are often encouraged to do things when they feel that others actually *approve* of their behaviour.<sup>41</sup> Finally, more recent studies show that if there is lots of graffiti present and litter on the ground in an area, people are twice as likely to carry out acts of crime.<sup>42</sup>

If someone thinks that an area is uncared for or unmanaged, it suggests that 'anything goes' and people begin to perceive that it is unlikely that there will be consequences for negative behaviour. It has also been demonstrated that areas that are already littered experience a five-fold increase in littering, compared to 'clean' areas.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, research has shown that litter is less likely to occur in already 'clean' locations.<sup>44</sup>

40. *Influence: Science and Practice*, Robert B. Cialdini (2000)

41. *Behavioural Economics: Seven principles for policy-makers*, New Economics Foundation (2005)

42. Kees Keizer, et al. The Spreading of Disorder, *Science* 322, 1681 (2008), Our Natural Health Service, Natural England, Sheffield. Armitage, R, An Evaluation of Secured by Design Housing within West Yorkshire, for ACPO, Huddersfield University, Huddersfield (2009); and Keizer, K., Lindenberg, S., Steg, L., A Re-Evaluation Study (2008)

43. Finnie, W. C., (1973) Field experiments in litter control, *Environment and Behaviour*, 5, (1973) and Geller, E. S., Witmer, J. F. Tuso M. A., Environmental interventions for litter control. *Journal of Applied Psychology* (1977)

44. Cialdini R.B., Reno R.R., Kallgren C. A., A focus theory of normative conduct: Recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, (1990)

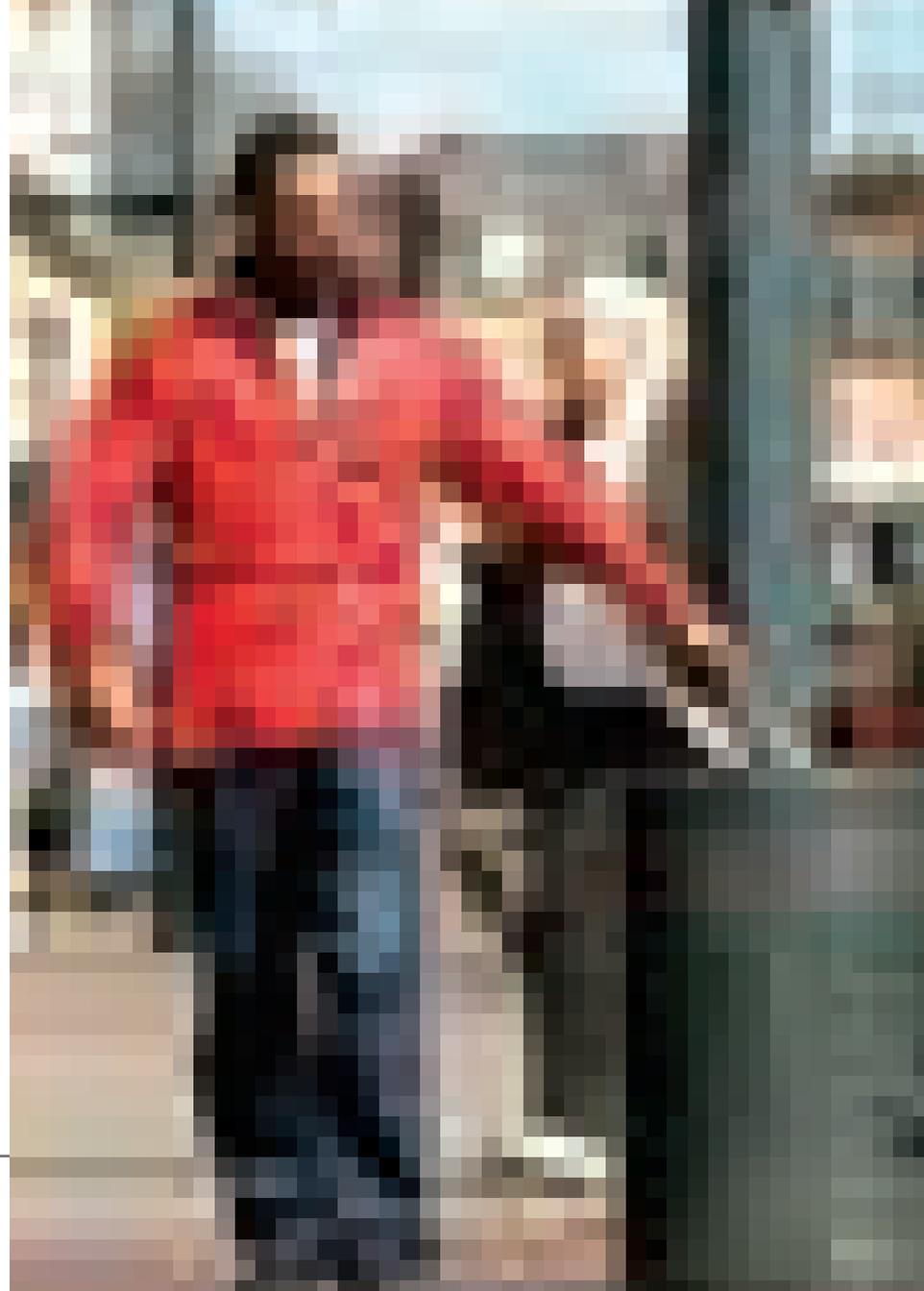
## The design and maintenance of litter bins affects people's littering behaviour

Much of the research carried out by Keep Britain Tidy shows that people can often blame their littering behaviour on a lack of litter bins. As we previously saw, the 'Blamer' group say that their littering behaviour is caused by an inadequate bin provision, and in our vehicle litter research, many commercial drivers (e.g. HGV drivers) commented that one of the reasons they were likely to litter out of their vehicles (rather than wait to find a bin) is because there are often no bins in lay-bys and where there are bins, they are usually full.<sup>45</sup> Our research also shows that people don't like to use bins that look full or dirty.

Although a lack of bins is sometimes used as an excuse for littering behaviour, though it might not always be the case, local authorities should still consider the strategic placement of litter bins and litter bin design as a useful way begin to tackle litter problems and encourage positive behaviour.

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45. Vehicle Litter Research, Keep Britain Tidy (2009)



## The impact of litter type on behaviour

In addition to the impact that society and culture can have on people's actions, our research has shown that there are certain types of litter that can cause people to behave differently.

**28%** of smokers don't think  
cigarette butts are litter

(Keep Britain Tidy, 2011)

## Cigarette litter

Although cigarette butts were thought to be a less acceptable form of litter than small bits of paper due to their size and nature, the public still believe they are relatively easily cleaned up.<sup>46</sup> However, the research also shows that cigarette litter is mostly considered offensive when it is found in large quantities – particularly around ‘smoking zones’ such as building entrances, bus stops, and local hospitals.

In order to understand this better, we conducted some research into the littering behaviours of smokers.<sup>47</sup> While some smokers insisted they never dropped cigarette butts, most said the way they got rid of them depended on three main factors: whether anyone was looking, whether there was somewhere to put it and where they were at the time.

This research also showed that many smokers don’t actually think of cigarette butts as litter and as such they treat them differently than they would other items of rubbish, almost dropping them subconsciously. We also found that women tended to feel more guilty about dropping cigarette butts on the floor than men did.

“ There’s nothing worse than a big pile of **cig ends around hospital entrances** and supermarket car parks ”

“ If I was on holiday and **knew nobody knew me,** it wouldn’t matter and **then I’d lob it** [cigarette butt] **in the street** ”

“ People will point out **there’s a crisp packet on the floor,** I’ve never known anyone to point out a **cigarette butt.** I think **it’s socially accepted** ”

46. Litter Segmentation, Keep Britain Tidy (2006)

47. Smoking-Related Litter, Keep Britain Tidy (2005)



// The dog poo thing  
has become a much bigger issue  
because it's now known to be  
**dangerous**  
to children //

## Dog fouling

In contrast to small pieces of paper and cigarette butts, the litter map in Figure 5 shows that the public consider dog fouling to be by far the most unacceptable and dirtiest type of litter. Research conducted after this map was created has confirmed that dog fouling is the issue people consider to be a priority, in terms of the importance they place on tackling it and the extent to which they perceive it is a problem.<sup>48</sup>

While our research shows that the issue of dog fouling has been a hot topic for local authorities and residents for many years, we have also observed the pendulum of social acceptability swing over the past decade – since the Keep Britain Tidy-led campaign in 2002 – resulting in there being more social pressure on dog owners. People are less tolerant of dog fouling and are more likely to challenge someone if they witness them not cleaning up after their dog. Our most recent campaign message “There’s no such thing as the dog poo fairy!” builds on this growing intolerance of dog fouling and encourages dog owners to pick up after their dog, then place the bagged waste in a bin.

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48. *Word on Our Street*,  
Keep Britain Tidy (2011)

## Vehicle litter

Despite Keep Britain Tidy running a number of successful campaigns, vehicle littering does remain a problem in many areas. In 2006, 14% of people admitted to dropping litter from a vehicle. By 2009, 23% admitted to it and in 2010, 31% admitted to it. We know from our research into littering behaviours that there is a gap between the proportion of people who admit to littering and the proportion that *actually* litter, therefore it is likely that the proportion of people who actually drop litter from vehicles will be higher than this.

In 2009, we conducted some research to gain a better understanding of vehicle littering to inform the development of a targeted campaign.<sup>49</sup> We found that people admitted to littering out of their vehicles because they believed they were much more anonymous than dropping litter elsewhere.

Of those who admitted to littering from their vehicle, most said they had last littered in a residential area, perhaps unsurprisingly the majority said that this was not in their own neighbourhood. They were also more likely to litter from a moving vehicle (rather than a stationary vehicle) as this linked to the anonymity factor; as they felt that other people would be less likely to see them and identify them in moving vehicles.

Some people did keep a plastic bag in their vehicle for certain items of litter, but not for the most commonly-littered items (such as cigarettes, chewing gum, and other messy / smelly items). It was therefore considered unlikely that a car/vehicle litter bin would make a difference to the amount of litter thrown out of vehicles.<sup>50</sup>

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49. Vehicle Litter Research, Keep Britain Tidy (2009)

50. Vehicle Litter Research, Keep Britain Tidy (2009)



“ It’s less noticeable,  
**so I feel less guilty.**  
It’s gone in a second,  
**then you don’t**  
see it anymore ”



“ I’m less likely  
**to do it**  
near home ”



# Final Thoughts

Each year the RSPCA receives **over 7,000 calls** about litter-related incidents (RSPCA, 2011)

Litter is a problem that affects the whole country and it is also an issue that many people feel very strongly about. At Keep Britain Tidy, we believe that everyone has the right to live in a clean, well-maintained and attractive environment and we know that poor quality local environments can have a detrimental impact on people's overall quality of life.

Research, both our own and that of others working the field, clearly shows that the very presence of litter is enough to persuade or dissuade someone from creating even more litter and that, astonishingly, littered areas are more likely to attract criminal activity. In fact, the presence of litter has an impact on many aspects of people's lives. It affects how safe we feel when we are in an area and also it impacts on our feelings of pride in our communities.

The presence of litter on the streets can even influence residents' perceptions on how well they believe their local council is performing and even more importantly, litter can affect people's level of satisfaction with the area where they live. Nobody wants to live in or visit an area that feels or appears to be neglected or poorly maintained.

Not only does litter have an influence on people's perceptions, but we have seen that it has an impact on the local economy; the costs of cleaning up are huge and a poor quality environment can discourage businesses from investing in an area.

It is for these reasons that we believe everyone has a responsibility to look after their local environment and not drop litter. We have been campaigning against litter for many years now and our survey results do show that things are slowly improving; litter is now lower than it was ten years ago and dog fouling has become much less socially acceptable.

Around three-quarters of adults in England are proud of their town or city. One of the main reasons for this is the feeling that their town or city is clean





A third of people who are proud of where they live, show that they love their area by not dropping litter.

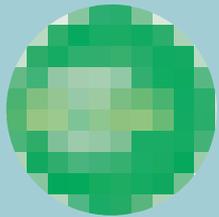
We also recognise that there is still much work to be done, particularly around the growing problem of vehicle litter, fast food litter and cigarette ends. Recently we have been lobbying government for changes to legislation, in order to give local authorities powers to deal with vehicle litter more effectively and we will continue to push for this. We will also continue to campaign against litter and for better quality local environments. Using our knowledge of littering behaviour we will help others to recognise the importance of understanding *why* people litter and *how* they can be encouraged to change their behaviour.

Keep Britain Tidy is passionate about making our country cleaner and greener and helping to keep it that way. Over the years our campaigns have been pretty successful and our supporters are doing some great work on the ground, but we can't, and won't, rest on our laurels.

We can only succeed in our aims when we act together. As a charitable campaign group, Keep Britain Tidy relies to an increasing extent on its enthusiastic supporters and volunteers to be able to run campaigns and raise awareness across the country. That support is crucial in helping to keep our country cleaner and greener and free of litter and waste.

Additionally, the Keep Britain Tidy Network brings together land managers in the public, private and third sector to discuss collaborative strategies to make our places better.

We need to continue to raise awareness so that more people are able to enjoy the benefits of better cared for and more attractive places and to achieve our vision of a cleaner, greener England respected and enjoyed by all.



network

Find out more about the Keep Britain Tidy Network by emailing [network.enquiries@keepbritaintidy.org](mailto:network.enquiries@keepbritaintidy.org)

Keep Britain Tidy has a wealth of research and information on litter and how to combat it. For more information on supporting our campaigns and how you can get involved visit [www.keepbritaintidy.org](http://www.keepbritaintidy.org)



the **little** book of

# Litter

an essential guide

More than two million pieces of litter are dropped on our streets every day and £885m of taxpayers' money is spent every year on cleaning it up. Litter is a massive concern for the public who see it as one of the biggest factors affecting the quality of their local environment. But how did we get here and what can we do about a problem that a majority of us cause but only a minority admit to? Keep Britain Tidy's *The Little Book of Litter* brings together in one place all you need to know about litter, littering, who does it and why and is an essential guide for everyone who cares about keeping their country clean.

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