

Litter - the facts



Packaging protects

Litter is any waste in the wrong place. Individuals create litter through thoughtless or anti-social behaviour. Only individuals can therefore prevent it.

Packaging is actually a relatively small component of litter, but by its nature it catches the eye and INCPEN works closely with the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign and supports its efforts to influence behaviour to reduce littering.

What makes up litter?

Packaging may sometimes be the most visible litter but, contrary to popular misconception, it is not the most prevalent.

All forms of packaging combined make up about 4% of litter according to ENCAMS, the group behind the Keep Britain Tidy campaign. By contrast, cigarette-related litter constitutes 34% of all litter, and chewing gum 61%.¹

Common myths

- **“Imposing deposits on certain types of containers reduces litter.”** In fact, this doesn't work in practice. For example, the New York authorities introduced a 'Bottle Bill' in 1983 - imposing deposits on drinks containers. However, it led to an increase in litter as bins were upturned by people scavenging for drinks containers to reclaim the deposits. New York legislators recently decided not to extend the scope of the bill.
- **“Recycling is a cure for litter.”** It isn't. Litter and recycling are polar opposites. People who recycle usually care enough to dispose of all waste carefully. Those who litter can't be bothered to find a bin, so they are unlikely to consider recycling.
- **“Packaging's a major source of litter.”** The facts show that cigarettes and gum, not packaging, are the major constituents of litter. Moreover, the industry works hard to curb litter: manufacturers invest in education schemes, carry the Tidyman logo on the packaging for goods that are likely to be consumed outdoors, and have introduced packaging innovations such as the retained ring-pull.
- **“It's okay to drop litter that is biodegradable.”** It's not. Even a totally degradable item such as a banana skin that is dropped as litter takes time to degrade – time in which that piece of litter will continue to blight the local environment.

Why do people drop litter?

Careless and thoughtless behaviour causes litter. Most people acknowledge that it is wrong to drop litter, yet many of these same people do so anyway – 'litter schizophrenia'.

Research shows that nearly one in two of us in the UK rarely plans meals ahead of time and grabs something to eat when 'on the go'². Eating on the go means needing to dispose of packaging on the go – and in irresponsible or thoughtless hands that can mean litter. In some areas, there is still a lack of 'litter infrastructure' ie. rubbish bins and regular street cleaning.

Tackling litter

INCPEN advocates a three-pronged approach to tackling litter:

1. Education, education, education

The ultimate solution is to change public attitudes once and for all, so that littering becomes socially unacceptable. That's why INCPEN supports education and anti-littering campaigns- such as the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign and INCPEN's resources for schools.

2. Street cleaning

Councils already invest heavily in street-cleaning. Under Part IV of the 1990 Environmental Protection Act, councils failing to keep an area clean and free from litter can be fined up to £2,500.

Pilot projects for the Clean Neighbourhoods Act (2005) have shown that when companies and councils co-operate, litter can be reduced by upward of 30%.³

This is known as the 'Disneyworld Effect' – it's been proven that people are less likely to drop litter in a place that is already spotless, such as Disneyworld.

3. Law enforcement

Where education fails, fines should be used – The Clean Neighbourhoods Act proposes greater powers for town councils and the Environment Agency to impose on-the-spot fines for litter. INCPEN welcomes this measure.

Footnotes

1 ENCAMS / INCPEN Litter Composition Survey of England, 2005- based on a survey of 393 sites.

2 Busy Lives report, Rexam (December, 2004).

3 DEFRA, June 2004.