

Rising cigarette litter levels: "rounded solution" needed

Every day a staggering 122 tonnes of cigarette butts, packets and matches are dropped on the UK's streets - a figure that's risen by 20% over the last four years.

And the announcement on 13 February that the Government is proposing to make businesses legally liable for such litter outside their offices and other premises now indicates that a further increase in litter levels is recognised as an unintended consequence of the forthcoming UK smoking bans (2 April in Wales, 30 April in Northern Ireland and 1 July in England).

And evidence from around the world supports this - according to Charles Hamshaw-Thomas of Bath-based consultancy CSR Solutions, "Following the Irish ban in 2003, cigarette litter on Dublin's streets rose by nearly 20% in the first year.

"Towns and cities from across the world, including the USA, Canada, New Zealand and many European countries are reporting similar experiences. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, for example, local people are reporting 'sky-rocketing' levels of litter from their recent ban on 1 December 2006."

Hamshaw-Thomas believes there is a solution to the problem that has been proved to work in a number of pilot projects across the world. "A mix of public education and the provision of suitable disposal resources has had a dramatic effect in bringing about behavioural change among smokers," he says. "In the UK, for example, a four-week project in Colchester last year saw cigarette litter drop by 86.6%. In the US, where tobacco giant Philip Morris is supporting an initiative called the Cigarette Litter Prevention Program, the problem's been virtually halved in pilot areas."

Both initiatives involved the provision of public and personal ashtrays, alongside a public information programme. "It's simple - people will respond if they're made aware of this issue and have the means of disposal," he says. "Otherwise they'll carry on flicking their butts."

Keep Britain Tidy said: "According to our latest survey, there are more dropped cigarette ends on our streets than any other type of litter. It is a problem that, with the smoking bans coming into force this year, is only likely to get bigger - unless we see a change in behaviour."

Hamshaw-Thomas believes that a rounded, national solution is possible. As he says, "The results achieved in such pilots show that the problem is far from insurmountable. A combined approach, including Government, cigarette manufacturers, retailers and licensed premises, could encourage smokers to change their behaviour and enable this very real environmental problem to be overcome."

"Without action now, we're likely to see further rises in the current £400 million national street cleaning bill each year, and a further significant reduction in the environmental quality of our cities, towns and villages."

As to the Government's proposal for targeting enforcement measures at businesses, Hamshaw-Thomas's view is clear: "Enforcement cannot be viewed in isolation. It has been shown to be very hard to achieve - an awareness raising programme (reminding smokers that butts are litter) alongside an effective disposal infrastructure are necessary before additional enforcement measures can be fully legitimised."

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