Dear Secretaries of State,

As leaders in the fields of environmental and health protection, we welcome the UK government’s commitments to tackle the scourge of plastic pollution and to address the harms of smoking by achieving a smoke-free generation by 2030. We would, therefore, like to draw your attention to a rapidly escalating threat to both of those commitments: single use e-cigarettes, also known as vapes.

Disposable e-cigarettes are dramatically increasing in popularity and are consequently creating a huge waste issue. According to research by Material Focus, at least 1.3 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week, equating to two vapes every second. These are unnecessary electrical items that contain precious metals such as lithium. Lithium is a critical material for our green transition and is simply going to waste in these devices. They are also another unnecessary single use of plastic, a material which, along with the batteries and nicotine these disposables contain, is hazardous to the environment and wildlife when littered.

Moreover, disposable vapes have become hugely popular among young people. Since 2021, there has been a more than seven-fold increase in the proportion of 11 to 17 year olds who vape using disposable e-cigarettes rather than reusables, and studies indicate that this group is particularly susceptible to the way in which they are marketed. Uptake among young people is particularly concerning, with multiple health professionals warning that, instead of helping existing smokers to give up the habit, they could create a whole new generation hooked on nicotine. The harms of vaping are, as yet, not fully established but there is concern regarding increased risk of chronic lung conditions.

As such, we strongly urge the government to ban disposable e-cigarettes and believe the easiest way to do so is by adding them to the list of plastics that are prohibited as part of a shift away from single use culture. Defra’s call for evidence on commonly littered and problematic plastic earlier in the year included traditional tobacco filters, but the growing threat of disposable vapes was overlooked.

Decisive action from the UK government now could prevent this emerging environmental problem from becoming a major issue, and head off a health crisis among young people. This decision would not hinder people who choose to use vapes to quit smoking, as reusable vapes are readily available.

Yours sincerely,

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