



Resource: Resource 20 - How long does litter take to break down
Text: This resource looks at the issue of litter and how long litter takes to decompose. It involves literacy and numeracy skills and considers environmental science.
Suitable for: S1-S2
Curriculum links: SOC 3-08a
Meta-skills: Social Intelligence: Feeling, Innovation: Curiosity

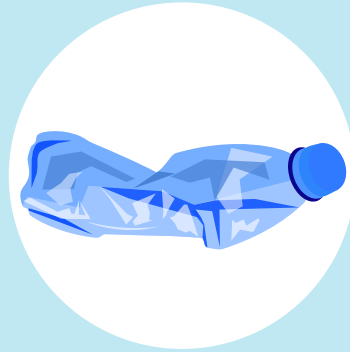
Sustainable Development Goal Links:















Match the image to the length of time it takes to break down.

- 1 month
- 450 years
- 20 years
- 12 years
- Never breaks down

Answers



12 years



Never



Never



450 years



1 month



20 years



Litter factsheet for secondary school teachers

We've put together a list of useful facts you can use to plan a lesson about litter prevention. It covers all the answers to the questions in our litter quiz.

What is litter?

- Litter is rubbish in the wrong place. That means any rubbish that's not put in a bin or recycling box.
- Flytipping is the name given to large amounts of rubbish, usually dumped from a car or van.

How big is Scotland's litter problem?

Each year, **Scotland's cleaning teams collect 15,000 tonnes of litter.** That's:

- the same weight as **50 individual Kelpies.**
- around **250 million items of litter.**
- enough to fill **570,000 wheelie bins.**
- around **50 pieces of litter for every person in Scotland** (on average).
- **475 items dropped every minute** (on average).

Who drops litter?

- Most litter in Scotland is dropped by pedestrians.
- Studies suggest that around half of all Scots have littered at least once.
- There's no specific profile for litterers as context (where, when and how) plays a big part.

Why do people litter?

Here are just some of the excuses people give for littering:

- "The place is already full of litter so it doesn't matter if I add a bit more"
- "Someone else will clean up after me – that's their job"
- "I can't see a bin so there's nowhere to put my rubbish except on the ground"
- "Litter isn't a big deal, it doesn't harm anyone"
- "I don't care about litter, it doesn't affect me"

Whose problem is litter?

It's everyone's responsibility to make sure they put their rubbish in a bin or recycling box.

Smoking-related litter

Smoking-related items are the most common kind of litter:

- More than **4.5 trillion cigarette butts are dropped around the world each year.**
- Half of Scotland's streets are affected by cigarette litter.
- Cigarette related litter —butts, packets, cellophane wrappers and foil — make up nearly **40%** of the littered items on Scotland's streets.

Gum litter

- It costs **3p to buy a piece of gum**, but **10p to clean up each piece of gum litter.**
- Cleaning gum removal uses expensive equipment and harmful chemicals.

Why does it matter?

Local authorities have to spend millions cleaning it up:

- At least **£46 million each year.**
- Around **£20.00 per taxpayer.**

This money could be spent on schools, hospitals, roads and other local services.

Other negative impacts of litter include:

- It makes Scotland less attractive to tourists.
- There's a link between litter levels and crime rates.
- It can damage physical health – injury from broken glass, rusty cans and lit cigarettes, litter in the road can cause car accidents.
- It can affect mental health.
- It can negatively impact house prices.
- Food waste can attract unwanted wildlife, such as foxes and rats.

How long does litter take to break down?

- **Paper bag** = up to 1 month.
- **Plastic bag** = up to 20 years.
- **Cigarette butts** = up to 12 years.
- **Plastic bottle** = up to 450 years to break into little pieces, never breaks down completely.
- **Glass bottle** = never breaks down.
- **Chewing gum** = never breaks down.

Many people don't realise it but fruit peel is litter. It is:

- **Banana skin** = up to 2 years.
- **Orange peel** = up to 2 years.

What happens if you get caught littering?

- You could get an **£80 fine** straight away.
- If you don't pay, you can be prosecuted and made to pay **up to £2,500.**
- If someone is caught fly-tipping, they can be fined **up to £40,000.**

Lots of our litter could be recycled

If something can be recycled, it's worth money. If we collected up all Scotland's litter to be recycled, we could make around **£1.2 million.** How would you spend that money to help people and wildlife?