

State of our Beaches Report 2024

Policy recommendations



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Foreword

Amanda Nobbs, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Marine Conservation Society

The issue of marine litter remains one of the most pressing environmental challenges of our time. Each year, millions of tons of plastic and other waste materials find their way into our ocean, causing severe harm to marine ecosystems, wildlife and even human health. The scale of the problem is overwhelming but it is not insurmountable.

In this report, we present a series of policy recommendations aimed at addressing the growing crisis of marine litter. These recommendations are based on the citizen science data collected by thousands of our amazing Beachwatch volunteers across the UK and Channel Islands.

We recognise that tackling marine litter requires collective action across governments, industries and individuals. No single solution will solve this problem; rather, it will take coordinated efforts, political will and innovative thinking to make meaningful progress. The recommendations in this report provide a roadmap for creating a cleaner, more sustainable future for our ocean and the countless species that rely upon it.

We hope that this report will serve as a catalyst for change, inspiring policymakers, businesses and citizens to join forces in the fight against marine litter. Together, we can protect our ocean for generations to come.

Executive summary

Marine litter remains a key environmental pressure that needs to be tackled by policymakers across the world, including here in the UK, due to the well-documented impacts on marine life, social amenity and coastal economies.

This report summarises the results from our Beachwatch beach litter monitoring project from 2024, engaging citizen scientists across the UK and Channel Islands. In it we reflect on some of the policy successes that have been supported by this invaluable data set, such as securing carrier bag charges, bans of varying degrees of certain single-use plastic items like cotton bud sticks, cutlery and straws and set out recommendations for the many actions still needed to help secure a circular economy, not least the long-awaited Deposit Return Schemes for cans and bottles promised across the UK.

Our full list of policy recommendations for governments to address by 2030 at the latest (unless otherwise stated below) for the different categories of litter featured in more depth in the report, are as follows:

Marine litter strategies

1. We are calling on all governments of the UK to publish marine litter strategies and ensure their strategies and action plans have a prevention-first approach which are updated and publicly available with regular progress updates.

Single-use plastics

1. Introduce further market restrictions (bans) on all the items listed in the table within the single-use plastics chapter in this report as well as other non-essential single-use plastic products or where there is a suitable alternative, such as cigarette filters, sachets and tampon applicators
2. Ensure appropriate enforcement of market restrictions once implemented
3. Implement mandatory clear and correct labelling on products and packaging that contain single-use plastic
4. Introduce measures to reduce consumption of single-use plastics through awareness raising
5. Introduce circular design requirements on single-use plastic products such as connecting caps to bottles
6. Introduce effective waste management and clean up obligations for producers of single use plastic products throughout their supply chains through policy interventions such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes (see further explanation on EPR below)
7. Set binding ambitious targets to reduce consumption and increase reuse and refill
8. Ensure suitable monitoring and evaluation of single use plastics policy

Smoking-related litter

1. Ban the manufacture of disposable vapes following the ban on sale and supply coming into force 1st June 2025
2. Increase awareness and enforcement of existing Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) and the Waste Batteries Regulations for producers, distributors and retailers of vapes including disposal and recycling
3. Require businesses to report on the number of vapes (as a percentage sold) that are returned for recycling under WEEE

4. Ban the sale and manufacture of single-use plastic cigarette filters
5. Introduce an extended producer responsibility scheme (EPR) for vapes and cigarette filters not covered by market restrictions

Sewage-related debris

1. Support consumers to move to reusable products to support a circular economy
2. Ban the sale and manufacture of single use plastic in wet wipes by the end of 2026 and other single-use plastic sanitary items where there are suitable alternatives by 2030
3. Apply Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to all single-use sanitary products (not just those that contain plastic)
4. Improve labelling and consumer information to promote correct disposal of items likely to be inappropriately flushed down the toilet
5. Set progressive reduction targets for discharges from combined sewer overflows (CSOs) (frequency, duration and harm) as soon as possible
6. Install electronic monitoring on all CSOs and Emergency Overflows (EOs) as soon as possible

Fishing and aquaculture gear

1. Raise awareness of the true impact that marine litter is having on island and coastal communities
2. Fund support for further clean-up activity across impacted coastal communities
3. Work with key stakeholders to produce a clear plan of action to tackle the issue of fishing and aquaculture litter
4. Require all UK ports and harbours to provide free, standardised waste reception facilities with equivalent measures for aquaculture sites and gear

Circular Economy

1. Introduce Deposit Return Schemes by October 2027 for plastic and metal drinks containers
2. Ensure circular solutions for glass to be put in place in each nation via a Deposit Return Scheme or other Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme as soon as possible and prioritising reuse
3. Design the Deposit Return Schemes with the infrastructure to move to reuse and refill schemes in the future

Single-use cups

1. Introduce a charge on all single-use cups
2. Set binding consumption reduction targets
3. Improve design and labelling for consumers to know when cups contain single use plastic and how to correctly dispose
4. Invest in pathways to reusable and refillable systems
5. Ban single-use cups in closed settings (e.g. workplace canteens)

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)

1. Ensure that packaging EPR payments extend to litter payments which include revenue to support cleansing as well as volunteer led clean-ups and prevention
2. Implementation of monitoring and evaluation needs to track impact of EPR on litter levels
3. Use EPR as a policy solution for other litter items such as smoking, fishing and aquaculture related litter
4. In line with the 'polluter pays' principle, EPR schemes for plastic products should ensure that producers internalise full lifecycle costs of items placed on the market

The policy success stories shared in this paper, such as the decline in carrier bags following the charges, show that policy works to prevent and reduce marine litter in our seas and on our shores. Now is not the time to slow down but to keep up the momentum across the UK in all governments to reach our targets to reduce ocean pollution.

Introduction

Marine litter remains a key environmental pressure that needs to be tackled by policymakers across the world, including here in the UK, due to the [well-documented impacts on marine life](#), social amenity and coastal economies.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14 'Life below water' includes target 14.1: 'By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution'. Whilst some domestic and international steps have been taken, there are still many opportunities for policymakers to reduce the amount of litter in our seas and washing up on our beaches.

Beachwatch is the Marine Conservation Society's national beach cleaning and litter surveying citizen science project, which includes the annual Great British Beach Clean. Beachwatch has been tracking litter data since 1994 and is now one of the largest and most comprehensive datasets on beach litter across the UK. This data is used to provide vital evidence for policy change, such as the carrier bag charges and single-use plastic bans.

Here we will look at the data collected by Beachwatch volunteers, which contributed to the [2024 State of our Beaches Report](#) and will highlight previous policy successes as well as recommendations for future policy to reduce beach litter. We are calling for all the policy recommendations in this paper to be implemented by 2030 at the latest other than banning single use vapes by June 2025, banning plastic in single use wet wipes by the end of 2025 and implementing deposit return schemes by October 2027. Data from the complementary citizen science activity 'Source to Sea Litter Quest' will also be referred to.

Acknowledgements

The Marine Conservation Society would like to thank and acknowledge the incredible volunteers who collect this vital data as part of the Beachwatch project and the Source to Sea Litter Quest.

Methodology and data analysis

How to take part in Beachwatch

Through the Beachwatch project, local people, groups, and organisations volunteer to clean up their chosen beach, removing litter and completing a litter survey to record what they find. Volunteers pick a representative 100m stretch of the beach and always use this section for surveying purposes. They use survey sheets and pick up and record every item in that 100m stretch. The Data Sheets categorise litter items according to material type, e.g. plastics, metal, sanitary. Each material type is then broken down into specific objects, e.g. bottle, crisp packet, cotton bud stick. This data is then uploaded to the Marine Conservation Society's litter database.

What happens with the data?

The data is analysed by the Marine Conservation Society to identify the quantities, types and sources of litter affecting the UK coastline and the impacts of litter on marine life and coastal communities, providing evidence that can be used to target specific polluters and pollutants at local, national and international levels.

Beachwatch also provides and shares data with several organisations, from other NGOs to water companies and academic institutions. We also provide data for the UK's Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) beach litter monitoring programme, the International Coastal Cleanup, co-ordinated by the Ocean Conservancy, and we are contracted by the UK Government to collect data for the international OSPAR project.

Source to Sea Litter Quest

Our Source to Sea Litter Quest citizen science activity, established in 2020, allows volunteers to capture litter data from inland areas, such as streets, parks and rivers. 15 key items are tracked, including drinks bottles, wet wipes, vapes and balloons. Unlike beach cleans, which collect data from a 100-metre stretch, Source to Sea cleans can cover any distance. We therefore use the totals of the items found as well as absent/present percentages to determine the prevalence of these items.

Beachwatch 2024 data overview

Summary of high-level statistics

In 2024, 15,168 volunteers submitted 1,262 litter surveys, covering 148 km of coastline and removing 764,451 litter items from across the UK and Channel Islands' beaches.

A breakdown of the data for each nation is provided in the table below.

Top level stats for Beachwatch 2024 by nation

	Number of volunteers	Number of surveys	Metres of coastline cleaned	Number of litter items
UK	15,168	1,262	147,462	764,451
England	9,565	651	82,637	204,136
Scotland	4,106	467	47,825	527,468
Wales	1,073	119	14,500	26,165
Northern Ireland	169	9	900	4,644
Channel Islands	164	16	1,600	2,038

Weight of litter statistics

Due to the weight of litter being heavily influenced by litter type and conditions in which the beach cleans were completed, data on the number of items collected is most often used for policy work rather than the overall weight.

However, for interest, the weights of litter are included in the table below to also highlight the scale of effort our volunteers put in.

Total weight of litter collected through Beachwatch in 2024, by nation

	Weight of total litter collected (kgs)
UK	16,843
England	5,456
Scotland	10,195
Wales	882
Northern Ireland	163
Channel Islands	146

International litter threshold comparisons

The OSPAR threshold value for beach litter was established in 2023 as 20 items of litter per 100m of coastline. It was determined by experts from that 20 litter items or less per 100m of coastline would reduce harm from beach litter to a sufficiently precautionary level. It is therefore clear to see that ambitious action is required from governments across the UK to reduce litter levels so that they fall below this threshold.

The analysis included in the table below is from all Beachwatch surveys submitted in 2024. This may differ from the UK's contribution to the OSPAR database which only uses data from 32 beaches across the UK.

	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach
UK	170.0
England	157.5
Scotland	203.7
Wales	120.0
Northern Ireland	316.3
Channel Islands	118.5

Note on Northern Ireland and Channel Islands data

Due to the limited number of surveys completed in Northern Ireland (9) and the Channel Islands (16), we are currently unable to draw robust conclusions from the litter data recorded in these nations.

Source to Sea Litter Quest

In 2024, 664 volunteers across the UK took part in the Source to Sea Litter Quest, submitting a total of 79 surveys. A total of 13,326 items of litter were removed weighing 1404kg.

Policy recommendations

To help drive action towards tackling beach litter overall, we would recommend the development of national marine litter strategies that work closely with terrestrial litter strategies. This would allow all stakeholders to follow a clear path of action, help secure further funding for specific action points within the strategies and to assign clear roles and responsibilities for delivery. To be effective these strategies must be suitably resourced and enforced and clearly link to other programmes of policy work such as circular economy. There are various strategies at different levels of use across the UK.

In Scotland, a Marine Litter Strategy was published in 2014 and was reviewed and updated in 2022. A National Litter and Flytipping Strategy was also published in 2014 and was reviewed and updated in 2023.

In Wales, a Marine Litter plan was published in 2020 but does not appear to have been updated since 2023. There is currently no published national litter and flytipping prevention plan or strategy.

In England, a National Litter Strategy was published in 2017 but has not been publicly reported against since 2022. Marine litter is also included in the Environmental Improvement Plan.

Northern Ireland's Marine Litter Strategy expired in December 2020, but the structure is still used to help tackle marine litter.

With only Scotland appearing to have current litter and marine litter strategies up to date, published and being reported on, it is clear that further action is required to update and ensure all litter strategies across the UK are current, published and fit for purpose. We are calling on all governments of the UK to ensure their strategies and action plans have a prevention-first approach and are updated and publicly available with regular progress updates.

Single-use plastics

Data overview

Plastic litter increased by 8.2% across surveyed UK beaches in 2024. Three of the top ten litter items were single-use plastics, accounting for 15% of litter collected. The continued presence of single-use plastics (SUP) on beaches highlights the need for a circular economy where consumers have more options and access to use refillable and reusable products.

Litter items classed as single-use plastics for our data analysis includes:

- Plastic bags (e.g. shopping)
- Plastic drink bottles
- Plastic caps/lids
- Cigarette stubs
- Plastic food containers (incl. fast food)

- Foamed polystyrene food containers (incl. fast food)
- Plastic cups
- Foamed polystyrene cups
- Plastic cutlery/trays/straws
- Plastic packets (crisp/sweet/lolly/sandwich)

	Number of SUP items found	Average number of SUP items per 100m of surveyed beach	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	160,364	41.4	21%	98%
England	63,716	43.0	31%	99%
Scotland	87,347	42.0	17%	98%
Wales	6,879	33.0	26%	99%
Northern Ireland	1,346	85.5	29%	100%
Channel Islands	576	39.5	28%	100%

Cotton buds

Cotton bud sticks have not been included in the above analysis, as cardboard and plastic cotton bud sticks are currently counted collectively on Beachwatch litter survey forms. However, a break down for cotton bud sticks is available in the table below.

	Number of cotton bud sticks found	Presence on beach surveys
UK	13,251	38%
England	2,647	37%
Scotland	10,348	39%
Wales	203	48%
Northern Ireland	50	25%
Channel Islands	3	19%

Source to Sea Litter Quest Data

Single-use plastics made up four of the top five items recorded on Source to Sea Litter Quest surveys.

Policy success stories

Beachwatch data has already been used successfully by governments across the UK as evidence to introduce litter-reducing policy such as the carrier bag charges and bans on certain single-use plastics.

Carrier bags

Beachwatch data continues to show an 80% reduction in carrier bags on beaches across the UK since charges were implemented. The average number found on Beachwatch beach cleans has remained at one per 100m since 2019.

In 2024, Scotland celebrated 10 years of its carrier bag charge and Beachwatch data shows that the number of bags found on beaches has decreased by 87% since then.

Wales, which was the first UK nation to implement a charge in 2011, has seen a decrease of 71% in plastic bags found on beaches. In Northern Ireland, the number of plastic bags recorded has dropped by 59% since 2013, when its charges were implemented. England introduced plastic carrier bag charges in 2015, with a decrease of 81% recorded since then.

Policy progress

As highlighted above, Beachwatch data has been successfully used by policymakers to make progress in tackling single-use plastics. The table below outlines which policy has been implemented or committed to by each of the governments across the UK, to the best knowledge of the Marine Conservation Society.

Items	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Single-use cutlery	Ban on supply October 2023	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply October 2023	No public commitment
Straws	Ban on supply October 2023	Ban on supply June 2022	Ban on supply October 2023	No public commitment
Single-use cups	Expanded polystyrene cups – ban on supply October 2023	Expanded polystyrene cups – ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Expanded polystyrene cups – ban on supply October 2023	No public commitment
Drink stirrers	Ban on supply October 2023	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply October 2023	No public commitment
Cotton buds	Ban on supply October 2023	Ban on manufacture and supply October 2019	Ban on supply October 2023	No public commitment
Single-use plates	Ban on supply October 2023	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply October 2023	No public commitment
Balloon sticks	Ban on supply October 2023	Ban on supply June 2022	Ban on supply October 2023	No public commitment
Expanded polystyrene contained (takeaway food and drink containers)	Ban on supply October 2023	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Ban on supply October 2023	No public commitment
Expanded polystyrene lids for cups and takeaway food containers	No public commitment	Ban on manufacture and supply June 2022	Proposed ban on supply – introduction by Spring 2026	No public commitment
Oxo-degradable products	No public commitment	No public commitment	Proposed ban on supply – introduction by Spring 2026	No public commitment
Plastic bottles	DRS by October 2027	DRS by October 2027	DRS commitment made but no implementation date	DRS by October 2027
Wet wipes containing plastic	Commitment to ban but no implementation date	Commitment to ban but no implementation date	Proposed ban (supply) by June 2026	Commitment to ban but no implementation date

Tampons and applicators	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment
Panty liners	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment
Nappies	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment
Plastic/carrier bags	Charge	Charge	Charge and proposed ban on supply - introduction by Spring 2026 (with exemptions)	Charge
Packets and wrappers	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment

Policy recommendations

1. To reduce single-use plastic pollution on UK beaches, we are calling on governments across the UK to:
2. Introduce further market restrictions (bans) on all the items listed in the above table as well as other non-essential single-use plastic products or where there is a suitable alternative, such as cigarette filters, sachets and tampon applicators
3. Ensure appropriate enforcement of market restrictions once implemented
4. Implement mandatory clear and correct labelling on products and packaging that contain single-use plastic
5. Introduce measures to reduce consumption of single-use plastics through awareness raising
6. Introduce circular design requirements on single-use plastic products such as connecting caps to bottles
7. Introduce effective waste management and clean up obligations for producers of single use plastic products throughout their supply chains through policy interventions such as Extended Producer Responsibility schemes
8. Set binding ambitious targets to reduce consumption and increase reuse and refill
9. Ensure suitable monitoring and evaluation of single use plastics policy

Smoking-related litter

Data overview

Smoking-related litter was found on 56% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2024.

Items classed as smoking related litter in our data analysis includes:

- Cigarette stubs
- Cigarette packets
- Cigarette lights & tobacco pouches

With the rapid rise in single-use vapes found littered in the environment they were added as a litter item on the Source to Sea Survey form. The results from Beachwatch for cigarette butts and all smoking related litter, as well as the vape data from the Source to Sea surveys, can be found in the table below.

	Cigarette butts (Beachwatch)		Vapes (Source to Sea)		All smoking-related litter (Beachwatch)	
	Presence on beaches	Total	Presence on surveys	Total	Presence on beaches	Total
UK	56%	24,092	68%	413	56%	25,971
England	69%	21,095	63%	206	80%	22,043

Scotland	35%	1,759	85%	194	35%	2,572
Wales	64%	1,044	75%	13	80%	1,140
Northern Ireland	63%	91	No surveys	No surveys	75%	105
Channel Islands	64%	103	No surveys	No surveys	64%	110

Policy success stories

Laura Young, also known as Less Waste Laura, is an environmental campaigner and an alumna of our Youth Ocean Network, who catapulted the issue of littered vapes to the forefront of public awareness in 2022. Since then, she has inspired politicians, charities and councils to take action to tackle this new form of litter.

We worked closely with Laura and with others to raise awareness of this issue and call for UK governments to ban single use vapes. This has led to a commitment from all governments of the UK to ban the sale and supply of single use vapes from the 1st of June 2025.

Policy progress

Items	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Single-use plastic cigarette filters	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment
Disposable vapes	Ban on sale and supply due to be implemented 1st June 2025	Ban on sale and supply due to be implemented 1st June 2025	Ban on sale and supply due to be implemented 1st June 2025	Ban on sale and supply due to be implemented 1st June 2025

Policy recommendations

1. Ban the manufacture of disposable vapes following the ban on sale and supply coming into force 1st June 2025
2. Increase awareness and enforcement of existing Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment and the Waste Batteries Regulations for producers, distributors and retailers of vapes including disposal and recycling
3. Require businesses to report on the number of vapes (as a percentage sold) that are returned for recycling under WEEE
4. Ban the sale and manufacture of single-use plastic cigarette filters
5. Introduce an extended producer responsibility scheme (EPR) for vapes and cigarette filters not covered by market restrictions

Sewage-related debris

Data overview

Sewage-related debris (SRD) was found on 74% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2024.

If sanitary waste, such as wet wipes, pads, tampons and tampon applicators, is flushed down the toilet, it can end up in the marine environment when untreated sewage is discharged into rivers and the sea from storm overflows.

Storm overflows were designed for use only during extreme rainfall to avoid flooding, but recent evidence shows this is happening far more regularly. Misconnections, when the wastewater system in homes and businesses has been wrongly connected to the surface water system, can also be a pathway for sewage items to reach the environment.

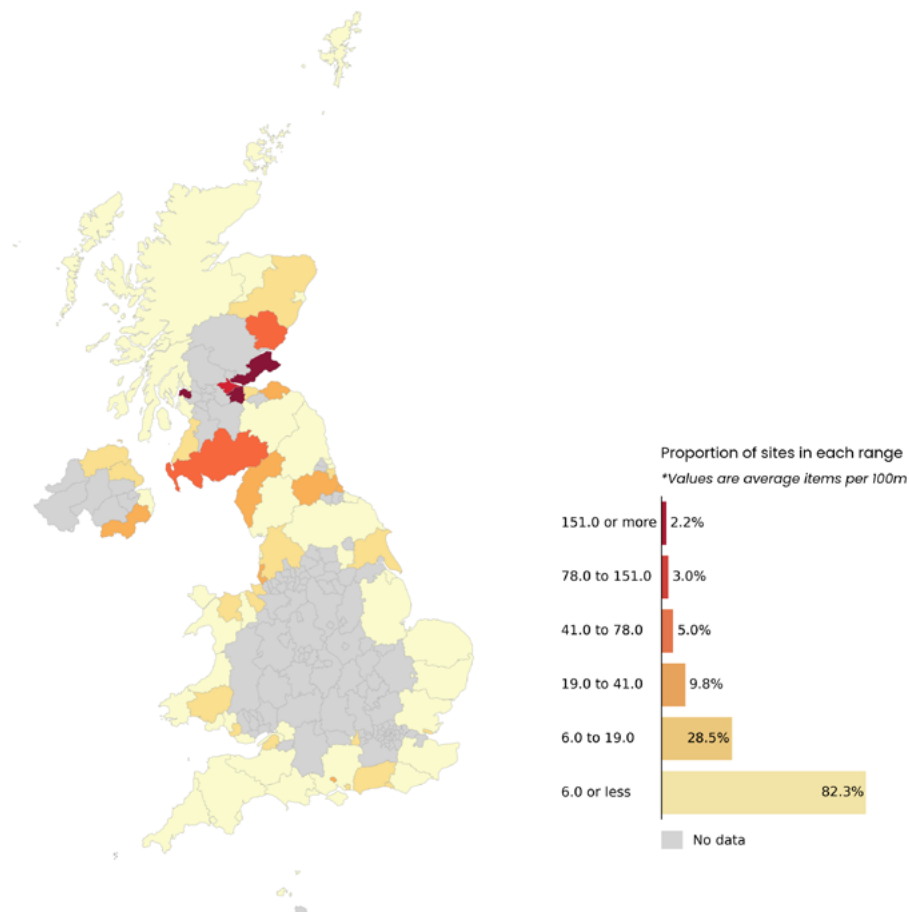
Items classed as sewage-related debris in our data analysis includes:

- Wet wipes
- Plastic cotton bud sticks

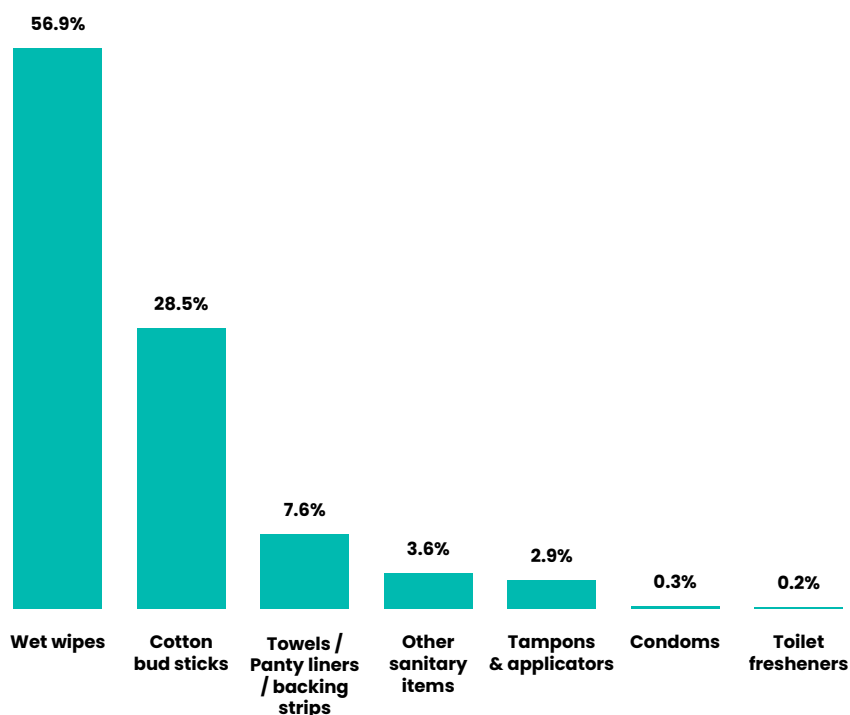
- Cardboard cotton bud sticks
- Tampons and applicators
- Condoms
- Toilet fresheners
- Sanitary towels/panty liners/backing strips

	Number of SRD items found	Average number of SRD items per 100m of surveyed beach	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	46,474	3.3	6.1%	72%
England	8,697	4.0	4.3%	78%
Scotland	36,974	2.0	7.0%	66%
Wales	663	2.5	2.5%	80%
Northern Ireland	99	4.0	2.1%	75%
Channel Islands	41	1.0	2.0%	73%

SRD in United Kingdom (2024)



Source: Marine Conservation Society



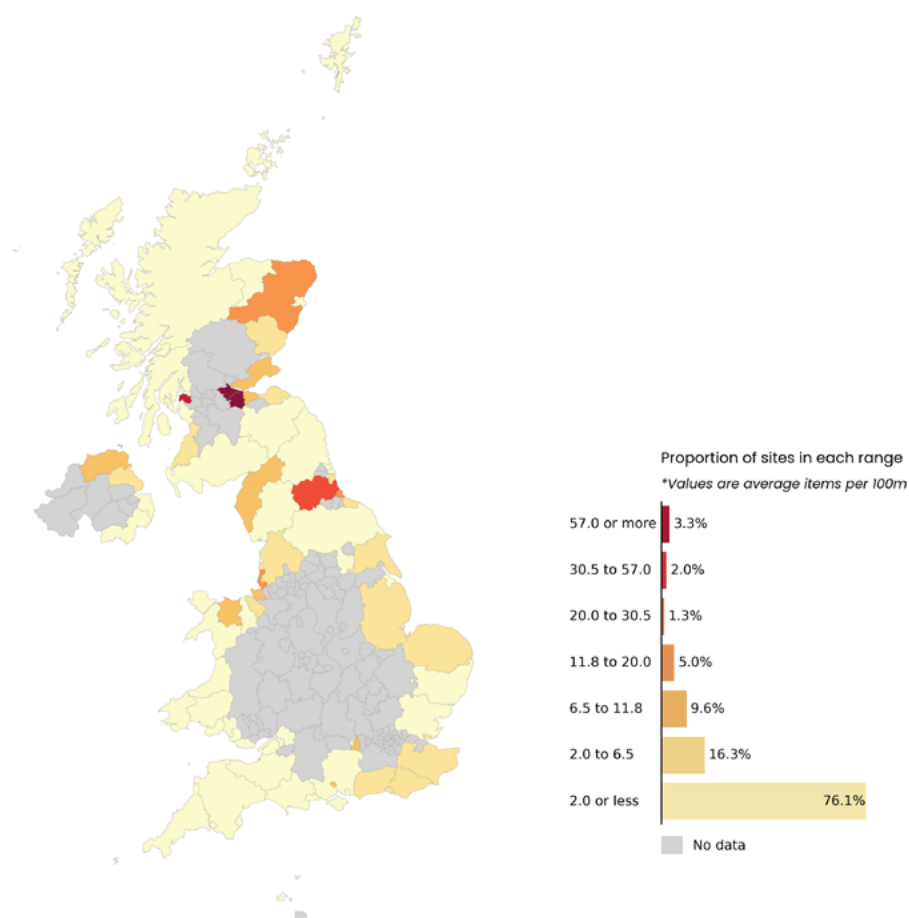
SRD litter items found in the UK in 2024, by percentage of total SRD litter

Wet wipes

Over 26,000 wet wipes were picked up in 2024 by Beachwatch volunteers. As Beachwatch volunteers have been consistently recording high volumes of wet wipes each year, the Marine Conservation Society has launched several campaigns to try and tackle this problem.

	Number of wet wipes items found	Average number of wet wipes items per 100m of surveyed beach	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	26,458	1.0	3.5%	54%
England	3,773	1.3	1.8%	63%
Scotland	22,332	0.0	4.2%	43%
Wales	288	0.0	1.1%	54%
Northern Ireland	42	1.5	0.9%	63%
Channel Islands	24	0.0	1.2%	45%

Wet wipes in United Kingdom (2024)



Source: Marine Conservation Society

Policy success stories

Wet wipes

Following years of campaigning, we were delighted to see the four-nation commitment in April 2024 to ban plastic in single-use wet wipes. Following the General Election in July 2024, we urge the UK Government to reaffirm their commitment to this ban. We look forward to seeing the legislation being implemented throughout the UK by 2026.

Combined Sewage Overflows (CSOs)

We welcomed the increase in coverage of CSOs monitored to 32% in Scotland in 2024 alongside the publishing of the [Overflow Map](#). The Overflow Map allows near real-time data on monitored overflows to be published.

We have also worked closely with Scottish Water on their Nature Calls campaign, which has included data from our Beachwatch project and encourages everyone to only flush the 'three Ps' down the toilet: pee, poo and paper.

We have also seen data transparency and accessibility improvements made to Combined Sewer Overflows operational data across England and Wales.

In England, The National Storms Overflow Hub, an interactive map showing the operation of every storm overflow, was launched in November 2024 by Water UK.

In Wales, Dŵr Cymru (Welsh Water) launched a similar interactive map in February 2024.

These maps provide easily accessible data that allows members of the public to see where sewage discharges are happening in real-time.

There have also been improvements to the monitoring of Emergency Overflows (EOs). Emergency Overflows are similar to CSOs but are only supposed to be used in an emergency situation, whereas CSOs are designed to be used during extreme rainfall. The recent Water (Special Measures) Bill has introduced a requirement for 100% of Emergency Overflows to be monitored in England and Wales. There is already monitoring of all CSOs in England and Wales.

Policy progress

Items	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Wet wipes containing plastic	Commitment to ban announced April 2024	Commitment to ban announced April 2024	Commitment to ban announced April 2024 and intention to come into force by June 2026	Commitment to ban announced April 2024
Tampons and applicators	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment
No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment
Nappies	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment	No public commitment

Policy recommendations

1. Support consumers to move to reusable products to support a circular economy
2. Ban the sale and manufacture of single use plastic in wet wipes by the end of 2026 and other single-use plastic sanitary items where there are suitable alternatives by 2030
3. Apply Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to all single-use sanitary products (not just those that contain plastic)
4. Improve labelling and consumer information to promote correct disposal of items likely to be inappropriately flushed down the toilet
5. Set progressive reduction targets for discharges from combined sewer overflows (CSOs) (frequency, duration and harm) as soon as possible
6. Install electronic monitoring on all CSOs and EOs as soon as possible

Fishing and aquaculture gear

Data overview

Fishing and aquaculture gear was found on 93% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers.

The Marine Conservation Society has been working with the Scottish Islands Federation to increase the number of Beachwatch surveys being conducted in the Highlands and Islands to ensure the Beachwatch dataset reflects the litter impacting island beaches.

Since we started working together in 2022, the number of surveys completed by island communities has increased by 37%. The data collected shows that there are differences in the types of litter that island communities face compared to those on the mainland, highlighting the need for policy interventions on different types of litter impacting different locations.

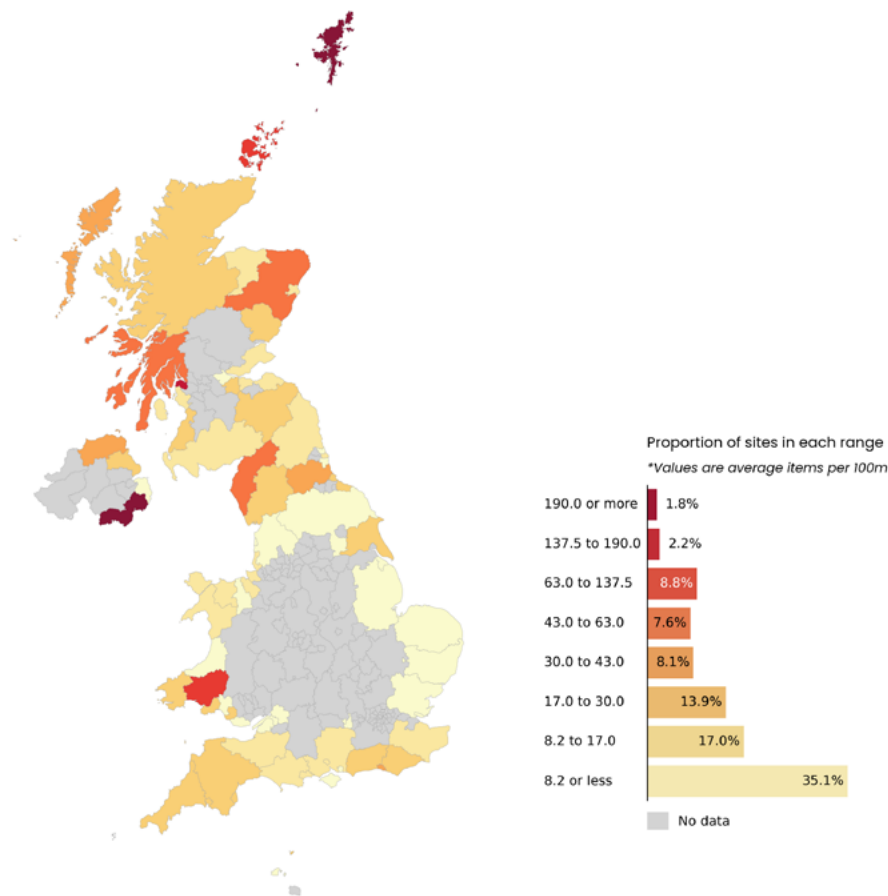
Items classed as fishing and aquaculture litter for our data analysis includes:

- Metal: Fishing weights / hooks / lures
- Metal: Lobster / crab pots & tops
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Biobeads
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Fish boxes - foamed polystyrene
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Fish boxes - plastic
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Fishing line (angling)
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Fishing net and net pieces: 0-50cm
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Fishing net and net pieces: 50cm+
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Floats / buoys
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Gloves (industrial/professional)

- Plastic/Polystyrene: Jerry cans
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Lobster & fish tags
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Lobster/crab pots & tops
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Octopus pots
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Oyster nets/mussel bags (inc. plastic stoppers)
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Oyster trays (round from oyster cultures)
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Sheeting from mussel culture (Tahitians)
- Plastic/Polystyrene: String and filaments exclusively from dolly ropes
- Plastic/Polystyrene: String/cord (thickness 0-1cm)
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Tangled dolly rope
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Tangled nets/cord/rope and string without dolly rope or mixed with dolly rope
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Tangled nets/cord/rope/string
- Pottery/Ceramics: Octopus pots
- Rubber: Boots
- Rubber: Tyres used as fenders
- Wood (machined): Crab/lobster pots & tops
- Wood (machined): Fish boxes

	Number of fishing and aquaculture items found	Average number of fishing and aquaculture items per 100m of surveyed beach	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	239,058	16.0	31.3%	93%
England	23,828	12.0	11.7%	92%
Scotland	209,386	32.0	39.7%	95%
Wales	4,801	10.0	18.3%	94%
Northern Ireland	714	33.0	15.4%	100%
Channel Islands	329	15.0	16.1%	100%

Fishing litter in United Kingdom (2024)



Source: Marine Conservation Society

Shipping litter

The Beachwatch data is analysed following established categories. Currently we class rope over 1cm in diameter classed as coming from a shipping source. However, we have had feedback from volunteers who think some may come from fishing and aquaculture sources which means we will review this category in future.

Shipping litter accounted for 5% of all litter recorded with an average of 6.5 items per 100m of surveyed beach, an increase of 18% compared to 2023. The survey form grouping that includes 'String / cord / rope: thickness 1 cm +' along with strapping bands are the two most common items found in this category, accounting for 49% and 17% of total litter within the shipping category, respectively.

The items included in the data analysis for shipping includes:

- Glass: Light bulbs / tubes
- Metal: Aerosol / spray cans
- Metal: Cans (food)
- Metal: Oil drums
- Paper/Cardboard: Cartons (purepak e.g. milk)
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Bags: Mesh (e.g. vegetable)
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Bottles/containers: Cleaner
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Crates
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Hard hats
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Injection gun cartridges (e.g. sealant)
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Oil containers/drums: 0-50cm
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Oil containers/drums: 50cm+
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Packaging/plastic sheeting (industrial)
- Plastic/Polystyrene: Strapping bands

- Plastic/Polystyrene: String / cord / rope: thickness 1 cm +
- Wood (machined): Crates
- Wood (machined): Pallets

Policy progress

In 2019, the British-Irish Council Marine Litter Symposium resulted in all four UK nations committing to improve the recycling of end-of-life fishing nets. Governments of the UK then commissioned research into which policy options there could be for fishing and aquaculture gear. The was completed by [Resource Futures](#) in 2022.

Through the Scottish Government's Marine Litter Strategy Steering Group, the Marine Conservation Society fed into the now published CEN/TC 466 standard on the circularity and recyclability of fishing gear and aquaculture equipment. This standard establishes sustainability principles to minimise the impact fishing gear and aquaculture equipment can have on the environment.

We also welcome projects such as [KIMOs Fishing for Litter](#) project or [Salmon Scotland's pollution hotline](#) service being included in national marine litter strategies, such as the one in Scotland.

Policy recommendations

1. Raise awareness of the true impact that marine litter is having on island and coastal communities
2. Fund support for further clean-up activity across impacted coastal communities
3. Work with key stakeholders to produce a clear plan of action to tackle the issue of fishing and aquaculture litter
4. Require all UK ports and harbours to provide free, standardised waste reception facilities with equivalent measures for aquaculture sites and gear

Circular Economy

We need to move away from a single-use society to one which refills, repairs and reuses; one in which nothing is wasted or leaked into the environment. There have been moves across the UK to move towards a circular economy with some significant progress in 2024.

In Scotland, we welcomed the passing of the Circular Economy (Scotland) Act and the publication of the Circular Economy and Waste Route map in December 2024.

In England we saw the establishment of a Circular Economy Taskforce and Wales hosted the 2024 European Circular Economy Hotspot event in Cardiff.

There are many policy tools and interventions available to move us towards a circular economy. Beachwatch data has recently been used for some of these, including campaigning for Deposit Return Schemes, single-use cup charges and Extended Producer Responsibility schemes.

We need governments across the UK to invest in reuse, refill and repair schemes. There are many fantastic examples in communities, including repair cafés, toy and tool libraries, school uniform and sports equipment swap events – but we need to scale this up, so every community has the opportunity to reuse.

Deposit Return Schemes

The Marine Conservation Society have been campaigning for Deposit Return Schemes for bottles and cans for almost a decade. This tried and tested policy in countries across the world reduces litter and increases recycling and is an important stepping stone towards a circular economy. Beachwatch data has consistently highlighted the extent of drinks-related litter on our beaches, demonstrating the need to urgently introduce comprehensive and interoperable Deposit Return Schemes across the UK.

Data overview

Drinks-related litter was found on 96% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2024.

The litter items in this category include:

- Metal drink cans
- Plastic drink bottles
- Plastic bottle caps/lids
- Glass bottles

	Number of drinks-related litter items found	Average number of drinks-related litter items per 100m of surveyed beach	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	59,455	15.1	7.8%	96%
England	18,855	15.0	9.2%	95%
Scotland	36,259	17.0	6.9%	95%
Wales	3,186	10.7	12.2%	99%
Northern Ireland	844	30.0	18.2%	100%
Channel Islands	301	14.0	14.8%	100%

Source to Sea Litter Quest

A total of 627 glass bottles were recorded on Source to Sea Litter Quest surveys in 2024, and were present on 80% of cleans. Plastic bottles and lids were also found on 91% of cleans.

Policy progress

Deposit Return Schemes in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland are due to start in October 2027, with the necessary legislation for England and Northern Ireland passing in January 2025 and Scotland amending its previously laid legislation.

The next stage will be the setting up of the Deposit Management Organisation, which is the company that will run the Scheme. This should be confirmed by April 2025, after which the preparations for implementing the scheme will begin in earnest.

The UK Government, Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive remain committed to jointly implementing Deposit Return Schemes for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively, by October 2027 for plastic and metal drinks containers.

On the 18th of November 2024, Deputy First Minister for Wales Huw Irranca-Davies MS announced that Wales would no longer be proceeding with the joint approach with England, Scotland and Northern Ireland as outlined in April 2024.

Following the announcement by Wales, we're looking forward to hearing more details on its plans, which look likely to also include glass and options for reusing containers.

Policy recommendations

1. Introduce Deposit Return Schemes by October 2027 for plastic and metal drinks containers
2. Ensure circular solutions for glass to be put in place in each nation via a Deposit Return Scheme or other Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme as soon as possible and prioritising reuse
3. Design the Deposit Return Schemes with the infrastructure to move to reuse and refill schemes in the future

Single-use cups

Data Overview

With 5,230 single-use cups found by Beachwatch volunteers in 2024, we need to look at policy interventions to reduce single-use cup use and encourage reusable and refillable options.

The items in the cups category include:

- Plastic cups
- Foamed polystyrene cups
- Cardboard cups

	Number of cup items found	Presence on beach surveys
UK	5,230	64%
England	3,017	72%
Scotland	1,897	54%
Wales	273	64%
Northern Ireland	36	75%
Channel Islands	8	36%

Policy progress

Last year the Scottish Government consulted on introducing a mandatory minimum charge on single-use disposable beverage cups in Scotland, which we supported with Beachwatch data. This follows the recommendations highlighted by the Expert Panel on Environmental Charging and Other Measures (EPECOM) report in 2019.

Policy recommendations

1. Introduce a charge on all single-use cups
2. Set binding consumption reduction targets
3. Improve design and labelling for consumers to know when cups contain single use plastic and how to correctly dispose
4. Invest in pathways to reusable and refillable systems
5. Ban single-use cups in closed settings (e.g. workplace canteens)

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)

EPR follows the 'polluter pays' principle whereby those who produce products that can end up as litter are responsible for covering the full costs of their products becoming waste.

Data overview

Products that are currently within an EPR scheme or have been highlighted to be part of a future EPR scheme were found as litter on 97% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2024.

Items included in the EPR items category include:

- Glass bottles
- Metal drink cans
- Paper shopping bags
- Cardboard Pure-Pak cartons
- Cardboard Tetrapak cartons
- Cigarette packets
- Paper cups
- Plastic shopping bags
- Plastic bottles
- Cigarette lighters and tobacco pouches
- Plastic food containers including fast food
- Foamed polystyrene food containers including fast food
- Plastic cups
- Foamed polystyrene cups
- Plastic cutlery/trays/straws
- Plastic food packets (crisp/sweet/lolly/sandwich)

	Number of EPR items found	Average number of EPR items per 100m of surveyed beach	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	108,999	29.0	14.3%	97%
England	37,126	30.5	18.2%	97%
Scotland	66,061	29.0	12.5%	97%
Wales	4,792	22.0	18.3%	97%
Northern Ireland	647	67.0	13.9%	100%
Channel Islands	373	22.0	18.3%	100%

Policy progress

Several four nation consultations have been held since 2019 on the setting up of the EPR scheme for plastic packaging. Businesses were required to start recording data on packaging from 2023 and the scheme administrator was appointed in 2024. EPR fees are expected to start in 2025.

Policy recommendations

1. Ensure that packaging EPR payments extend to litter payments which include revenue to support cleansing as well as volunteer led clean-ups and prevention
2. Implementation of monitoring and evaluation needs to track impact of EPR on litter levels
3. Use EPR as a policy solution for other litter items such as smoking, fishing and aquaculture related litter
4. In line with the 'polluter pays' principle, EPR schemes for plastic products should ensure that producers internalise full lifecycle costs of items placed on the market

Conclusion

There have been many positive policy steps taken in the last year to tackle beach litter. However, as the Beachwatch statistics for 2024 demonstrate, we have a long way to go.

We urgently need:

- Governments across the UK to speed up progress towards a circular economy using every policy tool available, from charges and market restrictions to extended producer responsibility schemes.
- Commitments to banning further single-use plastic items implemented as soon as possible, including the ban on plastic in single-use wet wipes, as well as extending those bans to the full list of items in the EU Plastics Directive.
- National marine litter strategies and litter prevention plans be put in place, updated and suitably resourced to drive action from all stakeholders including government, regulators, industry, charity and community.

From the policy success stories shared in this paper, we know policy works to prevent and reduce marine litter in our seas and on our shores. Now is not the time to slow down but to keep up the momentum across the UK by all governments to reach our targets to reduce ocean pollution.

Contact

If you would like to arrange a meeting or to follow up on any of the policy recommendations in this report, please email our Policy and Advocacy Manager Catherine Gemmell on catherine.gemmell@mcsuk.org.

If you would like to get involved in beach cleans or have questions on the data email our Beachwatch Manager Lizzie Price on lizzie.price@mcsuk.org.uk.



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