

State of our Beaches Report 2025

Policy recommendations



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Foreword

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

One year on from the publication of our first State of Our Beaches policy recommendations paper, the issue of marine litter remains as urgent and deeply concerning as ever.

This past year, thousands of dedicated Beachwatch volunteers have once again stepped up to gather the vital data that underpins this report. Their commitment throughout the years has equipped us with one of the most robust long-term datasets on coastal litter in the world, forming a crucial evidence base that helps us understand how litter is changing on our shorelines and how policy interventions are performing in practice.

Global efforts to tackle plastic pollution have reached a pivotal stage; international negotiations towards a legally binding Global Plastics Treaty are ongoing, although the latest talks disappointingly ended without agreement. Meanwhile, our work continues.

The governments of the UK have committed to an ambitious treaty, which we hope will bring further domestic legislation to curb marine litter both at home and on the global stage. In 2025, we saw a 15% decrease in litter compared to 2024 – potentially because of the single-use plastic bans introduced across the UK in the past few years. Progress, yes, but not the end. We must build on this legislation and seize the opportunity to tackle marine pollution, for good.

This second annual report builds on the foundations set last year, tracking developments over the past 12 months and presenting strengthened policy recommendations informed by the latest data and policy context. If adopted, these measures will help drive the systemic changes needed to reduce litter at its source and protect the health of our marine environment.

As a result of our campaigning based on this vital dataset, we have seen further legislation laid over the last year to reduce marine litter. The regulations to ban single-use vapes were implemented in 2025 and the regulations to ban plastic in single-use wet wipes have been passed in nearly every UK country at the time of writing. We are also pleased to see progress towards Deposit Return Schemes across the UK with the setting up of the Deposit Management Organisation for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and Wales receiving an exclusion via the UK Internal Market Act to include glass and reuse trials with industry.

However, with only four of our 36 policy recommendations achieved or built on by governments across the UK in the past year, there is still much work to be done.

As Chair of the Marine Conservation Society, I remain inspired by the dedication of our volunteers, supporters and partners, and encouraged by the growing recognition – here in the UK and worldwide – that ocean health must be a priority. I hope this year's report reinforces the urgency of the task ahead and motivates policymakers, businesses and the public to redouble and coordinate their efforts for effective action. Together, we can continue transforming evidence into meaningful action and move closer to the cleaner, healthier seas that future generations deserve.

Executive summary

Marine litter remains a significant environmental pressure that must be addressed by policymakers across the world; here, UK governments have the opportunity to become global leaders. The well documented impacts of litter on marine life, social amenity and coastal economies persist, reinforcing the need for sustained and coordinated action between governments, industries and communities.

This policy recommendations paper presents findings from the Marine Conservation Society's 2025 Beachwatch beach clean and litter monitoring programme, which once again mobilised thousands of volunteers across the UK and Channel Islands. Building on last year's report, it highlights the continued value of long-term data collection in understanding litter trends, assessing policy interventions and identifying areas requiring further action.

Over the past year, we have seen how this evidence base continues to support policy progress, and vitally, how it demonstrates the effectiveness of measures to combat pollution. With a 15% decrease in litter recorded on UK and Channel Island beaches compared to 2024, we may already be seeing the impact of the single-use plastic bans introduced across the UK in recent years.

However, substantial work remains. This report sets out recommendations for the many actions still needed to help reduce marine litter and achieve a truly circular economy in the UK. Among the most significant of these is the long-awaited introduction of Deposit Return Schemes for drinks containers across the UK – an essential step in reducing waste, improving recycling rates and preventing litter from reaching our coasts. Our findings consistently highlight how widespread and prolific drinks-related litter is on our coasts, and we hope it will also evidence a downward trend when these schemes are finally introduced.

Our policy recommendations for governments to address the most problematic types of marine litter by 2030 at the latest (unless otherwise stated below), and 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 that came 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 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 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 introduction of charges, and the potential reduction in single-use plastic as a result of recent bans, 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

This second edition of the State of Our Beaches policy recommendations paper comes at a critical stage of securing ocean protections, both in the UK and across the globe. Marine litter remains a persistent and escalating environmental challenge, with significant ecological, social and economic consequences. As plastic pollution continues to impact marine species, coastal communities and the wider environment, the need for coordinated and ambitious policy action has never been clearer.

Over the past year, efforts to secure a legally binding Global Plastics Treaty have continued, though negotiations in Geneva in 2025 ended without agreement as countries struggled to bridge divides on measures such as upstream production limits and lifecycle regulation. Nevertheless, nations – including the UK – have reaffirmed their commitment to stay at the table and work towards a robust global instrument capable of addressing plastic pollution across its full life cycle.

Domestically, 2025 brought some progress in the UK's efforts to address the issue, including the launch of the Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme for plastic packaging, the introduction of regulations to ban plastic in single-use wet wipes and a ban on single-use vapes.

However, substantial work remains. Major policy commitments, including Deposit Return Schemes, still need to be fully realised, and further action is required to prevent plastic pollution at source. As international negotiations continue and UK regulatory reforms advance, this report underscores the critical opportunity – and responsibility – for policymakers to deliver the transformative change required to protect our seas for future generations.

The evidence generated through the Marine Conservation Society's Beachwatch citizen science programme remains indispensable. This beach cleaning and litter surveying programme 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.

Drawing on data collected from beaches across the UK and Channel Islands in 2025 as presented in the [State of Our Beaches report](#), this report provides updated insights into the types and sources of beach litter, highlights emerging patterns and evaluates the effectiveness of recent policy interventions while setting out recommendations for future policy to reduce beach litter.

We are calling for all policy recommendations in this paper to be implemented by 2030 at the latest, with the UK-wide Deposit Return Schemes to be implemented by October 2027. Data from the complementary inland 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.

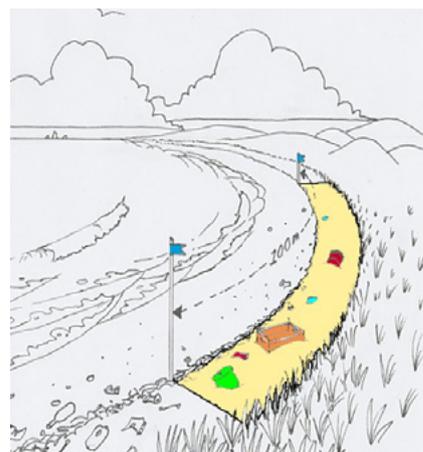


Illustration: Calum Duncan

How we analyse the data

We use improved methods to analyse Beachwatch data to make it as fair and accurate as possible. To do this, we start by looking at each individual beach stretch on its own. This ensures that no single beach can disproportionately influence the overall results. Once we've summarised each beach, we combine the data to get a broader picture of litter across larger areas.

Instead of using the standard arithmetic average (mean), we report the **median** average (the middle value), which better reflects typical litter levels, as mean average can be skewed by beaches with unusually high or low amounts of litter. We also analyse plastic pieces under 2.5cm separately, as their high numbers can otherwise hide important patterns in the data. This approach aligns with internationally agreed protocols used in OSPAR beach litter reporting and was adopted by the Marine Conservation Society in 2022.

We use two different metrics when analysing litter: **median average/100m** and **presence**. Median average/100m is the median amount found over a 100m stretch of beach, while presence records whether an item appears on a survey or not. For example, a presence of 50% means that half of the surveys in that region found at least one of those items.

For individual items, we focus on presence because many are found in very small numbers or not at all. These "zero-heavy" data make averages less reliable. By recording presence instead, we get a clearer sense of where different types of litter are showing up, even if they are rare.

For all litter or groups of litter items, such as sewage-related debris, single-use plastics, and fishing gear, **median average/100m is better suited** because zero counts are less common. Using the median average in these cases gives a reliable picture of overall litter levels and trends, helping us track changes over time and assess the effectiveness of policies and clean-up efforts.

Throughout the document, all references to "average" refer to median values

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 100m 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 2025 data overview

Summary of high-level statistics

In 2025, 14,507 volunteers submitted 1,192 litter surveys, covering 142km (88 miles) of coastline and removing 603,963 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 2025 by nation

	Number of volunteers	Number of surveys	Metres of coastline cleaned	Number of litter items
UK	14,507	1192	141,656	603,963
England	9,635	645	85,326	190,753
Scotland	3,763	410	39,900	385,551
Wales	858	112	13,880	20,598
Northern Ireland	95	7	700	3,301
Channel Islands	156	18	1,850	3,761

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 2025, by nation

	Weight of total litter collected (kgs)
UK	11,452
England	4,478
Scotland	5,825
Wales	864
Northern Ireland	134
Channel Islands	150

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 that this level 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 2025, alongside the analysis from 2024 highlighting the positive news of a decline in litter everywhere except Northern Ireland. These figures 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 2021	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach 2022	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach 2023	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach 2024	Average number of litter items per 100m of surveyed beach 2025
UK	186	165	167	170	141
England	204	173	161	157.5	151
Scotland	161	160	190	203.7	156.5
Wales	162	134	115	120	73.5
Northern Ireland	874	570	233	316.3	380
Channel Islands	17	72	72	118.5	27

Note on Northern Ireland and Channel Islands data

Due to the limited number of surveys completed in Northern Ireland (7) and the Channel Islands (18), we are currently unable to draw robust conclusions from the litter data recorded in these nations. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful runs the OSPAR monitoring in Northern Ireland, the latest data for which was published in November 2025 in its [Marine Litter Report](#).

Source to Sea Litter Quest

In 2025, 1,465 volunteers across the UK took part in the Source to Sea Litter Quest, submitting a total of 212 surveys. A total of 41,351 items of litter were removed.

Policy Recommendations

The UK Marine Strategy Assessment Part One published in 2025 highlighted that the UK has not met Good Environmental Status for marine litter but does show encouraging decreases in litter levels on beaches.

The UK is also a contracting party to OSPAR and helped develop and implement the second [Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter](#); its midway assessment published in 2025, highlights progress but calls strongly for continued work from all parties.

There is still a clear need to drive action towards tackling beach litter overall. We therefore continue to 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 mid-term review was undertaken in 2025 with results due to be published in 2026; and a National Litter and Flytipping Strategy was published in 2014 and 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; a Plastic Pollution Plan was also consulted on in 2025.

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

Three of the top ten litter items recorded in 2025 were single-use plastics, accounting for 16% of litter collected. We have seen an 18% decrease in single-use plastic litter items on Beachwatch beach clean surveys between 2024 and 2025. This data suggests the single-use plastic bans implemented across the UK are starting to have an impact. While encouraging, almost 160,000 single-use plastic litter items were recorded, highlighting the need to keep moving towards 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 average change from 2024	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	158,238	36	18% decrease	26%	97%
England	67,392	43.0	6% decrease	35%	98%
Scotland	83,980	30	38% decrease	22%	96.5%
Wales	5,776	22	34% decrease	28%	97%
Northern Ireland	768	67	23% decrease	23%	100%
Channel Islands	322	12	70% decrease	9%	93%

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 breakdown for cotton bud sticks is available in the table below.

Although we didn't see a change in average per 100m, there was an 11% drop in presence of cotton bud sticks on beaches surveyed across the UK between 2024 and 2025 which also suggests a positive policy impact from the bans on single-use plastic cotton buds across the UK.

Due to some volunteers using old survey forms that did not separate single-use plastic from cardboard cotton bud sticks for this analysis, both were grouped together.

	Number of cotton bud sticks found	Presence on beach surveys	Percentage presence change compared to 2024
UK	8, 331	34%	11 % decrease
England	1,203	29%	22% decrease
Scotland	6,935	44%	12% increase
Wales	188	36%	24% decrease
Northern Ireland	5	33%	33% increase
Channel Islands	0	0%	100% decrease

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 88% reduction in carrier bags on beaches across the UK since charges were implemented. The average number found on Beachwatch beach cleans is now 0.5 per 100m.

Wales, which was the first UK nation to implement a charge in 2011, has seen a decrease of over 99% in plastic bags found on its beaches; however, in 2025, bags were still recorded on 54.5% of beach clean surveys.

In Northern Ireland, the number of plastic bags recorded has dropped by 94% since 2013, when its charges were implemented, and were found on 50% of beaches surveyed.

Scotland introduced its carrier bag charge in 2014 and Beachwatch data shows that the average number of bags found on its beaches has decreased by over 99% since then, although they are still present on 54% of beaches surveyed.

England introduced plastic carrier bag charges in 2015, with a decrease of 81% recorded since then, and bags found on 57.5% of beaches surveyed.

Single-use plastic bans

Following the single-use plastic bans across England, Scotland and Wales on cutlery, straws, expanded polystyrene cups and food containers and their lids, drink stirrers, plates, balloon sticks the data is starting to show a positive impact with an 18% decline in single-use plastic items found on beaches and an 11% decline in cotton bud sticks. We will conduct further trend analysis later in 2026.

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 by October 2027	DRS by October 2027
Wet wipes containing plastic	Ban on supply May 2027	Ban on supply August 2027	Ban on supply December 2026	Ban on supply May 2027
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 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

To reduce single-use plastic pollution on UK beaches, we are calling on governments across the UK to:

1. 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
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 schemes
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

Data overview

Smoking-related litter was found on 68% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2025.

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 in 2023. We saw no change in the average smoking litter found on beach clean surveys across the UK and Channel Islands between 2024 and 2025. 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 tables below.

	Cigarette butts (Beachwatch)			All smoking-related litter (Beachwatch)		
	Presence on beaches	Total	Presence percentage change from 2024	Presence on beaches	Total	Percentage presence change from 2024
UK	54%	24,854	4% decrease	68%	26,577	5% decrease
England	67.5%	22,261	2% decrease	76%	23,296	5% decrease
Scotland	31.5%	1,743	9% decrease	58%	2,305	1% decrease
Wales	53%	729	17% decrease	64%	840	20% decrease
Northern Ireland	50%	49	20% decrease	67%	55	11% decrease
Channel Islands	40%	72	37% decrease	47%	81	27% decrease

Vapes found inland using Source to Sea Litter Quest form - UK					
	2024		2025		
	Total picked up	Percentage on survey	Total picked up	Percentage on survey	Percentage presence change from 2024 to 2025
UK	419	71%	769	59%	16% decrease
England	176	66%	571	56%	16% decrease
Scotland	194	85%	183	77%	9% decrease
Wales	13	75%	11	75%	0% decrease
Northern Ireland	No Surveys	No Surveys	No Surveys	No Surveys	No Surveys
Channel Islands	No Surveys	No Surveys	No Surveys	No Surveys	No Surveys

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 – which they did in June 2025.

This is a prime example of how individuals, organisations and politicians can join together to drive positive change.

Our initial Source to Sea data demonstrates a decrease in the presence of vapes across the UK.

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 June 2025	Ban on sale and supply 1st June 2025	Ban on sale and supply 1st June 2025	Ban on sale and supply 1st June 2025

Policy recommendations

1. Ban the manufacture of disposable vapes following the ban on sale and supply that came 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

Data overview

Sewage-related debris (SRD) was found on 69% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2025. There was a 37.5% decrease in the average number of SRD items found per 100m of beaches surveyed across the UK between 2024 and 2025. Sewage-related debris is a hotspot litter group which you can see in the heatmap further down. Although found on almost 70% of beaches across the UK, they are found in high numbers in concentrated areas.

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.

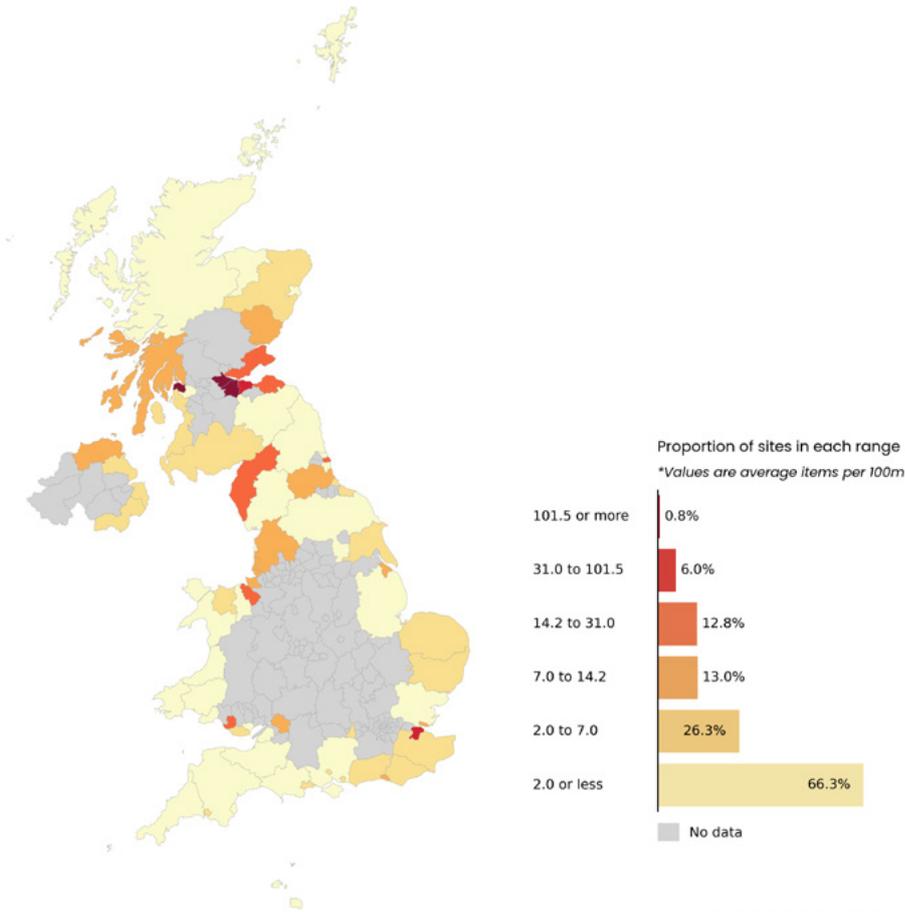
Storm overflows should only be used during extreme rainfall to avoid flooding of the sewer network, but recent evidence shows this is happening far more regularly. Misconnections, when the wastewater system in homes and businesses has been wrongly connected to the surface water system, can also be a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

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

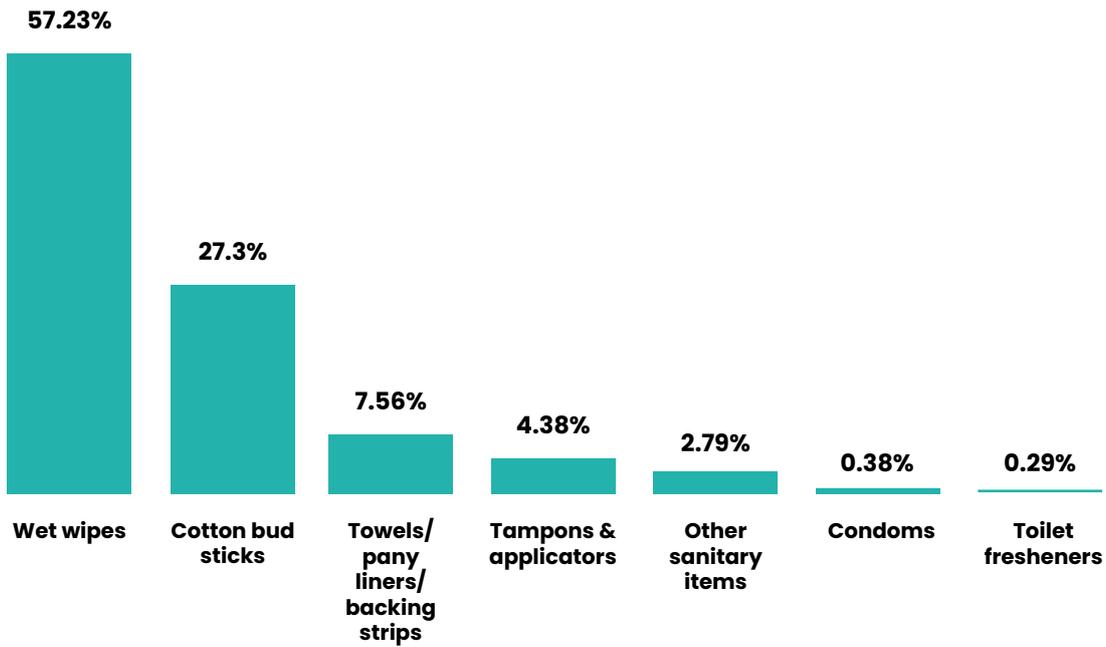
- Wet wipes
- Plastic cotton bud sticks
- Cardboard cotton bud sticks
- Tampons and applicators
- Condoms
- Toilet fresheners
- Sanitary towels/panty liners/backing strips
- Other sanitary items

	Number of SRD items found	Average number of SRD items per 100m of surveyed beach 2025	Percentage average change from 2024	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	30,436	2.0	37.5% decrease	5%	69%
England	6,300	2.5	37.5% decrease	3%	73%
Scotland	23,608	2.5	25% increase	6%	65%
Wales	490	1.0	60% decrease	2%	65%
Northern Ireland	31	3.0	25% decrease	1%	83%
Channel Islands	6	0.0	100% decrease	0.2%	20%

SRD in United Kingdom (2025)



Source: Marine Conservation Society



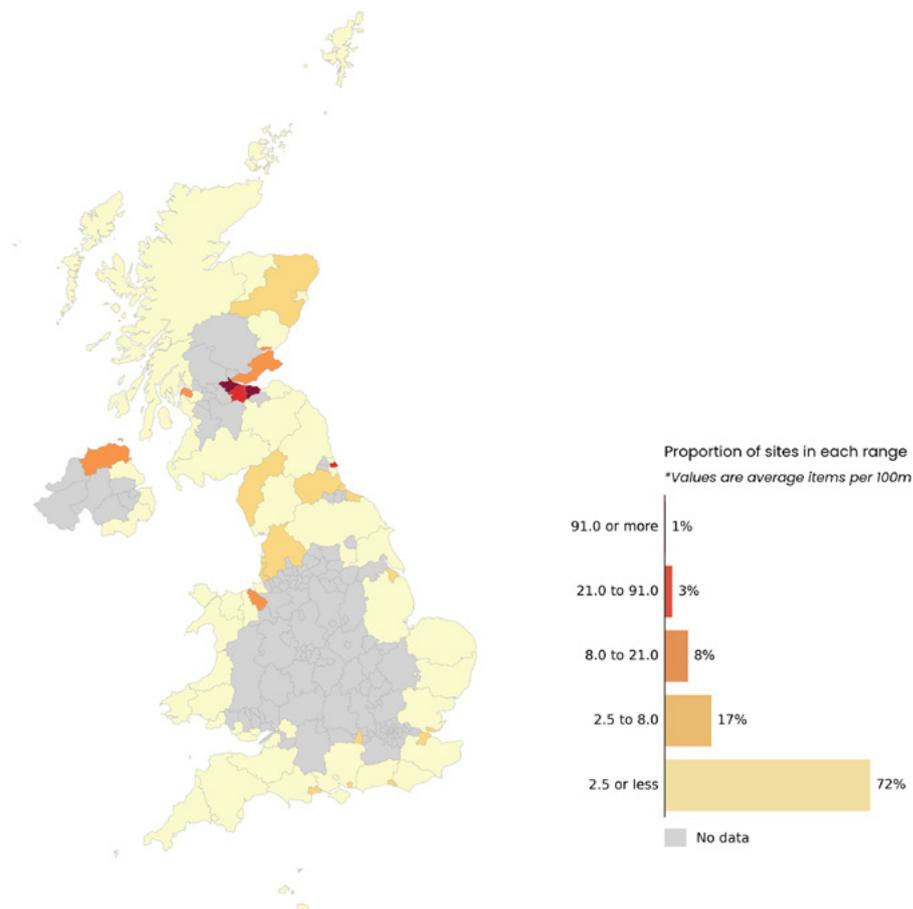
SRD litter items found in the UK in 2025, by percentage of total SRD litter

Wet wipes

Over 17,419 wet wipes were picked up in 2025 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. We may be beginning to see the result of these efforts, with a 7% decrease of presence of wet wipes found on beaches across the UK and Channel Islands between 2024 and 2025.

	Number of wet wipes items found	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys	Percentage change in presence from 2024
UK	17,419	3%	51%	7% decrease
England	3,046	2%	60%	4% decrease
Scotland	14,130	4%	40%	8% decrease
Wales	221	1%	46%	15% decrease
Northern Ireland	21	1%	50%	20% decrease
Channel Islands	1	0.1%	7%	85% decrease

Wet wipes in United Kingdom (2025)



Source: Marine Conservation Society

Policy success stories

Following years of campaigning, we were delighted to see the four-nation commitment in April 2024 to ban plastic in single-use wet wipes. Legislation has followed with England and Northern Ireland implementing the ban from May 2027, Wales from December 2026 and Scotland from August 2027.

As mentioned above in the single-use plastic chapter, our Beachwatch data is showing an 11% decrease in presence of single-use cotton bud sticks since the bans came into effect across Scotland, Wales and England. We will be conducting further trend analysis later in 2026.

Policy progress

Items	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Wet wipes containing plastic	Ban on supply May 2027	Ban on supply August 2027	Ban on supply December 2026	Ban on supply May 2027
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

Storm Overflow Monitoring and Regulation

Over recent years, the UK has taken significant steps to improve the monitoring, transparency and regulation of sewage spills from storm overflows, which should help to reduce levels of sewage-related debris.

Improved Monitoring and Public Access to Data

Monitoring and online access to near real-time information on sewage spills has expanded across the UK. In England and Wales, all storm overflows and emergency overflows are now required to have event duration monitoring in place, with companies obliged to publish near real-time data on discharges. These maps provide easily accessible data that allows members of the public to see where sewage discharges are happening in real-time. In Scotland, monitoring coverage remains comparatively low. In 2025, coverage of monitored CSOs increased slightly from 32% to 35%, supported by enhancements to Scottish Water's near real-time Overflow Map.

Regulation of sewage discharges

Governments in England and Wales have made commitments to reform the water sector. The Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 has strengthened regulation of water companies, including new powers for tougher enforcement, requiring companies to produce pollution-reduction plans and a legal requirement for real-time monitoring of all emergency overflows.

In July 2025, the Independent Water Commission made 88 recommendations for further reform of the water sector in England and Wales. In January 2026, the UK Government responded by publishing 'A New Vision for Water' outlining plans to take some of the reforms forward. This includes creating a new, stronger single water regulator, improving sewage infrastructure, and moving to 'pre-pipe' solutions to tackle pollution. The Welsh Government is also developing new oversight and planning reforms following the IWC recommendations and has published a Green Paper to take this forward, including plans for a new Water Regulator for Wales.

In Scotland we are calling for the next Scottish Government to make clean water a national priority by introducing a Water Bill within the first 12 months of the next parliamentary session.

Behaviour Change

Following recommendations from the Independent Water Commission, Defra has set up a Discussion Forum to tackle Sewer Misuse and build on the recent ban on plastics in wet wipes. We have shared data from our Beachwatch project on the items which are commonly found on beaches. 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 'bin the wipes' and to only flush the 'three Ps' down the toilet: pee, poo and toilet paper'.

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 and Channel Island beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers, with a 12% decrease between 2024 and 2025.

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 166%. 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. In 2025, fishing and aquaculture related litter made up 34% of all litter collected on Scottish Islands compared to only 9% on mainland beaches.

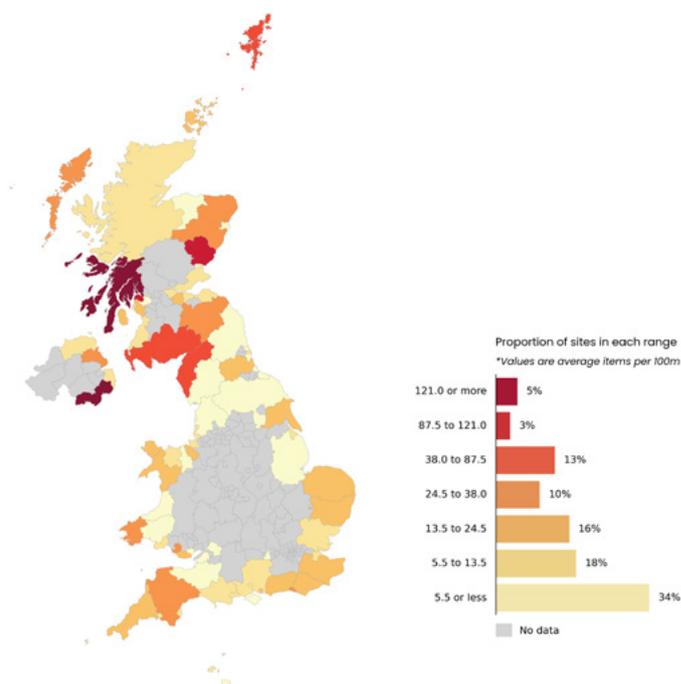
Items classed as fishing and aquaculture litter for our data analysis includes:

- 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 average change from 2024	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	137,624	14.0	12.5 decrease	23%	93%
England	23,697	12.0	0% change	12%	91%
Scotland	109,057	19.0	37% decrease	28%	95%
Wales	4,292	15.0	50% increase	21%	94%
Northern Ireland	402	23.8	28% decrease	12%	100%
Channel Islands	177	4.0	73% decrease	5%	93%

Fishing litter in United Kingdom (2025)



Shipping litter

The Beachwatch data is analysed following established categories. Currently we class rope over 1cm in diameter 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 4.3% of all litter recorded, with an average of five items found per 100m of surveyed beach – a decrease of 23% compared to 2024. The survey form grouping that includes 'String / cord / rope: thickness 1 cm +' along with strapping bands are the two most commonly reported items in this category, accounting for 65% and 11% 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. This 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.

In Wales the Recycle Mor and Odyssey projects are both fantastic examples of collection and recycling of end-of-life gear which we would like to see available in every port and harbour across the UK, with equivalent provisions for aquaculture sites.

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 made in 2024 and 2025.

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 and the consultation on a Circular Economy Strategy in 2025. In England we saw the establishment of a Circular Economy Taskforce in 2024 and await the Circular Economy Growth Plan in 2026. It was very welcome to see Wales hosting the 2024 European Circular Economy Hotspot event in Cardiff and consulting on pathways to reuse in 2025.

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 has been campaigning for Deposit Return Schemes for bottles and cans for almost a decade. This tried and tested policy 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 inter-operable Deposit Return Schemes across the UK.

To find out more about our work on Deposit Return Schemes, and watch films on international best practice, or join our DRS Fan Club head to our [website](#).

Data overview

Drinks-related litter was found on 95% of UK and Channel Island beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2025, with a 15% decrease in the average number found compared to 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 DRS per 100m of surveyed beach	Percentage average change from 2024	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	49,771	14.0	15% decrease	8.0%	95%
England	22,228	15.0	12% decrease	12%	95%
Scotland	24,243	12.0	29% decrease	6.0%	93%
Wales	2,644	11.0	15% decrease	13%	96%
Northern Ireland	417	42.0	26.5% increase	13%	100%
Channel Islands	239	3.0	80% decrease	6%	87%

The table below highlights the different drinks litter materials that were found in each country across the UK as well as the Channel Islands. Whereas this table considers drink containers by individual material type, the table above reports combined material types, therefore, the presence of grouped items is higher.

	Presence of glass bottles	Presence of metal drinks containers	Presence of plastic drinks bottles
UK	47%	59%	69%
England	50%	63%	67%
Scotland	45%	53%	72%
Wales	41%	62%	70%
Northern Ireland	67%	67%	83%
Channel Islands	7%	33%	53%

Source to Sea Litter Quest

A total of 2,080 glass bottles recorded on Source to Sea Litter Quest surveys in 2025 and were present on 66% of cleans. Plastic bottles and plastic caps and lids were found on 92% and 84% of cleans, respectively.

Policy progress

Deposit Return Schemes are due to start across the UK in October 2027. In England, Scotland and Northern Ireland the scheme will include plastic and metal drinks containers and in Wales will also include glass. The Deposit Management Organisation for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland was set up in 2025 and the public facing 'Exchange for Change' brand was launched in early 2026.

The Welsh Government consulted on pathways to reuse in 2025 and was granted an exclusion through the UK Internal Market Act to include glass in their DRS with reuse trials being set up with industry. At the time of writing a decision on the DMO for Wales is still to be announced.

Policy recommendations

We are calling on the governments across the UK to:

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

Beachwatch volunteers found 4,876 single-use cups in 2025 – an 8.2% decrease in presence compared to 2024. Despite this slight reduction, we must still 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 cups items found	Presence on beach surveys	Percentage change compared to 2024
UK	4,876	59%	8% decrease
England	2,953	66%	8% decrease
Scotland	1,651	50%	8% decrease
Wales	252	55%	15% decrease
Northern Ireland	16	67%	11% decrease
Channel Islands	4	27%	27% decrease

Policy progress

The Scottish Government consulted in 2024 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 95.5% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2025. Overall, we saw a 14% decrease of EPR items on beach clean surveys across the UK and Channel Islands between 2024 and 2025.

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 per 100m of surveyed beach	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys	Presence change from 2024
UK	96,003	25.0	16%	96%	1.5% decrease
England	36,853	29.5	19.3%	96%	1% decrease
Scotland	54,432	20.0	14%	95%	2% decrease
Wales	3,910	15.0	19%	96%	2% decrease
Northern Ireland	616	52.5	19%	100%	0% change
Channel Islands	192	3.0	5%	93%	7% decrease

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 started 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 2025 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 success stories shared in this paper, we know policy is an effective way to prevent and reduce marine litter in our seas and on our shores. Now is not the time to slow down but for all governments of the UK to build on the progress made and keep up the momentum 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 on lizzie.price@mcsuk.org.uk.



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