



Rural Litter

POSITION STATEMENT

What is rural litter?

While we often see more litter in urban areas, litter is also a big problem in the countryside. Rural litter occurs when an individual or individuals either throws something out of their car window or doesn't clean up after themselves on a picnic. This litter is in many cases more hazardous for our environment due to the lack of services available to properly clean it up, and can have potentially deadly impacts on domestic animals, farm animals and wildlife. This paper will not deal with the issue of fly tipping. Whilst there are links between the two issues, it is important to deal with them separately

DEVELOPING OUR POSITION

We are concerned at the rise in rural litter and the impacts if this goes on unchecked by relevant authorities. We welcome the opportunity to raise awareness of this critically important issue and in this paper will set out concrete measures to address this problem.

Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful has been engaging with policy-makers in the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), local councils and other civic groups over the issue of rural litter and its impact across Northern Ireland. In addition to this, through the Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report we have been surveying the impact of rural litter across Northern Ireland for more than a decade. We have a solid basis of research that helps inform our views on this topic and allows us to identify some of the underlying issues that are fuelling this problem.

The most recent edition of the report shows that 39% of rural roads surveyed across the country failed to meet the accepted standard for litter in 2017/18. This is 13 times higher than the 3% of transects that failed in city and town centres.ⁱ While no data was collected to show the frequency of littering events in these areas and whether one was higher than the other, it is clear that litter is removed from urban areas much more frequently than in their rural counterparts.

There are serious economic costs arising from rural litter. According to a recent NISRA bulletin, there are more tourists than ever coming to Northern Ireland, with an estimated 2.7 million overnight trips from external visitors in 2017 contributing £657 million to the local economy. Tourism currently represents 5% of Northern Ireland's GDP.ⁱⁱ With the route between our two most visited attractions involving travel along rural roads, tourists are almost guaranteed to catch an eyeful of our littered hedgerows, perhaps making a return trip all the less likely.

Rural litter has been raised as a problem in the Republic of Ireland by the Irish Farmers Association. They have called for the Irish government to impose harsher fines and greater enforcement by local authorities.ⁱⁱⁱ Rural litter is obviously an island wide problem.

OUR POSITION

At Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, we believe that:

- Rural areas are disproportionately impacted by litter due to reduced cleansing regimes from local authorities.
- Rural litter has recently become a growing problem in the wider battle against litter in Northern Ireland.
- We need a proactive approach in tackling rural litter by all relevant agencies. There is currently a disjointed approach by local councils, the Roads Service and relevant departments in tackling this problem.
- More resources need to be deployed to rural areas to ensure litter is picked up more regularly by the relevant agencies.
- Regular enforcement by relevant agencies is required to provide a deterrent and demonstrate the consequences of littering.
- Greater public awareness and understanding of the problems rural litter causes and messages to facilitate behavioural change are needed.

OUR RECCOMENDATIONS

- Policy makers need to deliver a coherent rural litter strategy that includes all relevant agencies.
- Hold all bodies with responsibility for litter collection to account, including Department for Infrastructure, Transport NI and local councils.
- We strongly support a greater role for the Rivers Agency in tackling rural litter. Many items of litter end up in rivers which damage local wildlife and can cause damage to other areas. Litter in our rivers needs urgent attention and action.
- Support campaigns that specifically tackle rural litter. More can be done to highlight the impacts of litter on our countryside and the cost economically and environmentally.
- An impact survey should be conducted by the DAERA on the impact of rural litter.
- Prioritise behaviour change above providing more disposal facilities. Installing more bins alone has no significant impact on litter. We need to think differently and be more proactive to greatly reduce the number of people who think it is acceptable to litter.

- Provide more environmental education for the public. Those who are caught littering usually receive a fine of around £80, but we believe that an educational awareness course, already in place in other territories, to demonstrate the impact of litter should also be developed by authorities.^{iv}

OUR ACTIONS

- Annual Cleaner Neighbourhood Surveys carried out to monitor overall levels of rural litter. The data goes into an annual report and is published online
- Liaise with other like-minded organisations such as Keep Scotland Beautiful, Keep Britain Tidy and Keep Wales Tidy to help increase awareness of this issue and provide coherent and practical messages for action.
- Continue providing support to community groups in rural areas through the Live Here Love Here Small Grants Scheme.
- Continue to work with partners across the European Union on the issue of litter such as the European Litter Prevention Agency, the Foundation for Environmental Education and the Global Environmental Education Partnership.
- Support enforcement of litter provisions set out in the 2011 Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland).^v

CONCLUSION

The issue of rural litter has been slowly getting worse in Northern Ireland. With relevant stakeholders working in a more proactive and collaborative manner this can be reversed. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful believes that by focusing on behaviour change we can achieve the best results, but we also recognise the importance of fines and other deterrence measures for those who are caught littering. The environmental and economic benefits that can come from tackling this issue could be substantial.

ⁱ <https://keepnorthernirelandbeautiful.etinu.net/cgi-bin/generic?instanceID=48>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Tourism-Statistics-Annual-Publication-2017.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.medpartnership.com/index.php/minister-coveney-must-address-litter-scourge-across-rural-ireland-say-ifa/>

^{iv} <https://naaee.org/eepro/groups/global-ee/case-study/implementing-taiwan-environmental>

^v <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/23/contents>