

# Marine Litter Report 2024

KEEP  
NORTHERN  
IRELAND  
BEAUTIFUL



MARINE  
SURVEY

Kilkeel beach, one of the 12 beaches  
being surveyed in Northern Ireland.





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# Foreword

**The Marine Litter Report, published with the support of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, has set a benchmark for the marine litter debate in Northern Ireland and highlights the most commonly found forms of litter across our community.**

This year's report shows that we cannot afford to stand still in our fight against litter. To put the challenge into one sentence, a lot has been done, but still, there is a lot more to do.

On the positive side, we are seeing a gradual reduction in marine litter in Northern Ireland. Previous reports have noted increases in litter of all kinds, particularly plastics, and it is welcome that we have seen a slight decrease. This is a tribute to those who ensure they put their rubbish in the bin and play their part in looking after our environment.

However, the entire picture is not a cheerful one. Whilst some modest progress has been made, we need to be honest with ourselves that our litter levels, particularly in marine areas, are far too high. Northern Ireland still faces a significant plastics problem, which is endangering marine ecosystems and harming our wildlife. The Marine Litter Survey is still finding that 84% of the litter we are finding is made of some form of plastic. This emphasises the need for us to move toward alternatives that are more environmentally friendly and implement policies that will build a more circular economy.

My earnest belief is that it doesn't have to be like this. Northern Ireland deserves so much better, and this report is to show all of us how we can do better. In 2025, we welcomed the Open Championship at Royal Portrush. This area is home to some of the best beaches in Europe. Whilst tourists came for the golf, they also enjoyed the magnificent natural heritage that all of us can be proud of and have a duty to protect. Events like this and their success are a timely reminder of just how lucky we are to live here.

It is this pride that motivates us to conduct this research. The first step in solving any problem is recognising that there is one. This report serves as a benchmark for understanding precisely what our marine litter problem is and then seeks to point out a pathway forward for how we can deal with it.

In this report, you are going to see what the current state of our marine areas is. We will tell you what the most commonly found items of litter are and how they compare to previous years. You will then read our recommendations section, which highlights what we need from the public, political leaders and businesses to help drive down the litter problem in Northern Ireland.

Some parts of this report may be challenging to read, but I urge those who take the time to read this not to get angry about our situation; instead, get active. Get active in your communities and make a difference. Press our political leaders for change, use your power as a consumer to nudge businesses towards more environmentally friendly alternatives and do your bit by putting rubbish in the bin.

Standing still is not enough for Northern Ireland, and at Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, we will continue to make this case. Our marine environment deserves no less from us.

Let's not stand still, let's move forward, together.

## Eric Randall

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER.  
KEEP NORTHERN IRELAND BEAUTIFUL





# Executive Summary

This report highlights key findings from marine litter surveys conducted on twelve reference beaches around Northern Ireland in 2024.

Marine litter continues to be a serious, global issue. It's estimated that 5-12 metric tonnes of plastic enters the ocean every year. About 89% of plastic litter found on the ocean floor is single-use items like plastic bags.<sup>1</sup> Plastic pollution accumulates in marine environments, causing a range of issues from entanglement and ingestion by marine species to disruption of food chains.

Locally, data has been collected since 2012 using the internationally recognised OSPAR methodology. OSPAR monitors litter at over 70 beaches in the North East Atlantic following common monitoring guidelines.

The 2024 results for Northern Ireland show some improvements – 341 items of litter were recorded, on average, per 100m of beach surveyed, down from 513 in 2023. The percentage of litter made from plastic has also dropped from an all-time high of 91% last year, to 84%.<sup>2</sup>

While these improvements are welcome, there is still a long way to go – the OSPAR threshold value for beach litter is just 20 items per 100m. This means our beaches still have 17 times more litter than the level experts consider to be sufficiently precautionary.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/oceans/#:~:text=The%20world%20is%20now%20in,to%20local%20culture%20and%20industry.>

<sup>2</sup> All of our photographs are from beaches in Northern Ireland. These images highlight the marine litter problem across beaches, even ones we do not survey.

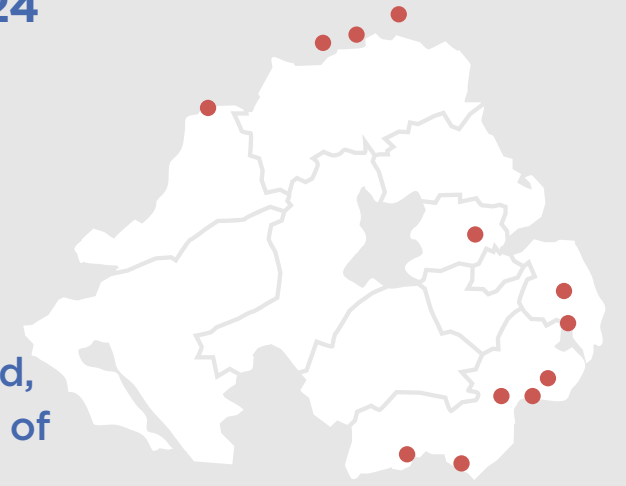
Note: Any small discrepancies between data sets in this report will be due to rounding of figures.



## Key Facts from 2024

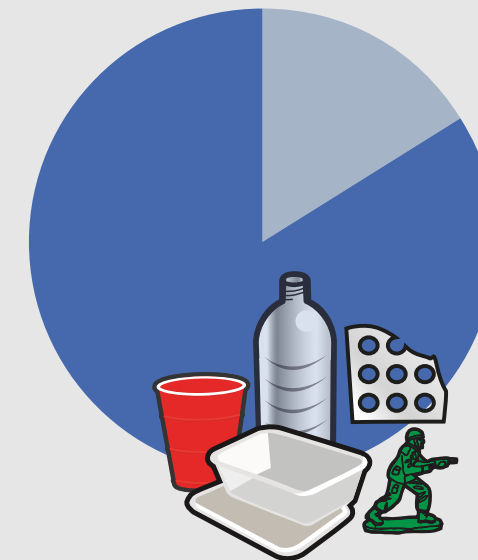
341

items of litter recorded,  
on average, per 100m of  
beach surveyed



17,573

items of litter  
were recorded  
in 2024



84%

of the litter on our  
beaches was made of  
plastic, a drop of 7%  
from 2023.



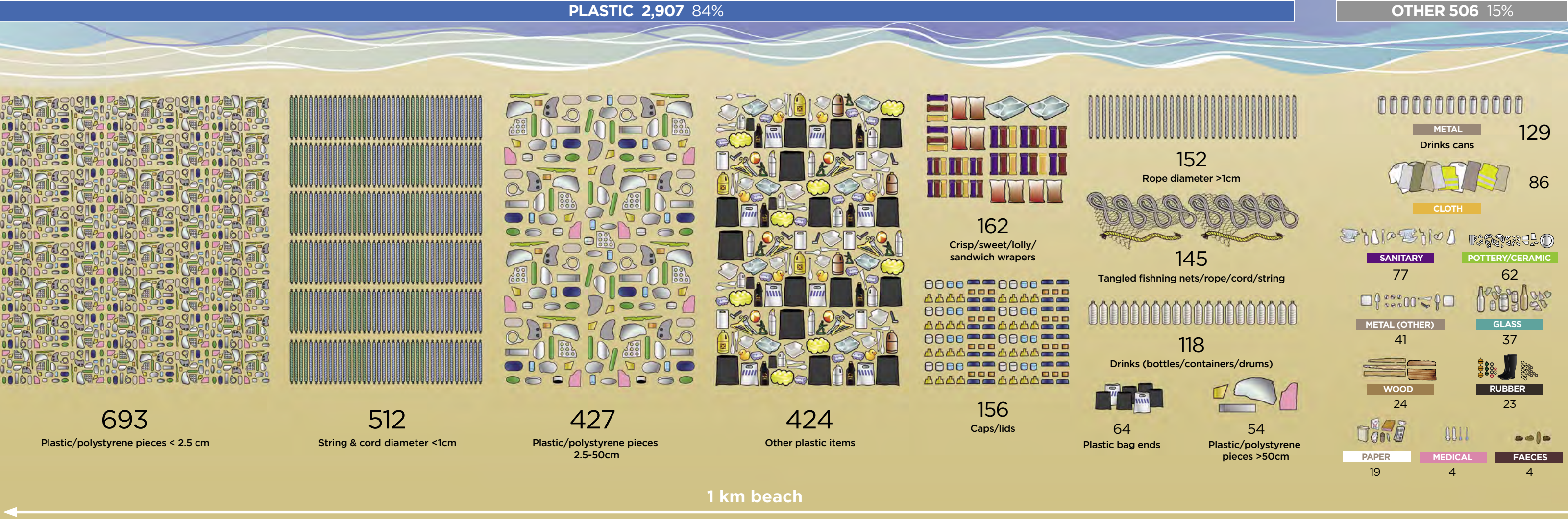
# Overview

The overall picture shows some progress in the Marine Litter picture with overall levels decreasing and the amount of plastic litter being found also dropping.

The data collected in this report breaks down into more detail some of the most commonly found items of litter. This enables us to see the areas that Northern Ireland needs to focus on to continue reducing marine litter.

3,413

Items of litter per km of beach surveyed in 2024<sup>1</sup>



1 This figure varies slightly from the cumulative total in the graphic on page 8 due to it being made up of average figures that have been rounded up or down.



# What is the Marine Litter Survey?

**Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful have been recording Marine Litter in Northern Ireland for more than 10 years.**

We use a survey method designed by the OSPAR Commission to standardise the monitoring of litter on beaches across countries bordering the North Atlantic.

Currently 12 beaches are being surveyed in Northern Ireland ([see page 9](#)).

OSPAR is the mechanism by which 15 governments and the EU cooperate to protect the marine environment of the North-East Atlantic. The 15 Governments are Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>.

OSPAR's strategic marine litter objective, shared by Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, is to "Prevent inputs of and significantly reduce marine litter, including microplastics, in the marine environment to reach levels that do not cause adverse impacts to the marine and coastal environment with the ultimate aim of eliminating inputs of litter."<sup>2</sup>

You can view the data for all OSPAR sites by visiting <https://odims.ospar.org>

## The methodology

The OSPAR Commission designed the marine litter survey guidelines to assist countries with recording and tackling the marine litter problem on both a local and North East Atlantic level.

The information collected from each beach is fed into a central database which shows trends in the types of litter found in the marine environment. Surveyors record all litter found on the beach under different categories to help describe the different groups and items of litter observed.

When selecting beaches to be surveyed the following criteria were used. The beach must:

- Be composed of sand or gravel and exposed to the open sea;
- Be accessible to surveyors all year round;
- Be accessible for ease of marine litter removal;
- Be a minimum length of 100 metres and if possible over;
- 1 kilometre in length;
- Be free of 'buildings' all year round; ideally not be subject to any other litter collection activities

Two sampling units are used to measure a fixed section of the beach between the water's edge and the back of the beach.

These units are:

100 metres: for identifying all marine litter items;

1 kilometre: for identifying objects generally larger than 50 centimetres.

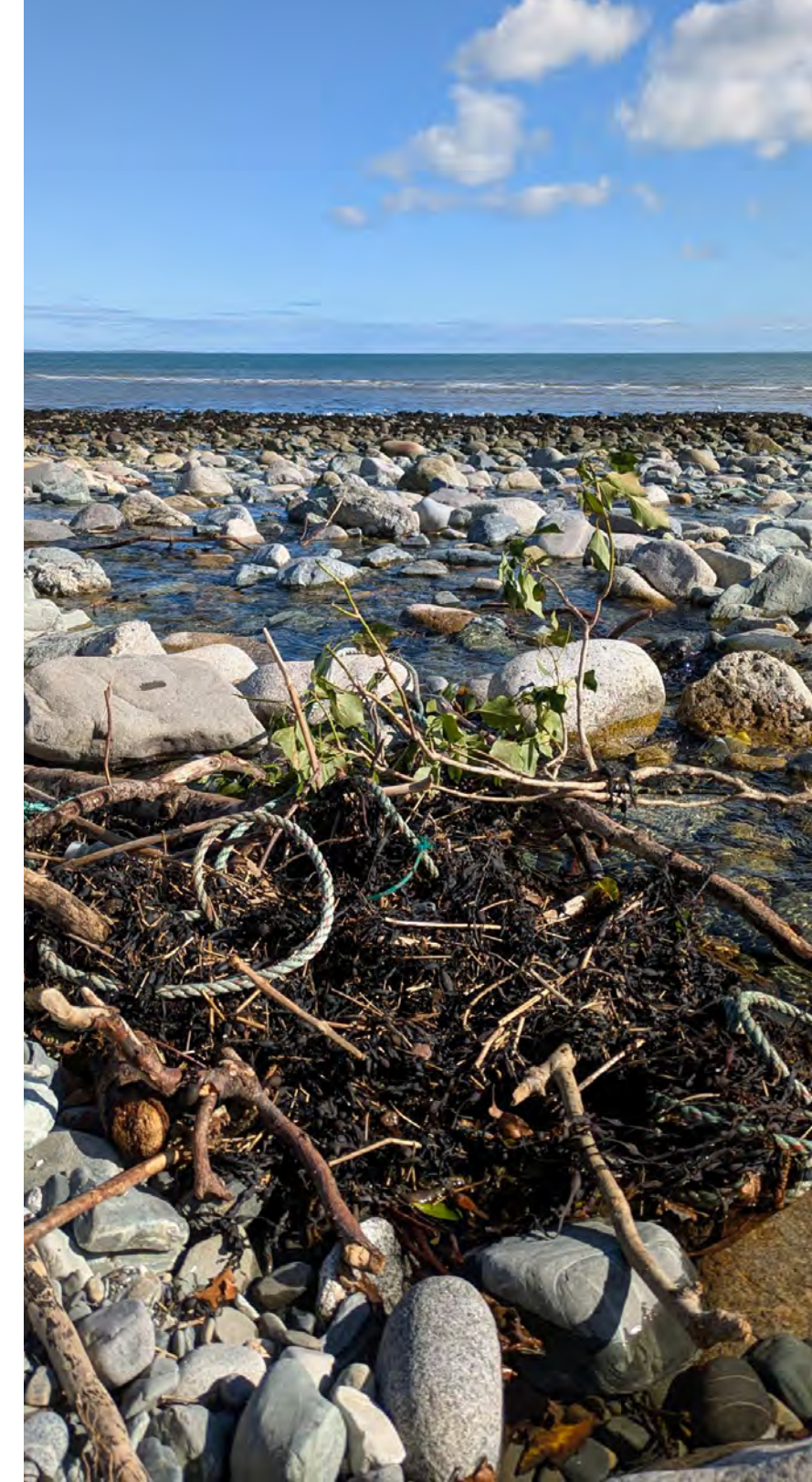
The survey periods are as follows:

- Winter: mid-December to mid-January
- Spring: April
- Summer: mid-June to mid-July
- Autumn: mid-September to mid-October

To ensure that the marine litter being recorded during each of the surveys isn't duplicated, the survey beaches are cleaned within two weeks of the survey.

Once all data has been collected, it is collated into one form and uploaded to the OSPAR database.

Newcastle beach



<sup>1</sup> [About | OSPAR Commission](#)

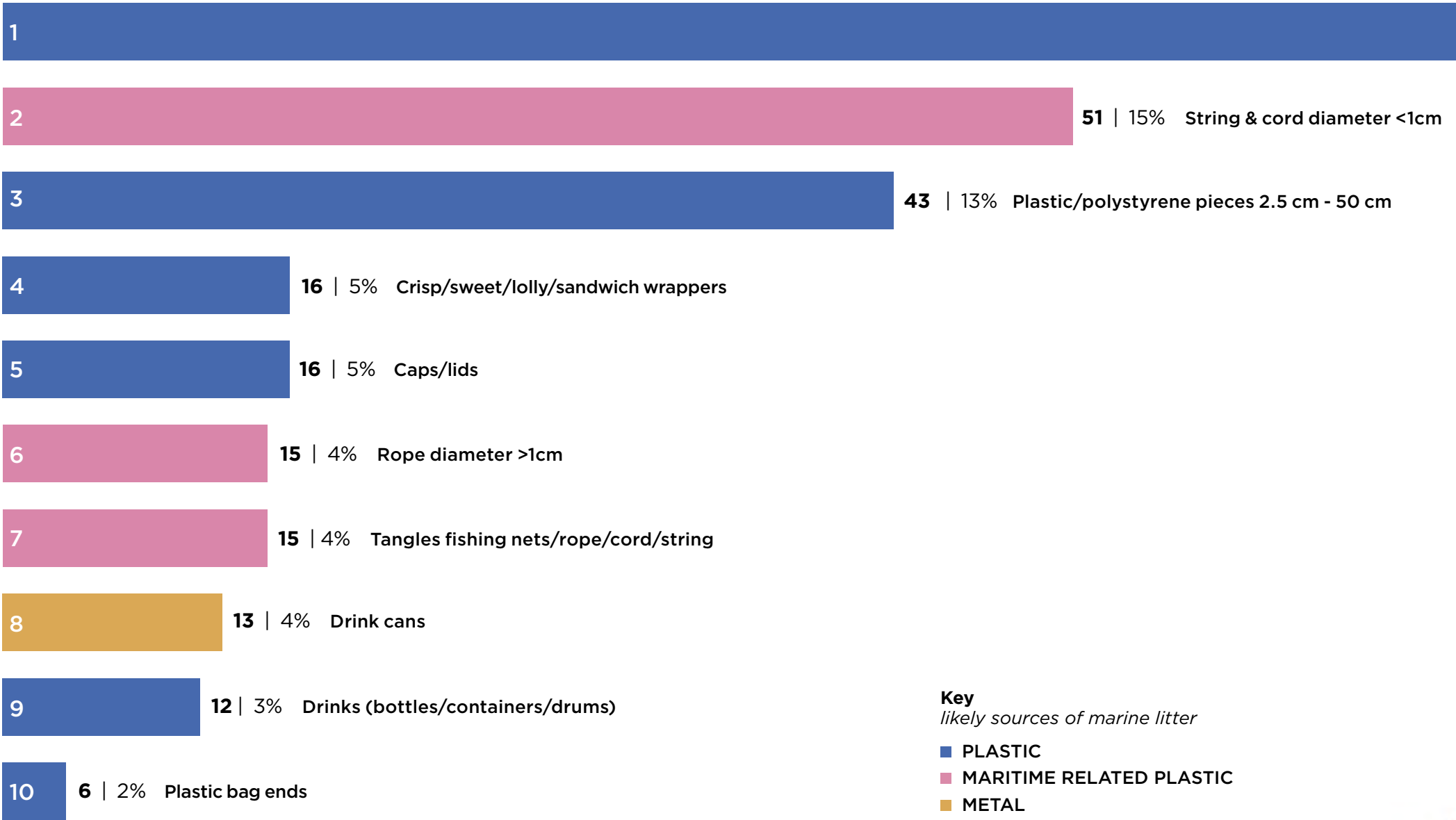
<sup>2</sup> [Action Plan for Marine Litter | OSPAR Commission](#)





# 2024 Terrible Ten

Plastic remains the most prevalent type of litter found on surveyed beaches, the most commonly found items include drink containers, as well as string, rope, and cord. The accompanying graph shows the average number of each litter type recorded per 100 metres surveyed. Notably, the number of drinks related litter items features quite regularly in this year's list, highlighting a need to tackle these particular items of litter.



**Key**  
*likely sources of marine litter*

- PLASTIC
- MARITIME RELATED PLASTIC
- METAL

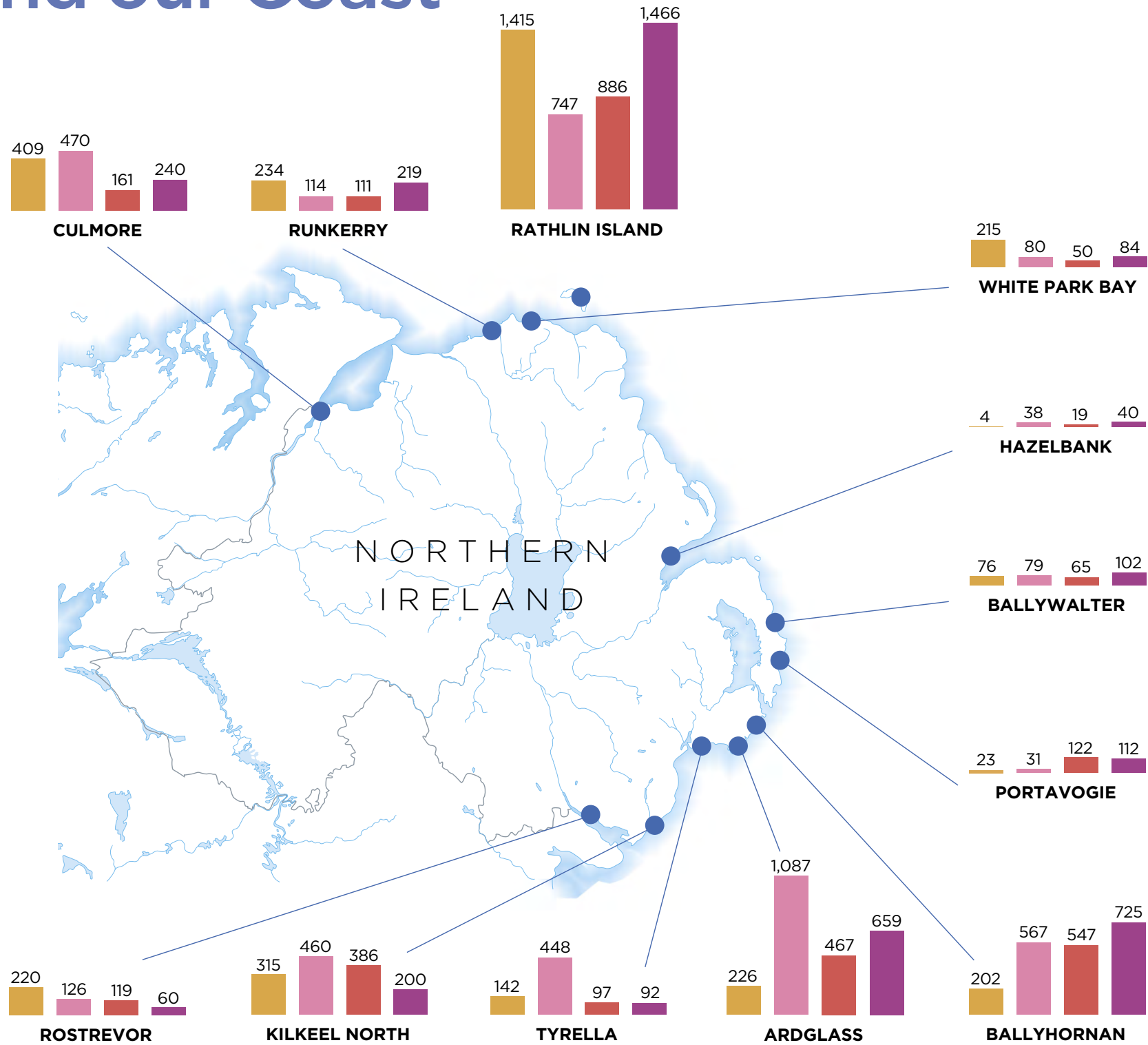
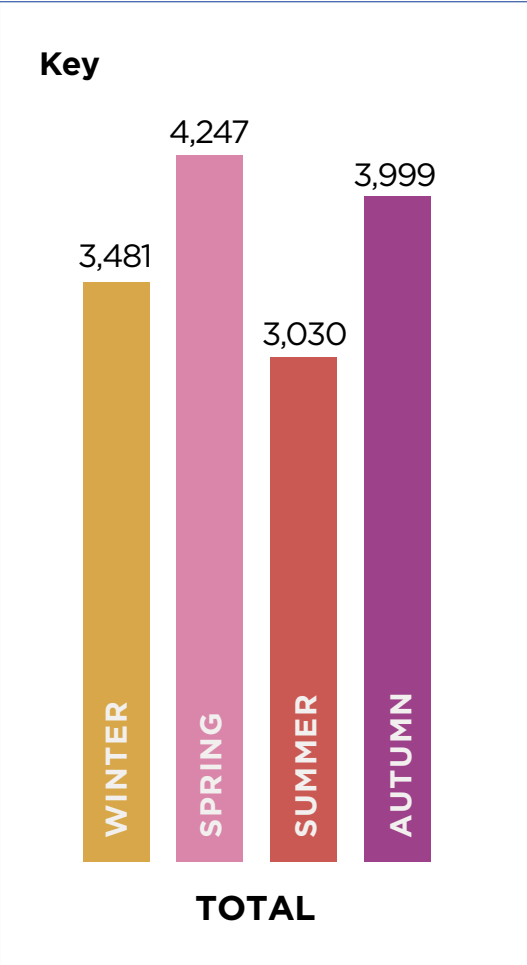


In 2024, the methodology for collecting and recording heavy duty gloves was under review and new data will be available in next years report.



# Plastic Around our Coast

These mini graphs depict the seasonal variation in the total number of plastic items found around our coast. These include both Single-Use Plastic items and other relevant items of litter that we are finding across Northern Ireland.





# MyEarth means more ways to make a difference

**In 2025, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, in partnership with Northern Ireland Environment Link launched the MyEarth platform: a hub for environmental action and education in Northern Ireland.**



The platform aims to provide an online space that brings together Northern Ireland's environment sector to engage people in action, educate through resources and offer opportunities to become involved in making a difference.

The findings in this year's Marine Litter Report highlight that all of us need to do more to protect our marine areas. With that goal in mind, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful has been working hard with our partners to develop an integrated environmental platform that everyone can use.

MyEarth offers numerous incredible activities that can help tackle Marine Litter and make a difference to our blue spaces.

Through this interactive platform you can take part in activities like;

- Beach Cleans
- Rockpooling
- Learning about local wildlife

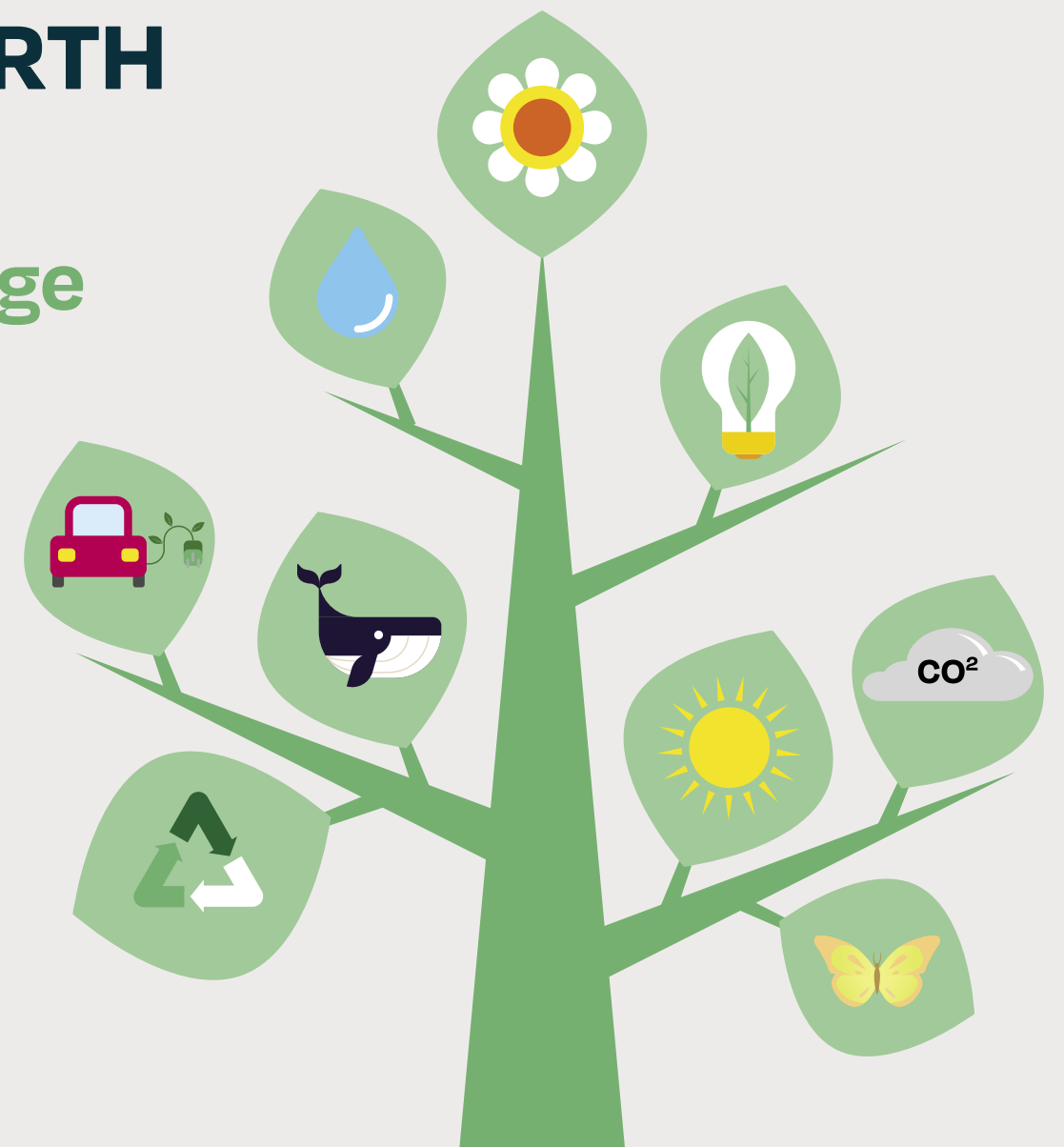
MyEarth brings all of this together for you to find the information or event you want to take part in, and it's free to sign up for. Visit <https://myearth.org.uk/> to find out more information.



More  
Knowledge

More  
Action

More  
Change





# Recommendations

**Everyone in society must contribute to solving the monumental marine health battle that we have on our hands. As always, a joined-up approach remains essential. It is welcome that we are seeing progress on some of the environmental plans and strategies necessary to tackle the climate emergency. There is still more to be done to improve our marine areas.**

## Government

### 1. A Deposit Return Scheme

The Republic of Ireland introduced a DRS in February 2024. A similar scheme should be introduced in Northern Ireland, working in partnership with other parts of the UK. This will help tackle some of the plastic litter that is being identified as an issue in our marine litter.

### 2. Implement the Plastic Pollution Plan and a Climate Action Plan

In 2025, DAERA proposed two new plans that contain measures that will help tackle issues in our marine areas. We want to see these plans progress and be implemented. The feedback being provided by the sector will serve to strengthen the proposals, and Northern Ireland should move to implement the relevant policies to reduce marine litter.

## Businesses

### 1. Sign the Global Plastics Treaty

Some of the biggest multinational companies in the world have already signalled their support for this international instrument that aims to stop plastic pollution from ravaging our oceans irreversibly by 2040. We welcome the many new initiatives being forged ahead with by businesses, but we need to see more to reduce our single use and throw away culture. Why not do something equally powerful and go on the

record with your business's support for the Global Plastics Treaty? Add your signature at [www.businessforplasticstreaty.org](http://www.businessforplasticstreaty.org).

### 2. Donate to an Environmental Charity

Protecting endangered species, building bonds between people and the sea, and addressing overfishing problems. Those are just a handful of examples of the fantastic and vital services that marine charities perform to preserve and enhance our aquatic ecosystems. If your business has the available funds and you want to show that you are serious about caring for our blue spaces, consider donating to Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful. <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/keep-northern-ireland-beautiful-102973>

### 3. Organise a Litter-Pick

The beach, river or lough that is closest to your business is the perfect place for you to protect our precious waterways. You can register your event as part of our Big Spring Clean or Healthy Oceans Healthy Minds campaigns, which are highlights of Live Here Love Here calendar each year, and we will help get more members of the public involved in your good work. Visit [www.liveherelovehere.org](http://www.liveherelovehere.org) for more information.

## Individuals

### 1. Make a Plastic Promise

In most cases, people have huge power and choice in where they choose to spend their money. Our Plastic Promise sets you the challenges to refuse, reduce and reuse (in that order) common plastic products, and the best part is that most of these items are regular marine litter culprits. Sign up to cut your plastic footprint at [www.liveherelovehere.org/PlasticPromise](http://www.liveherelovehere.org/PlasticPromise).

### 2. Support the Global Plastics Treaty

As noted, the Global Plastics Treaty has enormous potential to offer a lasting legacy in our unsustainable relationship with plastics, particularly the single-use variety. But people power will be crucial in ensuring that the treaty truly delivers the circular economy that we need. The UK government expressed disappointment that agreement wasn't reached in 2025, but you can help maintain the momentum into 2026 by continuing to voice your support for a treaty.

### 3. Sign up to MyEarth

MyEarth is a hub for environmental action and education in Northern Ireland. This new platform empowers everyone in Northern Ireland to take action in tackling the climate and biodiversity crises by bringing together resources and opportunities from a wide range of partners in one place, leading to real-world change. Every person can take part and make a difference. Sign up here <https://myearth.org.uk/>





If you would like to learn more about volunteering with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful or would like to get involved with the marine litter surveys please contact:

Runkerry, one of the 12 beaches being surveyed in Northern Ireland



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