

Marine Litter Report 2025

KEEP
NORTHERN
IRELAND
BEAUTIFUL



MARINE
SURVEY



Seal showing the scars from entanglement with litter. Credit Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)



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Foreword

This year's Marine Litter Report highlights the continuing battle that Northern Ireland faces with its litter problem. The increase in litter found shows that we cannot afford to be complacent in tackling this important problem and in changing how we deal with waste and packaging.

Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful has used this report for many years to put forward policy recommendations to our Executive and local councils to help turn the tide on our litter problem. The findings in this year's report make the case for action even more compelling.

Alongside the policy change we need to see, there also has to be a change in attitudes about litter. It is never acceptable not to take your rubbish with you and dispose of it properly. A small minority of people do not take the wise advice to "leave no trace" seriously and expect others to pick up after them. The reality is that litter, no matter how small it might seem, can have significant consequences for marine wildlife and our environment.

The increase in the litter we are finding is causing long-term damage to our marine areas. We are fortunate in Northern Ireland that we have such outstanding natural beauty on our doorstep. All of us owe it to future generations to look after these areas and protect them. Sadly, some people are not playing their part.

However, it does not have to be like this. By doing some things differently as a society, we can turn this around. One set of disappointing findings in a report does not mean that we should give up the fight. I know that right now, many people are conducting litter picks and taking action to improve our marine areas. Their work is essential, and as an organisation, we will continue to value and support them.

Parts of this report will be uncomfortable reading, but there are seeds of hope in there, too. I am confident that with concerted effort, we can make things better. Reports like this are necessary to know where we are, so that we can more accurately plot the course of where we need to go.

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 2025.

Marine litter remains a serious, global issue. It's estimated that 5-12 metric tonnes of plastic enter the ocean every year. Single use plastics continue to be the most commonly found items of litter around the world.

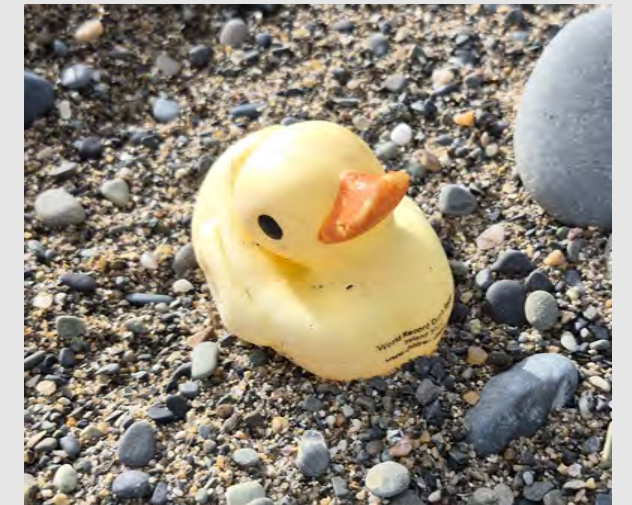
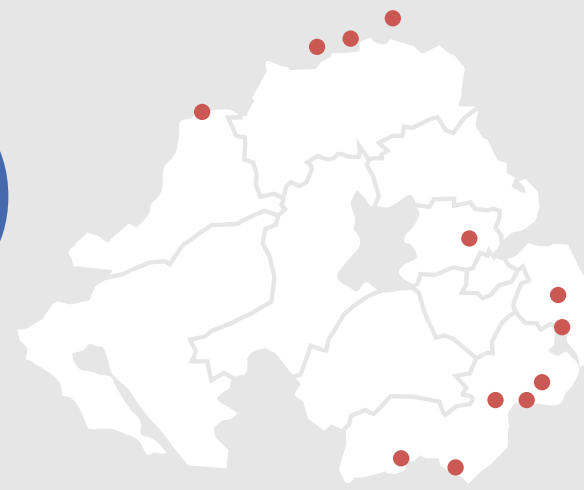
Plastic pollution accumulates in marine environments, causing a range of issues from entanglement and ingestion by marine species to disruption of food chains. Locally, data has been collected since 2012 using the internationally recognised OSPAR methodology. OSPAR monitors litter at over 70 beaches in the North East Atlantic following common monitoring guidelines.

The 2025 results for Northern Ireland show we are in a worse position than last year – 500 items of litter were recorded, on average, per 100m of beach surveyed, up from 341 in 2024. The percentage of litter made from plastic has increased from 84% last year to 85%. These figures show we still have a distance to travel – the OSPAR threshold value for beach litter is just 20 items per 100m. This means our marine areas are significantly higher than the recommended threshold and are getting worse.

Key Facts from 2025

500

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



26,442

items of litter were recorded in 2025



85%

of the litter on our beaches was made of plastic, an increase of 2% from 2024.





Overview

The overall picture shows we are stagnating in the marine litter picture; the facts are that the amount of litter being found is on the rise.

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.

5,002

Items of litter per km of beach surveyed in 2025¹



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 Kingdom¹.

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."²

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

¹ [About | OSPAR Commission](#)

² [Action Plan for Marine Litter | OSPAR Commission](#)

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.



Field Officer Jenny Morrison finds a keyboard discarded on Rostrevor beach.

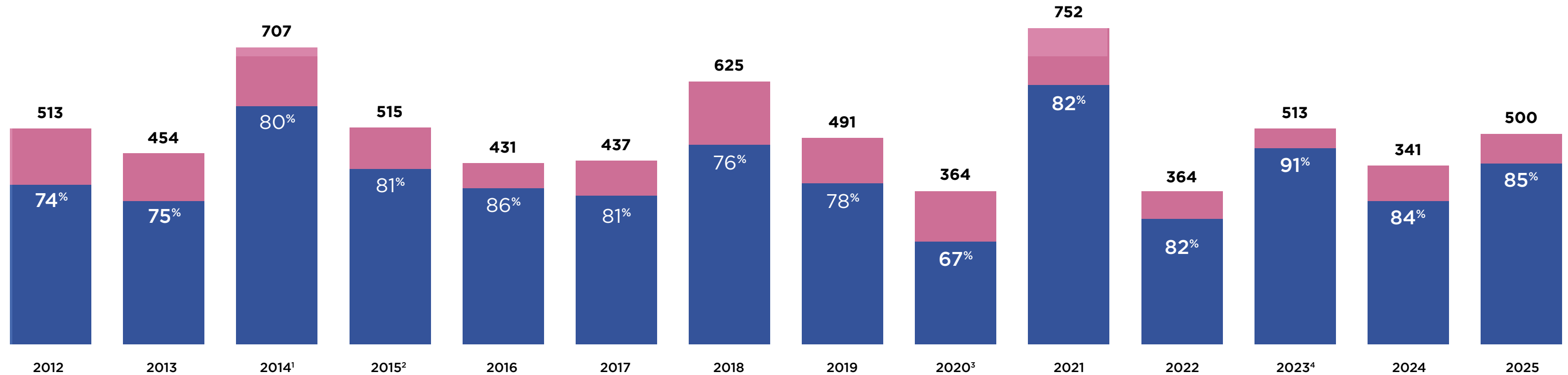


Then and Now: The Plastic Problem

The 2025 figures highlight the continuing plastic problem we face in marine litter.

The figures are clear: our rates of litter, particularly plastic, are much too high. This year, we have found that the amount of plastic litter has marginally increased, but with such high levels, we need to see consistent decreases.

We know plastic litter has a devastating impact on marine areas and this report demonstrates the scale of the plastic problem in Northern Ireland.



Key
■ OTHER
■ PLASTIC

Bar chart shows mean items of litter per 100 metres of beach surveyed.

- 1 One off events, such as the winter storms of 2014, can skew the data. It can also be influenced by very good weather, or if there has been a recent clean up.
- 2 Surveys were not carried out in Northern Ireland during the period Spring–Autumn 2015.
- 3 Surveys could not be carried out in Northern Ireland during the period Spring 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions in line with Public Health guidelines.
- 4 Surveyors recorded a significant spike in small plastic pieces found on Rathlin Island in Summer 2023. This unusual occurrence led to the overall jump in percentage of plastic items found on our shores in 2024.

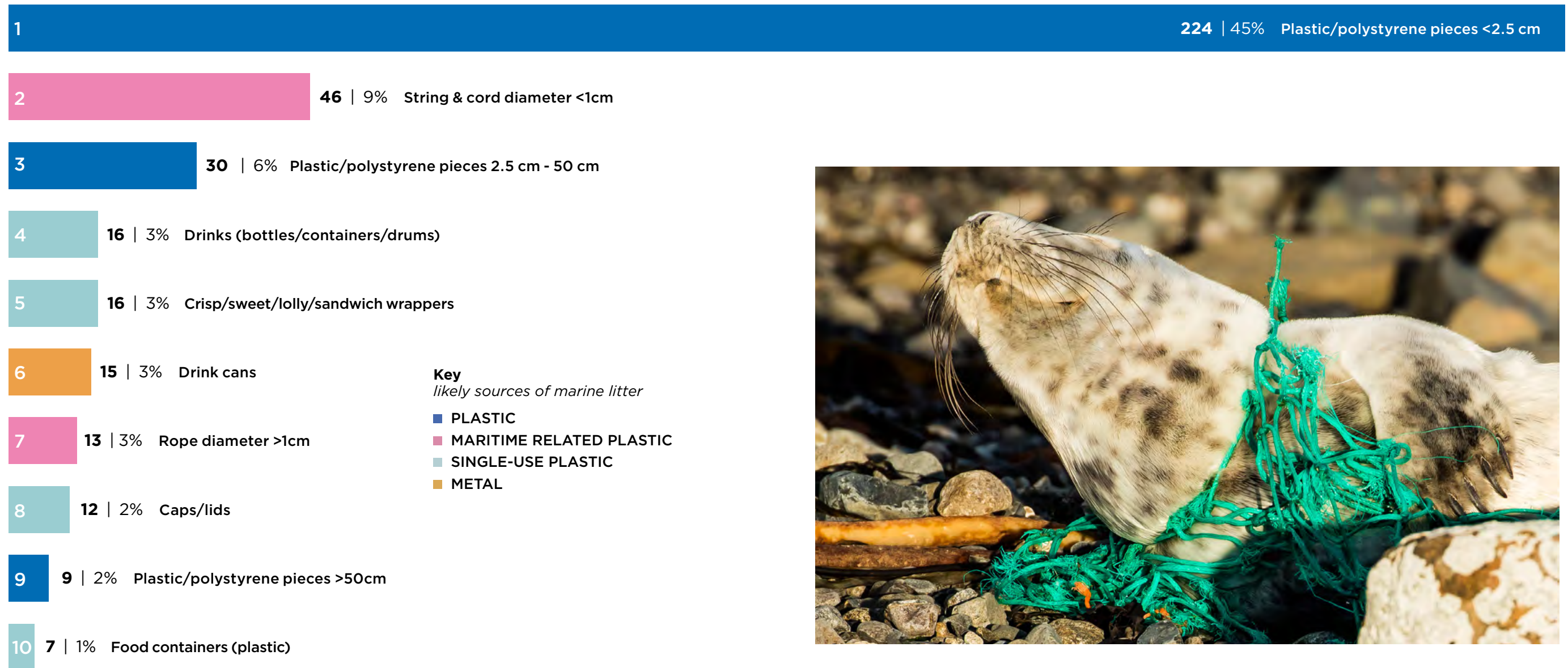


2025 Terrible Ten

The usual suspects creep up every year. They are terrible for our environment and are harmful to wildlife in marine areas.

The graph shows what we are finding: small plastic pieces, string and drink containers are consistently being discovered.

Here is how we paint the picture of our local litter problem: we count every litter item we find within 100 meters of a designated area. This approach allows us to produce accurate and detailed findings.

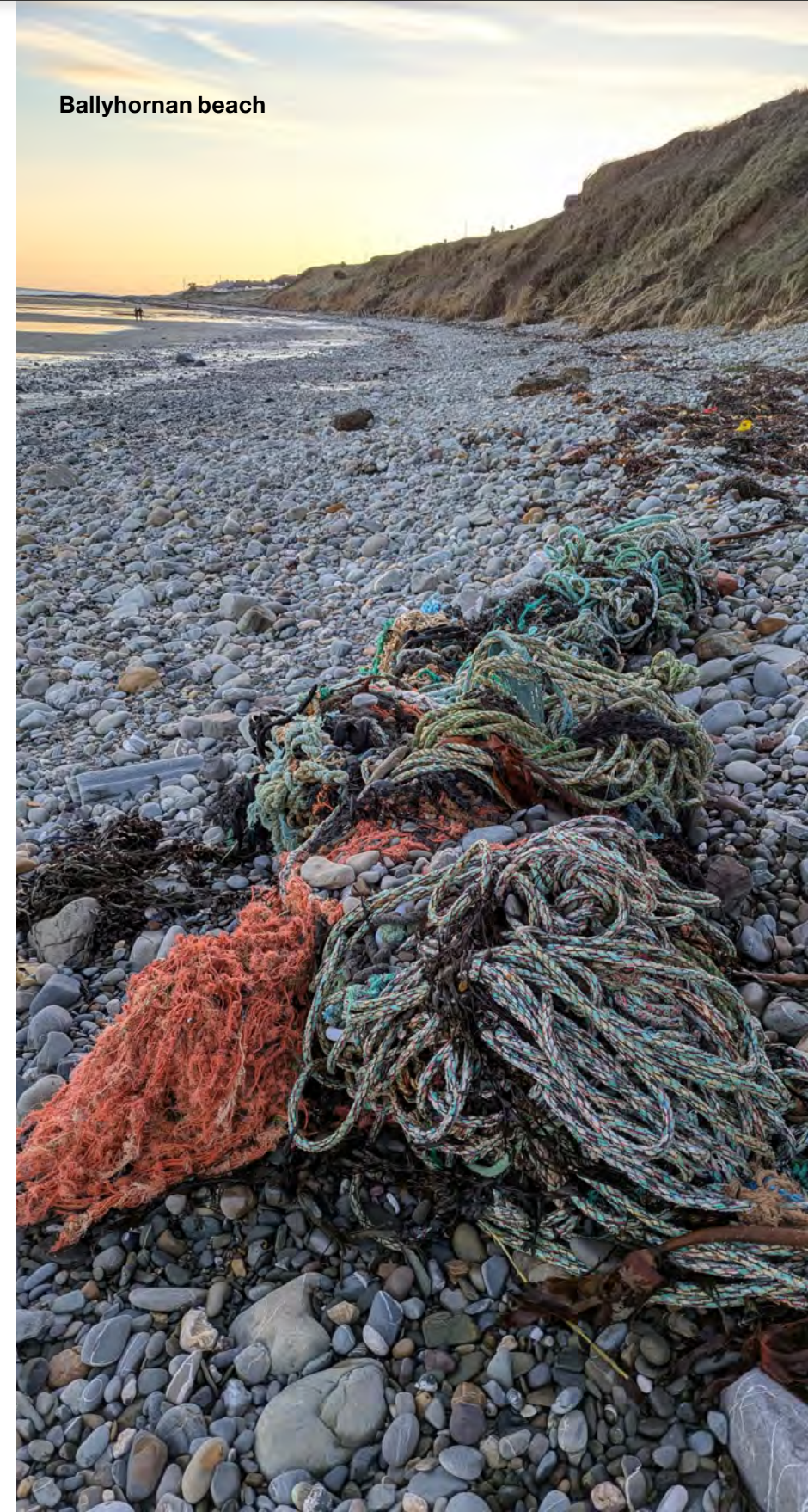
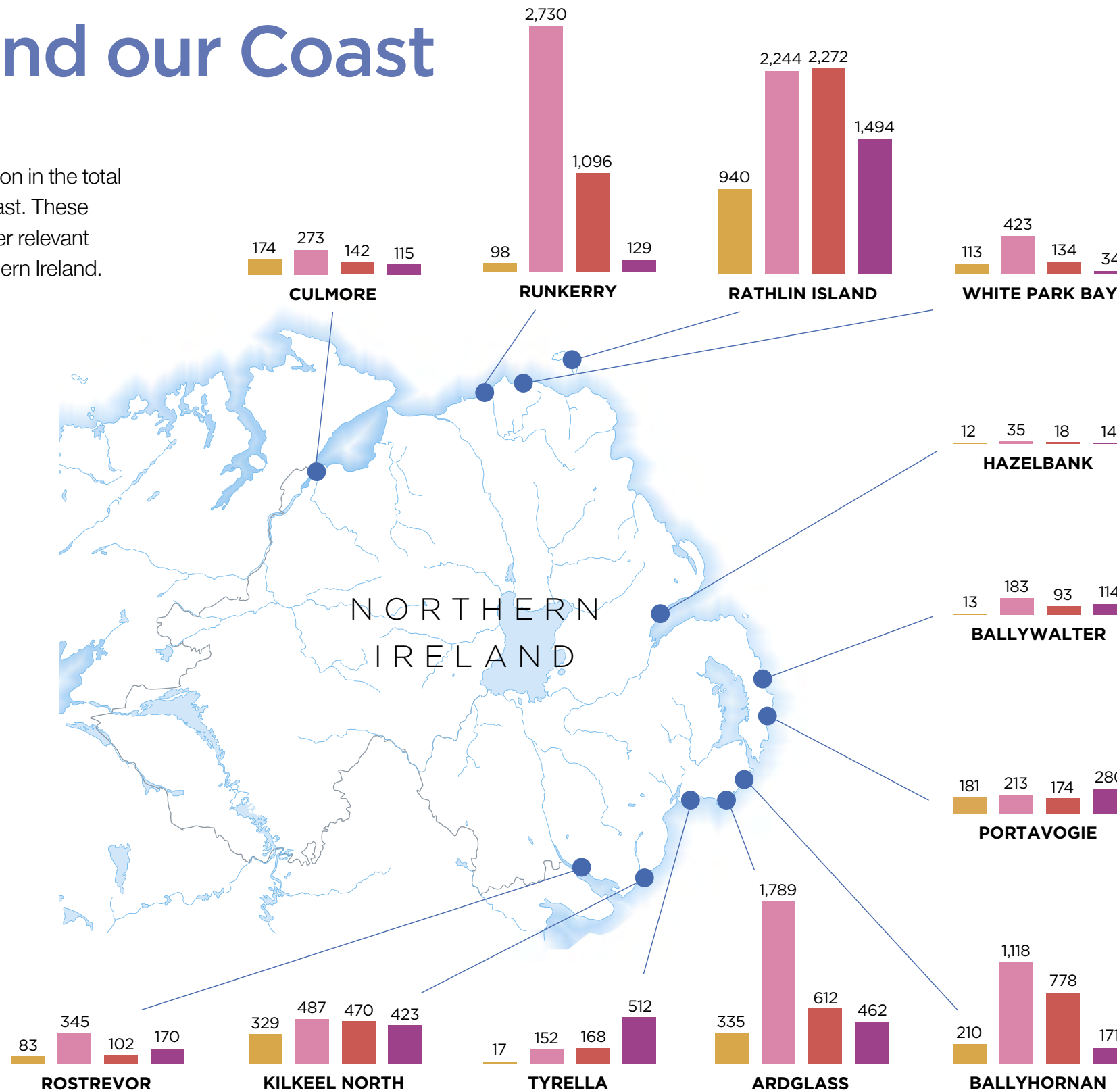
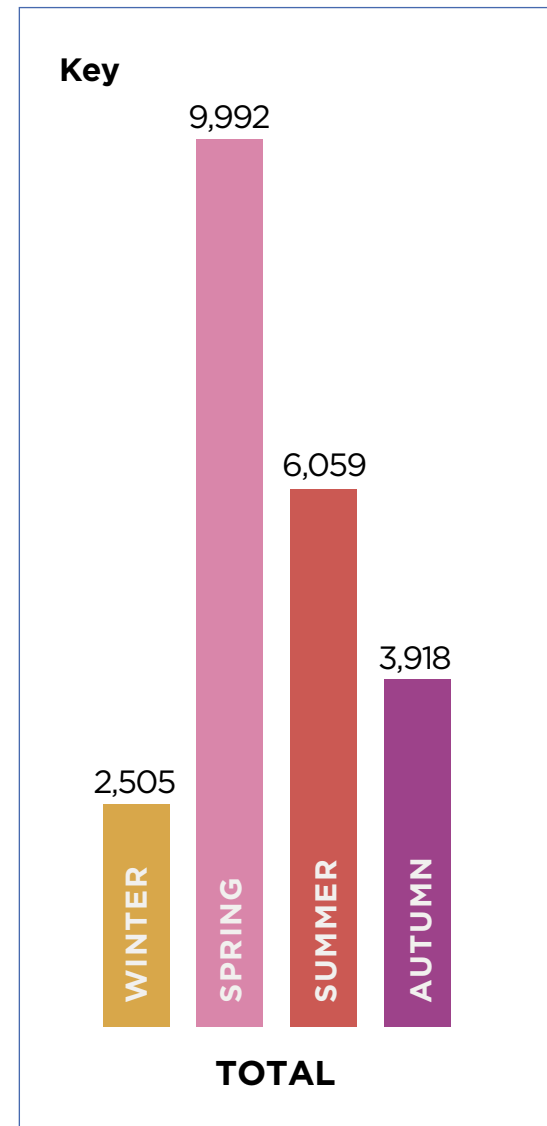


Seal ensnared in part of a plastic fishing net. See the case study on page 10. Credit DAERA



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.



Ballyhornan beach



Trapped by Our Waste: Rathlin's Grey Seal

Marine litter is, sadly, a persistent issue around our coast – even offshore and in the most remote locations where I work.

During call outs and patrols as a DAERA Marine Protected Area officer, I have unfortunately witnessed its impact on marine wildlife firsthand on far too many occasions. This is typically seen in the form of entanglement and the ensuing injuries that result. Over the last 30 years along the north coast, I have encountered seabirds caught in angling lines, seals ensnared in plastic sacks and on one occasion, an adult minke whale dragging a rope and marker buoy.

Experience has shown that whilst entanglements of seabirds and most cetaceans (minke whales are the exception) are relatively rare, seals appear to get caught up in litter more regularly than other marine animals. The sheltered coves where they rest, moult and breed are sometimes the same locations where litter accumulates. Their playful, investigative nature probably also contributes to their interaction with potentially hazardous items. On several occasions I have been called upon to cut them free or coordinate their rehabilitation. Sadly, this is usually only possible with seal pups; intervention with adult seals is rarely practical as most are simply too large, agile and dangerous to approach.



If you spot any injured, sick or distressed seals, Exploris Seal Sanctuary can be contacted on 028 4272 8062.

In August 2025, while undertaking a patrol on Rathlin Island, we observed one such survivor – a female grey seal with a very large plastic collar around its neck. Despite its impediment, this young animal appeared to be healthy and was not exhibiting any signs of distress. We immediately discussed options for freeing it with experienced staff from Exploris Seal Sanctuary. However, its alert state, easy access to deep water and proximity to up to 40 other resting and nursing seals around Ushet Point, meant that the likelihood of disturbing the wider colony outweighed the low chance of a successful outcome. Regrettably, this is the reality of entanglement for most large, mobile marine mammals and so anything we can do collectively to prevent litter entering their habitat is critical to managing the problem.

Whilst superficially resembling part of a creel pot, our working assumption is that the collar is a piece of marine litter, not a component of fishing gear. The plastic collars used in the construction of lobster pots have holes around the rims to secure them and examination of the images appears to show a smooth collar. Possible culprits include a coupling used to join pipes or an exhaust seal from a large marine engine, but we cannot be sure.

For several months our team monitored its condition regularly and learned that it has been observed between the Skerries Islands and Rathlin Island over the previous two years. On a more hopeful note, the resilience of casualties of marine litter can, at times, be extremely impressive, with some adult seals being observed to successfully pup multiple times and swim large distances over several years, despite remaining entangled.

To the best of our knowledge, this animal has not been seen since early October 2025, however, we continue to check regularly with our island contacts and search for it during each Marine Protected Area patrol.

Gary Burrows

DAERA MARINE CONSERVATION & REPORTING TEAM
PORTRUSH COASTAL ZONE

Gary cutting fishing net off a seal pup at Ramore Head, Portrush.





Protecting Northern Ireland's Marine Wildlife

I have worked for Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful since 2022 and feel incredibly fortunate to work in a field I am genuinely passionate about.

Growing up taking part in outdoor sports along our coastline, I developed a deep connection to Northern Ireland's landscapes and the wildlife that also calls this place home.

Since taking on the role of Local Environmental Quality Manager, I have dedicated much of my time to monitoring and understanding the state of marine litter on our shores. Each year, the volumes of litter recorded by myself and the team are staggering. While the data clearly demonstrates the scale of the problem, it can still be difficult to fully comprehend the real-world consequences of marine litter when faced with numbers alone. That changed for me in September 2025, when I became a Marine Mammal Medic with British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR). This role equipped me with the skills to assess and support stranded marine mammals, from initial response through to emergency care.

Taking on this responsibility brings an immediate and sobering awareness of how fragile our marine wildlife truly is. The seas and rivers these animals depend on must be protected and enhanced, yet far too often I witness or hear of wildlife being injured as a direct result of waste and litter. Even items discarded on land frequently find their way into waterways and out to sea, where they can cause serious and sometimes fatal harm to marine life.

Like many others, I take immense joy in seeing our marine mammals thrive in local waters. There is something truly special about watching a seal playing in the shallows or witnessing a fin whale breach the surface offshore. We share our home with these animals, and with that comes a responsibility to protect our waterways from marine litter so they can continue to survive and flourish. Research and reports such as this play a vital role in driving action, helping to reduce the number of animals exposed to the harmful impacts of litter.

I am proud to have shared my passion for marine wildlife through my role at Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and to have supported colleagues in learning how they too can help protect our marine environment. I encourage everyone reading this report to consider how they can make a difference.

This might include volunteering for litter-picking initiatives, reporting injured or stranded marine mammals to DAERA or BDMLR, or simply spreading awareness about the devastating impacts marine litter can have on wildlife. I truly believe that education is a core piece of the puzzle in driving meaningful societal change and addressing marine litter once and for all.

Sinead Murray

LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY MANAGER,
KEEP NORTHERN IRELAND BEAUTIFUL



Sinead surveying Ardglass beach.



Recommendations

To achieve progress, we need a joined-up approach. It is important that the Government, Business and Individuals across Northern Ireland work together.

We need to see many of the plans and strategies proposed since 2024 become a reality. Now is the time to make a difference for our marine environment.

Government

1. A Deposit Return Scheme (DRS)

We are encouraged by the success of the DRS introduced into the Republic of Ireland in February 2024. The UK DRS is now on track to be introduced in 2027. This will help reduce the quantity of drinks bottles and cans identified as an issue in our marine environment. We encourage the NI Executive to keep the momentum of this exciting development and ensure its safe passage through any remaining implementation hurdles that may appear.

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 from the sector will strengthen the proposals, and Northern Ireland should move to implement the relevant policies to reduce marine litter.

3. Implement bans on commonly littered items

We want to see some of the commonly littered items in this report restricted and banned from use. The Environmental Improvement Plan sets out a goal of restricting the sale or supply of ten common single-use plastic items.

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 put in place 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.

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 a marine charity or support KNIB's clean up activities and education work (including this report) by [Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful](#).

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 the Live Here Love Here calendar each year, and we will help get more members of the public involved in your good work. Visit www.livehereandlovehere.org for more information.

Individuals

1. 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 an agreement wasn't reached in 2025, but you can help maintain the momentum into 2026 by continuing to voice your support for a treaty.

2. 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](#).



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:

Seal on Rathlin Island, showing the scars from entanglement with litter. Credit DAERA



Sinead Murray

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agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

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an' Kintra Matthers**

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