



Briefing by the Marine Conservation Society

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Marine litter

November 2025

The Marine Conservation Society is calling on the Welsh Government and political parties to:

- ✓ Bring forward a deposit return scheme (DRS) that includes glass and reuse – maintaining momentum towards the October 2027 deadline set for the deposit return schemes in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland
- ✓ Implement an updated Marine Litter Action Plan for Wales
- ✓ Expand the End of Life Fishing Gear Scheme and Recycle Môr programme to all ports and harbours in Wales, with equivalent measures for aquaculture sites and gear

What does the Marine Conservation Society's beach litter data show?

Each year, the Marine Conservation Society's State of our Beaches report compiles litter data from the Beachwatch programme, our year-round citizen science initiative. Volunteers clean and survey 100m stretches of beach, providing one of the UK's most detailed beach litter datasets. This helps identify beach litter trends and key areas of pollution concern.

Last year, **1,073 volunteers** took part in our Beachwatch programme in Wales, **removing over 26,000 pieces of litter from Welsh beaches**. Our data has shown:

- A **4% increase in the average amount of litter recorded**, with an average of 120 litter items per 100m of beach surveyed.
- **Drinks-related litter was found on 99% of beaches surveyed**, with glass bottles found on nearly half of these.
- Sewage-related debris, including wet wipes, is still **being recorded on 80% of beaches in Wales**. This is higher than the UK average.
- **Fishing-related litter increased by 43%**, with an average of 10 items found per 100m on surveyed beaches.

What are the impacts of marine litter on our seas and coastal communities?

Marine litter poses a serious risk to marine life and economies:

- Removing marine litter costs UK ports and harbours on average **£2 million per year (€2.4 million)**
- **Larger items, like plastic netting, can entangle animals and impact habitats.** This includes sensitive coral habitats like pink sea fan. This can lead to an increased likelihood of net repairs and more 'ghost' gear.
- Plastic fragments & microplastics **cause damage to the digestive tract of marine mammals**, like harbour porpoises and seabirds, when ingested. They can also **enter human food chains**.



Discarded net found in sea
© Sam Mansfield

How would our policy asks help to tackle marine litter?

Deposit Return Schemes are effective and proven ways to tackle drinks-related litter

Countries with established Deposit Return Schemes, like Germany, Norway and Lithuania, have return rates of 90% or more for drink containers. In countries like Germany, which includes both refillable and single-use glass bottles in their DRS, return rates for refillable glass bottles are over 98%. This has also led to reductions in beach litter. The first litter survey on Irish beaches since Ireland's Deposit Return Scheme started in 2024 has also shown a 30% drop in drinks-related litter.

A Marine Litter Action Plan would provide a holistic policy solution to a big problem

Current legislation to tackle marine litter, like the Environmental Protection (Single-Use Plastic Products) (Wales) Act 2023 is limited in scope and has taken a piecemeal approach to a multi-sector problem. The existing Marine Litter Action Plan is obsolete and urgently needs to be updated. A co-ordinated, robust Marine Litter Action Plan has the potential to tackle problem areas and align efforts across the Welsh Government, local councils, environmental groups, fisheries and communities.

Ghost gear, which can have many sources of origin, injures and kills marine life

A study which analysed 870 recovered fishing nets off the coast of the United States found that the ghost gear contained over 32,000 marine organisms. The Welsh Government has started work through pilot recycling schemes in some harbours across Wales and has supported the Recycle Môr programme. However, this approach is too piecemeal. Expanding the End of Life (EoL) Fishing Gear Scheme and Recycle Môr programme to ensure all ports and harbours in Wales have these facilities, with equivalent measures for aquaculture sites and gear, would reduce the harmful impacts of ghost fishing.

As an MS, how can you help?

- Push your political party to **include our key policy recommendations** in your 2026 Senedd Manifesto.
- Urge the Welsh Government to **stick to the October 2027 deadline for Deposit Return Schemes**.
- Secure a short debate to **highlight the effects of marine litter on your coastal constituency**. We can provide localised beach clean data for all coastal constituencies across Wales.
- **Join us on a beach clean**. Take part in our Beachwatch programme and join the Marine Conservation Society on a beach clean in your local area to **see first-hand the extent of Wales' marine litter problem**.

For more information, please contact Elise Lavender
(Parliamentary Affairs Officer) at elise.lavender@mcsuk.org



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Registered office: Overross House, Ross Park, Ross-on-Wye, HR9 7US. VAT number: 321491232.

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