



Registered charity no. 1071737

A Rubbish Reality

Our litter problem
and why it matters

Litter has been at the heart of Keep Britain Tidy's work for 70 years. In that time, we have been working hard to understand and combat the litter problem we face from all angles. From assessing the problem on the ground and researching littering behaviour, to developing innovative anti-littering campaigns and solutions, as well as mobilising hundreds of thousands of volunteers to clean up litter, our commitment to eliminating litter has been and still is unwavering.

In the seven decades since the Women's Institute first came up with the idea of a campaign to keep Britain tidy, recognising that changing patterns of consumption in post-war Britain were resulting in increasing amounts of litter appearing across our country, the world has changed beyond recognition.

On-the-go consumption and fast food have gone from being all-but-unheard-of to being the norm and single-use plastic packaging, be it drinks bottles, crisp bags, sweet wrappers or coffee cups, is ubiquitous. In short, we are battling a tsunami of waste in this country and nowhere is that tsunami more evident than in our environment, which is blighted by litter.

In fact, the reality is that it is almost impossible to find anywhere that isn't impacted by litter and, as this report reveals, it is having a detrimental effect on both people and places. It is affecting people's perceptions of the place we all call home and disproportionately affecting the most deprived areas, with significant implications for feelings of safety and wellbeing, as well as economic investment.



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Our litter problem

- very few places are free from litter

In the past ten years our surveyors have walked 1,140 miles across England assessing the litter on our streets: where it is, what it is, and how much of it there is¹.

1,140 miles assessing litter



Over the years, we've visited a representative sample of the places people live, from urban housing estates to rural villages; the places people visit for work or leisure, such as shops,

businesses and parks, and the routes in-between them, large² and small, to see if they are littered. In recent years we have also meticulously counted the litter we've found while surveying. All of this has shown us something important (that we already knew but which we wanted to quantify) - litter is a big problem that is not going away.

This may seem obvious and, anecdotally, we hear all the time that we are 'the dirty man of Europe' but if we are to make a systemic change, which we must, we need to know the scale of challenge we are facing and where we need to focus attention to make the biggest difference.

In the years we surveyed between 2013 and 2024, more than 90% of the places we surveyed were littered. Let's just consider that for a moment. This means that consistently, over the past decade, more than nine in ten of the places our surveyors visited had litter on them. In fact, in our latest survey, **only nine out of every 100 places we went to were actually litter-free.**

¹ You can read more about our on-the-ground survey methodology on page 15.

² Our on-the-ground surveys do not cover motorways, trunk roads or any other roads within the strategic road network for reasons of safety and accessibility.

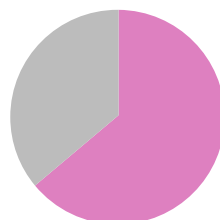


It isn't just litter that makes places look unloved and uncared for and that impact people's feelings of safety. While we were out recording litter, we also looked at things like graffiti, fly-posting and fly-tipping, all of which also have a negative impact. Consistently over the past ten years, at least 93% of sites – so in some years more than that – have been blighted by at least one of the problems of litter, graffiti, fly-posting or fly-tipping. Last year only seven of every 100 places we surveyed were problem-free.

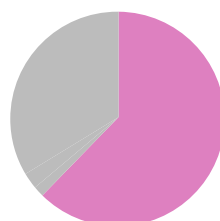
This is the reality, based on robust data gathered over many years. Having learned about the persistence of our litter problem, we wanted to know what the public thought, so we asked them. We asked how they feel about litter, where they see it, what they see and what they think should be done about it³.

The answer they gave us was clear. Litter is a pervasive problem that is affecting everyone. It didn't matter how we looked at the data, the overwhelming majority of people feel that litter is a problem in this country, and it is a problem that, in their view, is getting worse.

When we asked people to think about their local area, 64% said they see litter as a problem, with seven in ten saying they notice litter where they live every day of their lives and 61% think it has become more of a problem in recent years.



64%
say they see litter
as a problem.



61%
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Seven in ten
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³ You can read about our survey methodology on page 15.



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If they thought it was a problem in their local area, when it came to the country as a whole their view was even more bleak. More than eight in ten (83%) feel that litter is a problem in this country and a similar proportion (77%) believe that it has become more of a problem over the past few years.

Similar to the findings from our on-the-ground survey, the public realises that it is not just litter that is an issue. Three in five people (60%) report that they see graffiti as a problem where they live and an even greater proportion, almost four in five (79%), say that fly-tipping is an issue.

There are lot of statistics here but, putting it all together, what does it tell us? It tells us that, despite the great efforts of councils and volunteers up and down the country to clean up their communities, we are stuck with a persistent litter issue that is seen as increasingly problematic by people up and down the country.

This report is designed to shine a spotlight on an issue that is largely ignored or seen as being simply about civic amenity, which it isn't. It is about the degradation and pollution of the environment where it impacts people the most - on their doorstep. It is about the wellbeing of communities and the ability of those communities to thrive, both socially and economically.



Where we live, where we visit and the routes in-between - most places are littered

As was explained earlier, we assessed litter in different places and grouped those places into where people live, where people visit and the routes in-between them. We found that litter has been present consistently in all of them. No matter where we looked, it was harder to find a litter-free space than one that was littered, across the entire ten-year period. Last year, litter was present on at least nine in every ten places we surveyed, regardless of what type of space it was.

In fact, in 94% of the places people live we found litter, as well as in nine out of ten (90%) of the places they visit and 91% of the routes in-between them.



94%
of places people live are littered.



90%
of places people visit are littered.



91%
of routes in-between are littered.

We also asked people which spaces they felt were the worst for littering. We found that alleyways and cut-throughs are thought of as the worst places by the highest proportion of people, followed by high streets and parks and green spaces.

Spaces people feel are the worst for littering



Alleyways and cut-throughs
64%



High streets
46%



Parks and green spaces
42%



Residential streets
41%



Main roads
37%



Beaches and coastal areas
36%



Rural areas and countryside
32%



Motorways
32%



Retail parks
28%



Industrial estates
27%

In both urban and rural areas - most places are littered

Littering remains a persistent problem in both urban and rural areas, though it is more problematic in urban spaces where consistently more than 92% of spaces were littered over the past ten years. In fact, in our last survey, 94% of the urban areas we visited were littered. While the presence of litter is lower in rural locations, it still remains problematic with 83% of places surveyed in 2023/2024 having litter on them.

The most deprived communities are most impacted by litter

The presence of litter is an issue for every community in the country. However, certain communities are more likely to be impacted by litter than others.

In the most deprived areas just 2% of places were litter-free, compared with 14% in the least deprived areas⁴. This means that while we were out surveying, we were seven times less likely to find a litter-free space in the most deprived areas. This stark contrast is compounded when looked at alongside our data which shows that not only is the presence of litter a bigger problem in our most deprived communities, but those communities are also impacted by greater quantities of litter. In fact, in the past two years we found that there was almost three times as much litter in the most deprived areas compared with those that are least deprived.

Our public survey confirmed our on-the-ground finding. Seven in ten people (71%) in the most deprived areas agree that litter is a problem where they live. This fell to just over half (56%) of those living in the least deprived areas. This shows that it is those in the most deprived areas who are feeling the impact of our ongoing litter problem the most.

We have already shown that litter is viewed as a worsening problem. Again, this view is also more keenly held by people in the most deprived areas, with 69% agreeing that litter has become more of a problem where they live in the past few years. This compared to 54% in the least deprived areas.

⁴ The most deprived areas are those in the top 20% in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), and the least deprived are those in the bottom 20%.

In our most deprived communities, 77% of people say they notice litter in their area every day, a figure that drops to 63% in the least deprived areas. Again, this shows that, while litter is a problem for every community, those living in our most deprived areas are impacted by litter the most.

There are many reasons why litter is more common in the most deprived areas. These areas tend to be in more built-up and densely populated and, as we discussed in the previous section, urban spaces are more likely to have litter on them. They are also places where there is likely to be more on-street parking in residential areas, which means it is more difficult to clean those streets due to obstruction by cars.

Also, being more densely populated areas, they can create more waste overall and thus increase the chance of litter being present.

Previous research by Keep Britain Tidy has also shown that people living in more deprived communities are more likely to talk to each other about issues affecting their local area, whereas people in less deprived communities are more likely to report issues to the authorities⁵. If problems in more deprived communities aren't reported, then they are unlikely to be resolved.

We also know that the presence of litter leads to more litter and that this is something people instinctively understand and are worried about, with three in five expressing this concern.

There is no doubt that those same communities that are disproportionately affected by our litter problem would also feel the greatest benefits if the problem was tackled.

⁵ Whose Reality is it Anyway? Understanding the Impact of Deprivation on Perceptions of Place, Keep Britain Tidy, 2011.



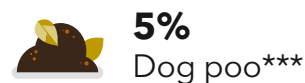
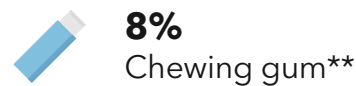
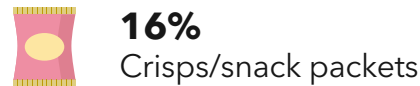
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All litter isn't the same but all litter is a problem for most people

The list below shows the types of litter we found in our latest on-the-ground survey. The figures show the percentage of places where we found that litter type but it doesn't show the number of each litter type that we found. It does however show that some types of litter are more likely to be present than others.

Smoking-related litter (cigarette butts and packaging) was present in the highest proportion of places (70%). This is a unique litter type and our latest on-the-ground survey was carried out in the middle of our national programme of work to tackle cigarette butts, that has now reduced cigarette litter by 17%. This has been achieved through a national behaviour-change campaign and interventions, working with local authorities and businesses. More details can be found [here](#).

Outside of smoking-related litter, these were the most common types of litter found by our surveyors, based on the proportion of places they were present:



* Vape litter was not part of our litter problem a decade ago but has appeared and grown significantly in recent years. It can only be hoped that the ban on disposable vapes, due to come into force in June 2025, will result in a marked reduction in this new and dangerous form of single-use plastic litter.

** While fresh chewing gum litter was found in 8% of places, old chewing gum staining was found in 77% of places. Keep Britain Tidy provides the secretariat to the Chewing Gum Task Force, which is funded by chewing gum manufacturers. The Task Force provides grant funding to councils to combine targeted street cleaning with litter prevention signage - an approach which is proven to reduce gum littering by up to 80% after two months.

*** Dog poo is seen as one of the most offensive forms of littering but, despite the fact we have seen an estimated increase in the UK dog population of 4.6 million since 2014⁶, the percentages of places affected by dog poo consistently remains at around 5%. Keep Britain Tidy has long campaigned on the issue, developing effective behaviour-change campaigns such as We're Watching You, that has been adopted by 289 organisations and has shown to reduce dog poo by an average of 46%.

⁶ Dog population in the United Kingdom 2011 - 2024, Statista, 2025.

Reflecting the evidence around litter in our most deprived communities, perhaps unsurprisingly, the most deprived areas were more likely to see the presence of every type of litter that we measured, as shown in the table below. Fast food litter was two and half times more likely to be found in the most deprived places than in the least deprived. See Table 1 below.

There were some types of litter that were present in a small percentage of the spaces we surveyed (e.g. dog poo found on 5% of spaces). However, when we asked the public how problematic they find those same litter items, we got a resounding response – it's all of them. This tells us that regardless of the prevalence of certain litter types, they're all regarded as problematic for most people. In other words, most people don't want to see any forms of litter on their streets regardless of how often they might see it.

Again, more people living in the most deprived areas found each litter type problematic when compared to those living in the least deprived areas (up to a seven percentage point difference), demonstrating that it is the most deprived communities that are impacted by litter the most.

The proportion of people who regard each litter type as problematic

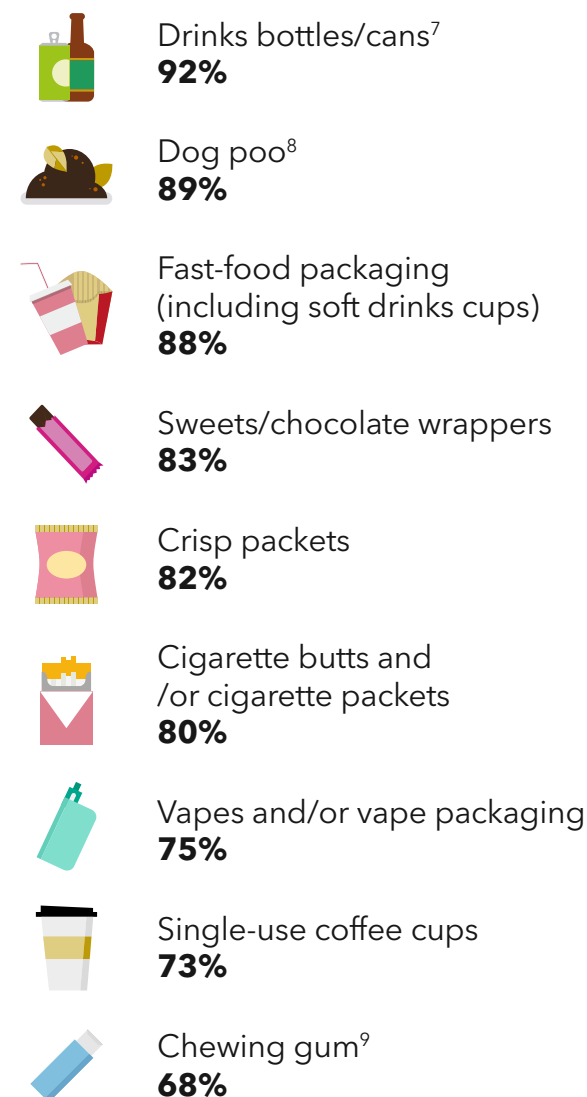


Table 1: Proportion of places with each litter type

	Most deprived places	Least deprived places
Cigarette butts/packaging	81%	54%
Sweets/chocolate/chewing gum wrappers	60%	42%
Drinks bottles/cans	46%	22%
Fast-food related (including soft drinks cups)	27%	13%
Crisp and snack packets	25%	9%
Vapes/vape packaging	21%	11%
Single-use coffee cups	10%	3%
Chewing gum	9%	4%
Dog poo	7%	4%

⁷ We asked people whether drinks cans, plastic bottles and glass bottles were a problem in their local area as individual questions. We then amalgamated these figures to calculate how many people find that at least one of these items is a problem in their local area.

⁸ We asked people whether bagged and unbagged dog poo were a problem in their local area as individual questions. We then amalgamated these figures to calculate how many people find that at least one of these items is a problem in their local area.

⁹ We asked people whether fresh and old chewing gum were a problem in their local area as individual questions (60% and 65% respectively). We then amalgamated these figures to calculate how many people find that at least one of these items is a problem in their local area.

Why litter matters

We wanted to know why litter matters to people, so we asked what concerned them about our current litter problem. Two thirds of people are worried that it may attract vermin or pests (67%) or damage nature and wildlife (65%). The majority also recognise that litter attracts more litter, with 61% concerned that it may lead to even more littering.

When we showed people the image of a littered street shown below, without any prompting to draw attention to the litter, 88% said that the street looked unloved. When we later asked respondents to pay attention to the litter, 87% said they would feel bad for people living in a littered area like the one shown.

People also feel that litter can impact their feelings of safety, health and wellbeing. When shown the picture of a littered street, and once their attention was drawn to the litter, two thirds (66%) said that they wouldn't feel safe walking there alone at night - a concern that

was felt more acutely by women (72% compared to 59% of men). More than two thirds (67%) said their mental health would be impacted by living in a similarly littered street and 86% said they would feel embarrassed living in an area with these levels of litter.

It is also clear that litter would deter people from investing in an area. Almost nine in ten people (87%) would be put off buying or renting a house or flat in an area with litter like the one shown in the image, and almost eight in ten (78%) believe businesses would be put off investing in or near such an area. 87% of people also believe that litter levels like the ones shown in the image would put people off visiting.

It is clear that if we are to make the areas in greatest need of economic investment attractive to potential investors, we need to address the problem of litter as a matter of urgency.



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A welcome development: What difference will the Deposit Return Scheme make?

The Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) is a recycling initiative where consumers will pay a small deposit on single-use drinks containers that they can reclaim when they return the empty container to a designated collection point. The scheme aims to reduce single-use drinks litter and increase recycling and is due to launch in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland in October 2027. Based on our findings, this will be of the greatest benefit to communities in more deprived areas where this type of litter is both more prevalent and more problematic for the people living there.

Our on-the-ground survey shows that drinks-related litter was present at a third of all the places we surveyed last year. Our survey of public perceptions also highlights that drinks-related litter is seen as the most problematic types of litter for people, with more than nine in ten (92%) citing it as an issue in their local area.

For every in-scope drinks container (metal can or plastic bottle) we counted in the least deprived areas, we counted 2.8 times as many in the most deprived areas. This means for every 100 drinks containers counted in the least deprived areas, there are 280 in the most deprived. In their impact assessment of a DRS, Defra estimates that we could see a reduction in littered drinks containers of 85%¹⁰. This would mean that for an area that is one of the least deprived with 100 littered in-scope drinks containers we would hope to find 85 fewer after DRS is implemented. Whereas in an

area that is one of the most deprived with 280 littered drinks containers, we would hope to find 238 fewer following the implementation of DRS.

These figures highlight that the most deprived communities can be expected to feel the greatest benefit from the DRS. What's more, Keep Britain Tidy's own 'Beacons of Litter' research¹¹ shows that soft drinks bottles and cans, being both relatively large and highly visible due to their bright packaging, attract more litter than other, less noticeable forms of litter such as bits of paper or small pieces of packaging, so reducing their numbers should lead to some reduction in non-drinks-related litter as well.

While the introduction of the DRS is fantastic progress, other forms of litter will still be a problem. In fact, in our last survey, excluding plastic bottles and cans, we also counted 2.8 times as many items of all other food and drink litter in the most deprived areas than in the least deprived areas. This means that again, for every 100 items of food and drink litter in the least deprived areas, there were 280 in the most deprived areas. As such, it is important to continue developing campaigns and initiatives for reducing all forms of litter, which will be of the greatest benefit to the most deprived communities in our country.

¹⁰ Impact assessment: Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme on beverage containers, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2021.

¹¹ Beacons of Litter – a social experiment to understand how the presence of certain litter items influences rates of littering, Keep Britain Tidy, 2016.

The action needed to tackle our litter problem

On-the-go consumption is firmly embedded in 21st-century society. The number of takeaway and fast-food restaurants has increased over the past decade and is still growing with an estimated 48,000 outlets¹² in the UK generating £22 billion¹³ of turnover. That growth is expected to continue. Alongside this, the sale of soft drinks has also risen – we consume around eight billion litres per year – along with other commonly littered items. At the same time, councils have seen cuts to street cleaning budgets of more than a fifth¹⁴.

The fact that the proportion of littered spaces hasn't increased against this backdrop should be noted. This is, in part, testament to the hard work of councils across the country, along with growing numbers of volunteers who clear help up the litter in their communities. But still, more than 90% of places are littered.

It is concerning that more than six in ten people (62%) believe that less pride in maintaining local community spaces is contributing to an increasing litter problem. Alarmingly, more than half (52%) also feel that littering has become normal behaviour. It is clear that, if we are to make any significant strides towards creating litter-free spaces for everyone, we need to take action at every level within society. We need to turn the tide through a wide-ranging, long-term programme of behaviour change, economic measures and policy levers.

There is huge public support for action and 96% of people would welcome measures to improve the situation. More than seven in ten people (71%) agree that more funding is needed to tackle the country's litter problem. However, the public recognises that cleaning up litter once it's on the ground is not the solution.

As part of our research, we gave people a list of prevention measures and clean-up measures. While 75% of people supported at least one clean-up measure¹⁵, including more community litter-picking events, 94% supported at least one prevention measure, showing that the public understands the need to 'turn off the tap' rather than just keep on 'mopping up' the problem.

More than half (55%) specifically support anti-littering campaigns at either the local or the national level¹⁶. At Keep Britain Tidy, we view this as key to challenging the normalisation of littering behaviour and putting prevention at the heart of litter-reduction strategies. Research-based behaviour-change campaigns can be extremely effective in addressing littering behaviour, as our cigarette litter programme demonstrates.

We welcome the introduction of a deposit return scheme for drinks containers. A well-designed scheme could see reductions in littered drinks containers of 85%. As explained earlier, this will have the greatest benefit for the most deprived communities because they suffer from the highest prevalence of litter, including drinks cans and plastic bottles, and have the highest levels of concern about litter.

¹² Number of takeaway and fast-food restaurants in the United Kingdom (UK) from 2013 to 2023, with a forecast for 2024, Statista, 2023.

¹³ Market size of the fast food and takeaway industry in the United Kingdom from 2013 to 2023, with a forecast for 2024, Statista, 2023.

¹⁴ How a decade of austerity has squeezed council budgets in England, The Guardian, January 2024.

¹⁵ We asked people to select which measures, if any, they would support to help reduce litter in this country. Making businesses who produce the items being littered pay the cost of cleaning them up, more regular cleaning by councils, and more community litter picking events were given as separate items. We then amalgamated these figures to calculate how many people support at least one of these.

¹⁶ We asked people to select which measures, if any, they would support to help reduce litter in this country. More local and national anti-littering education and awareness campaigns were given as separate items. We then amalgamated these figures to calculate how many people support at least one of these.

But what about the other types of litter that will still be there? Measures like DRS will be effective in tackling certain types of litter but if we are to 'turn off the tap' this is clearly not enough. The most recent national Litter Strategy¹⁷, developed by the previous Conservative government, was unfunded and unmonitored with no clear targets. We need a national strategy with robust targets and monitoring, clear focus and adequate resourcing.

We need to find ways of funding this work that recognise the scale of the problem and the challenges of addressing it.

Extended producer responsibility for packaging (pEPR) is a welcome step forward, putting the cost of dealing with post-consumption packaging waste on the producers rather than cash-strapped local authorities, alongside incentivising a move away from the most environmentally damaging packaging materials. However, while producers will carry the cost of rubbish that finds its way into a bin, in England that responsibility is not extending as far as litter on the ground. This must change. Those who put packaging and other items that end

up as litter on the market must bear the responsibility for tackling the rubbish that ends up on the ground, damaging the environment and blighting communities across the country.

This would offer a unique opportunity to fund the behaviour-change approaches to prevent littering that we know work.

Litter is more than just an eyesore and more than just an environmental problem. It is a barrier to investment and impacts people's feelings of safety, health and wellbeing. As a charity, Keep Britain Tidy is committed to eliminating litter so everyone can love where they live, but we cannot do it alone. We call on the government both locally and nationally, on industry and, indeed, on anyone who has an interest in improving the environment on people's doorsteps to acknowledge our country's litter problem and work with us to create litter-free places for all.

¹⁷ Litter Strategy for England, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Department for Transport and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, published April 2017, updated July 2018.



Methodology

Assessing litter on the ground

Our on-the-ground litter surveys have been carried out almost every year since 2001. Originally delivered as the Local Environmental Quality Survey of England (LEQSE) on behalf of Defra, the last survey of this form was in 2014/15. Without funding, we were unable to conduct a national litter survey for the following two years. However, we resumed national litter surveying on an annual basis in subsequent years funded by a charitable grant.

Our litter surveys comprise a representative sample of council-cleansed land across England classified into ten land uses – high-obstruction housing, medium-obstruction housing, low-obstruction housing, main retail and commercial, other retail and commercial, industry and warehousing, recreation areas, main roads, rural roads and other highways.

The surveys are conducted in line with the standards set out in Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse (COPLR), across a typical timeframe of 12 months. The litter-free sites referred to in this report were observed to be a grade A standard (no litter or refuse). The littered sites referred to in this report were observed to be either a grade B standard (predominately free of litter and refuse apart from some small items, grade C standard (widespread distribution of litter and/or refuse with minor accumulations), or grade D standard (heavily affected by litter and/or refuse with significant accumulations).

The geographic location of each site visited by our surveyors was recorded which enabled IMD (Indices of Multiple Deprivation)¹⁸ and RUC (Rural Urban Classification)¹⁹ data to be appended to the on-the-ground litter data. IMD quintiles identify those sites surveyed which are located within the 20% most deprived

communities in England and those sites amongst the 20% least deprived, allowing for comparisons between litter in the most and least deprived communities.

Mann-Kendall trend analysis was conducted on the litter grades of data collected over the ten-year period. The purpose of this time series test is to assess if there is a consistently increasing or decreasing trend in litter grade over time or if no trend is detected. Data collected during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020/21 and 2021/22) is excluded from the time series analysis. The restrictions on the movement of people and the closure of workplaces and businesses during those years meant that the levels of recorded litter in this period appear as outlier values in the time series when compared to all other years in our data set.

Assessing what people think about litter

For the YouGov survey, a nationally representative omnibus survey was conducted online, with a sample of 1,737 adults in England, taken from a wider sample of 2,066 UK adults aged 18+. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16th and 17th December 2024.

The partial postcode of survey respondents was recorded which enabled IMD²⁰ to be appended to the perceptions data. IMD quintiles identified responses from people living within the 20% most deprived communities in England and those living in the 20% least deprived, allowing for comparisons between perceptions in the most and least deprived communities.

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

¹⁹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/ruralurbanclassifications/2011ruralurbanclassification>

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

Acknowledgements

Keep Britain Tidy is grateful to players of People's Postcode Lottery for raising the funds that made this research and the production of this report possible.

We would also like to thank our dedicated team of surveyors who walked those 1,140 miles to complete the on-the-ground surveys we have discussed within this report. It is through their commitment to our work that this has been made possible, thank you.



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This document was first published in 2025 by Keep Britain Tidy.

Report designed by Carbon Creative
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