



Report by GreenSeas Trust

Are UK councils doing enough to prevent coastal littering?

*GreenSeas Trust investigates the extent
of the UK coastal littering problem and
reveals the results of a unique
community survey.*





Summary

The use of plastic in everyday life is at crisis point. Annually, at least 11 million tonnes of plastic waste enter our oceans, becoming embedded and entangled in the ecosystems that nature and society rely on (UNEP, 2021). This huge volume of waste is significantly endangering marine wildlife, leading to an estimated loss more than a million seabirds and 100,000 mammals are killed by plastic debris each year (United Nations, 2022).

The lack of recycling across the globe is the root cause of this destruction because only 9% of all plastic has been recycled, leaving most plastic waste to accumulate in the natural environment (Latham, 2021).

GreenSeas Trust is a UK-based marine conservation charity committed to tackling this issue by preventing plastics from entering the sea at source. To investigate the severity of coastal littering and insufficient recycling, the Trust has conducted a community survey that gives an insight into these trends across the UK. Of 1,329 participants who took part, an overwhelming 99.8% stated that there was a significant problem with coastal littering. Moreover, local residents suggested that the survey empowered them, giving them a platform to voice their concerns regarding the true extent of coastal littering.

Introduction

The plastic problem in the UK

Plastic debris in the UK's marine environments is increasing at an alarming rate. An estimated 38.5 million plastic bottles are used every day, of which 16 million are not recycled (Water UK, 2018). Moreover, 700,000 of these non-recycled bottles are littered each day, prompting the build-up of plastic along beaches, rivers and waterways (Parliament UK, 2017). Each mile of beach in the UK accommodates approximately 5,000 plastic items, of which roughly 150 are plastic bottles (Williams and Rangel-Buitrago, 2019).

The recycling rate of all plastic waste in the UK is estimated to be 'just below 50%' in 2020 (Recoup, 2020). This low rate can be related to a multitude of reasons, including lack of



education, poor attitudes towards the environment, and the inadequate implementation of national and regional government policy. While government solutions are falling short of expectations, non-governmental organisations and environmental campaigners are taking an active role in tackling the problem of marine plastic pollution. Action ranges from monitoring the accumulation of plastic on beaches, creating new and innovative ways to encourage recycling, organising beach clean-ups, research on the degradation of plastic, and – amongst others – nationwide campaigns aiming to educate the public.

The work of GreenSeas Trust

GreenSeas Trust was founded as a charity in 2003. Its aim is to educate, promote and implement environmental programmes that reduce the extent of plastic pollution entering marine habitats. Its overarching goal is to ensure the sustainability of marine life, such as healthy fish stocks, a lack of toxicity in the water and a thriving ecosystem where sea mammals and birds can flourish. If this is to be achieved, reducing plastic pollution is paramount. The flagship project at GreenSeas Trust is the **BinForGreenSeas** initiative. Standing at 1.5 metres tall, these bright and bold bins, which are made using about 450 recycled plastic bottles in its fiberglass resin, not only encourage polyethylene terephthalate or PET plastic recycling but also act as an educational tool to remind people of the consequences of littering on oceans. To date, nine bins have been introduced on coastal and riverside promenades across the UK, with some bins receiving over 60kg of plastic each month (GreenSeas Trust, 2020). By 2023, the Trust hopes to have 16 or more such bins placed in locations across the UK to advertise and expand the charity's work.

Methodology

The Survey

To discover views about recycling and littering across the UK, GreenSeas Trust designed a survey to be conducted anonymously. Participants were from community groups in coastal areas across the UK. They were asked to identify the council they lived in to give an indication of regional differences. The survey was multiple choice and consisted of the



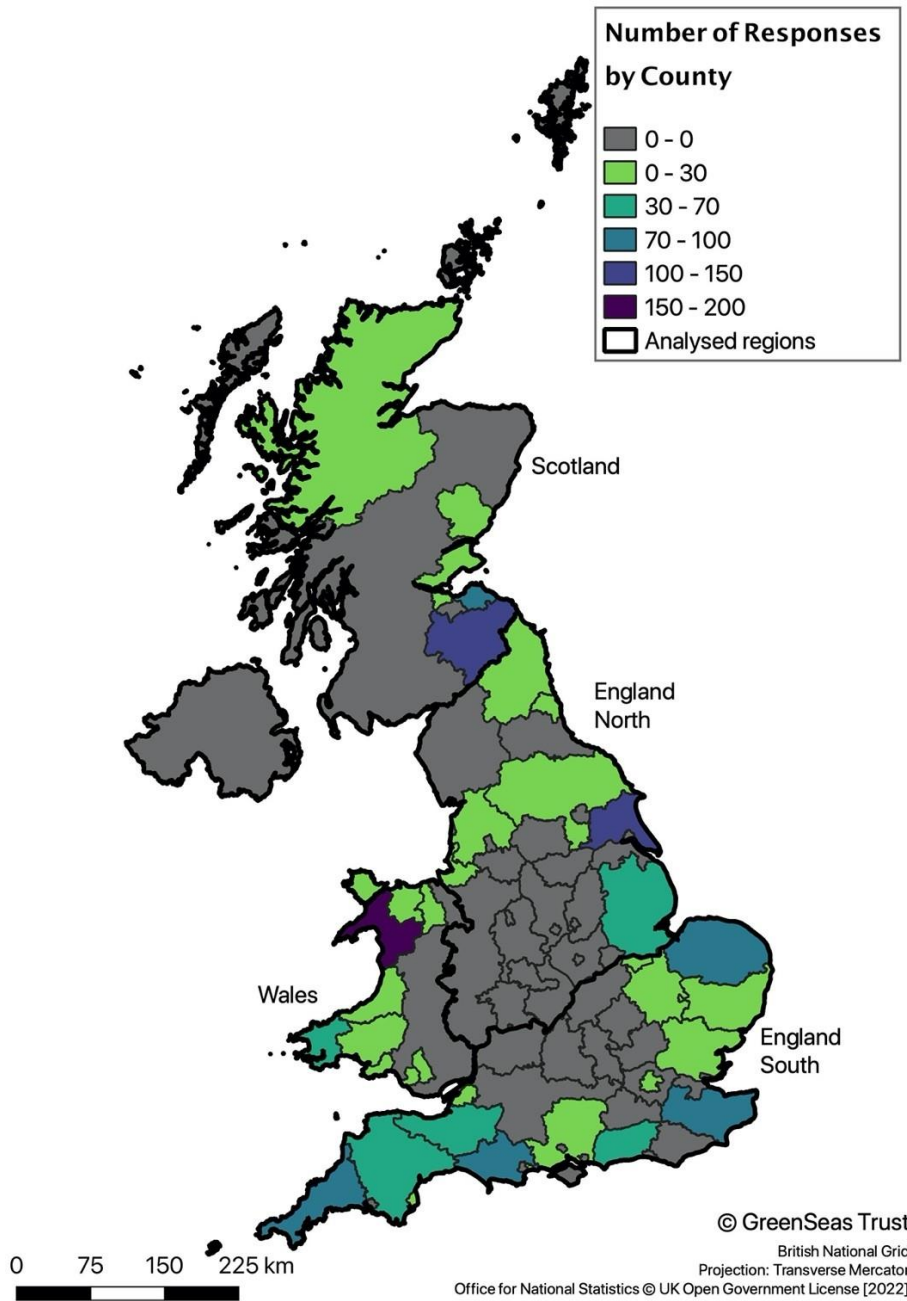
following five questions :

1. Is there a beach litter problem in your area, especially in summer?
2. Are there enough bins on the beach/promenade in your area?
3. Are you happy with your council's effort to prevent littering?
4. Do you think a BinForGreenSeas could help to prevent littering?
5. Would you like to have a BinForGreenSeas at your local beach/promenade?

The participants were asked to tick one of three answers: Yes, No or Maybe. There was also space available for comments.

Data analysis

For analysis of the survey, the participants' answers were pooled by each constituent country of the UK. Because of the high number of responses (1,329), answers from England were further divided into North and South (Figure 1). Upon the division of respondents per region, the results of the survey were inputted into 5 separate tables for each individual question.

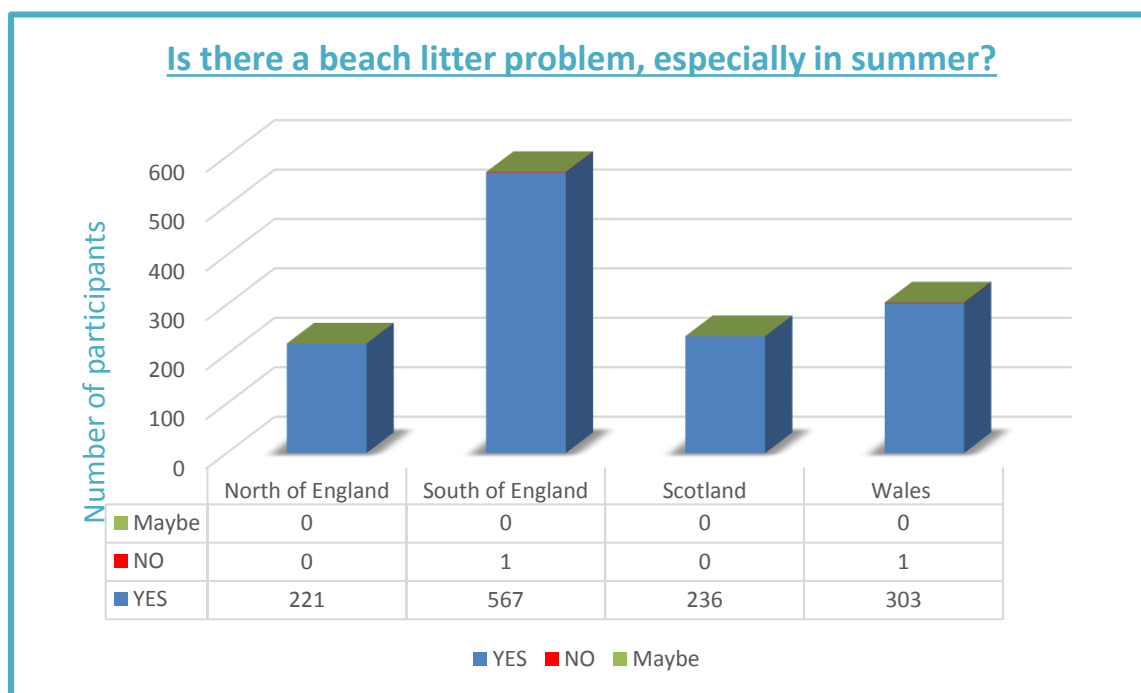


[Figure 1: Map of the number of participants across the UK grouped by district. The black line indicates the outline of the four survey regions]

The written comments section was also assessed by region, allowing an easier breakdown and analysis of results. There were 1,329 participants in total: 304 participants from Wales, 236 participants from Scotland and 789 participants from England – 221 from the North and 568 from the South.

Results and opinions

Survey result – Question 1



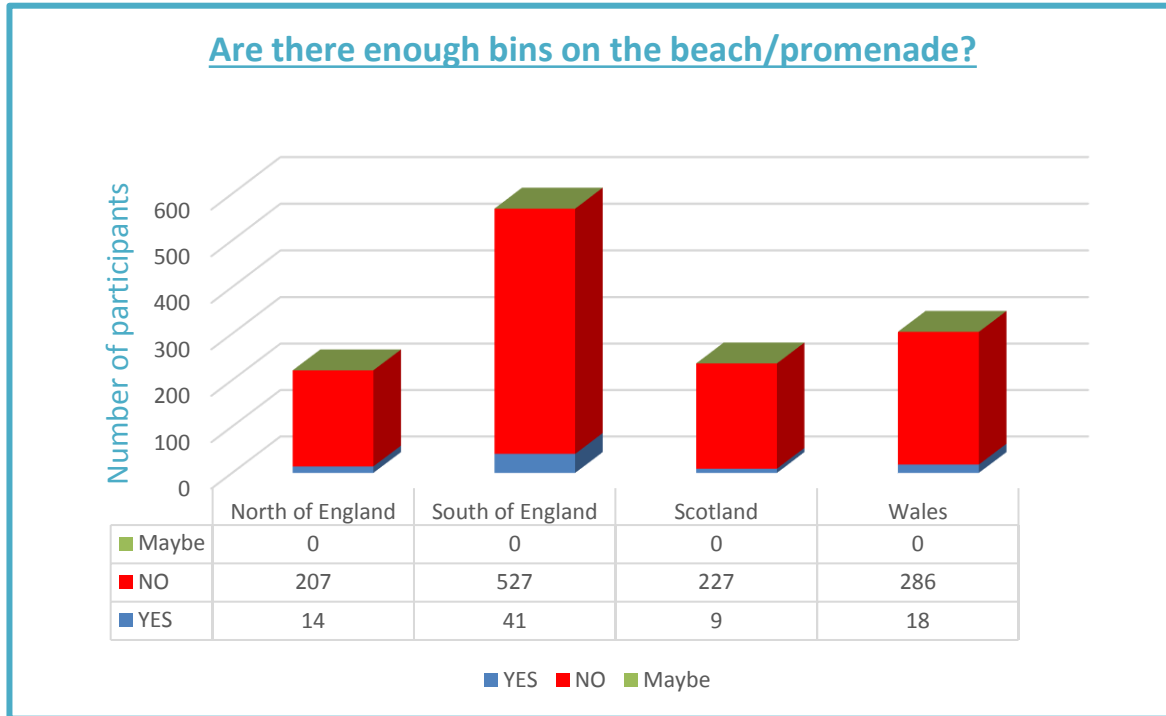
[Figure 2: Responses to Question 1]

Overall, 99.8% of participants considered that there was a litter problem in their area. The responses by each country were very similar: in Northern England and Scotland, all participants reported litter problems; in Southern England, it was 99.8% while the figure for Wales was 99.7%. Moreover, many participants highlighted the urgency of the litter problems in their areas in the comments section. Below are some examples:

- ‘The litter being left in our community is appalling. We need help!!!!’ (Participant in Bridgend, Wales)
- ‘We really have a problem. Locals clean the beaches all year and pick up litter. If we go for a walk we organise collections... but the sheer mass of people who really don’t care cancels out all the hard work.’ (Participant in Newquay, Cornwall)
- ‘People leave their rubbish all over the beaches and other areas. I believe local people would be encouraged to confront people who leave rubbish if there was somewhere to put the rubbish.’ (Participant in the East Riding area of Yorkshire)
- ‘The beach closest to me is Bournemouth Beach and in summer the mess from gatherings and beach BBQ’s is awful! We rely on volunteers and beach cleans to

help reduce the waste afterwards...’ (Participant in Bournemouth)

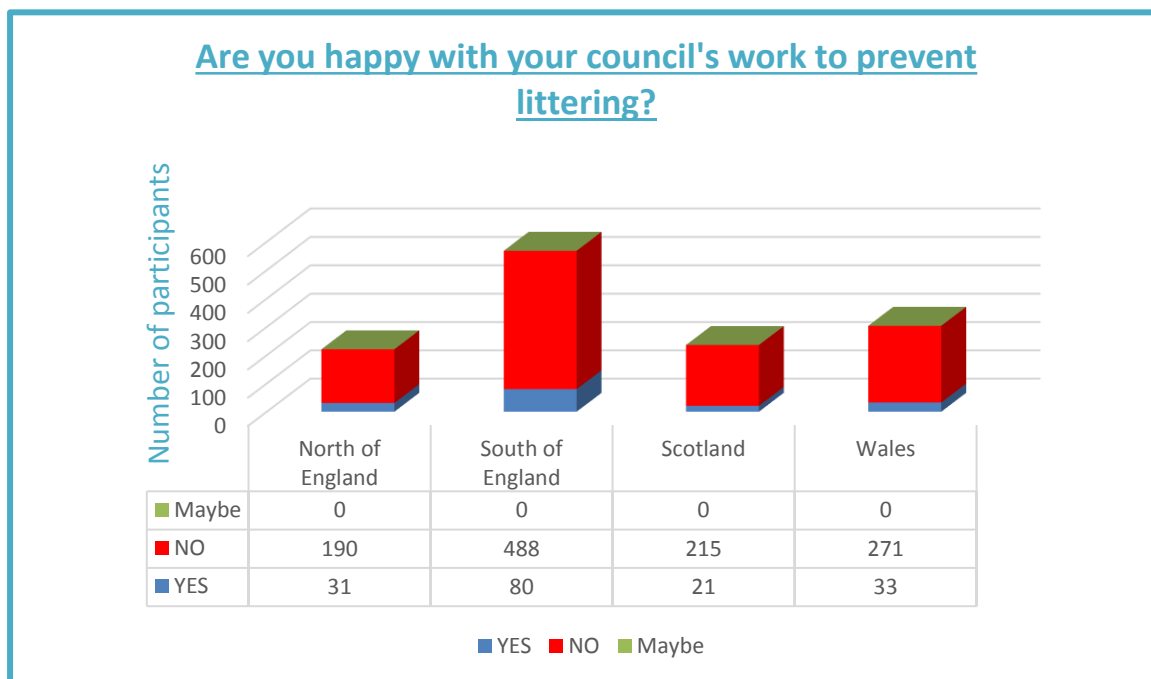
Survey result – Question 2



[Figure 3: Responses to Question 2]

The question whether there are enough bins provided in the area was answered with ‘Yes’ by only 6.2% of all participants. The highest satisfaction was found in Southern England with 7.2% replying with ‘Yes’. In Northern England and Wales, the percentage of participants who answered ‘yes’ was 6.3% and 5.9%, respectively. Respondents from Scotland reported the lowest satisfaction with local bin provision – only 3.8% felt there were enough in their area. An overwhelming majority of 93.8% of those surveyed stated that there were not enough bins on their local beaches/promenades.

Survey result – Question 3



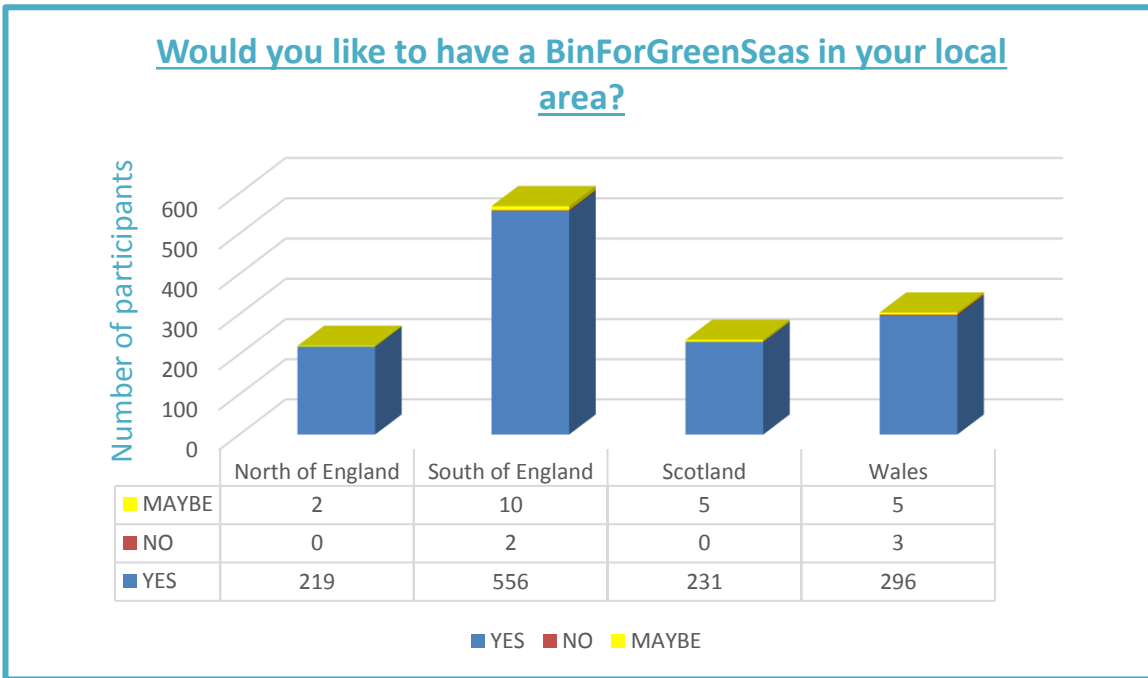
[Figure 4: Responses to Question 3]

The highest satisfaction for council work in relation to littering, while statistically low, was in the South of England, standing at 14.1%. Northern England’s satisfaction was slightly lower at 14%, followed by Wales at 10.6%. Scotland was the country with the lowest satisfaction rate at 8.9%.

The higher satisfaction rate in England could be related to beach clean-up and litter-picking events. One participant from Burnham-on-Sea stated that ‘the Town Council has recently supported The Great British Spring Clean and 51 volunteers engaged in 3 organised litter pick events.’ However, not all participants’ comments praised the council as those below show:

- ‘The council have increased the number of bins but the frequency of them being emptied doesn't match the footfall.’ (Participant from Cornwall)
- ‘Our council does not recognise the scale of the litter problem or the efforts of locals cleaning the beach each morning.’ (Participant from Wales)
- ‘The bins which are there at present are not big enough and tend to be overflowing, leaving litter all over our beautiful coastal areas.’ (Participant from Yorkshire)

Survey result – Question 4



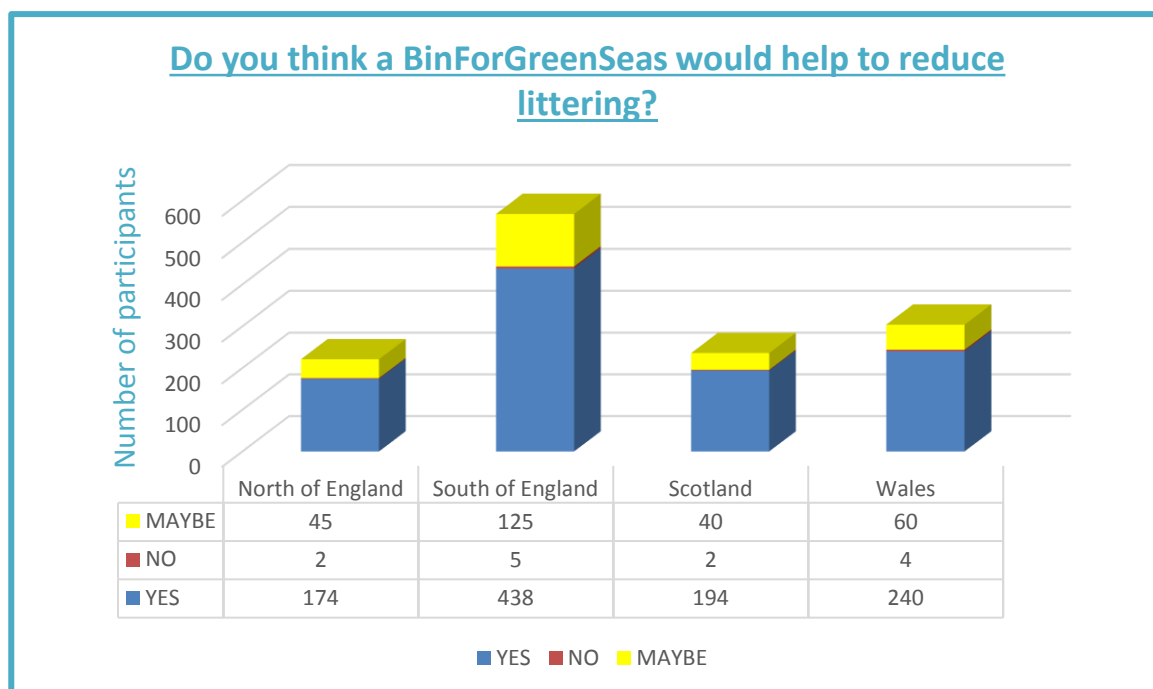
[Figure 5: Responses to Question 4]

In answer to this question, 98% of participants stated that they would like to have a BinForGreenSeas in their area. Numbers were very similar across all regions, ranging from 99% in Northern England to 97.4% in Wales.

Participants praised the design of the BinForGreenSeas, as well as its educational purpose. Below are some positive comments relating to the bin itself:

- ‘Your lovely bins should encourage people to remember to put their litter in them!’ (Participant from Devon)
- ‘I believe something eye catching is needed to draw attention and promote anti-littering. This bin would be a great prompt for people to dispose of their waste appropriately.’ (Participant from Dorset)
- ‘As an arrival point for many tourists to the UK (in normal times), I think it would be a great statement to show we are taking care of our coastline and would like others to do so too.’ (Participant from Dover)

Survey result – Question 5



[Figure 6: Responses to Question 5]

Most participants (78.7%) believed that a BinForGreenSeas would reduce littering; 20.3% were not sure if it would help; only 1% thought that it wouldn't help. In Northern England, 78.7% believed a BinForGreenSeas would be helpful – in Southern England, it was 77.1%. In Wales and Scotland, 78.9% and 82.2% of participants believed that a bin would be beneficial.

Suggestions to have educational programmes to accompany the bin were also made, as well as the belief expressed that a BinForGreenSeas would help the issue of plastic pollution:

- 'I don't think that enough is done to educate people not to drop litter or put it in an already overfilled bin. There should be a campaign to get people to take their litter home.' (Participant from Edinburgh, Scotland)
- 'There are so many independent organisations and individuals who are all trying so hard – something like this could be just what we need to spearhead yet another anti-littering campaign.' (Participant from Cornwall)



Conclusion

Evidenced by the community responses to questions 1, 2 and 3, and supported by national statistics that were described in the Introduction, it is clear that the UK has an unequivocal problem with coastal littering. While there is a complex variety of factors that have prompted coastal littering, the GreenSeas Trust community survey has shed light on where the public perceives the issues to lie. First, there are issues with the lack of bins (including recycling bins) along beaches and promenades, with 93.8% of those surveyed stating that there were not enough bins to safeguard the beaches from littering. Second, the public are troubled by the inaction from local councils, which they believe are not doing enough to mitigate the litter crisis.

The BinForGreenSeas project aims to challenge and resolve these issues. On further implementation of the project, local councils will be shown to increase willingness towards tackling coastal littering, and to take a more active role to prevent littering and the subsequent environmental harm that it causes. With 78.7% of those surveyed believing that the BinForGreenSeas project would reduce coastal littering, and 98% wanting a BinForGreenSeas in their local area, it is clear that there is unwavering public support for the implementation of the project.

However, while marine plastic pollution grows to an almost irrevocable level, local councils have been reticent in their support of the project, preferring to adopt a less reactionary policy to polluted beaches and coastlines that relies on public litter-picks and beach clean-ups. Their inaction to tackle the root of the problem is a stark reminder of the many challenges that the environment faces. Beach clean-ups are holistically ineffective at reducing coastal littering and pollution because they are infrequent, expensive, and purely reactionary.

In contrast, the BinForGreenSeas project acts as a preventative tool, helping to stop coastal littering at its source. The visual graphics on the bins act as educational tools on a subliminal level to influence behavioural change. The project has already yielded results with each bin captures around 5,000 PET plastic bottles per month.



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