

The Issue

Ireland has a serious litter problem in urban and rural areas throughout the country. Fáilte Ireland is concerned about the potential impact of this problem on Ireland's image as a tourism destination abroad. The damage that this is likely to cause to the tourism industry may not be evident in the short term, but rather over an extended period of time with the gradual erosion of our credibility as a clean, green island. In order to better understand tourists' attitudes to litter in Ireland, Fáilte Ireland included a number of questions relating specifically to litter in its annual Visitor Attitudes Survey in 2006. The main finding of the survey was that overseas holidaymakers to Ireland have noticed our litter problem and that it appears to be impacting on our clean, green image.

In 2006, 75% of overseas holidaymakers surveyed agreed with the statement that "Ireland is a clean and environmentally

green destination". In 2007, this figure was 72%, a drop of 3%. The extent to which litter is a contributing factor of this change in attitudes is not clear, but it is likely that it is one of a number of causes which include the deterioration in water quality and an increased environmental awareness among the public in general.

The sustainability of the tourism industry is heavily dependent upon the extent to which Ireland's environmental reality matches its image. Each year an average of 80% of holidaymakers feel that Ireland's high quality environment and scenic landscapes are a "very important" factor in their choosing Ireland as a holiday destination. So far, we have been fortunate in maintaining a relatively positive perception. However, according to the Report of the National Anti-Litter Forum "we have without doubt one of the worst litter problems in Europe".



Photography: Robert Jackson

What our visitors think

The results of the Visitor Attitudes Survey suggest that littering is noticed by holidaymakers to Ireland in not insignificant numbers. Littering is noted in both cities and the rural countryside in relatively similar proportions, with 21% of respondents disagreeing that city streets in Ireland are

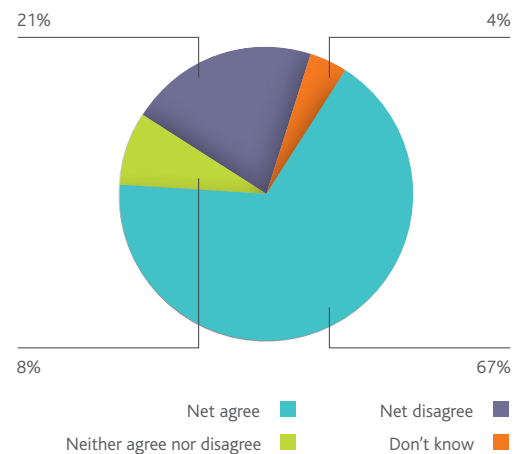
clean and litter free, and 27% having evidenced littering or dumping in the countryside. Littering on beaches appears to have attracted the least amount of attention, although with 18% considering it a "real problem" it is still a cause for concern and should not lead to complacency.

The problem of litter pollution on rural roadways requires particular attention. Traffic on rural roadways has increased over recent years, as have the number of service stations which provide a wide range of hot food and beverage products. This has inevitably led to increased litter pollution on rural roads, which is time-consuming and expensive to remove. Plastic and aluminium beverage packaging represents a particular problem in this regard, in that this type of litter is highly visible and does not degrade. Fly-tipping has also emerged as a significant problem on rural roadways, resulting from individuals seeking to avoid paying the recently introduced Local Authority charges for refuse collection.

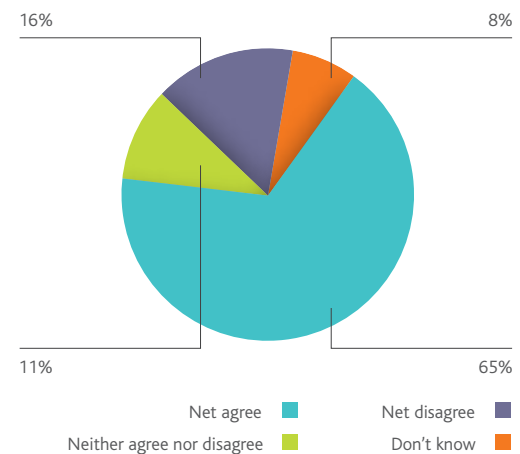
The idea that holidaymakers to Ireland compare evidence of litter to the cleanliness of their own country is qualified only to a limited degree. The statement "Irish streets are cleaner than the streets in my own country" has an enormous range of levels of agreement (ranging from 20% to 60%). Interestingly, this discrepancy is not repeated in the answers of the other questions: holidaymakers who perceive the street in their own countries to be cleaner than those in Ireland are only slightly less tolerant of litter pollution than those who consider their country less clean than Ireland. Whatever the analysis, it should be a cause for concern that on average only 44% of visitors perceive the streets in Ireland to be cleaner than those in their own country. This issue, however, is not simply a question of litter on our streets not being dealt with. There are indications that there is a developing impression among overseas holidaymakers of Irish people as being complacent about litter.

The highest level of dissatisfaction among holidaymakers appears to be with the emptying of litter bins. Only 40% of all holidaymakers agreed that "litter bins on Irish streets are emptied regularly", contrasting starkly with the 65% who think that cities are well provided with litter bins, or 67% who think that Irish city streets are clean and litter free. This low figure is similar across the board, regardless of the visitor's country of origin. It would appear that full and overflowing bins are perhaps more noticed by holidaymakers than any other form of litter.

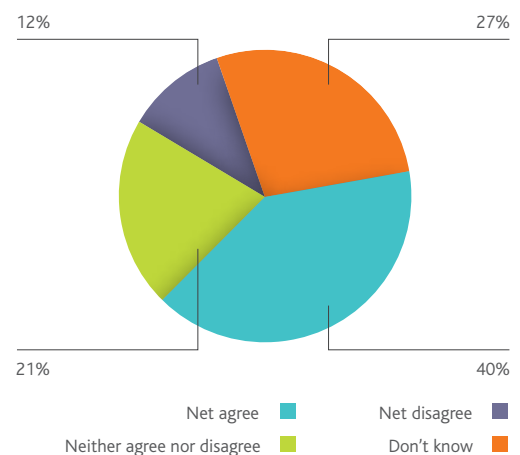
The streets in Irish cities are clean and litter free



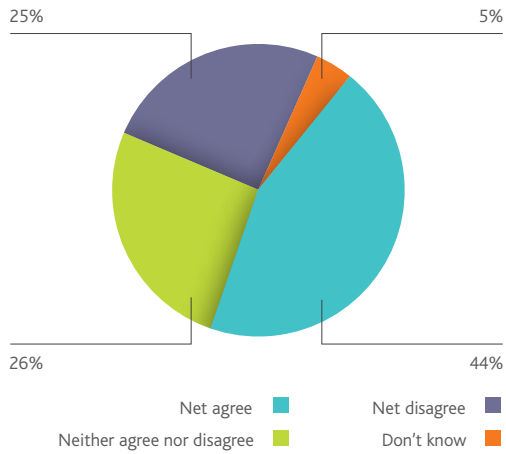
The streets in Irish cities are well provided with litter bins



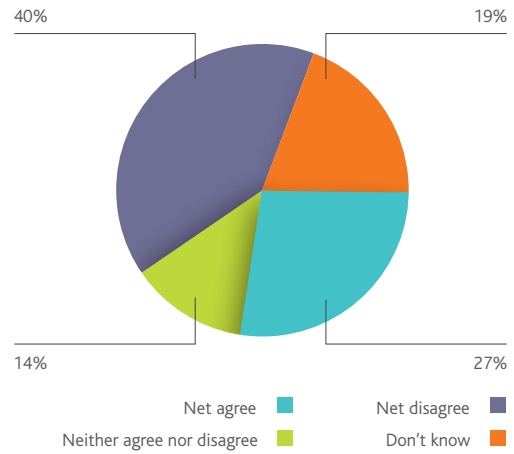
Litter bins on Irish streets are emptied regularly



Irish streets are cleaner than the streets in my own country

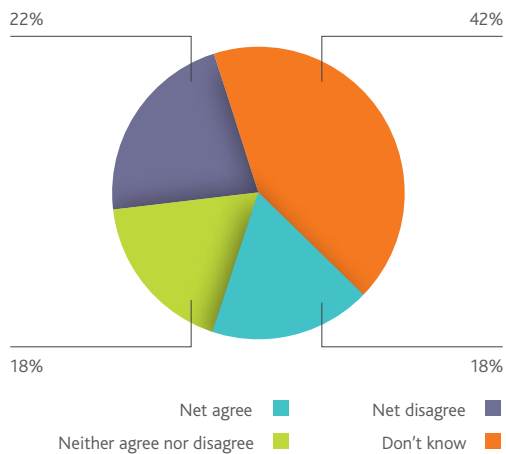


The rural countryside in Ireland shows evidence of littering and / or dumping

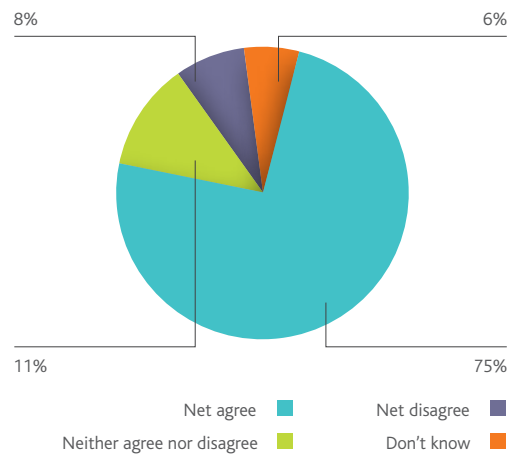


Photography: Litter Monitoring Body / Tobin Consulting Engineers

Litter on Irish beaches is a real problem



Ireland is a clean and environmentally green destination



The challenge

There are two distinct challenges to be faced if Ireland's litter problem is to be tackled effectively. The first is to change public behaviour from the current situation where it appears to be largely acceptable to dispose of litter onto the streets of our cities, towns and rural roadsides, to one where this practice becomes totally unacceptable. The second challenge is to ensure that sufficient resources are provided to cleaning the streets and public places of our urban and rural areas.

Over time, it is likely that litter pollution, if not arrested in the short term, and in association with a number of other perceived environmental problems, will undermine the credibility of Ireland's clean green image. The trend towards rising standards in litter and waste management in Europe clearly brings with it increased awareness and expectations. It is crucial that Ireland is pro-active in keeping up with European standards and fully exploits the reputation we have established as a clean, green destination. The findings from this study caution us that we must not underestimate the impact of a littered environment on tourism.

Solving the problem of litter in Ireland, or at least improving the situation, is not an easy one. The solution requires concerted action at local level, supported by a comprehensive legislative and policy framework at national level. Most Local Authorities are taking a pro-active approach to litter abatement and have produced a litter management plan, increased the number of litter wardens employed, and increased the issuing of fines. Fáilte Ireland has begun to contribute to a number of Local Authority Litter Management Plans. It is clear that these plans need to be supported in terms of greater resource allocation for the appointment of full-time litter wardens, for street cleaning and, in particular, for more frequent emptying of litter bins.



Photography: Litter Monitoring Body / Tobin Consulting Engineers



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