

'Urgent' need to clean up key tourist routes as summer approaches

IBAL proposes alternative solution as Government decision on gum looms

As Irish Business Against Litter (IBAL) launches its 9th Anti Litter League, it is pointing to the good progress that has been made since it first commissioned An Taisce to survey litter levels in towns and cities and rank them according to international standards. The first survey in 2002 showed that only two towns in Ireland were deemed 'litter free'. At the end of 2009, that number had risen to 39, or almost two-thirds of all towns.

However, according to a new survey by IBAL, key entry routes for tourists in Ireland – including airports and seaports – are blighted with large amounts of litter. The litter group is calling on the National Roads Authority to ensure visitors this summer are welcomed by clean roads and litter-free surroundings. IBAL is also warning the Government not to be lured by chewing gum manufacturers into a renewal of its agreement on gum. Highlighting gum as a key source of litter in our towns and cities, IBAL has called for conventional chewing gum to be replaced with a biodegradable form. The call was made at today's launch of the IBAL Anti-Litter League, which took place in the presence of Environment Minister John Gormley.

Widespread litter on key tourist routes

IBAL's latest litter survey will make for uncomfortable reading for tourist chiefs. The survey described the airport road in Dublin as an "appalling sight" for any tourist arriving in Ireland. "It wasn't just an isolated area which was responsible for the terrible state – several separate incidents were recorded," said An Taisce, assessors of the survey on behalf of IBAL. "It was characterised by street cones lying in the grass verge, white plastic wrapping in the hedge and vast amounts of casual litter trapped in the shrubbery."

Visitors taking the M1 from the Dublin Port tunnel are likewise greeted with "an eye-sore – there was a distinct lack of cleaning along this route as evidenced by the array of debris, not just casual litter," according to An Taisce.

Routes in and out of Cork City were also found to be litter blackspots with serious litter problems in particular on the Waterford/Rosslare road into Cork City (N25): "This route was in a shocking state, an array of all sorts of discarded rubble. There was a blanket of litter along some stretches of the road and huge swathes of old plastic wrapping trapped in the branches of trees". Similarly the Limerick Approach Road (N20) into Cork City showed "patches of litter in places. Most litter is now hidden by vegetation. At a number of sites along the roads there are areas that have been extensively fly tipped", while visitors travelling from Shannon airport are greeted with "heavily littered" sites on the N18 Northbound and Southbound. In contrast both Rosslare Harbour and Dun Laoghaire harbour were classed as excellent and very well maintained.

Commenting on the survey, Chairman of Irish Business Against Litter, Dr Tom Cavanagh, said: "First impressions count, and the first impression our tourists are getting is not at all good. They are encountering roads here that are not nearly as clean as in the countries they have come from. Unfortunately it recalls an old slogan 'Welcome to Ireland. Please excuse the litter.' Isn't it ironic that, with most of our towns and cities now cleaner, many of the key routes for tourists to access them are so neglected?"

"These routes are the responsibility of the National Roads Authority, who engage local authorities to keep them clean," said Dr Cavanagh. "Be it litter-strewn shrubbery or neglected lay-bys, they are clearly failing in this task and undoing the good work of communities in towns and cities. With a maintenance budget of €44 million, you would expect a much better performance. Due to public pressure some roads have been cleaned recently but IBAL is calling for a published schedule for regular cleaning of our national primary roads, as is the practise in Northern Ireland."

76% of visitors to Ireland enter the country via Dublin Airport or Port.

Biodegradable alternative to tackle chewing gum problem

"Despite the cleaner towns, the prevalence of gum on our streets increased significantly in 2009," said Dr Cavanagh. "There are about 700 million pieces of gum sold here each year. Research suggests that about 20% of them are dropped on the streets by the consumers. However, even if only 10% is dropped on the street, that means 70 million pieces added annually. Hoping for a

behavioural change is not realistic. All gum should be biodegradable. But corporate greed is happy to continue to damage our priceless worldwide image of being a clean green island."

Conventional gum, once thrown and trodden into the street, will not decompose for at least 25 years. It is no longer sold in many shops in airports, train stations, primary schools and third level institutions, and, according to IBAL, if the Government is serious about developing our tourist industry, all gum on sale in Ireland should be biodegradable.

"Now is the time for the Government to solve the problem," said Dr Cavanagh. "It must resist the temptation of another unbecoming partnership with the gum industry. Taxation is one option that could bring about a quick change."

"Visitors notice the litter – and they don't like it"

Paddy Mathews of Fáilte Ireland said : "Without doubt, our litter problem poses a serious threat to the credibility of our clean, green image as a tourist destination. Our Visitor Attitudes Survey, which is carried out every year, shows that our visitors do indeed notice the litter problem in Ireland and they don't like it. While great improvements have been made in tackling litter in our cities and towns in recent years, the situation on our main roads appears to be disimproving. Unless this is problem is tackled, it will result in long-term damage to our image abroad. Fáilte Ireland's Environment Unit are working closely with tourism businesses to help them in their mission to become more green."

Peadar O'Sullivan, of Dublin City Council also commented : " Dublin City Council supports these initiatives to introduce scheduled cleaning of national primary routes and to ban the use of non biodegradeable chewing gum."

IBAL member John Power of the Irish Hotels Federation, added: "From a wide range of factors that might influence the choice of a holiday destination, the most important in choosing Ireland are friendliness, scenery, an unspoilt environment, and the range of natural attractions. The presence of litter and chewing gum litter in particular undermines the positive impact of each of these deciding factors."

Kildare town is a new entrant to the Litter League programme this year, joining 51 other towns and cities. The first result of the 2010 Anti Litter League will be published in June. Bray was deemed cleanest town in Ireland in the 2009 programme.

-ENDS-

For further information contact Conor or Dawn in Cullen Communications.

Tel 01 668 9099/ 086 821 7211 / 087 215 6942 or dburke@cullencommunications.ie

Editors note:

Set up in 1996, Irish Business Against Litter is an alliance of companies sharing a belief that continued economic prosperity - notably in the areas of tourism, food and direct foreign investment - is contingent on a clean, litter-free environment. As part of the IBAL Anti-Litter League, An Taisce monitors all towns of population 6,000 and over independently in accordance with international grading standards.