THE NATIONAL RECYCLING BIN SURVEY

A SICK OF PLASTIC CAMPAIGN

SICK OF PLASTIC

VOICE



LIFTING THE LID

REPORT

National Recycling Bin Survey 2026

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Executive Summary

The third National Recycling Bin Survey (NRBS) took place during July and August of 2026. Building upon the first NRBS in 2023 and the second in 2025 the 2026 iteration of the survey included additional questions to discern the use of the packaging within our bins. The survey was completed by 50 households, spread across 16 local authority areas. These households recorded the items they placed in their recycling bin over the period of two weeks. A total of 6,418 packaging items were recorded by participants. The key findings from the survey were:

Packaging composition

- Plastic (hard and soft combined) accounted for 3,493 items, or 55% of all packaging recorded, making it the dominant packaging material in households. Soft plastic alone represented 31% of all items. This is an increase from previous years, the NRBS surveys in 2023 and 2025 both found that plastics made up 47% of all packaging recorded by participants.

Sources of packaging

- Seven out of every ten packaging items found in household recycling bins originated from supermarkets.
- Four in ten supermarket packaging items were associated with supermarket own-brand products, indicating a substantial proportion of packaging is directly under retailer influence and control.

What was the packaging used for?

- 24% of all supermarket packaging held dry goods - one of the easier food types to sell using reusable packaging.
- Fruit and vegetable packaging accounted for 22% of all supermarket packaging, making it one of the largest identifiable packaging streams and a particularly important category given upcoming PPWR ban on single-use plastic produce packaging.

Deposit Return Scheme

- Over the two-week survey period, households reported an average of 8.7 plastic bottles and 9.8 beverage cans per home. This would suggest an annual count of 574 eligible containers to the scheme per household, substantially higher than the 280 containers annually suggested by the results of the 2025 NRBS .

Consumer attitudes

- 43 respondents (86%) said they actively try to buy package-free items whenever possible.
- Despite this, plastic still made up 55% of all packaging recorded, suggesting consumers face significant limitations in avoiding packaging through current retail offerings

Introduction

Plastic pollution is often viewed as a waste management issue, but it is fundamentally a symptom of a much larger challenge: our dependence on a linear, throwaway economy. Plastics have become deeply embedded in modern life, particularly through single-use products and packaging designed to be used for only a matter of minutes before being discarded. The environmental consequences are now visible across the planet, with plastic contamination found in oceans, rivers, soils, wildlife and even the human body. As plastic production continues to grow, so too do its impacts on climate change, biodiversity, resource security and public health.

Ireland is not immune to this crisis. In fact, Ireland generates more plastic packaging waste per capita than any other EU Member State, producing 67 kilograms per person in 2023, a 50% increase since 2013. Over the past decade, Irish households have become increasingly reliant on single-use packaging, embedding a resource-intensive consumption model that cannot be made sustainable through recycling alone. While considerable investment has been made in recycling infrastructure, evidence continues to demonstrate that recycling, although important, cannot by itself address the scale of the plastic pollution challenge.

This dependence on disposable packaging also creates economic and geopolitical vulnerabilities. Plastic production relies heavily on imported fossil fuel feedstocks and complex global supply chains, exposing countries to price volatility, supply disruptions and resource insecurity. Reducing reliance on single-use plastics can therefore deliver benefits that extend beyond waste reduction, strengthening Ireland's resilience, supporting more local and circular systems of production and consumption, and reducing dependence on imported materials and resources.

The need to focus on prevention rather than end-of-pipe solutions is reflected in European policy. The EU Single-Use Plastics Directive identified ten everyday plastic items which, together with abandoned fishing gear, account for approximately 70% of marine litter. These items include many of the products consumers encounter daily, such as beverage containers, food packaging, plastic bags and disposable cutlery. Their prevalence highlights the need to move upstream, tackling unnecessary packaging at source and prioritising reduction, reuse and refill systems over continued reliance on single-use products.

Sick of Plastic is a national campaign founded by Voice of Irish Concern for the Environment (VOICE) and Friends of the Earth Ireland in 2018. Since then, Sick of Plastic has empowered communities to pressure industry and decision-makers to take action on single-use plastic. The National Recycling Bin Survey was born out of prior work by Sick of Plastic to expose the failures of the supermarket industry to tackle the plastic crisis. In 2022 Sick of Plastic conducted the Refill, and Reuse in the Grocery Sector report which reviewed the pledges of Ireland's top supermarket chains and provided recommendations to catalyse the transition away from single-use plastic packaging. Sick of Plastic also facilitated the 2022 Under Wraps report in Ireland, in which Irish grocery chains received a score of just 16 out of 100 for their transparency, commitments, and policy support regarding the elimination of plastic waste. This ranked Ireland 5th worst country out the 13 EU members involved in the study.

Introduction

Understanding where packaging waste originates is an essential first step in delivering this transition. First conducted in 2023, the National Recycling Bin Survey (NRBS) is the first and only study in Ireland to analyse household recycling waste and attribute packaging waste to specific retail sectors. By identifying the sources of packaging waste entering Irish homes, the survey provides a unique evidence base to support targeted waste prevention measures, increased reuse and greater accountability across the supply chain.

This report presents the findings of the third edition of the survey, conducted during June and July 2026. In addition to identifying the retailers and sectors responsible for packaging waste, this year's survey also examined the function of packaging by recording the types of products it originally contained, including fruit and vegetables, dry goods, beverages, detergents and other household goods. This additional layer of analysis provides valuable insight into where packaging is most prevalent and where opportunities for waste prevention and reuse may exist.

By repeating the survey for a third time, it is possible to begin tracking trends in household packaging waste and assessing how exposure to single-use packaging is changing over time. The findings help answer important questions: Are Irish households being exposed to more or less single-use packaging? Which retailers and sectors are contributing most to packaging waste? And where are the greatest opportunities for reduction and reuse? The evidence generated through this survey is intended to support stronger recommendations to retailers and policymakers and to help accelerate Ireland's transition towards a more circular economy.

Main findings

128

Number of items in the recycling bins of each family over a two week period

70%

of waste items in the average recycling bin in Ireland originated from the supermarket

55%

of waste items in the average recycling bin in Ireland were plastic

88%

Find the amount of packaging frustrating



Actions and Policy priorities

Based on the findings of this third National Recycling Bin Survey (NRBS26), it's clear that household packaging waste remains high and retail responsibility is growing. To address this, we propose a series of focused recommendations targeting government, supermarkets and the retail sector as a whole. These actions aim to reduce packaging at the source, expand reuse and refill systems, and ensure fair access to zero waste solutions across Ireland.

Make reusable packaging the norm across all retail sectors, with strong targets to shift away from single-use.

Ensure supermarkets offer refill options at scale, by requiring 20%offloor space in shops over 400m² to be dedicated to refill by 2030.

Phase out single-use in the takeaway sector, making reuse the default for food and drink packaging (75% reusable packaging by 2030)

Reduction of packaging quantities, not only their weight, focusing especially on supermarkets where overpackaging is growing.

Track national progress on reuse and circular systems, through a public,central observatory based on France's model.

Make zero waste and healthy food accessible to all, by supporting local refill hubs and lowering the cost of loose, organic goods.

Reducing packaging – policy support

Packaging waste remains one of Ireland's most significant circular economy challenges. According to the EPA, Ireland generated 1.19 million tonnes of packaging waste in 2024, representing an increase of 20% since 2016. While recycling rates have also improved over this period, packaging waste generation has grown almost four times faster than recycling, highlighting the limitations of relying on recycling alone to address growing levels of consumption.

Recognising this challenge, recent policy has shifted beyond recycling towards reducing packaging waste at source. The Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2026-2028 identifies reusable and refillable packaging systems as a key priority, alongside support for packaging design innovation, demonstration projects for reuse models, and the implementation of refill obligations under the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR). The strategy also commits to developing key performance indicators with Repak by the end of 2026 to monitor progress towards the PPWR packaging waste reduction targets of 5% by 2030, 10% by 2035 and 15% by 2040.

Achieving these targets will require a fundamental shift away from the current dependence on single-use packaging and towards systems that prioritise reduction, reuse and refill. Robust data on the sources and types of packaging entering Irish households will be essential for tracking progress, identifying priority sectors for intervention, and ensuring that policy measures deliver meaningful reductions in packaging waste generation rather than simply improvements in recycling rates.

“Packaging waste generation has grown almost four times faster than recycling, highlighting the limitations of relying on recycling alone to address growing levels of consumption”





The National Recycling Bin Survey

The National Recycling Bin Survey 2026 (NRBS26) aims to provide insights that complement existing national waste management data by examining household recycling behaviour in greater detail. Through this citizen-led research, the survey investigates the quantities, types and sources of materials placed in household recycling bins. By looking not only at what ends up in the recycling bin, but also where these materials originate, the research helps to build a clearer understanding of consumption and disposal patterns. This evidence can support more informed decision-making by identifying where responsibility for waste prevention, product design, packaging choices and recycling practices lies, ultimately helping to shape more effective waste and circular economy policies.



Results from the first and second edition

In 2023 and 2025 the survey was completed by 49 and 50 households respectively.

Supermarkets were the main source of recycling bin waste - 66% in 2023 and 70% in 2025.

In total, plastic (both soft and rigid) made up 47% of all waste items recorded in both the 2023 and 2025 surveys.

What's changed?

Since the first National Recycling Bin Survey was undertaken in 2023, there have been several changes to Ireland's waste management system that may have influenced householders' attitudes and behaviours relating to waste prevention, recycling and packaging.

The most notable changes occurred between 2023 and 2025. In February 2024, Ireland introduced the Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for eligible plastic drinks bottles and aluminium cans. This introduced a new approach to managing beverage packaging, with consumers paying a small deposit which is refunded when containers are returned through a collection point. The scheme has seen strong participation, with return rates increasing steadily since its introduction and billions of containers now diverted from residual waste and litter streams.

Another significant change was the nationwide rollout of brown bin services. From 2024, all households with access to a kerbside waste collection service became entitled to a brown bin for food and garden waste. This represented an important step in improving the segregation of organic waste, particularly given EPA findings that food waste previously made up a substantial proportion of residual household waste.

Householders also benefited from expanded recycling opportunities through the acceptance of soft plastics in household recycling collections. This increased the range of materials that could be recycled at home and simplified recycling practices for many households.

By comparison, there have been relatively few new household-facing changes between the second survey in 2025 and this survey in 2026. Instead, this period has largely been characterised by the continued adoption and normalisation of the measures introduced in recent years. As a result, many households are now routinely separating food waste into brown bins, returning eligible drinks containers through the Deposit Return Scheme, and making greater use of household recycling services.

These developments provide important context when comparing survey results over time. Any changes in attitudes, behaviours or reported waste prevention practices between 2023, 2025 and 2026 may reflect not only increased awareness of environmental issues, but also the impact of these systemic changes to waste collection and packaging management that have made waste segregation and recycling more visible and accessible for householders.



Methodology

Participants of theSurvey were recruited through social-media, newsletter updates, media appearances, and word of mouth. The Survey was open throughout July and August of 2026.

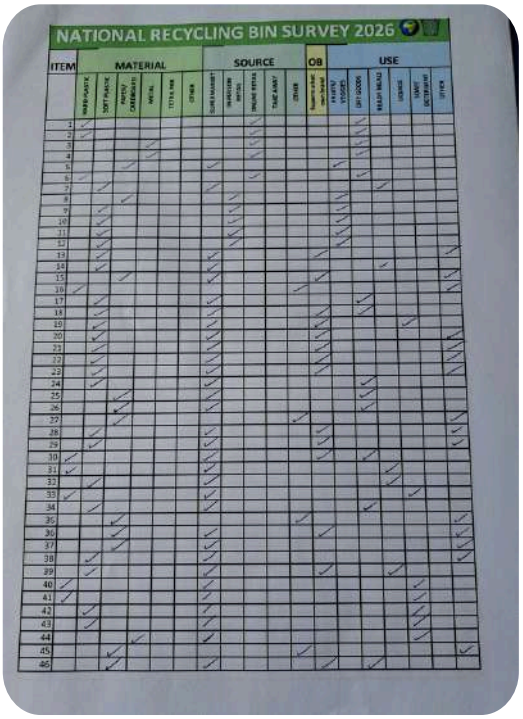
Participants were asked to recycle as normal over a two week period (between bin collection dates) and then conduct the waste audit on the material collected in the recycling bin. Waste items were recorded based on three criteria. First, waste items were analysed by their source. Second, waste items were analysed by their material. Third, waste items analysed by their use.



Data gathered

- For the survey, there were four primary source categories (supermarket, retail, online retail, and takeaway) and an 'other source' category.
- Four material categories were defined: rigid plastic, soft plastic, paper and cardboard, and metal.
- Five use categories were defined. These were fruit/vegetables, dry goods, ready meals, liquids. soap/detergent. There was also an 'other' catergory.

As such, each waste item documented in the Survey has had its source, material and use recorded.



Two methods were created for participants to audit their recycling bins. A tally sheet was created to facilitate both methods. The tally sheet was a table that allowed participants to count waste items while recording their source, material and use.

The first audit method involved tipping over the recycling bin after the two- week period, organising the waste into piles, and counting the waste items using the tally sheet before returning the waste to the recycling bin.

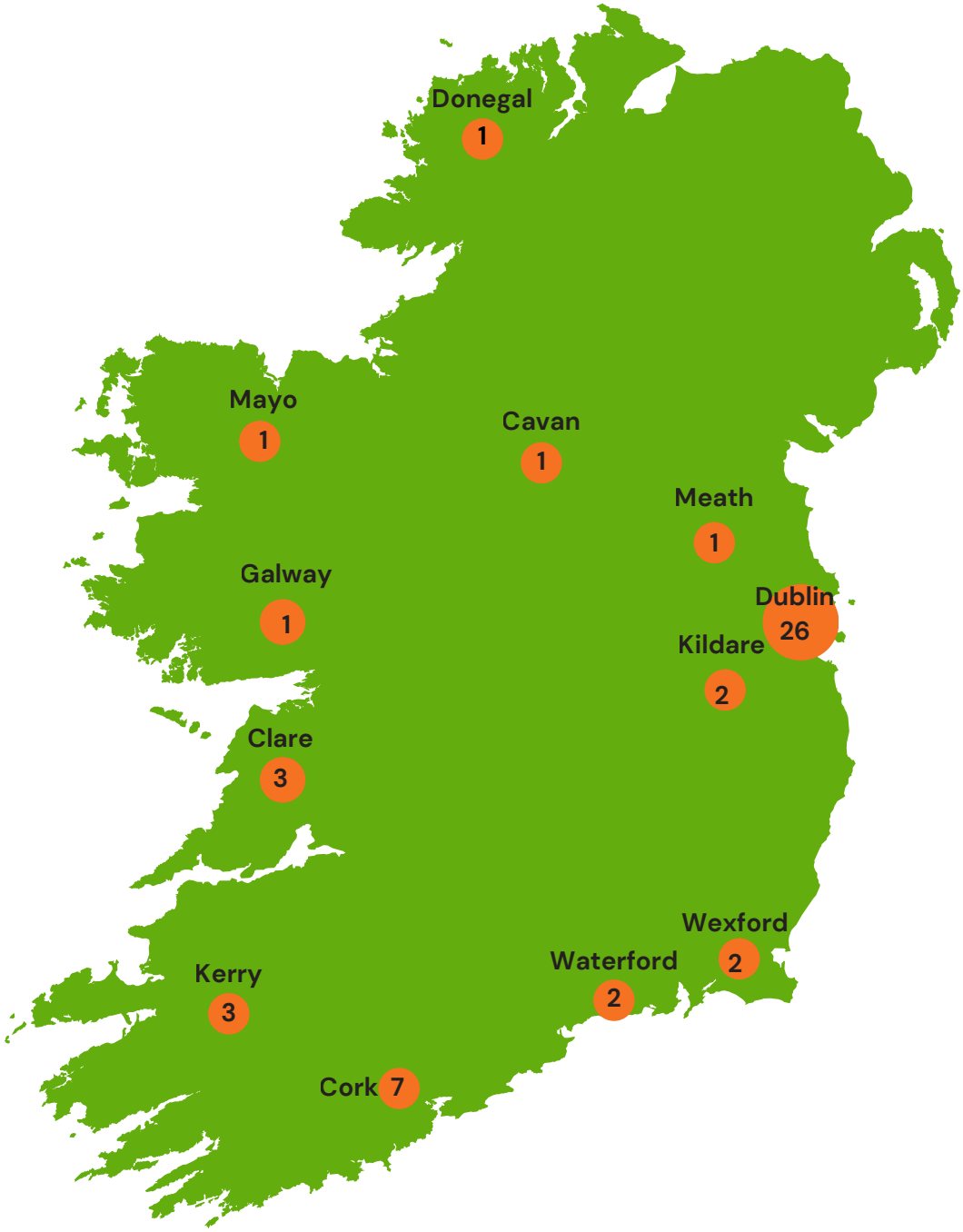
The second method involved logging each waste item as they were recycled, using the tally sheet, over the two-week period.

Finally, participants were asked to upload their tally sheets. This data was accumulated and analysed to produce a picture of the average recycling bin in Ireland and to understand this waste based on its material and source.

Results

In total 52 households completed the survey, from 369 sign-ups, this constituted a 14% follow-through rate. Considering the commitment required to complete the survey (30-45 minutes to audit the bin and another 15 minutes to input the data) a significant differential between the sign ups and follow-through rate was expected. Out of the 52 completed surveys, two surveys were removed from the data analysis due to inaccuracies. This meant **50 surveys were completed accurately**. Participants were spread across **16** local authority areas across all regions of Ireland making this a truly national campaign.

Map of participating households across Ireland

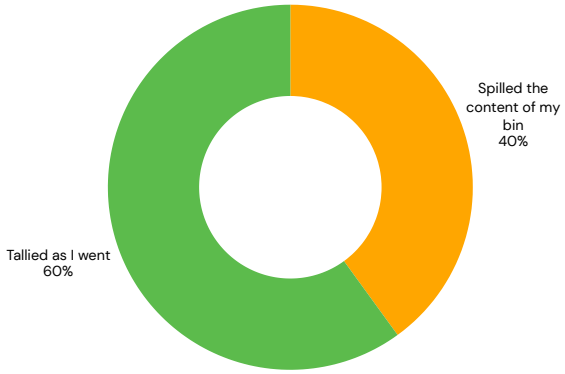


Participating Households size

Number of people in households	Number of households of this size	Total number of people
1	8	8
2	22	44
3	10	30
4	**8**	32
6	**2**	12
Total		**126**

Source: VOICE Ireland

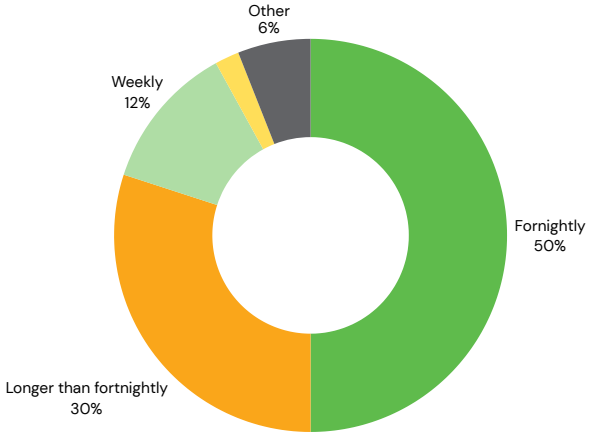
Which tally method did you use to gather the survey data?



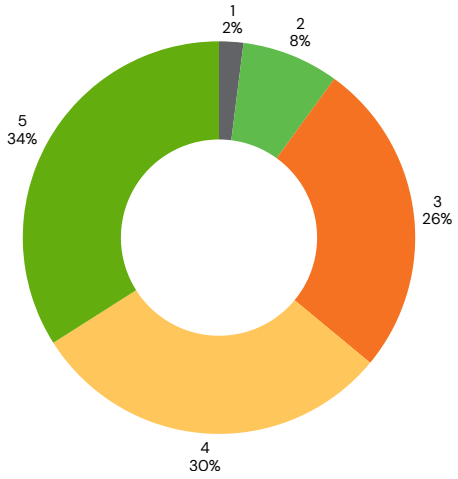
Together they counted and sorted **6,418 items**. On average, a household discards **128 pieces** of packaging through their recycling bins over two weeks, bringing it to 3,337 a year.

Information on household size, the frequency by which they put their recycling bin out for collection, as well as the fullness of their recycling bin was also gathered. 62% reported their bin as being full within a fortnight and when asked to rank their bins fullness on a 1-5 scale (1 meaning their bin was hardly full and 5 meaning they had to squash the bin's contents) 64% of participants ranked their bin a 4 or higher.

How often is your Recycling bin full enough to be left out for collection?



How full would you say your outdoor recycling bin was just before collection day?



Results by source



70%

70% of total waste items.



11%

Retail comprised
11% of total waste items.



3%

Takeaways**comprised
3% of total waste items



6%

Online retail* comprised
6% of total waste items



6%

The remaining items came from sources defined as "other", typically reported as letters, printed paper and other loose paper

*with the exception of online supermarket shopping
**with the exception of supermarket's delis

Results by material

Paper &Cardboard comprise

34%

Soft plastic, defined as plasticthat you can scrunchup in your handcomprise

31%

Rigid plastic, defined as plastic that keeps its form (including plastic bottles), comprise

24%

Metal comprise

8%



Results by use



24%

Dry goods packaging comprised 24% of supermarket packaging and 17.5% of total waste items.



22%

Fruit and veg packaging comprised 22% of supermarket packaging and 16% of total waste items



18%

Packaging for liquids comprised 18% of supermarket packaging and 13% of total waste items



8%

Ready meals packaging comprised 8% of supermarket packaging and 6% of total waste items.



3%

Detergent and soap packaging comprised 3% of supermarket packaging and 2% of total waste items.



The remaining items came from uses defined as "other"

VOICE chose to ask about the prevalence of packaging for the above five product categories based on the availability of non single use packaging alternatives for these items.

Sources of recycling – changes over time

	2023	2025	2026
Percentage of recycling in bin that originated in supermarkets	66%	70%	70%
Percentage of recycling in bin that originated from in person retail	15%	13.3%	11.6%
Percentage of recycling in bin that originated from online retail	6%	3.7%	6.2%
Percentage of recycling in bin that originated from take aways	3%	1.5%	2.6%

Materials in the recycling – changes over time

	2023	2025	2026
Rigid plastic	24%	23%	24%
Soft plastic	23%	24%	31%
Paper/cardboard	40%	40%	34%
Metal	10%	13%	8%

DRS use insights

Introduced in February 2024, Ireland's Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) marked a major policy step toward improving collection rates and eventually recycling rates for plastic bottles and cans. Over the two-week survey period, households reported an average of **8.7 plastic bottles and 9.8 beverage cans** per home. This is an increase from the 2025 NRBS findings in which households reported an average of 5.1 plastic bottles and 5.7 cans per home. This would suggest an annual count of **574** eligible containers to the scheme per household, substantially higher than the 280 containers annually suggested by the results of the 2025 NRBS .

Most participants reported having set up a dedicated system to collect DRS items, with the most common approaches being **storing the items in a shopping bag** or **a specific box or bin** in kitchens, utility rooms, or garages.

Only **two households (4%)** reported not using the DRS at all, mainly due to a **very low use of eligible containers**. One household continued to place items in the recycling bin, while another noted: *"We only had two of these in this survey time, and usually have none, so we don't have a system for storing them really."*

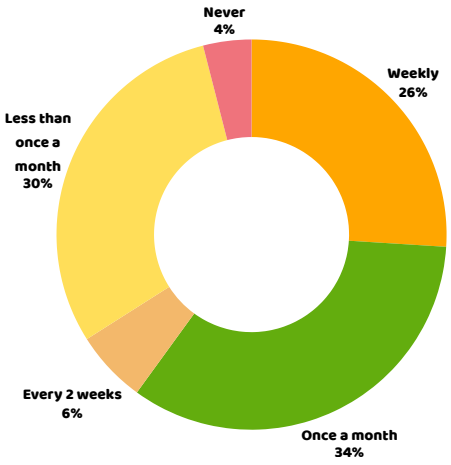
The increase in cans and bottles set aside for redeeming via the DRS from 2025 to 2026 shows that it has become normalised within household recycling behaviour.

Only two households reported not using the DRS at all, mainly due to a very low use of eligible containers.

How many bottles and cans did you have for the DRS over the two week survey period

	2025	2026
DRS - Bottles per fortnight	5.1	8.7
DRS - Cans per fortnight	5.7	9.8

How often do you redeem DRS items?



Consumer attitudes: Frustration with packaging

A strong theme emerging from the survey was participants' frustration with the volume of packaging entering their homes and the limited opportunities to avoid it. While the vast majority of respondents reported actively trying to reduce packaging where possible (86%), many felt that excessive packaging has become unavoidable, particularly when shopping in mainstream supermarkets. This reflects the survey finding that supermarkets were responsible for 70% of all packaging items recorded.

88% of participants said that they are frustrated by the amount of packaging coming into their home:

"The first thing I do when I get home is remove all the plastic that came with my items, because I can't stand it. It's just awful to fill your fridge and press with unnecessary packaging."

"Even our cucumbers have plastic wrap on them in Aldi and bananas are sometimes in plastic bags. This is definitely not necessary."

"It really annoys me that everything is wrapped in plastic."

Several respondents highlighted a sense that consumers have limited control over the packaging entering their homes, despite making conscious efforts to reduce waste:

"I wish I could shop with less packaging, but frankly the option is not available in my area."

"It is difficult to shop with less packaging in Ireland since so many food items come in plastic packaging. Plastic packaging is unavoidable if you use a supermarket for your weekly groceries."

"The choice is limited, and even if I am trying to make efforts, the fact that I need to go to multiple places every time if I want to get less packaging is discouraging."

Many responses also indicated frustration that responsibility for addressing packaging waste is being placed on consumers rather than producers and retailers:

"The removal of plastic must come from source."

"If you have to work at a normal job and have to live on a budget removing plastic waste is impossible."
"Supermarkets and food producers need to start reducing their unnecessary packaging."

The survey also prompted participants to reflect on the scale of packaging they generate, with many describing surprise or concern at the quantity of material found in their bins:

"Shocked at the level of plastic in my bin."

"Interesting, horrifying the amount of wasted packaging & the amount of rubbish generated."

Overall, participant feedback reveals a strong appetite for packaging reduction measures, particularly increased availability of loose fruit and vegetables, refill systems and packaging-free shopping options. Many respondents felt they were already making efforts to reduce waste but were constrained by the packaging choices made by retailers and product manufacturers.



Examining Supermarkets

A review of the sustainability commitments of Ireland's major supermarket retailers shows a growing focus on packaging reduction, recyclability and the elimination of unnecessary plastic, with a more limited emphasis on reuse and refill systems. Tesco's "4Rs" strategy (Remove, Reduce, Reuse and Recycle) explicitly includes reusable packaging initiatives, while SuperValu has committed to making all own-brand packaging recyclable, reusable or compostable and has expanded loose produce and reusable bag options. Lidl and Aldi have reported significant reductions in own-brand plastic packaging and continue to replace plastic with alternative materials, although customer-facing refill and reuse initiatives remain relatively limited. Dunnes Stores has incorporated packaging sustainability within its circular economy and Eco-Pack strategies, but has made fewer public commitments relating specifically to reusable or refill models.

Given the central role supermarkets play in household packaging consumption, these commitments have the potential to significantly influence packaging waste generation. However, findings from the 2026 National Recycling Bin Survey show that 70% of packaging reported by households originated from supermarkets. Notably, around 40% of this supermarket packaging was own-brand packaging, highlighting the substantial degree of control retailers have over the design, material choice and overall quantity of packaging entering Irish homes.

> **"I'd love if supermarkets offered refill stations for things like cereal, washing-up liquid and detergents, etc. But their is little or none of that around here."**
>
> Participant to the survey

> **"I would love if we could shop without all the excessive package. I wish there wasn't so much packaging within packaging"**
>
> Participant to the survey

Examining Supermarkets



Additionally, despite commitments by supermarkets to reduce plastic packaging, the survey findings suggest that consumers are not experiencing a reduction. In fact households are reporting an increase in plastic packaging. The proportion of packaging identified as plastic increased from 47% in both 2023 and 2025 to 55% in 2026. This increase was driven primarily by growth in soft plastic packaging, indicating that plastic, particularly flexible plastic formats, continues to make up an increasing share of the packaging encountered by households. Given that supermarkets account for the majority of packaging reported in the survey, and that a significant proportion is own-brand packaging under their direct control, these findings suggest that stronger implementation of packaging prevention, reuse and refill measures are required if retailers are to deliver meaningful reductions in plastic packaging generation.

These changes in packaging will be required of supermarkets under EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR) (Regulation (EU) 2025/40). One area that will have a big impact upon supermarkets and their customers is the complete ban on single-use plastic packaging for unprocessed fresh fruits and vegetables weighing less than 1.5 kg from 2030. Households taking part in the 2026 survey reported on what items the packaging held for the first time, with the finding that fruit and vegetable packaging accounted for 22% of supermarket packaging,

> **"I've always felt bad about ending up with plastics in my shopping. The first thing I do when I get home is remove all the plastic that came with my items, because I can't stand it."**
>
> Participant to the survey

Supermarket-Controlled Packaging: A Major Opportunity for Refill and Packaging-Free Retail



The 2026 survey found that supermarkets were responsible for approximately 70% of all packaging recorded in household recycling bins. Importantly, around 40% of that supermarket packaging was own-brand packaging, meaning that a substantial proportion of the packaging entering Irish homes is under the direct control of supermarkets themselves rather than external manufacturers.

This finding has significant implications for packaging reduction strategies. While retailers often argue that packaging decisions are driven by suppliers and manufacturers, the survey demonstrates that supermarkets have considerable influence over packaging outcomes through their own-brand ranges. As a result, supermarkets are uniquely positioned to implement refill, reuse and packaging-free solutions without needing industry-wide agreement from multinational brands.

The greatest opportunities exist within product categories already represented in the survey. Dry goods, which accounted for 24% of supermarket packaging, such as pasta, rice, cereals, flour, nuts and baking ingredients are particularly well suited to bulk dispensers and gravity-fed refill systems, allowing consumers to purchase the quantity they need using their own containers.

The major online supermarket in the UK, Ocado, currently offers refill for dry goods as part of a successful pilot. Households add the Refill-Reuse products to their weekly shop and the products are then delivered with their regular groceries in a returnable container. The household pours their rice and/or pasta into their own containers, and returns the empty Ocado containers to the driver the next time they receive their Ocado shop. The empty containers are washed, sanitised, and refilled again. Results from the pilot show that online reuse products reached a high of 43% weekly sales share and averaged 16%. 100% of Ocado users said the packaging they received was clean. Products received consistent ratings of 4.8 and 4.9 stars, and 96% of consumers said they would buy again.

Fruit and vegetables, which accounted for 22% of supermarket packaging, could be shifted towards greater availability of loose produce and reusable produce bags, reducing reliance on unnecessary plastic wrapping and tray packaging. While many fruits and vegetables are suited to being sold loose, others are not, for example berries and mushrooms. In Belgium a pilot is underway for reusable mushroom containers. Based in Mechelen, the REPASYS project invites consumers to pay a €0.30 deposit to buy mushrooms in a reusable container, then receive a refund when they return the container to any participating store. The trays are industrially cleaned between uses, then re-circulated. Each tray is individually traced via a QR code to measure return rates, consumption habits, and logistical efficiency across the supply chain. The pilot is being delivered in Aldi, Lidl and Carrefour stores in the region.

Supermarket-Controlled Packaging: A Major Opportunity for Refill and Packaging-Free Retail



There are also significant opportunities in the liquids and household products category. Own-brand washing-up liquid, laundry detergent, fabric conditioner, shampoo and cleaning products could be offered through refill stations, enabling consumers to repeatedly refill durable containers rather than purchasing a new single-use container each time. Across Europe, refill systems for these products have become an important component of the growing reuse economy and are identified by the European Reuse Barometer as an area with strong consumer engagement and operational success. The Ocado pilot also includes fabric softener and liquid washing detergent, while Ecover cleaning products have used refill stations in shops it supplies for over 30 years.

The ready meal sector presents a different but equally important opportunity. Rather than refill, these products are more suited to reusable packaging systems in which consumers pay a deposit for a durable container that can be returned, washed and reused multiple times. A six-month trial was conducted in autumn 2025, with deposit-based reusable takeaway containers introduced for salad and service counter meals at K-Supermarket Ratina, Tampere in Finland, under the STOPP project. Consumers could opt to reuse the container on their next visit, or to return it for a refund.

The survey findings indicate that supermarkets have both the responsibility and the opportunity to play a leading role in reducing packaging waste. Given that such a large proportion of supermarket packaging is own-brand, retailers are well placed to trial refill and reuse models in key product categories without waiting for wider market transformation.

Retail

In the Survey, retail stores have been defined as any in-person (non-supermarket) outlets, such as bookstores, clothing stores, electronics shops, and similar businesses. These retailers were identified as the second largest source of household recycling bin waste, accounting for just under 12% of all items recorded.

Packaging originating from in-person retail outlets accounted for 11.6% of all recorded packaging items in 2026, continuing a downward trend observed across successive editions of the survey. This compares with 15% in 2023 and 13% in 2023 and may reflect changing consumer purchasing habits.



Online retail

In the Survey online retail has been defined as any online (non-supermarket) consumer shopping e.g. Amazon, Boohoo, Shein etc.).

Packaging associated with online retail accounted for 6.2% of all recorded packaging items in 2026, representing a notable increase compared with 3.7% in 2025 and returning to levels similar to those observed in 2023 (6%).

While online retail remains a relatively small source of household packaging compared with supermarkets, the increase observed in 2026 suggests that packaging associated with e-commerce and home delivery continues to be an important area for monitoring. As online shopping grows, there is a risk that additional transport and protective packaging could contribute to increased packaging waste entering households.

These findings are particularly relevant in the context of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR). PPWR measures designed to reduce unnecessary packaging in e-commerce, includes requirements to minimise empty space within shipping and grouped packaging. The PPWR introduces a maximum empty space ratio of 50% for e-commerce packaging, aiming to reduce the use of oversized boxes and unnecessary filler materials.

The increase from 3.7% in 2025 to 6.2% in 2026 suggests that online retail packaging warrants continued attention as part of Ireland's efforts to reduce packaging waste.

Take-away

In the survey takeaway has been defined as any vendor of to-go food (with the exception of hot and cold-food from supermarkets). The 2026 National Recycling Bin Survey found that takeaway packaging accounted for 161 items, representing approximately 3% of all 6,418 packaging items recorded by participants. This is substantially lower than packaging from supermarkets, which accounted for 70% of all recorded items. As in the 2025 survey, takeaway packaging remains a relatively small contributor to overall household packaging waste when compared with packaging associated with grocery shopping.

Despite its relatively small share of the packaging stream, takeaway packaging remains an important focus area for circular economy policy.

The Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2026-2028 identifies takeaway packaging as a key area for action under the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR). The PPWR establishes binding reuse and refill obligations for takeaway food and beverage packaging, and highlights reusable takeaway systems as an important opportunity for new circular business models. Under the PPWR, businesses selling takeaway food and beverages will be required to offer customers the option of reusable packaging by 2028 at no additional cost. The Strategy identifies this as a catalyst for the development of reusable container schemes, deposit-based systems, washing infrastructure and other logistics services that can keep packaging in circulation for multiple uses rather than relying on single-use formats.

While the survey findings suggest that the greatest opportunities for packaging reduction remain within the supermarket sector, the takeaway sector provides a valuable opportunity to demonstrate how reuse systems can operate at scale. The relatively small share of takeaway packaging currently observed in household recycling bins means that transition measures may be more manageable than in larger packaging streams, while also helping to familiarise consumers with reusable container systems. The forthcoming PPWR targets and obligations therefore provide an important framework for moving the sector away from disposable packaging and towards a more circular model based on reuse.



Recommendations for retail sectors



The Irish retail industry, particularly supermarkets, have a long way to go in reducing their reliance on single-use plastic and packaging. If Ireland is to meet the waste and recycling targets set in our Waste Management Plan and those set in collaboration with our EU partners, the retail industries will need to take real and ambitious actions. The following recommendations have been made based on the research and results gathered for the National Recycling Bin Survey, the focus study on supermarkets as well as targets which have been previously outlined by other NGOs in the sector.



For all retail sectors: we recommend that 25% of consumer packaging should be reusable by 2030, increasing to 50% by 2035



For supermarkets specifically: we recommend a fixed target and practice of 20% of the floor surface of shops over 400 square feet to be fitted with refill systems by 2030



For online-retailers: we recommend 50% reusable packaging by 2030, and 80% by 2035 in e-commerce, for all goods shipped within the EU; All oversea retailers who sell goods in Ireland via Ecommerce, must contribute to Repak for their waste's recycling



For the takeaways: we recommend the following fixed targets:

- **75%** reusable packaging by 2030
- **90%** by 2035

The Role of The Government

The findings from the 2026 National Recycling Bin Survey demonstrate the relevance and urgency of the measures outlined in the Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2026-2028: Accelerating Action. Despite high levels of engagement among participants, packaging waste remains a significant challenge. Supermarkets were the source of approximately 70% of all packaging items recorded, while supermarket own-brand products accounted for around 40% of supermarket packaging. Packaging associated with fruit and vegetables represented approximately 22% of supermarket packaging, highlighting the continued prevalence of unnecessary packaging in product categories where alternatives are often available.

The survey also found strong public support for packaging reduction measures. Around 86% of respondents reported actively trying to buy unpackaged items whenever possible, while a large majority expressed frustration with the amount of packaging entering their homes. Participants repeatedly identified excessive packaging of fruit and vegetables, limited availability of refill options, and a lack of package-free alternatives in mainstream supermarkets as key barriers to reducing waste. Many respondents stated that responsibility for reducing packaging must be addressed at source through changes by producers and retailers rather than relying solely on individual consumer behaviour.

These findings align closely with the Strategy's emphasis on packaging prevention, which recognises that recycling alone will not be sufficient to address Ireland's packaging waste challenge.

The Strategy adopts the targets established under the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR), including reductions in packaging waste generation of 5% by 2030, 10% by 2035 and 15% by 2040 compared with 2018 levels. The focus on preventing packaging waste at source directly responds to concerns raised by participants regarding the volume of packaging associated with everyday grocery shopping.

The findings also provide strong evidence for the Strategy's commitment to promoting reuse and refill systems. Survey participants frequently expressed a desire for refill stations for dry goods, detergents, personal care products and other household items, while many highlighted the lack of accessible reuse and refill options in their local areas. In response, the Strategy includes actions to promote reusable and refillable packaging systems, fund demonstration projects, implement refill obligations under the PPWR and establish a reuse matchmaker platform to support reusable packaging infrastructure.

The Role of The Government

Another notable finding was the continued dominance of plastic packaging within the recycling stream. Plastic and soft plastic packaging together represented a substantial proportion of recorded items, while participants consistently identified mixed-material packaging and non-recyclable formats as major frustrations. This supports the Strategy's focus on improving packaging design, increasing recyclability, reducing unnecessary packaging complexity and encouraging design-for-recycling approaches. The Strategy specifically identifies complex multi-material packaging as a barrier to circularity and highlights the need for significant redesign of packaging systems.

Overall, the survey findings suggest that the direction of travel set out in the Circular Economy Strategy is well aligned with the challenges being experienced by households. The results indicate a public that is willing to reduce packaging waste but is constrained by the packaging choices currently available on the market. The Strategy's focus on packaging prevention, reuse and refill, improved packaging design, retailer obligations and implementation of the PPWR therefore represents a necessary framework for addressing many of the issues identified through the survey. However, the findings also suggest that successful implementation will require particular attention to the supermarket sector, where the majority of household packaging originates and where significant opportunities exist to reduce packaging at source.

Recommendations for the Government



The Government must take more ambitious measures to solve the packaging problem we face in Ireland. Current legislation does not do enough to address the packaging problem. Sick of Plastic advocate the following recommendations to the Irish Government:

- Set national sub-targets to reduce the quantity of packaging and plastic put on the market.
- Set legally binding reuse and refill targets for retail industries (see targets above in retail recommendation section)
- Require industries to submit plans for introduction of reuse and refill systems and make progress updates publicly available.
- Require industries to submit plans for phase out of SUPs and make progress updates publicly available.

Prioritising the reduction of packaging waste through reuse and refill will better contribute to Ireland's achievement of the waste and recycling targets compared to solely focusing on increasing recycling capacity. A final recommendation we would make to the Government is based on the cost analysis of our 'zero waste shopping basket'. The development of this new system needs to be done in a fair manner. That entails providing incentives and funding existing alternatives to help them scale their activity. This mostly support local small businesses and community groups. Such a scheme would help highlight the financial burdens that consumers who aim to reduce their waste have to bear.

Recommendations for the Government

(continued)

Set quantities-Based Packaging Targets. Introduce national packaging reduction targets by volume(not just weight), with a focus on supermarkets:

- 5% reduction by 2035
- 10% reduction by 2040

Mandate Industry Action on Refill

- Launch pilot grants for retailers to install refill/bulk systems
- Require 20% of floor space in shops over 400m² to be dedicated to refill by 2030

Create a National Observatory for Circular systems and Reuse Establish a central body to monitor packaging reuse and circular food systems, based on France's Reuse Observatory model.

Clear definition of reuse and refill legal framework, involving the HSA
Ireland needs a clear legal definition of reusable packaging and refill system operation, with criteria on durability and safety. The Health and Safety Authority should provide guidance to ensure hygiene and give retailers confidence to scale safe, effective reuse systems.

Support Access to Zero Waste & Healthy Food

- Provide tax relief or subsidies to zero waste retailers
- Fund local refill hubs, mobile zero waste vans, and food co-ops to improve access to affordable loose and organic goods



Individual Responsibility

Encouraging people to adopt more sustainable lifestyles, whether by reducing waste, choosing reusable products or lowering their environmental footprint, has long been a cornerstone of environmental policy and public awareness campaigns. At Sick of Plastic, we strongly support and promote these positive behaviours. Where opportunities exist to use fewer resources, avoid unnecessary packaging or embrace reuse and refill options, individuals should be supported and empowered to make those choices.

However, the findings of this survey reinforce a growing body of evidence showing that individual action alone cannot deliver the scale of change required. Many participants demonstrated a strong commitment to reducing waste, with 86% reporting that they actively try to buy package-free items whenever possible. Despite this, respondents repeatedly described difficulties accessing products with less packaging and frustration at the volume of packaging entering their homes. One participant summed up this challenge succinctly: "The survey was very revealing in terms of how much recycling waste I generate but on the other hand I could not see how to significantly reduce this."

These findings point to a broader structural issue. Consumers can only choose from the options made available to them, and many respondents felt that excessive and difficult-to-recycle packaging was unavoidable within mainstream retail settings.

Ultimately, meaningful reductions in packaging waste require both individual engagement and systemic change. Consumers are clearly willing to play their part, but without action from retailers, producers and policymakers, many will continue to find it difficult to translate environmental concern into everyday purchasing decisions.

Recommendations for consumers

- Choose loose items when they are available to you - this way supermarkets see there is a market for unpackaged goods
- When available and affordable to you, shop at shops offering refill and reuse options.
- Invest in reusable containers e.g. water bottles and coffee cups
- Contact your local TD or councillor expressing your concern over the plastic and packaging crisis in Ireland.
- Express your concern to your local supermarket, shop, take-away manager that too much plastic and packaging waste is coming into your home.

Conclusion

The findings of the 2026 National Recycling Bin Survey paint a clear picture: Ireland remains heavily dependent on single-use packaging, and households continue to bear the burden of managing packaging waste generated further up the supply chain. While participants demonstrated strong environmental awareness and a willingness to reduce waste, the survey shows that consumers are often constrained by the choices available to them. Despite 86% of respondents actively seeking package-free options where possible, plastic packaging accounted for 55% of all items recorded, the highest proportion observed across the three survey rounds.

The survey also reinforces the central role of supermarkets in Ireland's packaging waste problem. Seven out of every ten packaging items recorded originated from supermarkets, and approximately 40% of this packaging was associated with own-brand products. This demonstrates that retailers have significant influence over the quantity and type of packaging entering Irish homes and therefore a substantial opportunity to drive change through packaging reduction, refill systems, reusable packaging, and the expansion of loose-product offerings.

The addition of packaging-use data in 2026 provides valuable new insights into where interventions can be most effective. Dry goods and fruit and vegetable packaging together accounted for almost half of all supermarket packaging, highlighting product categories where practical and proven alternatives already exist. Combined with growing consumer frustration over excessive packaging and limited refill options, the results suggest strong public support for more ambitious action from retailers and policymakers alike.

Importantly, the survey findings align closely with the objectives of Ireland's Circular Economy Strategy and the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation. The challenge now is implementation. Recycling remains essential, but it cannot by itself solve Ireland's growing packaging problem. Meaningful progress will require a shift towards prevention, reduction, reuse and refill, supported by clear targets, robust monitoring and investment in circular infrastructure.

As Ireland moves towards its packaging reduction goals for 2030 and beyond, the National Recycling Bin Survey provides a unique and valuable evidence base for tracking progress. The message from households is clear: people are willing to play their part, but systemic change is needed. Reducing packaging at source, expanding reuse systems, and making low-waste options accessible and affordable must become priorities if Ireland is to significantly reduce packaging waste and build a truly circular economy.

At Sick of Plastic, on behalf of VOICE Ireland, we would like to thank all those who participated in the National Recycling Bin Survey. This campaign was only possible due to your citizen science effort.

VOICE is a member-based Irish environmental charity that empowers individuals and local communities to take positive action to conserve our natural resources. VOICE is the NGO expert in Ireland on waste reduction and circular economy since 1998. As thought leaders in this space, we lead the way and set a high ambition for Ireland's circular economy, and push for effective national and local policy development and adoption.



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