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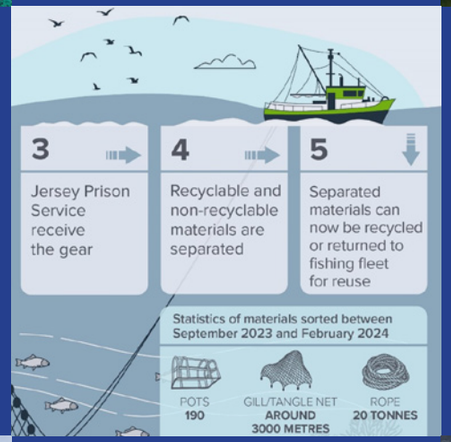
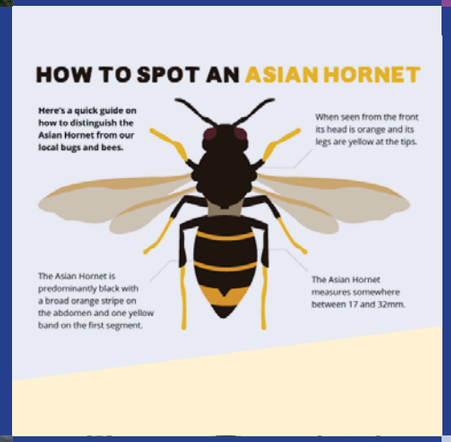
Environment Work Sector Policy Report 2020-2024





Foreword

The existential threat of the global climate emergency is one of the greatest challenges facing all BIC Member Administrations. Pollution, climate change, invasive species and other environmental hazards and threats do not respect borders, thus making intergovernmental co-operation vital in protecting and improving the beautiful and precious natural environments of these islands.

The Environment Work Sector was first established at the very first British-Irish Council Summit in 1999 to facilitate the sharing of expertise and learning across the BIC's membership. Environment Work Sector activity has been channelled through its five sub-groups, with leadership of these groups provided by the Irish, Scottish and UK Governments. This has proved a constructive and unique forum for collaboration since the Council was first established over 25 years ago.

The structure of the Work Sector evolved over time to differ notably from every other Work Sector in BIC, operating through five sub-groups. These are:

- **Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS), led by the UK Government.**
- **Climate Adaptation, led by the Government of Ireland.**
- **Marine Environment, led by the UK Government.**
- **Marine Litter, led jointly by the Scottish and UK Governments.**
- **Asian Hornet Taskforce, led by the UK Government.**

Through this structure, the Work Sector has collaborated on a wide array of topics, including: food waste, the circular economy; biodiversity; natural capital conference; micro plastics, Sellafield and radioactive waste; the blue economy; sustainable consumption and production; marine spatial planning; sustainable development; climate change adaptation; and consumer behavioural changes.

At the 2023 Dublin BIC Summit, the Council endorsed the re-structuring of the Work Sector to streamline and simplify its operation, as well as mainstream aspects of climate and decarbonisation across BIC Work Sectors, such as Housing and Transport.

Marine Litter Sub-Group

Marine litter is a truly transboundary problem, requiring action at local, national, macro-regional and international levels. The main issue is plastic, with the majority originating from land and in the form of products that were used just once. There is a drive at a global and macro-regional level to tackle this issue, particularly single-use products.

The Scottish Government hosted the first BIC Marine Litter Symposium on 22 February 2019 following the International Marine Conference 2019. There is varying alignment with international policies between the BIC's administrations but there is a common ambition of working towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 14: Life Below Water to 'prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution'.

Ministers from all BIC administrations committed to actions reflecting a mutual goal of reducing marine litter which threatens the health of our environment. The following actions were undertaken by the BIC's administrations and published in the **communique from the 2019 symposium**.

1. **A commitment to working together with industry to develop solutions for the collection and recycling of end-of-life fishing gear.**
2. **Learning from the trial of a supply-chain approach to reduce plastic pellet pollution.**
3. **A commitment to sharing educational materials amongst young people and embedding learning in professional fisheries training to highlight the risks marine litter pose to the environment within the fishing industry.**

End of Life Fishing Gear

The lack of sustainable solutions for dealing with end of life (EOL) fishing gear was identified as a priority issue for BIC administrations and was a key focus of the BIC's Marine Litter Sub-Group.

In 2020, the Northern Ireland Executive, Scottish Government, UK Government and Welsh Government collaborated to gather evidence to estimate the quantities and life cycle of gear to help inform policy development. The outputs of this work were published in 2021 and are available here.

In 2022, the Northern Ireland Executive, Scottish Government, UK Government and Welsh Governments agreed the Joint Fisheries Statement (here) to support the industry in increasing the amount of gear collected and managed in line with the waste hierarchy. This also includes encouraging the circular design of gear to improve reusability, repairability and recyclability.

This included supporting the development of an industry standard for the circular design of fishing gear and aquaculture equipment by the European Committee of Standardisation (CEN), which was published in late 2024 (here). The Marine Litter Sub-Group encouraged participation in the development of the Standard and kept officials updated on its scope and capacity to improve the approach to EOL gear across these islands.

Northern Ireland Fisheries Harbour Authority (NIFHA) End of Life Fishing Gear Project (2022)

At the BIC Marine Litter Symposium 2019, the Northern Ireland Executive committed to work together with the other administrations and with industry to develop solutions for the collection and recycling of End of Life Fishing Gear from their main fishing ports at Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel.

Northern Ireland's fishing fleet is small in comparison to England and Scotland and is more specialised. For example, prawn fishing and net manufacturing within Northern Ireland is carried out by small operators and sole traders.

To date, the total volume of EOL fishing gear processed was approximately 14 tonnes, with approximately 4.5 tonnes consisting of prawn netting.

Fishing gear recycling scheme in collaboration with the Jersey Prison Service

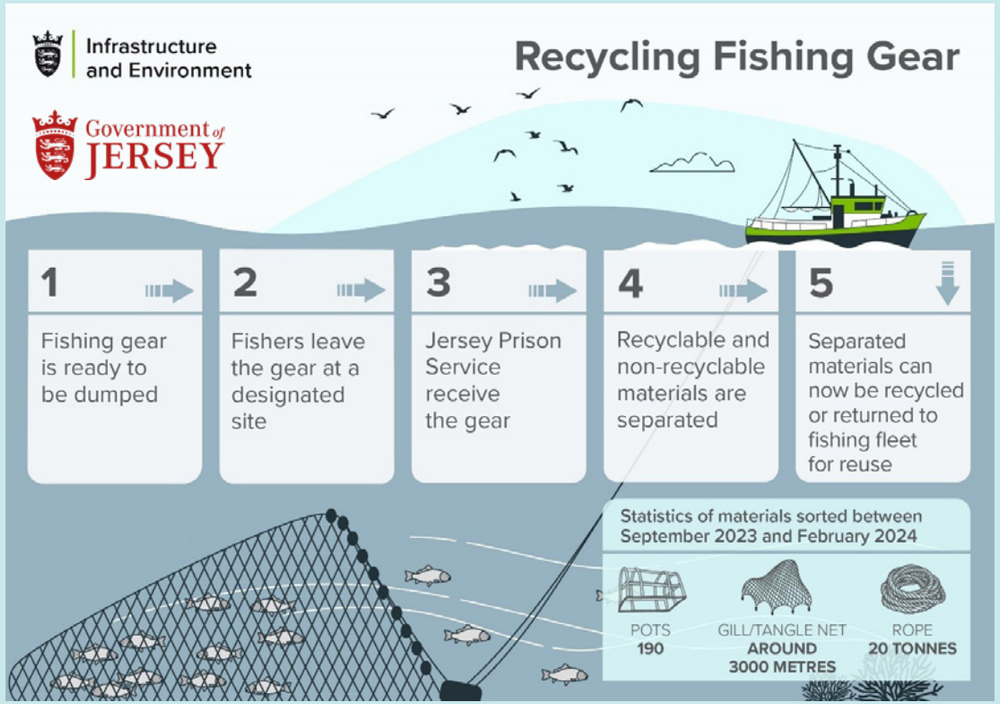
This has been a collaboration between Government of Jersey's Marine Resources, Ports of Jersey, Solid Waste, Jersey Fishermen's Association and the Jersey Prison service. This is the first year it has been running and has been set up as a 12-month pilot project.

Previously, fishers were unable to recycle or dump their end-of-life fishing gear due to the pots and nets consisting of mixed materials. Jersey prison service is now breaking down the equipment so the materials can either be recycled, re-used or incinerated.

Fishers now have a dedicated area to leave the fishing gear at the main harbour in St Helier which is collected weekly by one of the collaborators. The Government of Jersey are working to a point where there is enough recyclable material to make it economically viable to explore recycling possibilities.

The prison service has joined this workload into their current workstreams which have previously included planting vegetables and sorting cardboard for recycling. Rope is currently being cut to 1 metre lengths for incineration, and it is hoped an avenue is found to recycle this material in 2024.

Some parts of fishing gear such as lead line from nets, escape gaps and lobster pot door hooks are being returned to the fishing industry to be re-used.



Welsh Government – End of life fishing gear scheme

In 2020, Welsh Government commissioned research in Wales to improve understanding of gear usage, gear quantities and access to disposal facilities. The research concluded the majority of the fishing harbours did not have regular access to gear disposal facilities. The research also indicated where certain gear types were being used which could be collected as part of a pilot scheme.

A pilot scheme was setup in 2021, with Welsh Government partnering with Odyssey Innovation, who had been collecting gear from across the SW of England prior. The Welsh fishing fleet differs from that in the rest of UK with effort predominantly focusing on lobsters, crabs, whelk and some sea bass.

Odyssey Innovation through its model does predominantly accept all gear types except lobster and crab, so in Wales efforts were focused on harbours using whelk, nets and rope gear.

Initial take-up was slow, however, following the pilot a full nationwide scheme has been established covering at least 11 ports across Wales and includes additional collection points for beach litter derived gear.

At present nets and ropes, (which are predominantly high-density polyethylene (HDPE), are shredded within the UK and the material is pelletised and reintroduced back into the supply chain. Other forms of HDPE, buoys, whelk pots and fish crates are sent to a household waste recycling site in Port Talbot, following a successful trial of material.

At present, lobster and crab pots are not collected because of the high labour costs to dismantle the gear for very little return of material. However, the significant life span of pots means this is unlikely - at this stage - to cause major issues.

Statistics

- **4 collections per year from up to 11 harbours (from 2024).**
- **10 tons of material has been collected and recycled to date.**
- **Approximately 2-2.5 tons of material collected on each visit (rising annually)**

Plastic Pellet Loss Prevention

Most commonly known as nurdles, plastic pellets, flakes and powders are a major source of microplastic pollution, and if left unchecked, could pose a risk to marine animals and their habitats and, potentially, human health.

To address this issue, Scottish Government initiated the development of a **Publicly Available Specification** (PAS) through the British Standards Institution. This Standard set requirements for sites handling or managing plastic pellets, and is free to access and is available internationally. The sub-group agreed to promote and encourage implementation of this PAS across their relevant networks using a technical factsheet.

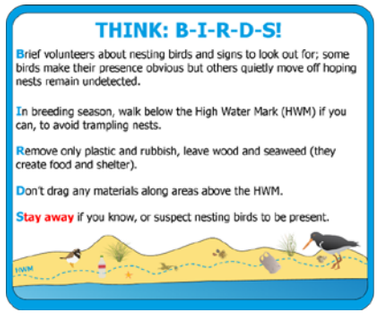
This work has been adopted through OSPAR, (Oslo Paris Convention), of which the UK and Ireland are contracting parties. In 2021, a **recommendation** on the reduction of plastic pellet loss into the environment was adopted which promoted the timely development and implementation of effective and consistent pellet loss prevention standards and certification schemes for the entire plastic supply chain. **Guidelines** were also published to support contracting parties and industry.

Marine Litter Education

Tackling marine litter is dependent upon behavioural change across all society. Marine litter education is key to creating that shift, whether it be with school children or professional marine users.

BIC administrations have pulled together information of the many organisations providing marine litter education for the general public and marine industry. Each administration now has its own set of available education materials and contacts. This information has also been shared across the administrations to prevent duplication of effort in developing educational materials.

Think Birds has also been launched in the Isle of Man to encourage good practice through beach cleaning volunteers engaged in programmes such as Beach Buddies events and Plastic Busters Adopt-a-Site volunteers, with stickers posted on Beach Buddies collecton bins at beach access points, to address events taking place in areas with nesting birds.



Fishing for Litter Scheme

Isle of Man Government relaunched its Fishing for Litter scheme in January 2020, encouraging the collection of marine litter by providing designated quayside bins and reusable sacks to fishing boats, so that on-ship storage of waste could be picked up at sea, as well as making buckets available from harbour offices so that crews can prevent any plastic from blowing into the sea when undertaking tasks such as net mending.

A Fishing For Litter School Activity Pack (available online) was developed during the Covid-19 lockdown, so that children could learn about the scheme whilst homeworking. It was a collaboration between the Department of Environment Food and Agriculture (including Biosphere IoM), KIMO and the Manx Fish Producers' Organisation Ltd., and sent out to schools to educate children on Fishing for Litter and the importance of ocean health.

The Department of Environment Food and Agriculture worked with the Department of Education Sport and Culture to ensure that Fishing for Litter was also included in the marine topic for the Manx Eco-schools initiative.

Furthermore, Isle of Man primary schools were partnered with Fishing for Litter ports with fishermen attending school assemblies to make children aware of the kinds of unexpected waste that are thrown away, contributing to marine litter issues at sea and the role that fishers have in cleaning the marine environment.

The areas of seabed which are trawled in the Isle of Man have effectively now been cleared of accumulated rubbish from the seabed and the scheme has come to a natural end.

Fishing For Litter School Activity Pack

www.gov.im/plastics

Marine Environment Sub-Group

Marine environments are inter-connected, and species are mobile. International cooperation is essential to achieve effective protection and deliver on the commitments to meet the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including under SDG 14 to "Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development".

Habitat Restoration and Blue Carbon Workshop – June 2021

To this end, the Marine Environment sub-group ran a workshop which brought together representatives from the BIC Member Administrations to share experience of marine habitat restoration projects and efforts to protect and manage blue carbon stores within their waters.

Administrations shared their working knowledge on marine habitat restoration projects and efforts underway to protect and manage blue carbon stores within the BIC Member Administrations. It also provided an opportunity to explore opportunities across these islands for increased collaborative working and capacity building on these topics.

Blue Carbon Initiatives in the Bailiwick of Guernsey

A Climate Change Action Plan was adopted by Guernsey in 2020. One action identified within this action plan was to "review the Island's Blue Carbon capacity of the marine environment". In July 2021, the States of Deliberation approved a Government Work Plan; a document which sets out the overarching government priorities for the States of Guernsey over four years. A Blue Economy Supporting Plan has been identified as one priority area, which includes, through a Marine Spatial Plan, the aligning blue carbon workstreams.

Therefore, Guernsey intends to produce a Blue Carbon report for its waters in 2025.

This will use the best available evidence to set out which are the relatively most important marine areas for current carbon sequestration and storage based on the habitats found in their waters, including seagrass beds, kelp forests and sediment sinks.

Blue Carbon Initiatives – Northern Ireland Executive

Following on from the BIC Blue Carbon workshop in June 2021, the Northern Ireland Executive formed a Biodiversity and Climate Stakeholder Working Group in 2022 to develop a Blue Carbon Action Plan in tandem with reviewing its Marine Protected Area Strategy. An innovative co-design approach was used, developing both approaches through three active stakeholder workshops.

The development of an updated Marine Protected Areas Strategy (MPA) and the Blue Carbon Action Plan will contribute to the effective management of the Northern Ireland marine environment, helping to address biodiversity loss while also realising wider environmental and societal benefits. Both recognise the need to embed nature-based solutions in plans and policies to meet the net zero target, as described under the NI Climate Change Act (2022).

A public consultation launched in April 2024 on the MPA Strategy and Blue Carbon Action Plan, with a view to embedding the new approach within decision-making in the marine environment.

Climate Adaptation Sub-Group

It is extremely likely given our shared geographic location and climactic influences that these Islands will be faced with a number of shared climate change impacts, challenges and opportunities in the future. A number of these impacts will be transnational and may also require coordination and collaboration at a regional level to ensure a coherent and effective response.

The UK Government is required, under the Climate Change Act 2008, to publish a Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA) every five years which is published on the UK Government's website, setting out the risks and opportunities facing the UK from climate change. Engagement across the UK's devolved governments is a key part of the process in determining the final assessment. There are three main stages to this process.

1. The Climate Change Committee (CCC) undertakes an independent assessment of climate risk to the UK. The UK Government, Welsh Government, Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive Departments each submit evidence to support this process.

2. Using the independent assessment report provided by the CCC, the UK Government, in conjunction with the Welsh Government, Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive Departments, then consider if they are content to accept the CCC's independent assessment as the basis upon which to develop the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA) which the UK Government are required to lay in Parliament.

3. Once the CCRA is published, the UK Government develops a National Adaptation Programme (NAP), with input from the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive Departments to set out responses to the risks. Separately the devolved governments also develop their own equivalent adaptation programmes under their respective legislative requirements.

To accompany the CCC published independent UK Climate Risk Assessment advice (CCRA-IA), a series of national summaries for each country of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) is also produced.

Ultimately, the risks posed by climate change are shared across the entirety of the BIC's membership and mitigating these impacts highlight the opportunities for ongoing collaboration and learning on multiple climate-related policy issues through various BIC workstreams.

UK Climate Risk National Summaries

The BIC Climate Adaptation sub-group has been effective in terms of sharing knowledge and experience across these islands and fostering cooperation on climate adaptation action.

26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) Coastal Heritage and Coastal Resilience Event – 6 November 2021

The UK hosted the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow from 31 October – 13 November 2021. As part of this, the Climate Adaptation sub-group hosted a panel discussion looking at Coastal Heritage and Coastal Resilience in the Resilience Hub, discussing the importance of collaboration and knowledge-sharing in helping bring real-world action to face common climate challenges.

The panel included a key note speech from Clare Pillman, Chief Executive of Natural Resources Wales as well as representatives of cultural organisations from across these islands including The Cherish Project, Historic Environment Scotland, Historic England and Historic Environment Division, NI. They shared experiences from Member Administrations on how partnerships are shaping policy for the greater good on energy, biodiversity and clean transport.

The event focused on:

- The importance of conserving heritage assets in the face of future climate risk;
- How heritage can be used to communicate the climate challenge, showing how examples connect people, place and community and how projects can empower people to make decisions about their local environment; and
- Key messages from BIC on adaptation and resilience, and the need to be prepared for future climate risk.

In her keynote speech, Claire Pillman spoke about the ongoing collaborative work being undertaken to address climate adaptation across the historic and natural environment in Wales and emphasised the importance of collaboration in tackling the impacts of climate change, as demonstrated by the British-Irish Council.

Visit to Caernarfon in September 2023

The Welsh Government hosted the sub-group in Caernarfon in September 2023 building on the work started at COP 26 where the sub-group hosted a Cultural Heritage and Coastal Resilience panel discussion.

The visit focused on the CHERISH (Climate, Heritage and Environments of Reefs, Islands, and Headlands) programme, which was a six and a half-year Ireland–Wales project, bringing together four partners across two nations: the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales; the Discovery Programme, Ireland; Aberystwyth University: Department of Geography and Earth Sciences; and Geological Survey Ireland.

The project began in January 2017 and ran until June 2023. It benefited from €4.9 million of EU funds through the Ireland–Wales Territorial Co-operation Programme 2014–2020.
The project aimed at raising awareness and understanding of the past, present and near-future impacts of climate change, storminess and extreme weather events on the rich cultural heritage of our seas and coasts.

The group also visited Dinas Dinlle, an important Prehistoric and Roman period hillfort that is being heavily affected by coastal and terrestrial erosion on a regular basis. Approximately a quarter of the site is believed to have been lost to erosion, taking with it important, unrecoverable archaeological remains including all of the western defences and a portion of the interior.

Dinas Dinlle was one of the many sites used in the project, allowing the team to record and monitor the impact of the coastal erosion and also provide a greater understanding of the fort and its surroundings. The National Trust explained how this work had influenced and informed their management strategy for the site, which is based on not actively working to stop the inevitable erosion into the sea.

"This visit provided an opportunity for the abstract and theoretical to be brought to life."

"Interesting to see an approach to the challenges we all face and the need to accept that sometime nature will just take its course."

"It was useful to talk about the common challenges around climate change and the effects on heritage reminding us all of the importance of connecting to a place."

Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) Sub-Group

Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) are plants and animals from other regions in the world which have the capacity to proliferate if introduced. They are one of the top threats to biodiversity worldwide and the greatest threat to fragile ecosystems such as islands. As well as having a significant impact on the environment they also have significant negative impacts on the economy and human health.

Since the last Ministerial meeting in 2020, the INNS sub-group has taken forward a range of activities focused on areas of shared interest and has continued to share information at regular meetings and workshops, hosted virtually and at venues across these islands, most recently in Dublin in November 2024.

Didemnum Vexillum (Carpet Sea Squirt) Action Plan

The British-Irish Council Environment work sector tasked the Invasive Non-Native Species sub-group with producing an Action Plan to address the issues associated with the invasive non-native tunicate Didemnum vexillum (carpet sea squirt). This was approved at the BIC Environment Ministerial in November 2020.

The objectives within the Action Plan aimed to mitigate the potential environmental and economic harms posed by this problem species, and are being taken forward by the BIC Member Administrations along with industry stakeholders. An action within this plan was to "establish cross jurisdictional, and internal, biosecurity protocols for application by the aquaculture industry with input from aquaculture policy officials, industry and relevant scientific expertise". At the direction of BIC, a working group was therefore established to develop a biosecurity protocol for invasive species in aquaculture, which has since met eight times.

BIC Didemnum Vexillum Invasive Species Action Plan

Invasive Non-Native Species INNS workshop – Belfast – May 2023

BIC Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) officials have been meeting bi-annually since 2013 to explore and agree areas of cooperation on INNS. The fifth BIC INNS workshop was held in Belfast in May 2023, hosted jointly by the BIC Secretariat and Northern Ireland Executive.

The workshop had four main themes:

(i) Pathways - To agree priorities for future work;

(ii) Long Term Management - Lessons learned and knowledge transfer on key projects;

(iii) Early Detection, Contingency Planning and Rapid Responses - Ensure all administrations have contingency plans developed for key species and expand the number and speed of rapid responses for priority species; and

(iv) Communication - An update on communications activity.

The workshop was highly successful and feedback was very positive. There were a large number of ideas for future collaboration and these have been the basis for the new forward work plan of the Invasive Species Work Sector.

Shared Island Biosecurity and Invasive Species Forum 2024

On Tuesday 12 November 2024, BIC Invasive Species officials attended the Shared Island Biosecurity and Invasive Species Forum in Dublin, Ireland.

In what was a chance to discuss issues and shared challenges to protecting the natural habitats of these islands, Professor Helen Roy gave a powerful keynote speech about the global state of nature and efforts worldwide in protecting native species.

Ireland's National Biodiversity Data Centre and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency also launched a consultation on their Invasive Species Theme Plan, which sets out their collective work over the next four years. The British-Irish Council was emphasised as an important forum for collaboration throughout the plan.

BIC Invasive Species Alert System

We know that we need to respond rapidly to novel invasive species before they become established but, to date, this has been hampered by delays in getting and sharing records of invasive species that are spreading. Therefore, following the BIC Environment Ministerial meeting in 2020, the INNS sub-group was tasked with looking at the feasibility of an alert system that could be implemented across the BIC's Member Administrations. The aim was to rapidly highlight to all administrations invasive species that had newly arrived or priority species that were spreading so action could be taken swiftly.

The UK's Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) was subsequently awarded the contract for managing the system, which is modelled on the European plant health alert system. CEH writes to all Member Administrations monthly to solicit new records using an agreed list of 13 priority invasive species, which are: two plants and 11 animals including the American bullfrog and Asian hornet.

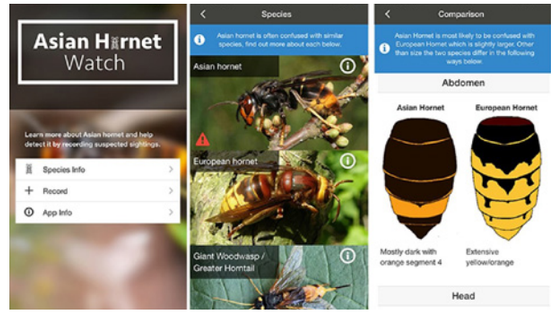
In addition, and more importantly, the alert system also aims to capture and alert all administrations to novel species turning up in the BIC area.

Asian Hornet Taskforce – Sharing of Intelligence and Advice Sub-Group

Asian hornets were accidentally introduced into France in 2005 and have been spreading rapidly across Europe since then. They were first found in the Channel Islands and England in 2016 and, since then, the BIC's Member Administrations have been attempting to stop them from spreading across these isles. To tackle the issue, a BIC Asian Hornet Taskforce was established in 2021 to facilitate the sharing of good practice, research results and experience between the BIC administrations.

One of the key aims of the Taskforce has been the development of contingency plans for BIC members (apart from the Government of Guernsey and Government of Jersey). These are key to mounting timely responses to prevent Asian hornets gaining a foothold.

While some contingency plans are currently under development, many have already been launched, with the Scottish Government most recently launching their own on 30 March 2024, coinciding with the start of beekeeping season.

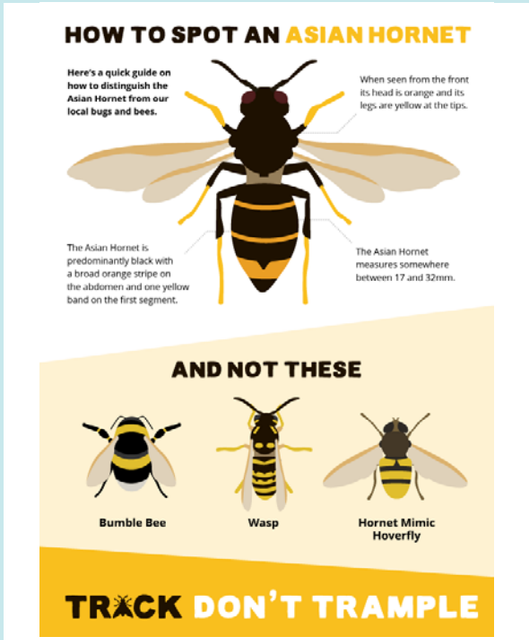


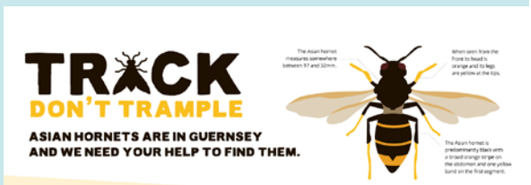
Asian Hornets in Jersey and Guernsey

Due to their proximity to France, the Bailiwicks of Guernsey and Jersey have been at the forefront of the incursion of Asian hornets across mainland Europe. Since their arrival on their islands in 2017 and 2016 respectively, both islands have collaborated extensively in developing protocols and strategies to control Asian hornets.

Importantly, they continue to share practical experiences and control methods allowing other BIC members to be better prepared for an invasion. The key elements of control programmes involve raising public awareness in hornet identification, effective reporting systems, spring queen trapping programmes and systematically tracking worker hornets back to their nests and then safely and effectively destroying hornet nests.

Many of these techniques and methods are equally applicable to other BIC administrations with appropriate modifications. To that end the Government of Jersey has hosted numerous visits of officials from other administrations, determined to gain firsthand experience and acquire the skills already employed on the Island. The BIC Asian Hornet Taskforce meetings have proved to be an invaluable forum to inform administrations of the present situation, latest research and the dynamic nature of the spread of this invasive insect.



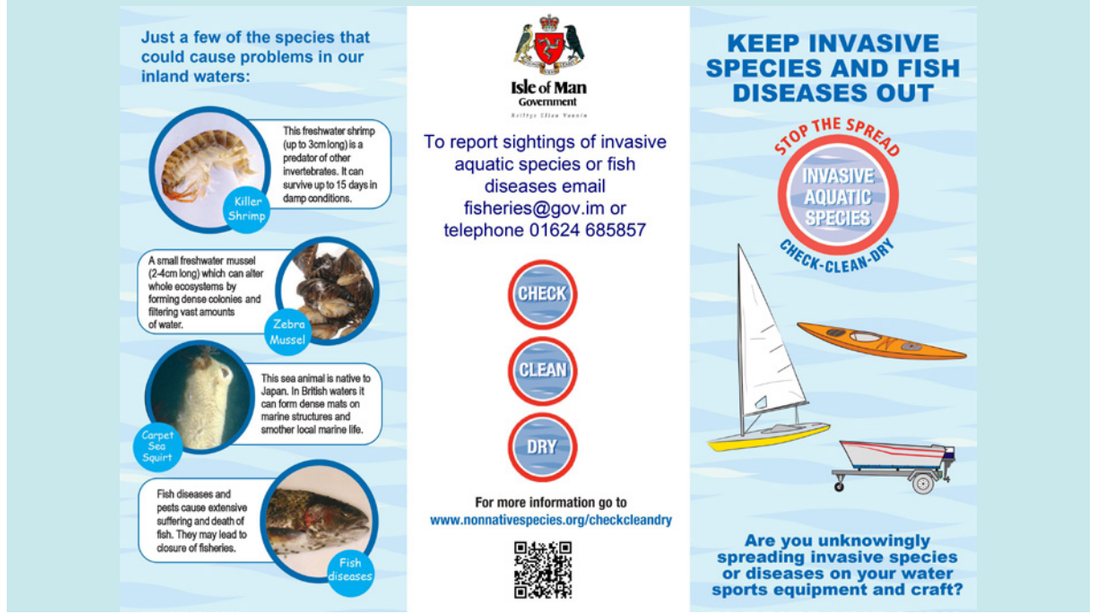


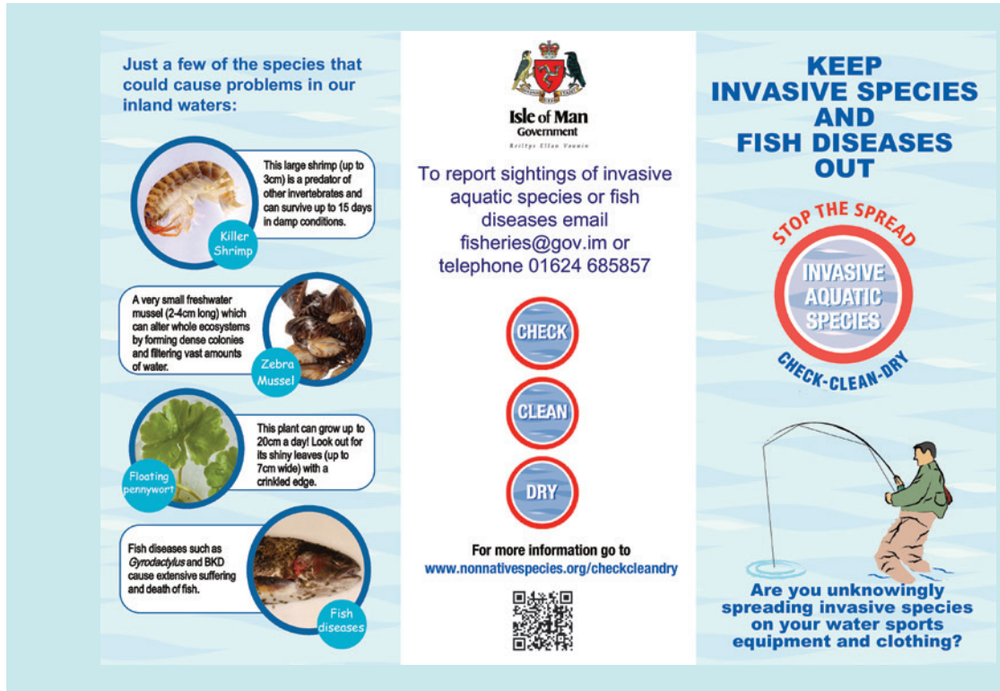
The Scottish Government published the Scottish Asian Hornet Contingency Plan on 4 April 2024 to coincide with the start of the beekeeping season. The plan has been developed in conjunction with NatureScot and SASA (Science & Advice for Scottish Agriculture).

Be Plant Wise and Check Clean Dry campaigns collaboration

Awareness raising is a key tool in reducing the risk of escape and spread of invasive non-native species (INNS). BIC administrations have adopted two awareness raising campaigns targeting key pathways: The Be Plant Wise campaign and the Check Clean Dry campaign.

The Check Clean Dry campaign for recreational water users (e.g. anglers, boaters, paddlers) to prevent the spread of INNS on boats, clothing, and equipment used in water, launched in 2011. This includes an annual border biosecurity campaign at ports over spring / summer to remind water users travelling abroad to clean their kit before returning. A joint ongoing campaign across BIC Member Administrations was launched at a Ministerial meeting in March 2018.





The Be Plant Wise campaign for gardeners, launched in 2010 to prevent the spread of non-native plants into the wild. At the November 2020 Ministerial meeting, BIC members agreed to adopt and promote the campaign.

To increase wider public awareness, the first annual joint Invasive Species Week was held across BIC Member Administrations and launched by Ministers at the Environment Ministers in March 2018. In 2023, over 260 organisations took part and 73 events were held to support the week.

Be Pet Wise Campaign

The import of animals is essential for the pet industry. However, the deliberate or accidental release of these animals into the wild can result in them becoming invasive, negatively impacting surrounding ecosystems, our economy and society.

Government of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive shared resources across the island to promote a Be Pet Wise campaign to protect their entry and release to the island, It was highlighted in a joint presentation at the INNS Belfast workshop in May 2023.