

**PRESS RELEASE, EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01, 19<sup>th</sup> MAY 2023**

## **New data shows alarming snapshot of Scotland's sewage scandal**

- The Marine Conservation Society calls for monitoring and reporting on 100% of Scotland's sewerage network by 2026
- Less than 4% of Scotland's marine storm overflows are currently monitored
- In 2022, untreated sewage was released into waters within 1km of areas designated for marine nature conservation in Scotland for more than 20,000 hours from just 20 storm overflows
- Only 2% of storm overflows within 1km of designated Bathing Waters are monitored, yet they alone released untreated sewage for over 600 hours last year

The [Marine Conservation Society](#), the UK's leading ocean charity, has discovered that only 3.4% (123 out of 3,617) of Scotland's storm overflows are currently monitored and reported on<sup>1</sup>.

Storm overflows are present across the UK. This system was designed to only be used in cases of extreme rainfall, when sewers are overwhelmed, but data from electronic monitoring shows that they are used more frequently than was originally intended.

New analysis by the Marine Conservation Society of data from Scottish Water and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), shows that last year, monitored storm overflows poured sewage into Scottish seas for over 113,000 hours - each dumping sewage an average of 114 times. This data is from the mere 3.4% of overflows that are currently monitored and reported on, showing just a fraction of what the problem might be across Scotland. This compares to almost all storm overflows monitored and reported on in Wales<sup>2</sup>, and in England this figure is 91%<sup>3</sup>.

Research by the Marine Conservation Society shows that, in 2022, untreated sewage was released into waters within 1km of areas designated for marine nature conservation in Scotland for more than 20,000 hours. This was from only 20 (3%) storm overflows. The remaining 653 (97%) do not have any way of recording when they discharge sewage.

These protected areas are designated to safeguard vulnerable marine species or habitats. Sewage pollution can have significant impacts on wildlife, from neurological, hormone and immune problems, to impacting on sensitive habitats, like seagrass and maerl beds, which provide the foundation of many marine ecosystems.

The official Scottish bathing season starts on 1<sup>st</sup> June, but just 4 of 177 (2%) storm overflows within 1km of designated bathing waters are monitored. These 4 overflows alone released sewage for over 600 hours last year. Bathing waters are designated in places where many people swim or bathe, but whilst we have a choice as to whether we enter the water, marine life does not.

**Laura Foster, Head of Clean Seas at the Marine Conservation Society**, said, “All we have is a tiny snapshot of data for storm overflows in Scotland, but from what we can see, they paint a terrible picture of the situation.

“For thousands of hours each year, untreated sewage is being released straight into Scotland’s seas. This includes into designated bathing sites as well marine protected areas which have been specifically recognised for their environmental importance. The Scottish Government needs to set spill reduction targets to tackle sewage pollution, for the sake of marine life, people and planet.”

Untreated sewage contains harmful chemicals, bacteria, viruses, micro- and macro-plastics, as well as sewage-related litter items, such as wet wipes and sanitary products, all of which are being pumped straight into our seas.

Although screens, which filter sewage-related litter items, have been installed on some overflows to reduce the litter items being discharged, results from a survey of UK water companies conducted by the Marine Conservation Society found that more than half (59%) of sewer overflows in Scotland are not screened<sup>4</sup>. Without these screens filtering out rubbish, more sewage-related litter makes its way into the ocean.

Last year, volunteers at the charity recorded and removed over 35,000 sewage-related items from Scottish beaches. Some regions in the central belt of Scotland recorded particularly high levels of sewage-related litter along surveyed beaches, with 374 items found per 100 metres in Falkirk, 274 items per 100 metres in West Lothian, and 88 items per 100 metres in Edinburgh.

**Catherine Gemmell, Scotland Conservation Officer at the Marine Conservation Society**, said, “We know sewage dumping in Scotland is bad by the amount of sewage-related litter that our volunteers find on beaches in certain areas across Scotland. But we still don’t know quite how bad it is, given that only 3.4% of sewage overflows are monitored.

“By setting progressive targets to reduce sewage pollution, and ensuring they are met by increased monitoring and the required enforcement, the Scottish Government can help protect our seas and the life within it.”

The Marine Conservation Society is calling for the Scottish Government to set progressive spill reduction targets to tackle sewage pollution. To meet spill targets, Scottish Water must first monitor and report on all discharges. The charity would like to see this achieved by 2026 at the latest.

The Marine Conservation Society is asking people to email their Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) to highlight the lack of stormwater overflow monitoring to the Scottish Government. You can email your MSP at [www.mcsuk.org/scotland-sewage-scandal](http://www.mcsuk.org/scotland-sewage-scandal)

In England, the Marine Conservation Society is taking legal action against DEFRA for an inadequate plan to tackle sewage pollution in the country. You can read more about the case, which goes to court on the 4<sup>th</sup> July, [here](#).

-Ends-

### Press Contact

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### Images

Please find a selection of [images here](#)

### **Notes to Editors**

#### YouGov Poll results:

A recent YouGov poll commissioned by the Marine Conservation Society on Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs, also known as storm overflows) found that;

- 86% of Scots agreed that screens should be installed on all CSOs\*
- 80% agreed that all CSOs in Scotland should be improved to ensure that they are only used during heavy rainfall\*
- 88% of Scots agreed that all CSOs in Scotland should be monitored\*

\* YouGov Plc 2023 study; Total sample size was 1,011 Scotland adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16th - 20th March 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Scotland adults (aged 18+)

### Water companies across the nations

Unlike in Wales, where Welsh Water operates on a not-for-profit basis, and England, where water companies are privately owned, Scotland's water and sewerage network is operated by Scottish Water which is held accountable to the public by the Scottish Government, who are therefore failing to address the issue.

### Calculations

The proximity of storm overflows to areas designated for marine nature conservation was calculated in relation to all inshore (within 12 nautical miles) nature conservation Marine Protected Areas, marine Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and marine bird Special Protection Areas (SPAs).

#### Nature conservation Marine Protected Areas

- 13 within 1km of an overflow
- 2 within 1km of an overflow with spill data

#### Special Areas of Conservation

- 18 within 1km of an overflow
- 4 within 1km of an overflow with spill data

#### Special Protection Areas

- 28 within 1km of an overflow

- 10 within 1km of an overflow with spill data

#### Summary

- 59 areas designated for marine nature conservation within 1km of an overflow
- 16 within 1km of an overflow with spill data

The [Marine Conservation Society](#) is the UK's leading ocean charity, fighting for cleaner, better-protected, healthier seas. The charity works to highlight the importance of our ocean, and the life within it, through working with government, industry and education, to take action to restore and protect the marine environment.

#### References

1 Scottish Water – 'Sewer Overflow Spill Data' <https://www.scottishwater.co.uk/Your-Home/Your-Waste-Water/Overflow-Spill-Data>

2 Dwr Cymru – 'Combined Storm Overflows' <https://www.dwrcymru.com/en/our-services/wastewater/river-water-quality/combined-storm-overflows>

3 Gov UK – 'Event Duration Monitoring Storm Overflows Annual Returns' <https://www.data.gov.uk/dataset/19f6064d-7356-466f-844e-d20ea10ae9fd/event-duration-monitoring-storm-overflows-annual-returns>

4 Marine Conservation Society water company survey 2021