

PRESS RELEASE, EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01, 21st MARCH 2023

Sewage-related litter washing up on UK beaches

- 75% of beach litter surveys across the UK find at least one sewage-related item
- Rise in the number of sewage-related litter items found on beaches in UK hotspots, including the Northeast of England and central belt of Scotland
- Over 30,000 wet wipes found on Scottish beaches in 2022
- Almost 30 years of Beachwatch data shows promising trend with total litter decreasing by 11% across the UK compared to 2021

The [Marine Conservation Society](#), the UK's leading ocean charity, has been running its Beachwatch litter survey programme for almost 30 years. The charity's year-round beach cleaning programme asks volunteers to record all litter that they find within a 100m stretch of beach. By gathering vital data, the charity can create change for cleaner seas and a healthier planet.

Over the last 30 years, data has been used to shape and influence many policy decisions in all home nations, such as the introduction of carrier bag charges and bans on many single-use plastic items. The Marine Conservation Society's beach clean survey results also contribute to a global database, tracking pollution trends around the world.

Clare Trotman, Beachwatch Officer at the Marine Conservation Society, said, "Thanks to our volunteers, we're collecting year-round data which we use to campaign for action on ocean pollution. The good news is that we've seen the amount of litter recorded on beaches decrease by 11% across the UK compared to 2021.

"Overall, the number of litter items found per 100m has decreased by 38% since 2016, when litter levels peaked. This highlights the effectiveness and influence of policies which reduce pollution, and the impact our volunteers have every time they join a beach clean."

Beachwatch data from 2022 shows that sewage-related litter is washing up on beaches all around the UK, with hot spots for pollution including wet wipes in the Northeast of England and Scotland's central belt.

Volunteer data shows that 75% of beach litter surveys across the UK in 2022 found at least one sewage-related item, such as wet wipes or sanitary products. Scotland's beaches were polluted with the most flushed litter. Over 30,000 wet wipes were found mainly around the

Firth of Forth and Firth of Clyde, and a total of 58,030 sewage-related litter items found across the UK.

Sewage-related litter can make its way into our rivers and seas when untreated sewage is released from storm overflows. This outdated system was designed to only be used in cases of extreme rainfall but are increasingly used as a way of routinely dealing with sewage, even during dry weather.

There are over 20,000 storm overflows in England, Wales and Scotland. Monitoring in each country, which records the number of times and duration of overflows, varies widely. Almost all storm overflows are monitored and reported in Wales and around 89% in England but only 4% in Scotland*.

The data that is available shows that storm overflows are being used far too frequently in each country, with an average of 29 discharges per overflow annually in England, 44 in Wales and almost double this amount, 81, in Scotland. The average duration of discharges is also highest in Scotland, at 11 hours per recorded discharge event. Scotland has the highest percentage (25%) of storm overflows with more than 100 discharges from storm overflows annually.

The Marine Conservation Society's 2022 Beachwatch programme found that sewage-related litter across Scotland's central belt was as high as an average of 88 items per 100m in Renfrewshire on the Firth of Clyde, and 274 items per 100m in West Lothian on the Firth of Forth.

This data underlines the need to take urgent action to tackle sewage-related litter both at source, preventing it from reaching sewers in the first place, and by reducing the occurrence of storm overflows and preventing the release of debris from any that remain.

Catherine Gemmell, Scotland Conservation Officer at the Marine Conservation Society, said: "The new First Minister must prioritise action to drastically reduce the amount of sewage and sewage-related litter polluting Scotland's seas. With published information on less than 5% of combined sewage overflows in Scotland, better monitoring is the first step in reducing the flow of sewage into our seas. We also need to see action to stop pollution at source, including a ban on plastic in single-use wet wipes and support for reusable sanitary products as part of a Circular Economy."

In England, as a last resort, the Marine Conservation Society has joined a legal case against the UK Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to protect

English seas from sewage dumping. The legal case seeks to compel the UK Government to rewrite its Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan 2022, to impose tighter deadlines on water companies and redevelop the Plan to effectively apply to England's coastal waters which are, currently, almost entirely excluded.

To find out more about the Marine Conservation Society's Beachwatch programme, please visit www.mcsuk.org/what-you-can-do/join-a-beach-clean.

Ends

For more press releases and up-to-date information visit the charity's [Media Centre](#).

Press Contact

Evie Martin, Media Relations Manager (evie.martin@mcsuk.org / 07579 814217)

Images

Please find the selection of high-resolution imagery [linked here](#).

Notes to editors

2021 Storm Overflow Summary Statistics from the [Marine Conservation Society UK Combined Sewer Overflow Policy](#)

2021 Storm Overflow Summary Statistics	England	Wales	Scotland
Total number of Storm Overflows	14, 470	2,202	3,576
%age of storm overflows monitored and reported	89%	99%	4%*
Total number of monitored spill events	372,533	94,033	10,763
Total duration (hrs) of monitored spill events	2,667,452	785,576	123,110
Average spills per overflow with spill data	29	44	81
Average duration (hrs) per monitored spill event	7	8	11
%age with at least one spill	90%	88%	80%
%age with more than 10 spills	60%	67%	65%
%age with 100 or more spills	5%	13%	25%

Scottish Water made data available in November 2022 for the first time – [view here](#).

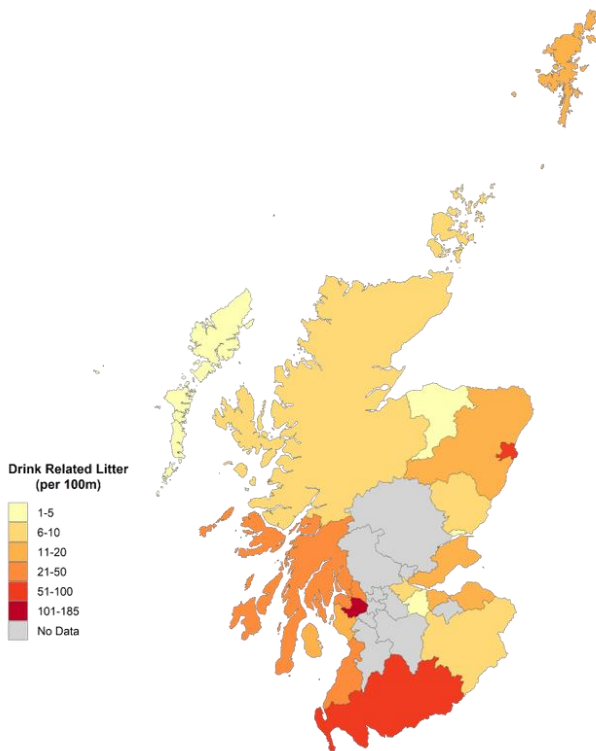
* The percentage of overflows with monitors which are reported annually. 9.5% of storm overflows are monitored in Scotland, although data is only available for around half of those monitored (4%).

Beachwatch report – 2022 Scotland drinks-related litter statistics:

The Marine Conservation Society’s 2022 Beachwatch data shows:

- 95% of surveys found drinks-related litter
- 82% of surveys found caps or lids
- 72% of surveys found plastic bottles
- 63% of surveys found metal cans
- 52% of surveys found glass bottles
- Caps and lids were the 3rd most abundant item after plastic pieces and plastic packets
- Plastic bottles were the 7th most reported item
- Metal cans were the 8th most reported item

Drinks-related litter heat map



The Marine Conservation Society has been campaigning for the implementation of Deposit Return Schemes for decades.

Calum Duncan, Head of Conservation Scotland at the Marine Conservation Society said, "Sadly, our volunteers found drinks-related litter on 95% of beach litter surveys in 2022. Our seas cannot continue to pay the price for our waste. The new First Minister must ensure the Deposit Return System starts in August, to boost recycling and turn the tide on this kind of pollution. We know that these systems work, and we can't afford any more delays. The Deposit Return System must be implemented on schedule, for both people and planet."

The Marine Conservation Society campaigns with the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland on the issue.

Kat Jones, the director of the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland, said, "You only have to look around you to see that litter is plaguing our countryside and beaches, and threatening both human health and wildlife. The fact that bottles and cans were found on 95% of beaches surveyed shows how critical it is that we introduce deposit return for these items.

"The good news is that this will decrease massively once deposit return is introduced this August in Scotland, and eventually across the rest of the UK. We need more internationally proven policy measures like this, and less foot dragging if we are to have any hope in tackling the litter blight we are currently facing."

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.