MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

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Marine Conservation Society position statement on:
Sewage Related Debris

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Geographical extent: UK

1. Summary

If sanitary waste, such as wet wipes, pads, tampons and tampon applicators, is incorrectly flushed down the toilet it can end up in the marine environment. These items, called sewage related debris, enter the environment when untreated sewage is discharged into rivers and the sea from storm overflows. Storm overflows (also called Combined Sewer Overflows, or CSOs) were designed for use only during extreme rainfall to avoid sewage flooding homes, gardens and streets[1] , but evidence continues to show this is happening far more regularly.

Misconnections, when the wastewater system in homes and businesses has been wrongly connected to the surface water system, can also be a pathway for sewage items to reach the environment[2].

Sewage-related debris (SRD) was found on 69% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2025 making up 5% of the total litter items recorded. Wet wipes made up 57% of all SRD items recorded in 2025 with 17,419 found by volunteers across the UK.

Sanitary items often contain plastics, which persist for long periods in the marine environment, breaking down over time into smaller and smaller pieces eventually becoming secondary micro plastics (<5mm). The ingestion of plastic pollution by marine life can negatively impact feeding behaviour, growth, development, reproduction and lifespan[3] and may result in greater exposure to persistent organic pollutants[4]. Prevention must therefore be prioritised to stop plastic entering the environment and reduce the impact it is having on the ocean.

We believe that stopping pollution at source, by preventing these items from being flushed in the first place, is the most effective way to reduce their impact. Governments and businesses can help achieve this by:

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- Supporting consumers to move to reusable products to support a circular economy.
- Banning the sale and manufacture of avoidable single-use plastic in all sanitary items likely to be inappropriately flushed down the toilet where alternatives exist by 2030.
- Applying Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to all sanitary products (not just those that contain plastic).
- Improving labelling and consumer information to promote correct disposal of items likely to be inappropriately flushed down the toilet.

If these items do reach the sewerage system, the following measures must be taken to stop them from escaping into the environment:

- A requirement for monitoring and real-time public reporting of all storm and emergency overflow discharges.
- Ensuring storm overflows operate only during genuinely exceptional rainfall, and emergency overflows only during genuine emergency situations, with mandatory targets to reduce spill frequency.
- Mandatory installation and maintenance of effective screening on all storm overflows.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the stop at source solutions.

2. Beachwatch Data

Sewage-related debris

Sewage-related debris (SRD) was found on 69% of UK beaches surveyed by Beachwatch volunteers in 2025.

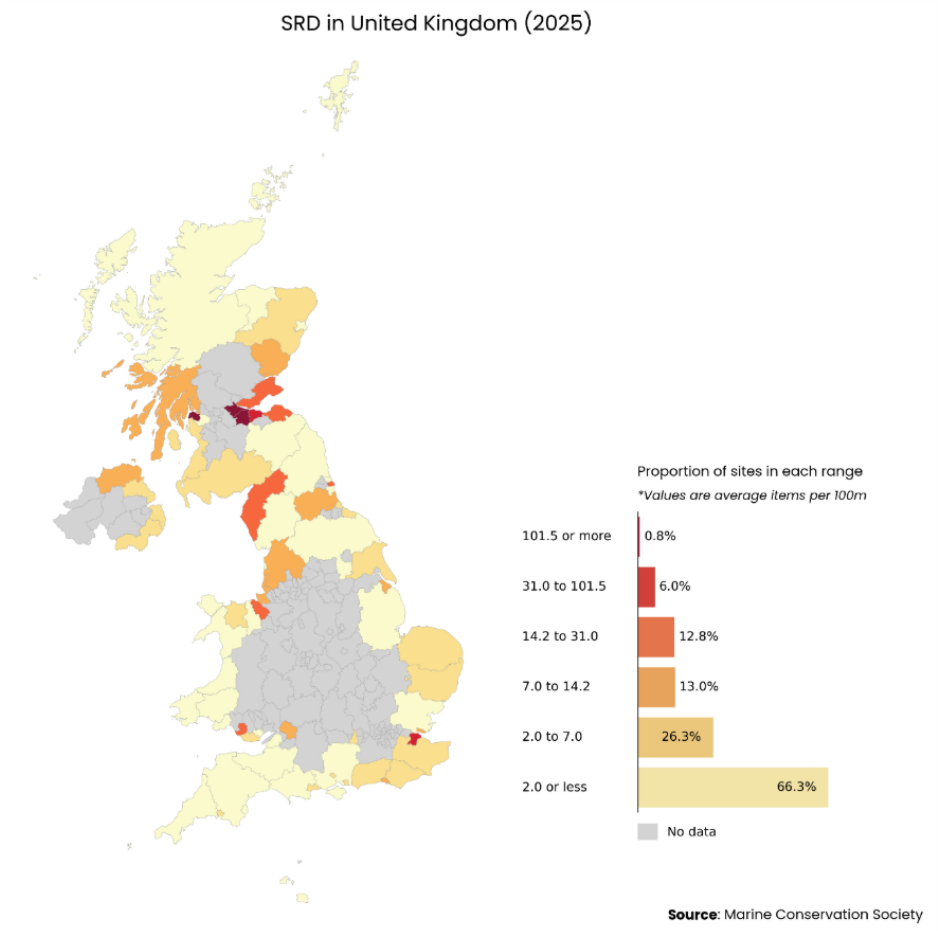
Items classed as sewage-related debris in our data analysis include:

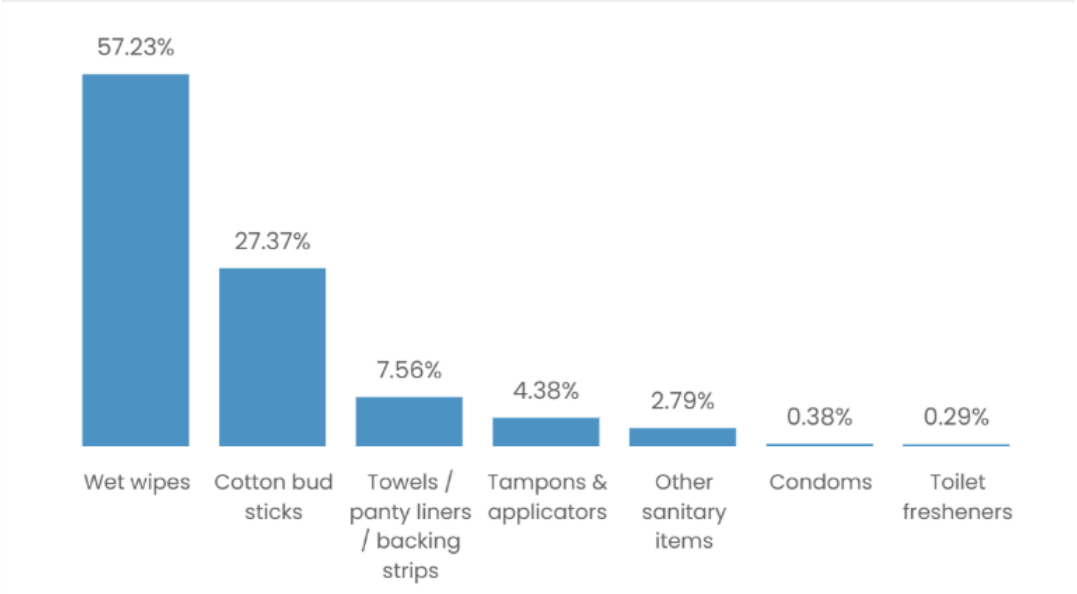
- Wet wipes
- Plastic cotton bud sticks
- Cardboard cotton bud sticks
- Tampons and applicators
- Condoms
- Toilet fresheners
- Sanitary towels/panty liners/backing strips
- Other sanitary items

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	Number of SRD items found	Average number of SRD items per 100m of surveyed beach 2025	Percentage average change from 2024	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys
UK	30,436	2.0	37.5% decrease	5%	69%
England	6,300	2.5	37.5% decrease	3%	73%
Scotland	23,608	2.5	25% increase	6%	65%
Wales	490	1.0	60% decrease	2%	65%
Northern Ireland	31	3.0	25% decrease	1%	83%
Channel Islands	6	0.0	100% decrease	0%	20%

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SRD litter items found in the UK in 2025, by percentage of total SRD litter

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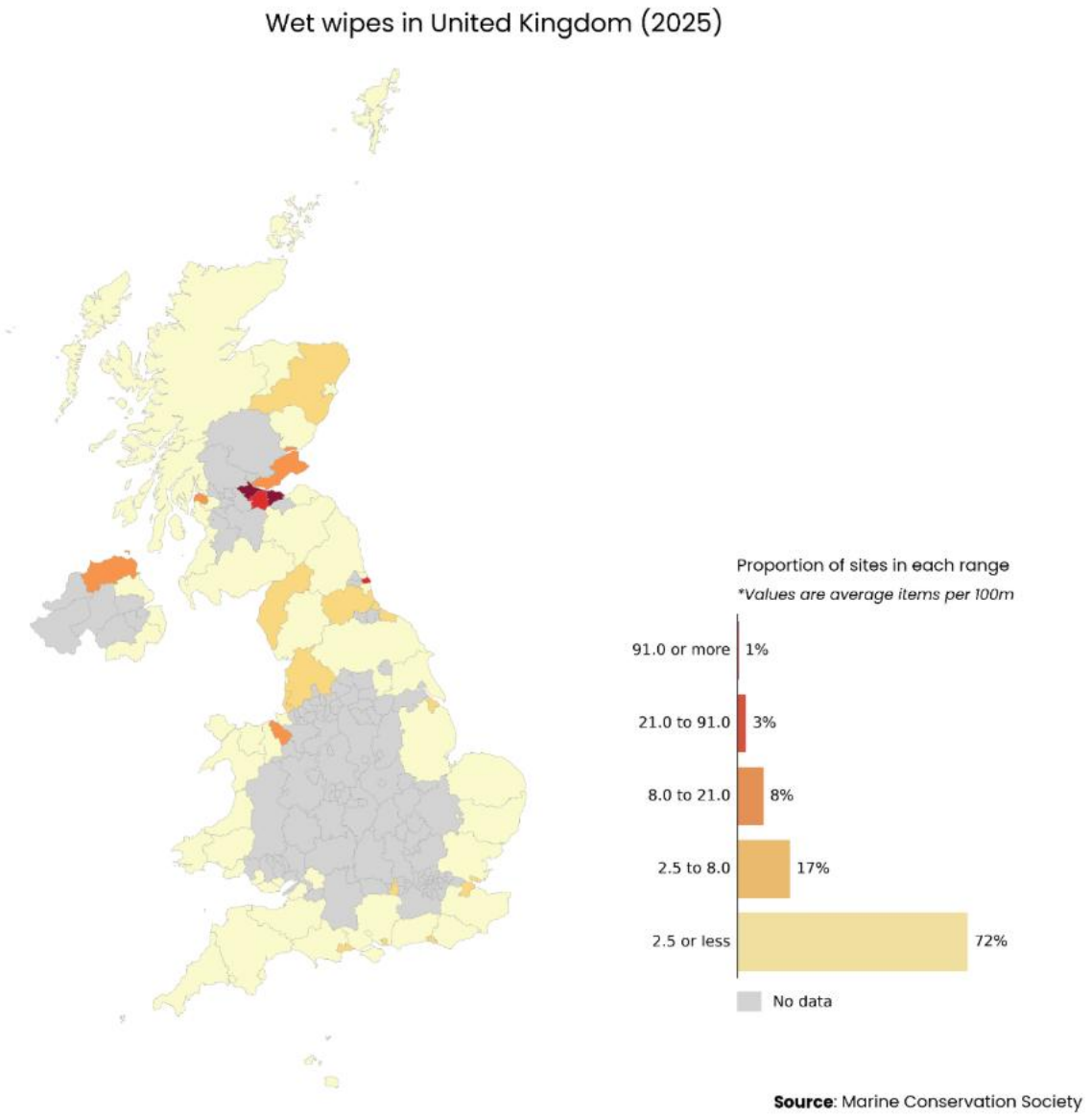
Wet wipes

Over 17,419 wet wipes were picked up in 2025 by Beachwatch volunteers.

As Beachwatch volunteers have been consistently recording high volumes of wet wipes each year, the Marine Conservation Society has launched several campaigns to try and tackle this problem. We may be beginning to see the result of these efforts, with a 7% decrease in the presence of wet wipes found on beaches across the UK and Channel Islands between 2024 and 2025.

	Number of wet wipes found	Percentage of litter collected	Presence on beach surveys	Percentage change in presence from 2024
UK	17,419	3%	51%	7% decrease
England	3,046	2%	60%	4% decrease
Scotland	14,130	4%	40%	8% decrease
Wales	221	1%	46%	15% decrease
Northern Ireland	21	1%	50%	20% decrease
Channel Islands	1	0.1%	7%	85% decrease

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3. **Environmental and socio-economic impacts**

Sanitary items often contain plastics. Traditionally wet wipes were manufactured from polyethylene terephthalate (PET), polypropylene (PP), cellulose or a combination of PET and cellulose5. More recently due to increased public pressure and new legislation some manufactures have replaced plastic in wet wipes with biodegradable or plant-based fibres such as PHA or PLA. However, as covered below, there are still concerns as these do not degrade adequately to

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avoid sewer blockages. From December 2026 in Wales, May 2027 in England and Northern Ireland and August 2027 in Scotland, the use of plastic in wet wipes will be banned, with exemptions for medical use.

Sanitary towels are usually made from PP, polyethylene (PE) or a combination[5]. PE and PP are two of the main plastics found in our ocean[6].

A 2020 study looking at the presence of fibres in sediments adjacent to a wastewater treatment plant consistently found white microplastic fibres that were comparable with the white fibres from wet wipes and sanitary towels, demonstrating that sanitary waste is a source of microfibre pollution in the marine environment[5].

The negative impacts of plastic litter (including microplastics) on marine wildlife are well documented. If ingested by marine life they can damage the digestive system, prevent digestion or stop animals from feeding, resulting in impacts on their growth, development, reproduction and lifespan[3] and can result in severe suffering and starvation[7]. Marine life which ingest microplastics may be exposed to higher levels of persistent organic pollutants which adsorb to the surface of microplastics[4].

Once sanitary items, particularly wet wipes, have been flushed into sewers they can combine with fats and oils, reducing capacity in the sewer. This can increase the frequency that sewers overflow and cause blockages resulting in environmental pollution and flooding of homes and gardens. There are over 300,000 sewer blockages throughout the UK every year, costing £100 million to clear up. A study by Water UK in 2017 found that non-flushable wet wipes make up around 93% of the material causing sewer blockages[8]. Furthermore, sanitary waste on beaches impacts on tourism and can potentially weaken coastal economies.

Plastic-free wet wipes may avoid contributing to microplastic pollution, but they can still cause serious blockages when flushed. UK Governments own guidance makes clear that *all* wet wipes regardless of whether they contain plastic can create sewer blockages[9]. Plastic-free wipes often fail to break down effectively in real sewer conditions, where they can snag on imperfections, accumulate with fats and grease, and form fatbergs. For this reason, we continue to advocate that no wet wipes should be flushed, even if labelled as plastic-free or biodegradable.

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4. Campaign Successes

In England, Scotland and Wales single-use plastic cotton buds have been banned since 2019 in Scotland and 2023 in England and Wales[10].

Following years of campaigning, we were delighted to see the four-nation commitment in April 2024 to ban plastic in single-use wet wipes. Legislation has followed with Wales implementing a ban from December 2026, England and Northern Ireland from May 2027, and Scotland in August 2027.

5. Solutions to stop sewage related debris at source

We believe that source control measures are the most effective way to reduce the amount of sewage related debris entering the marine environment. These can reduce the amount of plastic, and other litter, entering the ocean and as many of these actions support a circular economy, they also align with UK climate commitments11 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

1. Supporting consumers to move to reusable products to support a circular economy

Our ocean is currently facing the twin climate and biodiversity crises which are partly being fuelled by the single-use plastics problem. In the UK, the use of tampons, pads and applicators generates 200,000 tonnes of waste per year[11]. We need to move away from our current single-use society. We should not simply replace plastic with another single use material, but shift to reusable products, especially for sanitary products which are generally not recycled.

2. Ban the sale and manufacture of avoidable single-use plastic in all sanitary items likely to be inappropriately flushed down the toilet where alternatives exist by 2030

From December 2026 in Wales, May 2027 in England and Northern Ireland, and August 2027 in Scotland, the use of plastic in wet wipes will be banned, with exemptions for medical use. However, there are many other sanitary items that still contain plastic and contribute to marine pollution. Further restrictions must be put on the use of avoidable plastic due to its persistence and physical and chemical legacy in the environment.

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Bans on avoidable single-use plastics should be introduced for all sanitary items, likely to be flushed down the toilet, such as tampon applicators and panty liners where alternatives exist.

3. Applying Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to all single-use sanitary products (not just those that contain plastic):

All single-use sanitary items, regardless of material, should have EPR applied and funds should be used to promote reusable alternatives and provide support to make it as easy as possible for consumers to choose reuse over single-use. Reusable sanitary products reduce waste and have a lower carbon footprint. They can last a number of years and therefore are cost efficient in the long term, but can represent an expensive upfront cost; any measures need to be carefully implemented to ensure that they support ambitions to reduce period poverty and those living below the poverty line.

Industry should also cover the costs of; educating consumers and campaigning for correct disposal (see below); ongoing research to verify engagement is effective; clean-up (regardless of by whom the clean-up is undertaken and could include, but is not limited to, water companies, local councils, governments and their agencies and NGOs); and subsidising reusable wet wipes and other sanitary products in line with the concept of the circular economy.

4. Improve labelling and consumer information to promote correct disposal of items likely to be inappropriately flushed down the toilet

Labelling and consumer awareness must be improved to promote correct disposal of all sanitary products regardless of the material they are made from, since products made of alternative materials to plastic can still cause sewer blockages and impact the environment. There should be a legal requirement to display 'Do not flush' on all wet wipes and other sanitary products and bathroom items which may be incorrectly flushed. The labelling must be clear with minimum size and contrast fonts and colours, on the front of packaging and at the point of extraction. These design specifications should be mandatory with independent consumer research to ensure the specifications are effective and appropriate.

In addition, there should be a requirement for products to display 'Plastic in Product' and indicate its impact on the environment (e.g. the Single Use Plastics 'dead turtle' logo). This should be implemented until any plastic bans come into

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force, and for any other appropriate products, including products which are exempt from plastic bans.

We believe that responsible disposal of sanitary products would significantly reduce the amount of sewage related debris entering the marine environment by stopping it at source. Inconsistent and poor labelling of products has led to confusion amongst consumers regarding which products can be safely flushed.

6. References

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11. https://www.wen.org.uk/our-work/environmenstrual/

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