MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

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Sewage Related Debris in Scotland

The Marine Conservation Society is calling on the Scottish Government to:

Take action to reduce sewage related debris (wet wipes, sanitary pads, tampons, tampon applicators and nappies) by:

- **Setting progressive reduction targets for discharges from combined sewer overflows (CSOs) (frequency, duration and harm) as soon as possible** (our previous target of achieving this by 2022 has already passed).
- **Installing electronic monitoring on all CSOs as soon as possible** (our previous target was to achieve this by the end of 2024).
- **Supporting reusable sanitary products and phasing out single-use plastic sanitary items**.

Campaign progress

We're delighted that Marine Conservation Society pressure has helped deliver real results on this issue. This includes:

- The Scottish Government committing to ban plastic in single use wet wipes, together with other governments across the UK.
- The monitoring of CSO's increasing from 4% to 7% of published data since 2021. With 1000 new monitors being installed in 2024 by Scottish Water, 32% of all CSOs are now monitored (however, Scottish Water legally only have to report 4%).
- Improved transparency on the frequency of sewage discharges, with certain information now being published annually on the Scottish Water website, alongside the commitment to report on near real-time sewage discharges.

While we welcome progress on this issue, there is still so much work to do.

We are still a long way from achieving the 100% monitoring and reporting of Scotland's CSO network, and levels of sewage pollution are still too high. By moving towards a circular economy, we can drive down sewage related debris even further.

Registered charity in England and Wales 1004005 and in Scotland SC037480.

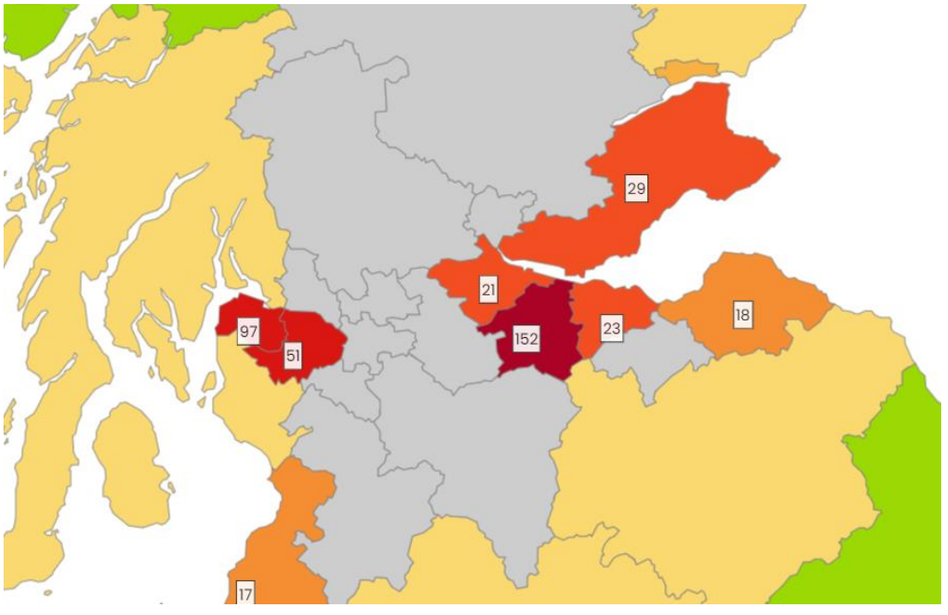
Background

If sanitary waste - such as wet wipes, sanitary pads, tampons, tampon applicators and cotton bud sticks - is incorrectly disposed of by flushing down the toilet, it can end up in the marine environment. Collectively known as sewage-related debris (SRD), these items can make their way to the sea when untreated sewage is discharged from CSOs.

Unfortunately, sewage-related debris is still a huge problem on many Scottish beaches. If you have taken part in our Beachwatch citizen science project, you will likely have seen items like wet wipes and cotton bud sticks on the survey form. You might have also seen sewage-related debris on the beach itself, especially if you've spent time on stretches of coast near highly populated areas.

Our volunteers recorded over 15,000 wet wipes on surveyed Scottish beaches in 2023. In fact, sewage-related debris of all kinds was recorded on nearly 70% of our cleans. According to 2023 Beachwatch data, the highest concentrations of sewage-related debris are across the central belt as can be seen in the heatmap below.

Sewage-Related Debris heatmap 2023 – these numbers represent the median average number of sewage-related debris items recorded per 100m of beach surveyed by Marine Conservation Society volunteers in each Local Authority area.



This heatmap shows that certain areas in Scotland still record the highest numbers of sewage-related debris of anywhere in Great Britain, with one area averaging 152 items per 100m. For comparison, the highest average found in England was 53 sewage-related items per 100m, and in Wales this figure was 23 sewage-related debris items per 100m.

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Combined Sewage Overflows (CSOs)

CSOs should only be used during exceptionally heavy rainfall to prevent sewage from flooding homes, gardens and streets. We know from the limited data that is available on the frequency of discharges and from the levels of sewage-related debris found on surveyed Scottish beaches, that they are being used far too often.

Scottish Water are only required to report on spills from 4% of CSO's in Scotland (though they are currently monitoring around 32%). Scottish Water reported that monitored overflows spilled over 21,000 times in 2023 for an average of 10 hours per spill. However, this was only from the 7% of CSOs monitored at that time, meaning this does not reflect the true scale of the problem. In comparison, 100% of CSOs in England and Wales are monitored.

Although screens have been installed on some CSOs to reduce the amount of sewage-related debris being discharged, results from a survey of UK water companies conducted by the Marine Conservation Society found that more than half (59%) in Scotland are not screened. Water companies in England are now required to ensure that all CSOs have screening controls.

CSOs can impact the quality of the receiving water, including impacting bathing water quality. 3% of Bathing Waters in Scotland are currently classified as 'Poor' and a further 10% as merely 'Sufficient'. In 2022, four CSOs within 1km of a Bathing Water spilled untreated sewage 379 times, for a total of 634 hours (this mapping was conducted by the Marine Conservation Society in 2022, and due to the low percentage of CSOs monitored by Scottish Water at that time, data was only available for a small number of CSOs close to Bathing Waters).

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The Solutions

We would always advocate that stopping pollution at source is the priority; intervention should be as early as possible (see box **1**). A shift to reusable products would reduce the number of flushed items, but additional steps can be taken to reduce the amount entering the wastewater network, alongside Scottish Water putting in place measures to stop pollution escaping from the network (see box **2**).

1. **Stop generating waste and prevent it from entering the wastewater network. This has been shown to be cost effective and to significantly reduce the quantity of SRD. Measures should include:**

- Supporting consumers to move to reusable products.
- Banning all avoidable single-use plastic in wet wipes and other sanitary items, such as tampon applicators, where alternatives exist.
- Applying Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to all sanitary products (not just those that contain plastic) to cover clean-up costs.
- Improved labelling and consumer awareness to promote correct disposal. As a minimum this should include requirements from the EU Single Use Plastics Directive (e.g. a requirement for products to display 'Plastic in Product' and 'Do not flush' labels).

2. **Use the best available techniques to stop pollution escaping from the wastewater network. These measures provide additional benefits such as improved water quality and reduction of litter discharged through sewer overflows from road/ storm water runoff. Actions should include:**

- Progressive reduction targets for spills (frequency, duration and harm) to be set as soon as possible, prioritising all high spilling CSOs and those affecting protected areas e.g. bathing waters, shellfish waters and nature conservation areas. Where possible, sustainable urban drainage and nature-based solutions should be prioritised to reduce run-off into the sewer network.
- Installing electronic monitoring on all CSOs as soon as possible (our previous target was to achieve this by the end of 2024). This data should be made publicly available in real-time.
- All CSOs should be reviewed to ensure they are meeting their permit requirements, and are only operating under extreme rainfall conditions.
- Screens should be installed on all CSOs to reduce discharge of solid pollution e.g. plastic. Sewage-related debris contributes to marine litter and should be addressed for all CSOs (not just those discharging to recreational waters).

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To arrange a meeting or find out more information please contact:

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Together, we can make a difference.

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