

# WATER QUALITY REPORT 25



PUBLISHED APRIL 2025



# FOREWORD:

## “OUR WATER SYSTEM IS BROKEN”

It's a simple statement, that speaks to a vital truth, even though it's taken a long time to take hold.

But now it has, and with more than nine in 10 of our supporters agreeing the water industry needs to be completely – and radically – transformed, change is on the horizon.

We are a movement of Ocean Activists, bound together by our love of water. We have a shared desire to immerse ourselves and connect with nature as we surf, swim, dip and paddle. Outrageously, our coastlines, rivers and lakes are beings destroyed in front of our eyes, by the very companies we pay to keep them clean, and each of us runs the risk of getting sick – perhaps seriously – by doing the activities we love.

This year's Water Quality Report lays this bare.

**ACROSS THE UK THERE WERE ALMOST 600,000 CONFIRMED SEWAGE DISCHARGES LAST YEAR, ALTHOUGH THE TRUE FIGURE IS LIKELY TO BE CLOSER TO 1 MILLION.**

But such numbers don't tell the full story. It's communities and individuals who use the water that suffer the consequences of systemic failure. Suzi Finlayson, mother of two, who became critically ill after developing a blood infection from swimming in polluted water, or Charlie Clarke who collapsed and was rushed to hospital after he contracted a virus when training for an Ironman.

The failure of the UK water system is having terrible direct and immediate impacts on thousands of people like Suzi and Charlie, as well as ruining the natural environment for everyone.

In England, the relentless focus on delivering profit has resulted in water companies racking up debt-piles worth billions of pounds while failing to invest. Far from being held to account, their shareholders receive huge payouts whilst customers' bills skyrocket. In Wales, rampant pollution is going unchecked, and in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the governments are content to simply sweep the problem under the rug. The causes of this routine pollution across the nations of the UK may look different, but they are all elements of systemic failure by the water industry to prioritise the health of people and the planet.

This year, we have a once in a generation opportunity to spark deep, long-lasting change in the water sector in England and Wales. On the back of the General Election and the rising tide of public anger, we lobbied hard for a review of the water industry – and won it. An Independent Commission is hearing evidence now and will make recommendations to the UK Government for the future of the sector. And in the devolved administrations, with elections coming in 2026 and 2027, that parties of all stripes must feel the pressure to get serious about ending sewage pollution.

**THE TIME FOR TINKERING AROUND THE EDGES OF A BROKEN SYSTEM IS OVER. WE NEED TRANSFORMATIONAL REFORM THAT ENDS POLLUTION FOR PROFIT AND LEADS TO A FAIR AND TRANSPARENT SYSTEM – ONE THAT PRIORITISES THE RESTORATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT, THE PROTECTION OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND VALUE FOR CUSTOMERS.**

Our movement's superpower is our community. The energy, creativity and passion of individuals and groups across the UK is creating waves, driving us towards the systemic change we urgently need to see. As we hand in our demands, backed by clear evidence, to the Independent Commission, it will be joined by messages from people across the UK explaining why this fight is personal. And on 17 May, record numbers of us will be paddling-out in protest.

**WE WILL KEEP THE PRESSURE ON.**

The water companies, regulators and the UK Government must know that we will not back down. We will end sewage pollution.

Together, for the ocean,  
Giles







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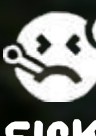
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# FROM RECORD HOURS OF SEWAGE DISCHARGES TO A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS, FROM BROKEN PROMISES TO POLLUTING FOR PROFIT... THIS YEAR'S WATER QUALITY REPORT HIGHLIGHTS A LITANY OF SYSTEMIC FAILURES.

There's no amount of tinkering that will fix this problem.  
It's time for vital, radical transformation...

## FROM LIFE-GIVING TO PROFIT-SNATCHING: THE STATE OF OUR WILD WATERS

We love the UK's wild waters. They invigorate and rejuvenate us, whether we like to swim, surf or splash in them, care about the wildlife they are home to or simply rely on them for our health and wellbeing.

Our fundamentally broken water industry is ruining these spaces that matter so deeply to all of us. Every day the toxic behaviour of big business and government is catastrophically affecting the health of people and planet. Thanks to their apathy, inaction, and profiteering, the nations' coastlines, rivers and lakes are in a shameful state.

### Broken promises, pollution for profit and a legacy of denial

Privatised water companies in England are so fixated on delivering short-term financial gain that they've continually failed to invest the money needed to upgrade or even maintain their infrastructure.

Over the last 35 years they've built up billions in debt, not to deliver on their well-publicised promises and targets to improve water quality, but to pay out £74.2 billion in dividends to profit-hungry shareholders.

In Wales, water companies have polluted at staggering levels and the regulators have failed to hold polluters to account.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, there's a continued policy of denial and a refusal to reveal the truth about the scale of sewage pollution.

**WE NEED TRANSFORMATIONAL REFORM OF THE INDUSTRY THAT ENDS POLLUTION FOR PROFIT AND LEADS TO A FAIR AND TRANSPARENT SYSTEM – ONE THAT PRIORITISES PUBLIC HEALTH AND VALUE FOR CUSTOMER MONEY AND DELIVERS HEALTHY COASTLINES, RIVERS AND LAKES.**

### More dumping ground than playground

These failures are having real world impacts. Across the UK there were 592,478 confirmed discharges last year for a total of 4,786,038 hours, but the actual figure is more likely closer to 994,499 discharges. That's equivalent to 113 every hour, for an entire year.

In 2024 alone, Surfers Against Sewage received 1,853 Sickness Reports. This equates to nine years' worth of sick days with a productivity hit to the economy of £493,200 – just from those who reported to us. The causes of this routine pollution across the UK may vary, but they're all a result of the systemic failure by the UK's water industry to do its job and keep our wild waters clean and safe.

### Time's up

The solution is clear. We need transformational reform that ends pollution for profit and leads to a fair and transparent system – one that prioritises public health and value for customer money, and which delivers healthy coastlines, rivers and lakes.



# A FRESH VISION FOR CLEAN & HEALTHY WATERS

There are five key principles a new system must include to End Sewage Pollution.

## LEGAL PRIORITY TO PROTECT PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

The water companies are delivering a vital public service. Their priority must be to protect and improve public and environmental health, over making profit or returns for shareholders.

## DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING

Decisions about how water is managed should be taken on a regional and local level with the input of local stakeholders including waters users, customers, local authorities, environmental groups and engineers. Crucially, these stakeholders must have real decision-making power.

## VALUE FOR MONEY

Customers must get what they pay for. A new system must be regulated to attract much-needed investment from long-term low-risk lenders investing over time and getting paid back once projects are delivered.

Investment in innovative and effective catchment scale nature-based solutions should be prioritised to help tackle the causes of sewage pollution and deliver cost-effective co-benefits for biodiversity and climate.

Regulators must ensure finances are used efficiently and debt managed sustainably.

## TOUGH INDEPENDENT REGULATORS

All regulators have a legal duty to protect public health and the environment.

Regulators must enforce the law and hold polluters to account. In particular, preventing illegal discharges occurring outside of exceptional circumstances.

They must end pollution for profit by stopping all forms of financial reward for water companies, shareholders and creditors who break the law and deliver consistently poor environmental performance.

They must be independent and sufficiently resourced to carry out the monitoring, enforcement and prosecution that will ensure full legal compliance and dramatic environmental improvement.

## TRANSPARENCY

Water companies must reveal the truth about their operations across the business and provide the public with consistent, easily understandable information to protect water users' health.

There should be complete transparency around the funding and rewards paid out by water companies to ensure no one associated with the business can profit from pollution.







03

SEWAGE SNAPSHOT

# SEWAGE SNAPSHOT

Sewage pollution is choking our coastlines, rivers and lakes. In 2024, the stench of water industry mismanagement was worse than ever.

**592,478**  
CONFIRMED UNTREATED  
SEWAGE DISCHARGES  
ACROSS THE UK  
LASTING FOR A TOTAL OF  
**4,786,038**  
HOURS!

**SCOTLAND**  
**24,398**

And when we add on projected figures from the data black hole in Northern Ireland and Scotland, we expect the real figure to be more like **994,499 DISCHARGES!**

**NORTHERN IRELAND**  
**2,697**

**WALES**  
**114,985**

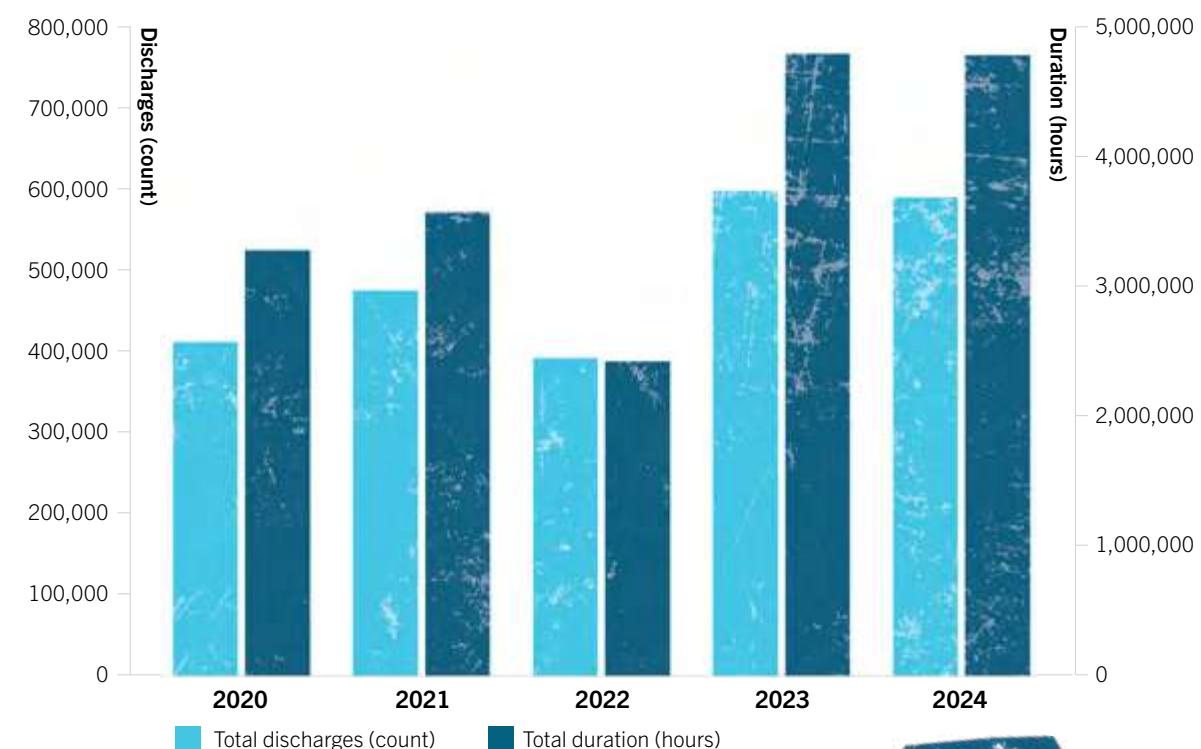
**ENGLAND**  
**450,398**

FIGURE 1

Total sewage discharges per UK nation in 2024

FIGURE 2

Total annual sewage discharges and discharge hours 2020 - 2024<sup>1</sup>



## DISCHARGES IN 2025

As well as the annual reporting figures released in March, water companies have also been making some live discharge data available. We've been tracking this information and logging it onto SAS DATA HQ as it comes in<sup>2</sup>. And the evidence is undeniable: the rampant pollution is going nowhere. Over the first two months of 2025, a staggering **95,141 DISCHARGES** occurred.

Although the way discharges are counted in live data differs from the method used in annual reports, our analysis shows we're heading for yet another sewage-heavy year.

### Explore more at Data HQ

Explore water quality deeper dives at our Data HQ and see what's happening right now with our live sewage map.



FIGURE 3

Sewage discharges per water company during January & February 2025



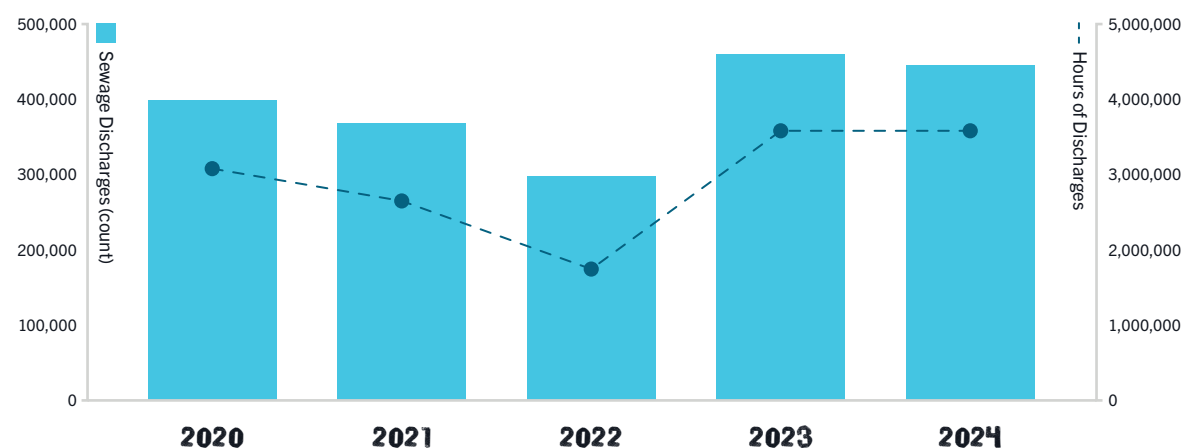
# ENGLAND: SAME SLOP, DIFFERENT DAY

Despite new laws, the tide of sewage across England remains stubbornly high. And every water company has muck on its hands.

Water companies in England have blamed this shameful outcome on exceptional weather, but we disagree. Those providers have been warned for decades to prepare for changes to our climate. Their response? Next to nothing.

**INSTEAD, WE'RE LEFT TO WATCH THE PLACES WE LOVE TO SWIM, SURF, AND PLAY IN BE RUINED BY POLLUTION.**

**FIGURE 4** Total annual sewage discharges and hours in England from 2020 to 2024



## FRESH VISION: WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Water users and the environment are paying the price for water companies profiteering from pollution. We need transformational reform that ends pollution for profit and leads to a fair and transparent system.



### WE'RE DEMANDING: A FRESH VISION

A new approach to ending sewage pollution needs to be framed around our five key principles for clean and healthy water (see p8).

**FIGURE 5**

Locations in England impacted by sewage discharges in 2024

### Map Key

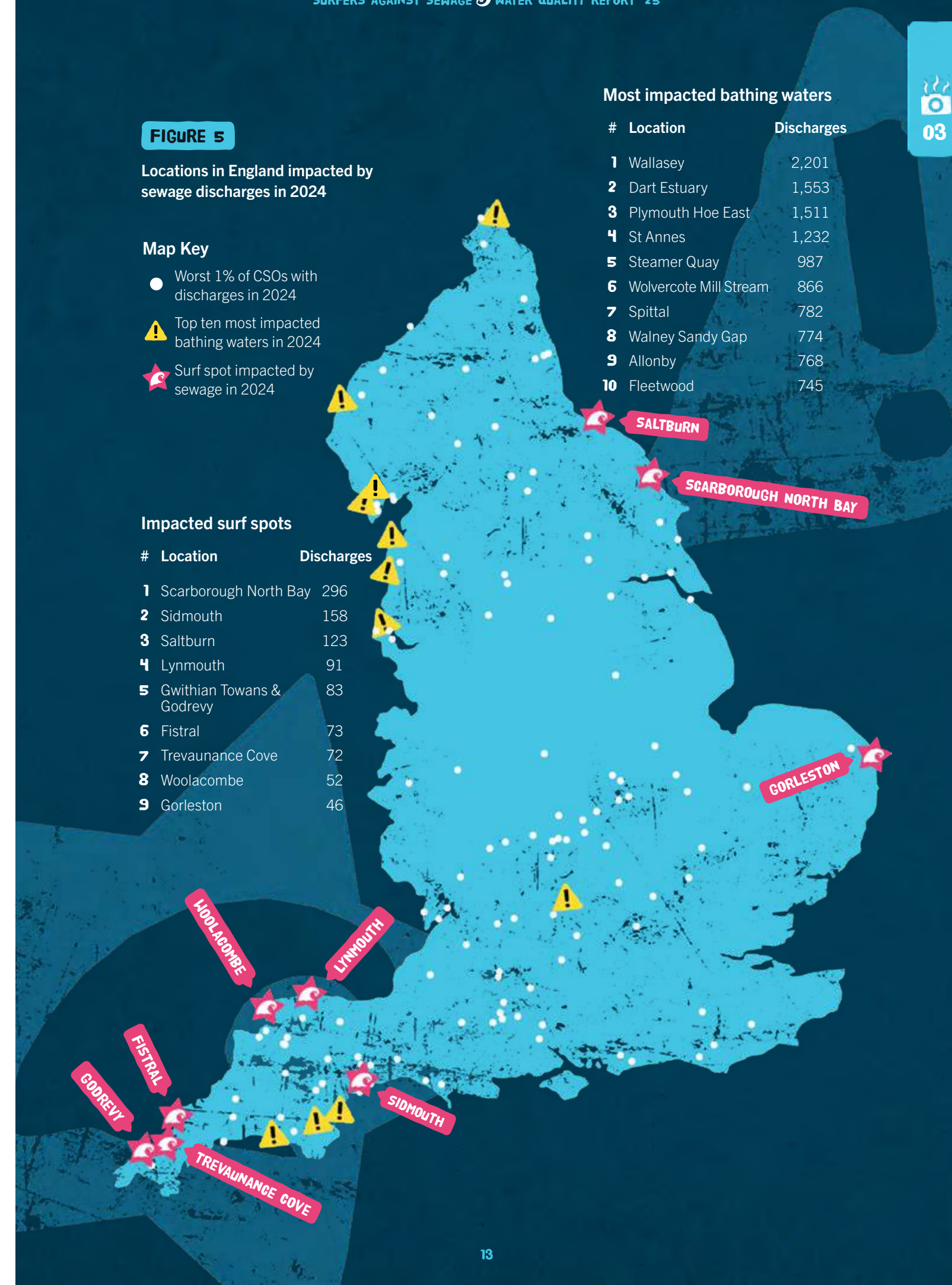
- Worst 1% of CSOs with discharges in 2024
- ⚠ Top ten most impacted bathing waters in 2024
- ★ Surf spot impacted by sewage in 2024

### Impacted surf spots

#	Location	Discharges
1	Scarborough North Bay	296
2	Sidmouth	158
3	Saltburn	123
4	Lynmouth	91
5	Gwithian Towans & Godrevy	83
6	Fistral	73
7	Trevaunance Cove	72
8	Woolacombe	52
9	Gorleston	46

### Most impacted bathing waters

#	Location	Discharges
1	Wallasey	2,201
2	Dart Estuary	1,553
3	Plymouth Hoe East	1,511
4	St Annes	1,232
5	Steamer Quay	987
6	Wolvercote Mill Stream	866
7	Spittal	782
8	Walney Sandy Gap	774
9	Allonby	768
10	Fleetwood	745





# WALES: AIMING LOW

In 2024, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water discharged sewage 118,276 times, for a total of **968,340 hours**.

THAT'S OVER  
110 YEARS  
OF SEWAGE!

Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water does not publish a single, summarised total of sewage discharges. To give a fuller picture, we have combined all available datasets, including data on both unpermitted overflows and emergency overflows.

**Emergency overflows should only operate in rare, critical situations** but some are currently discharging like regular storm overflows. Unpermitted overflows, meanwhile, are releasing sewage without the appropriate environmental permits. These sites are under review and may either be brought into the permitting system or removed entirely.

## A LAME DUCK REGULATOR

Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water has all the data it needs to find and deal with pollution. It's also a not-for-profit company with no shareholders, meaning it can reinvest money back into the system instead of worrying about dividends. And yet, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water has been routinely dumping sewage day after day and getting away with it.

This is because Natural Resource Wales (NRW), the environmental regulator which should be putting a stop to this pollution, **is an absolute shambles**.

The 2024 figure is slightly down on 2023, which seems like promising news. But when you look at the number of discharges from each overflow, the picture is much bleaker.

Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water's discharges per overflow hit 47. The company is aiming to reduce discharges to 30 per overflow by 2030<sup>3</sup>. The average discharge reduction target in England and Wales is 21. **Their lack of ambition is truly unacceptable.**

Last year the Welsh Government had to settle a £19 million tax bill following an investigation by HM Revenue and Customs into how NRW was hiring contractors. The regulator is now slashing costs to try and repay the debt.

256 jobs at the regulator have been axed already and a huge number of vacancies remain unfilled. Now operating on a shoestring budget, NRW have promised a rough 12 months. **And water users and the environment will end up paying the price.**<sup>4</sup>



### Another day another discharge

There wasn't a single day in January, February or March 2025 where Dŵr Cymru/ Welsh Water weren't discharged somewhere in Wales.<sup>5</sup>

We are seeing history repeat itself already in Wales. In the first three months of 2025 **we have already recorded 11,910 discharges**.



**FIGURE 7**

Daily sewage discharges in Wales during January - March 2025



## CASE STUDY

SICK OF IT:  
THE FAMILY HOLIDAYGRONANT BEACH:  
NORTH WALES

A family holiday should be about spending quality time together. And it often means saving up every hard-earned penny to do so. But with today's scandalous sewage crisis, not all memories can be treasured.

Alice's experience was so traumatic, she never wants to go on a beach holiday ever again. And thanks to the waterborne illness they caught, her children now feel the same. It's unacceptable that polluters are making people who love the water and so value its benefits feel this way.

"We were all very excited to have this break and decided to go swimming," Alice says. "Following the day out at the beach, we got back to the caravan and all quickly became quite poorly. The kids were coughing and being sick and my asthma was playing up."

Everyone in the group had a temperature. Back at home, the doctors gave them antibiotics for chest infections, and Alice was put on steroids for her asthma.

But the full damning diagnosis only became clear later.

"I found out after that there was a sewage leak in the area we were staying in," Alice recalls. "We all feel very traumatised by this situation."

**"WE WERE SWIMMING IN HUMAN FAECES. THAT'S CAUSED OUR HEALTH - MENTALLY, EMOTIONALLY AND PHYSICALLY - TO GO DOWNHILL."**



## FRESH VISION: WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

Welsh coastline, rivers and lakes have been being polluted for far too long. And the whole system is to blame. Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water has been polluting regularly, a shambolic regulator has let them get away with it and the Government are asleep at the wheel. It's time for change. With an election rapidly approaching, politicians in Wales need to stop stalling and start acting to get a grip on the broken system.

WE'RE DEMANDING:  
REGULATION THAT WORKS

A tough independent regulator is needed to enforce the law and ensure that sewage discharges **only ever occur in exceptional circumstances.**

NORTHERN  
IRELAND  
HIDDEN TRUTHS, DIRTY DEALINGS

In 2024, Northern Ireland Water recorded 2,967 discharges. And it gets worse, fast. Shockingly, just 122 of the country's 2,806 CSOs are actually monitored. That's only 4.3% of their entire network.

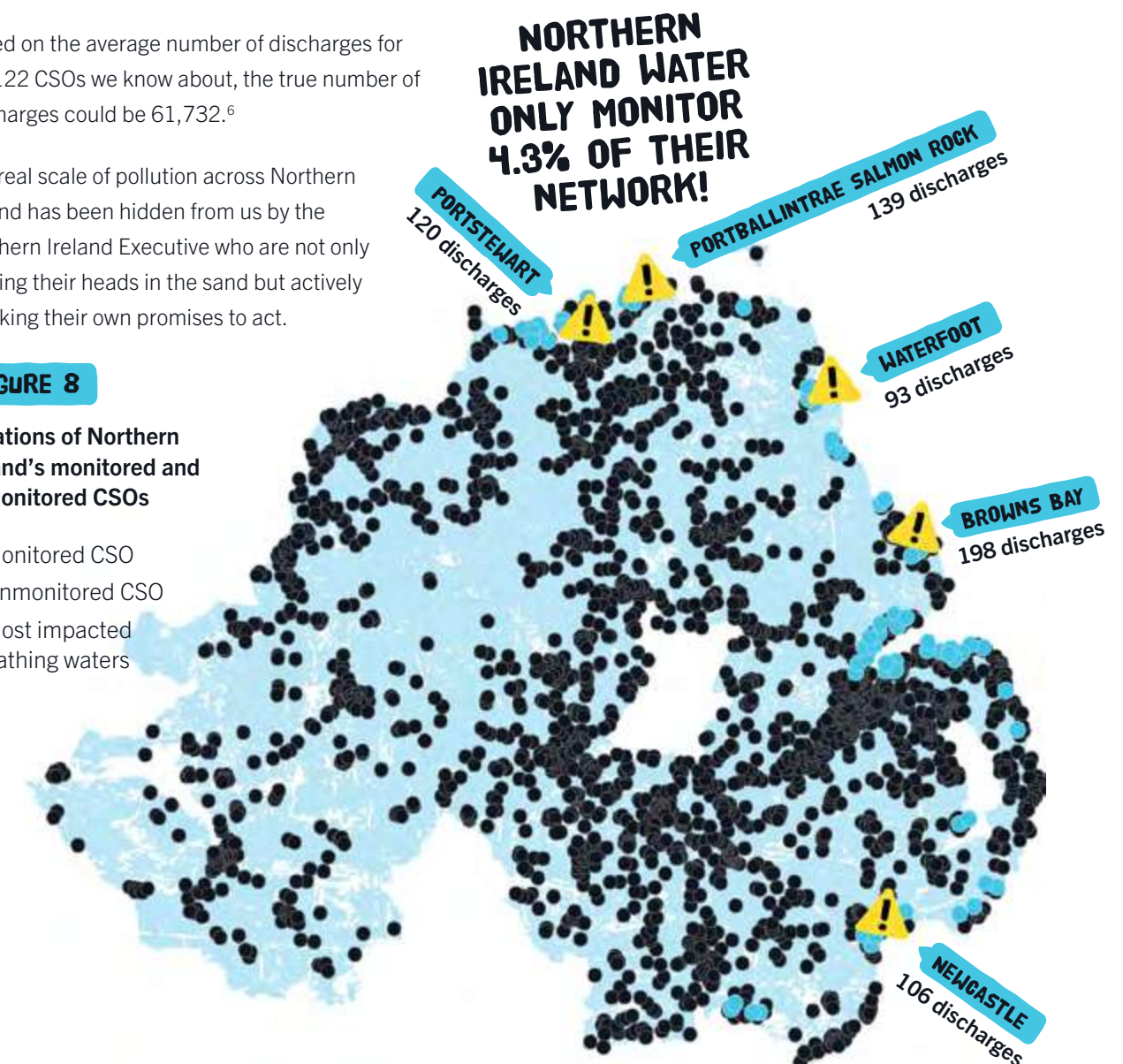
Based on the average number of discharges for the 122 CSOs we know about, the true number of discharges could be 61,732.<sup>6</sup>

The real scale of pollution across Northern Ireland has been hidden from us by the Northern Ireland Executive who are not only burying their heads in the sand but actively breaking their own promises to act.

FIGURE 8

Locations of Northern Ireland's monitored and unmonitored CSOs

- Monitored CSO
- Unmonitored CSO
- ⚠ Most impacted bathing waters





# SEWAGE SPOTLIGHT

## BELFAST LOUGH: A SCANDAL OF EPIC PROPORTIONS

Running from the nation's capital to the Irish sea, Belfast Lough is a much-loved and valued stretch of water.

From bathing spots like Helen's Bay and Groomsport, which support budding swimming communities, to the buoyant shellfish industry, which provides vital jobs to the area, thousands of peoples' happiness, wellbeing and livelihoods depend on it.

Despite all this, not only has sewage been pumping into the lough for decades, but a plan to save it has just been shelved by the Northern Irish Government, condemning the lough to endure this filth for years to come.

**LEVELS OF BACTERIA AT POPULAR SWIMMING SPOTS ARE MORE THAN THREE TIMES HIGHER THAN PERMITTED FOR BATHING WATERS – PUTTING WATER USERS AT UNACCEPTABLE LEVELS OF RISK.**

### Poisoned by sewage

In 2024, Northern Ireland Water discharged sewage into Belfast Lough 1,148 times, lasting a total of 3,967 hours. There are 122 overflows listed as discharging into Belfast Lough, but only 36 (30%) have monitoring in place. If the remaining 86 unmonitored overflows discharge at the same rate, the real total could be around 3,890 discharges a year – that's more than 10 discharges every single day.

The average spill per CSO for Northern Ireland Water overflows is 22, but for those around Belfast Lough it's 45% higher with an average of 31.9.



BELFAST LOUGH

**FIGURE 9**

Locations of sewage overflows in and around Belfast Lough

Sewage discharge

### Visible brown trails

The huge volume of pollution flooding into the lough is having a dire impact. Levels of bacteria at popular swimming spots are more than three times higher than permitted for bathing waters – putting water users at unacceptable levels of risk for getting ill.<sup>7</sup>

**“YOU CAN SEE THE VISIBLE BROWN TRAILS WHENEVER THERE HAS BEEN A DISCHARGE,”**

Helen Armstrong, a Surfers Against Sewage member, told the BBC last year. “Even on good sunny days I've been swimming, and a sanitary pad has drifted past me... We shouldn't be swimming in shit.”

It's not just water users who are feeling the impact of this lack of investment. It's also having a huge impact on wider society. The lack of wastewater infrastructure in Northern Ireland is holding up development and economic growth throughout the region, impacting some of the most in need.

Despite a backlog of 48,000 households waiting for housing, the complete lack of sewage infrastructure means the creation of thousands of social homes simply can't go ahead.<sup>8</sup>

### Just useless words

In 2015 the Government in Northern Ireland recognised the plight of Belfast Lough. The Living with Water Programme was supposed to drive the Department for Infrastructure, Local Stakeholders and Northern Ireland Water to take actions that would clean up the lough, including investing in eight major sewage projects. This plan was approved by the Northern Ireland Executive and money allocated by the regulator. Planning of the major infrastructure was also in full flow with teams of engineers in the midst of preparing work on the first major infrastructure projects.<sup>9</sup>

However, at the start of 2025 the Department for Infrastructure shelved the formal programme and constrained the funding that would be allocated to Northern Ireland Water. As a result, the desperately needed infrastructure projects which would have protected water users, the environment and the economy of Northern Ireland will now no longer take place. In its place a shoestring budget will put a sticking plaster over a woefully under capacity sewage system, fixing nothing.<sup>10</sup>

This is a scandal of epic proportions. Belfast Lough is being let down. Governments must allocate the funding needed to ensure the lough is clean and safe for the people who rely on it to thrive.

### Water users at risk

The failure to deliver on promises is a familiar trend with the Water System in Northern Ireland. The country is the last place in the UK without real-time sewage alerts, leaving water users to risk their health when entering its coastline, rivers and loughs.

For the last year, Surfers Against Sewage has been trying to engage with Northern Ireland Water to help it deliver on its promise to pilot the provision of real-time sewage alerts at one of Northern Ireland's best surf spots, Portrush. Despite there being 65 discharges there this year we've had nothing but radio silence.

**SO, FOR THE LAST YEAR, WATER USERS HAVE BEEN PUT AT RISK WITHOUT EVEN KNOWING.**

While Northern Ireland is miles behind the rest of the UK in terms of pollution data, it looked like Northern Ireland Water was finally making progress, with its plans for massive infrastructure projects and promises to start to provide real-time information. Turns out they were just spewing spin.



## CASE STUDY

## SICK OF IT:

RUBY FREE, CAMPAIGNER,  
SURFER, WRITER



"Fuelled by insufficient action, poor investment and weakening regulation, we demand that Northern Ireland Water, and the Northern Ireland Executive take meaningful action this year."

"In Northern Ireland not a single water body meets a good chemical standard - with 12% of species risking extinction here, many of which are marine and freshwater species, this must change."



"But poor water quality isn't just causing unimaginable harm to wildlife, it's affecting us too. Expert water sampling found levels of bacteria at popular swimming spots to be more than three times higher than what's permitted for bathing waters. I myself have been violently unwell after surfing areas that are prone to sewage discharges. I am unable to see live Event Duration Monitoring (EDM) data on the Safer Seas and River Service (SSRS) app – because the water companies don't make this data available. Those who are meant to be protecting us, are neglecting us."

## FRESH VISION: WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

We need change and we need it now. Northern Ireland Water is owned by the Northern Ireland Executive and the country's taxpayers.

It's time they delivered for the people of Northern Ireland by stepping up to our fresh vision for clean water.



### WE'RE DEMANDING: THE TRUTH

Northern Ireland Water must finally become transparent about

the scale of pollution across the country and provide real-time sewage alerts to keep water users safe. The Northern Ireland Executive must reverse its decision to cut the Living With Water Programme and deliver its planned investments to protect water users of Belfast Lough and around Northern Ireland. This means securing the long-term investment needed from public or private finance to deliver these projects.

# SCOTLAND

## A SORRY SAGA

Scotland's water industry perfectly illustrates the baffling and infuriating nonsense of our water companies.

### The top line

In 2024, Scottish Water recorded 23,498 discharges for a total of 208,377 hours, but these figures are from only 6.7% of their total network.

Scotland has the highest average discharge rate per CSO of any water company at a whopping 89.3. So the real number of discharges could be as high as 364,629.

### THE TRUE SCALE OF SCOTLAND'S SEWAGE CRISIS REMAINS HIDDEN BEHIND A WALL OF MISSING DATA AND WEAK REGULATIONS.

### The first glimpse of the truth

At the end of 2024, Scottish Water finally published its first public sewage overflow data. It was a step forward, but that's only opened another chapter in this sorry saga.

Scottish Water admits to having around 4,080 overflows. Yet just 1,116 appear on their sewage discharge map. That means they failed to report 73% of discharges in real-time, which could have seriously affected human health.

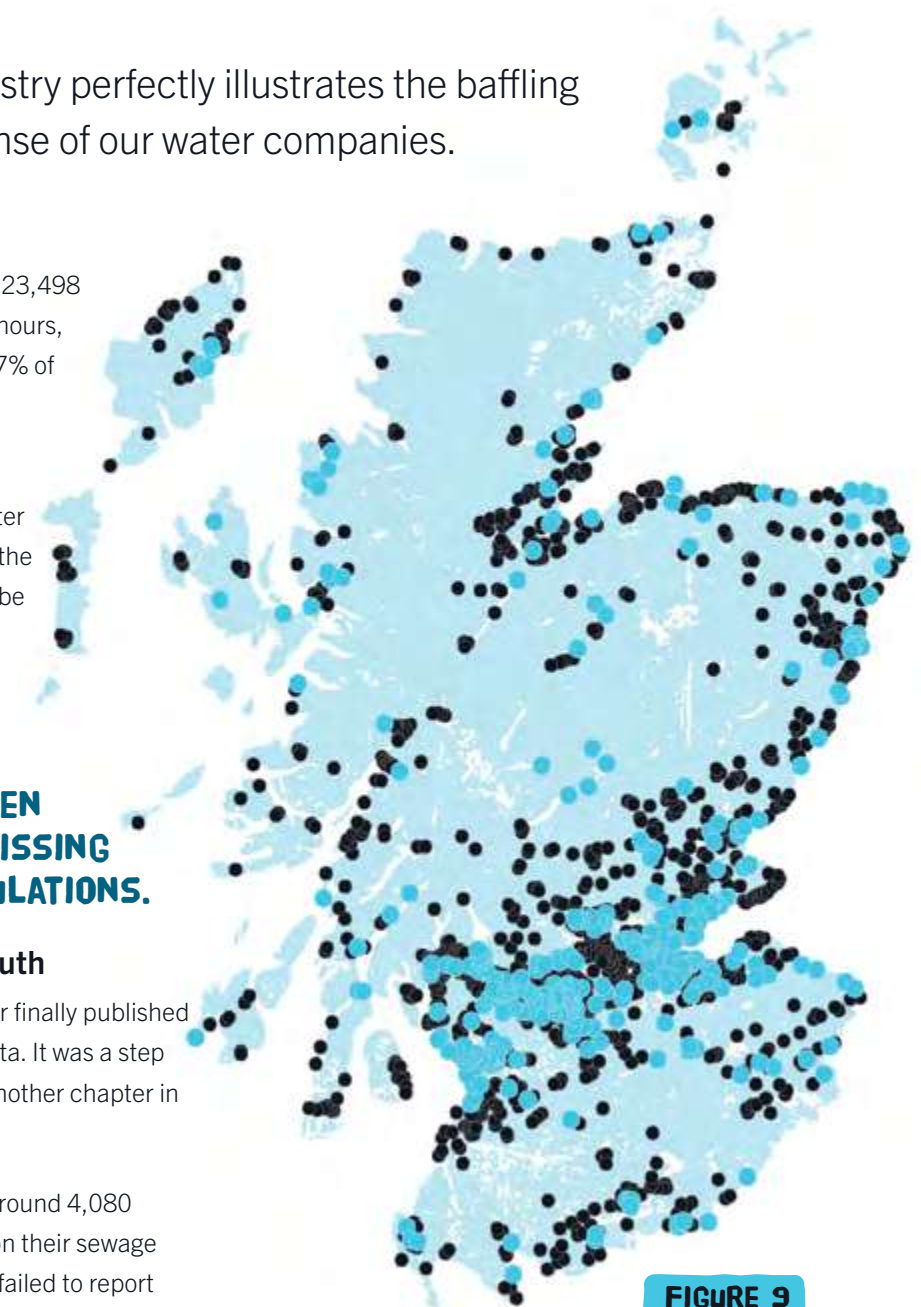


FIGURE 9

Locations of Scotland's monitored and unmonitored CSOs

Monitored CSO ●  
Unmonitored CSO ●



## 2025

In 2025 the trend looks similar. Since 3 February, Surfers Against Sewage has been logging Scottish Water's discharges in real time. We found 1,535 discharges in just one month, impacting the coastline, rivers and lochs all over Scotland.

**AND WE ONLY HAVE DATA ON 27% OF OVERFLOWS. THE FULL PICTURE IS LIKELY TO BE EVEN MORE APPALLING.**

#	Impacted waterway	Discharges
1	Forth Estuary ⚠️	129
2	River Clyde	76
3	River Tweed	61
4	Clyde Estuary	46
5	River Dee	43
6	River Nith	42
7	River North Esk	37
8	River Leven	33
9	Loch Linnhe	31
10	River Tay	27

### CASE STUDY

## SICK OF IT: HOSPITALISED WITH CRYPTOSPORIDIUM

**BELHAVEN,  
EAST LOTHIAN**

After a swim to celebrate a friend's birthday with her fellow Salty Sisters, Shelley Sim woke up with stomach pains and fatigue. Her GP told her it was urgent: she had to get to the hospital. Shelley ended up staying for five days because of severe gastroenteritis and dehydration.

After weeks of endless appointments, hours of commuting to the hospital, and even a move to an infectious disease unit, Shelley was finally diagnosed with cryptosporidium, a diarrheal disease contracted by swimming in contaminated water.

Until then, Shelley had swum every single day as part of her daily ritual. Now she couldn't get back in the water for nine whole weeks.



"I'm no longer swimming every day, and I'm more cautious about getting into the water," Shelley told us. "The sea is where I go for my mental health, to get away from stress of being a carer. The first thing I do now is check outfalls. That's good, but it comes from a place of fear. I shouldn't be doing this. I should be checking the tide, not when was it heavy rain and if there were any spills."

And Shelley wasn't the only one affected. Her fellow swimmers, friends, and family were too.

"It impacted my son's mental health," she said. "He has OCD, ADHD and autism and I'm his carer. My illness caused a lot of anxieties and stress."

## PLUGGING THE GAP: WHAT WE NOW KNOW ABOUT SCOTTISH WATER

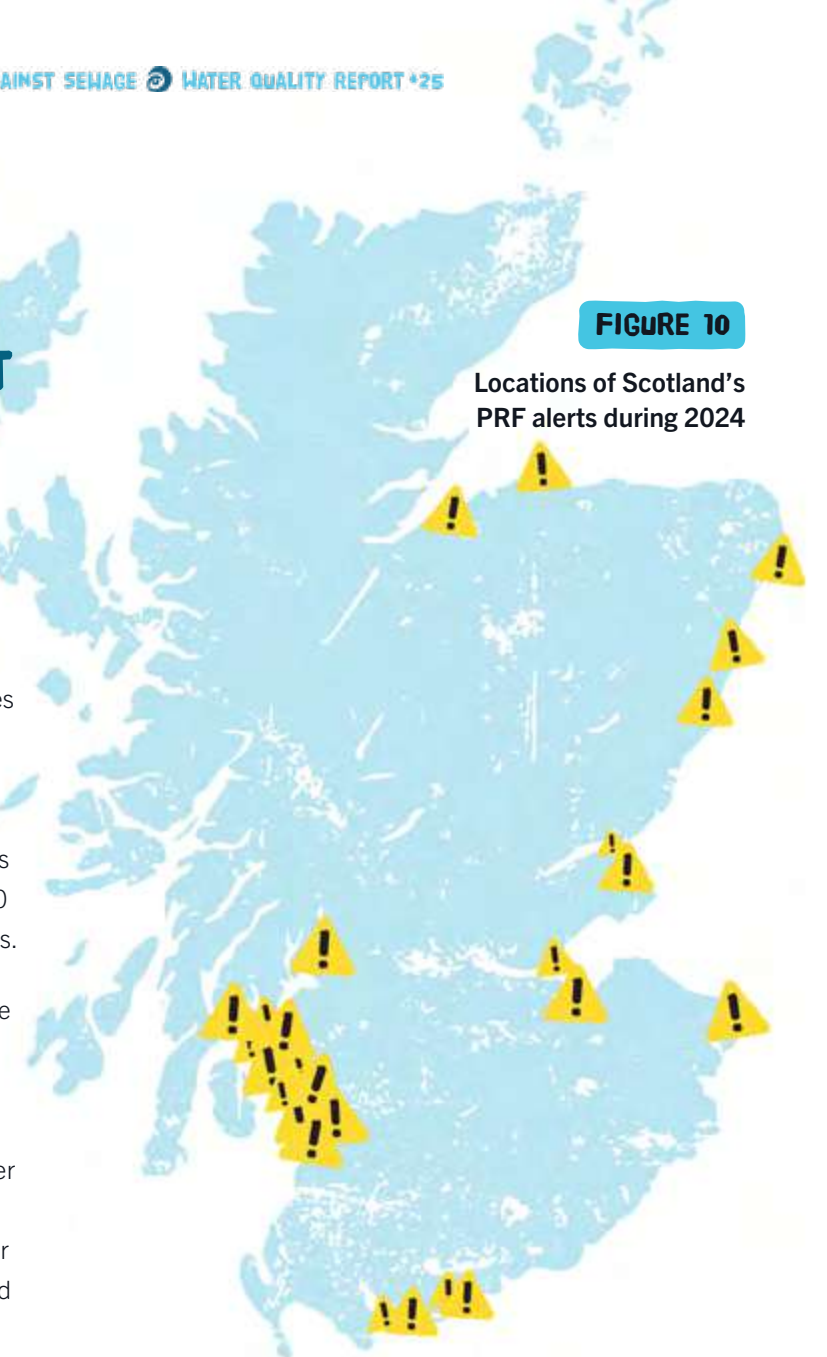
From the available 2024 data we have found that water users and the environment are suffering the cost of Scottish Water's Pollution.

The second highest month of discharges in Scotland was August, when the vast majority of people are using the water. One of the worst performing overflows was Perth Waste Water Treatment works which discharged into the River Tay 240 times in 2024 for a total of 13,177 hours.

In 2024, there were no real-time sewage alerts in Scotland. Instead, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) issued 800 pollution risk alerts during the bathing season – June to September in Scotland. These alerts warn water users when there may be reduced water quality. But they are just predictions and do not warn water users when sewage has been discharged.

**FIGURE 10**

**Locations of Scotland's  
PRF alerts during 2024**



## FRESH VISION: WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

With an election coming up in 2026, politicians in Scotland must finally get to grip with the Scottish sewage scandal and **stop pointing the finger elsewhere**.



### WE'RE DEMANDING: FULL TRANSPARENCY

We need 100% monitoring of sewage discharges in Scotland to keep people safe when they use the water. We need the Government to prioritise public and environmental health, and to end sewage pollution in Scotland by 2030. It must hold Scottish Water to account for delivering on the targets it sets.





# BROKEN PROMISES, BROKEN SYSTEM

The stench of the sewage scandal has become a fixture of the mainstream news in the last few years, with water companies making promise after promise to deliver record investments and hit all kinds of glittering targets. But can we ever truly believe them?

Water companies in England and Wales are regulated by multiple bodies, including Ofwat, which oversees their finances and operations. Every five years, each company has to submit investment plans to Ofwat through a process called the price review (PR).

PR plans show us what each water company is promising to deliver, the level of investment needed; and how much customers will have to pay in bills over the course of the five years the PR plan runs for.

In a functional system, that makes total sense. But in a broken industry, you learn not to trust companies to deliver on their promises. Or the regulator to hold them accountable.

**WHY ARE THE NEW PROPOSALS WELCOMED INTO THE ROOM SO WARMLY, WHEN ALL THE UNMET PROMISES FROM THE PREVIOUS PLAN ARE STILL SAT THERE IN PLAIN SIGHT?**

In 2025, PR19 ended, and PR24 began. We took the opportunity to examine the past five years of PR19 (2020-2025), to see whether water companies got anywhere near achieving what they'd pledged.

## Assessing the "industry leaders"

In its initial assessment of PR19 plans, Ofwat identified three companies that stood out: South West Water, Severn Trent and United Utilities.

According to the regulator, this trio offered ambitious plans that set a new standard for the water sector. So, it awarded them fast-track status. In exchange for promising to trailblaze on positive outcomes for both customers and the environment, these companies were heralded as industry leaders; given a head start on other companies to get working on their big plans, and millions in financial rewards.<sup>11</sup> But what standard were they really setting for the industry?



**IN A BROKEN INDUSTRY, YOU LEARN NOT TO TRUST COMPANIES TO DELIVER ON THEIR PROMISES...**







South West Water (SWW) received a **financial reward worth £6.7 million** for its 2019 plans.

Part of this reward was allocated because SWW promised to deliver on its proposed sector leading outcomes, like improving its environmental ratings and reducing sewer blockages.

**Target: Cut pollution incidents to 19.5 per 10,000 km of sewer**

**EXPECTED FAIL**

SWW pledged to reduce pollution incidents to 19.5 incidents<sup>13</sup> per 10,000 km of sewers by 2024-25.

So far, it's failed miserably. In fact, between 2022 and 2023, pollution incidents on its patch shot up by 80%.

We can't access official data on pollution incident reports until July 2025, but we have received unverified data from the Environment Agency through a Freedom of Information request.

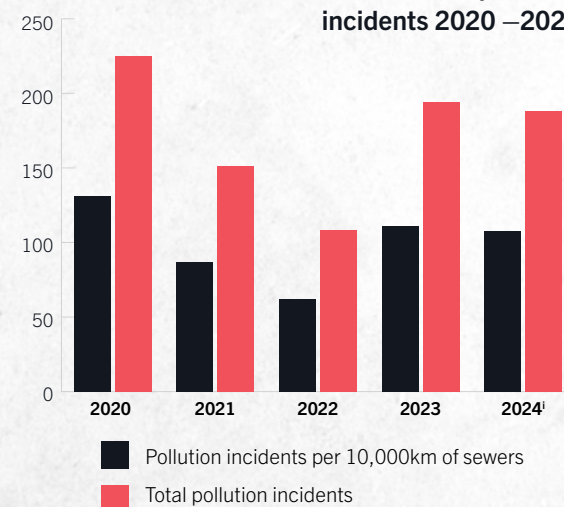
**THIS DATA SHOWS THAT THERE WERE 188 POLLUTION INCIDENTS IN 2024.**

Assuming the length of the sewer network remained the same as the year before, this equates to 107.8 pollution incidents per 10,000 km of pipe. While this number may change once the final figures are released, our investigation suggests that South West Water is on track to fail its target – with five times more pollution incidents than they were aiming for.

However we've been digging into SWW's performance when it comes to sewage pollution over the last five years and they do not look like a water company performing exceptionally.<sup>12</sup>

**FIGURE 11**

**Number of pollution incidents 2020 – 2024**



**Target: Reduce Overflow discharges to 20 a year**

**FAIL**

In April 2022, SWW's Plan for Healthy Rivers and Seas<sup>14</sup> contained a pledge to cut storm overflow discharges to an average of 20 per year by 2025. In 2024 their average discharges per overflow was 41.3, which is more than double the target. And 2025 isn't looking much better. According to our live reporting data from Data HQ, 21% of SWW overflows surpassed this annual target by March.

**FIGURE 12**

**SWW EPA ratings 2020-2024**

2020	★★☆☆	Requires improvement
2021	★☆☆☆	Poor performing
2022	★★☆☆	Requires improvement
2023	★★☆☆	Requires improvement
2024	TBC	TBC

**Target: Achieve 4-star environmental performance**

**EXPECTED FAIL**

In its PR19 plans, SWW boasted it would achieve a 4-star environmental performance rating, this was one of the key performance outcomes Ofwat cited as the reason that SWW would receive a financial reward. By 2023, the latest figures we had at the time of writing, it had only managed to hit 2 stars.

### The future for South West Water: a grim tide

After five years of SWW failing to meet targets, Ofwat has again dished out a reward for SWW's next set of plans. This time it's worth an equivalent to £36 million.

One of those goals for the next 5 years will be familiar from last time: "The company will improve its environmental performance by achieving 4\* Environmental Performance Assessment (EPA) status by 2028."

SWW also announced in February 2025 that it will be investing more than £700 million to reduce storm overflows across the region in the next five-year period.

**Target: Maintain excellent bathing water quality standards all year round**

**FAIL**

SWW states that it wants to "maintain excellent bathing water quality standards all year round, so everyone can enjoy our 860 miles of coastline, whatever the time of year".

**LAST YEAR, 3,168 SEWAGE ALERTS WERE ISSUED AT BATHING WATERS WITHIN SOUTH WEST WATER'S REGION.**

These alerts were throughout the year, with 541 alerts issued during the bathing season – May to September in England - and 2,627 alerts during the rest of the year. With such rampant pollution, we highly doubt the water quality will be anything close to excellent year-round.

The aim is to make SWW the first water company to meet the Government's target of fewer than 10 discharges per year – an impressive 10 years ahead of deadline.

**SWW has a huge mountain to climb.** 872 of its combined sewage overflows (CSOs) discharged over 10 times in 2024 (64% of their total overflows).

**AND AS IT'S FAILED TIME AND AGAIN TO MEET ENVIRONMENTAL TARGETS OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO TRUST THEM NOW?**

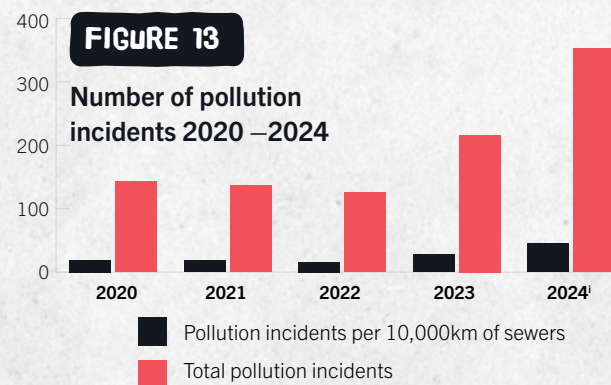




**Target: Reduce pollution incidents to 19.5 per 10,000 km of sewer by 2024-25**

**EXPECTED FAIL**

UU was the only “industry leader” that looked to be on the right track and remained so for several years. Until 2023, when it saw the number of pollution incidents shoot up by 71%, which UU blames on an exceptionally wet year and an increase in monitoring. Sadly though, it seems this downward trend is continuing. A freedom of information (FOI) response from the Environment Agency shows UU pollution incidents rose to 352 and discharges increased to 45 per 10,000km of pipe in 2024. That’s well over double the company’s target.



### The future for United Utilities: flush with profit

UU’s next set of plans are only receiving “standard” classification, meaning they are adequate overall and meet the minimum expectations, but are not exceptional. Regardless, the company will still pocket a reward equivalent to £16 million and its shareholders will keep reaping the benefits, while its customers suffer.

United Utilities (UU) was given a hefty **£24 million** for its PR19 plans, including a high-quality, five-year road map and sector-leading proposal to make bills affordable and provide support for vulnerable customers.<sup>15</sup>

They’ve very nearly hit PR19 targets set to reduce discharge numbers, but unfortunately they’re going in the wrong direction for pollution incidents.

**Target: Reduce overflow discharges by 33%**

**FAIL\***

*\*but only just*

In its Roadmap to Better River Health, UU pledged to cut storm overflow spills by at least 33% between 2020 and 2025. And in 2024 they nearly hit this target by reducing discharges by 32%.

But before we get too carried away, UU’s discharges in 2020 were the highest of any English water company this decade, by far. It was responsible for discharging 113,940 times, nearly double its nearest rival Yorkshire Water, who discharged 65,083.

UU paid out about £320 million to investors in 2023-24, and then announced it would **increase its dividends in line with inflation**, while UU’s customers will pay 32% more in bills.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Information obtained via a freedom of information request it is unverified by the EA and subject to change. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0

**SEVERN TRENT**  
**WONDERFUL ON TAP**

Severn Trent (ST) received a reward worth **£18 million** from the regulator for its plan which included a number of ambitious, innovative and sector-leading proposals to make bills affordable and provide support for vulnerable customers.

But when it comes to dealing with pollution, ST has **failed to meet its targets** every year so far.<sup>17</sup>

**Target: Reduce overflow discharges to 20 per year**

**FAIL**

In its Get River Positive document, ST stated that its operations will not be the reason for unhealthy rivers by 2030. To reach that goal, it said it would work to reduce spills from storm overflows to an average of 20 per year by 2025.<sup>18</sup>

It’s missed that target, too.

The company’s 2024 data shows the average number of discharges per CSO was 25.4. In total, 1,118 overflows discharged more than 20 times in 2024, with the five worst-performing sites accounting for 1,014 spills between them.

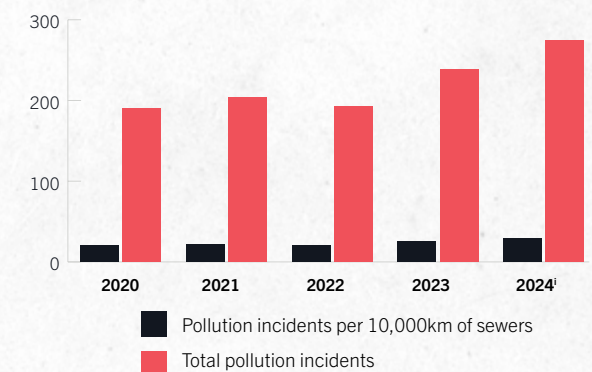
**Target: Reduce pollution incidents to 19.5 per 10,000 km of sewer by 2024-25**

**EXPECTED FAIL**

According to the latest data, ST has failed to meet this target every year to date, and 2024 looks to be no different, with pollution incidents still on the rise.

**FIGURE 14**

**Number of pollution incidents 2020 –2024**



In addition, analysis of overflows discharging through the NSOH<sup>19</sup> reveals that 1,313 overflows were active in January and February 2025, with 60 already exceeding 20 discharges.<sup>19</sup>

One of ST’s worst-performing sites is the Snarestone overflow, which recorded 168 discharges totalling over 1,000 hours in just the first two months of 2025. In 2024, Snarestone Sewage Treatment Works discharged into the River Mease 208 times, accumulating a staggering 3,780 hours.

### The future for Severn Trent

Despite missing key targets in its PR19 plan, Severn Trent still received a massive reward from Ofwat – equivalent to £93 million – for its “outstanding” PR24 plans.



## WHERE LEADERS FAIL

Our so-called “industry leaders” are failing to deliver on their promises. Are the rest doing any better? Ofwat stated that, “the sector committed to reducing total pollution incidents by 30% over the 2020-25 period.”<sup>20</sup>

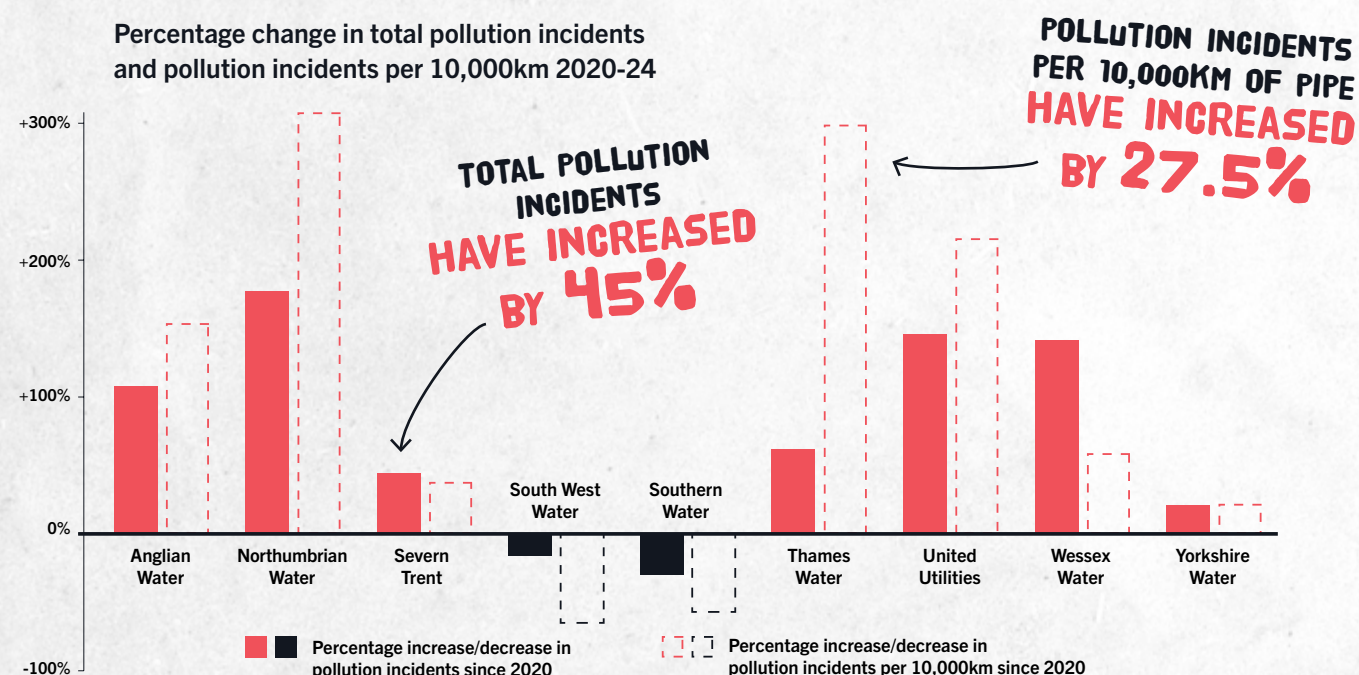
Our analysis of FOI data from the Environment Agency reveals that, whichever way you do the maths, water companies in England have collectively failed to deliver on this promise.

Pollution Incidents per 10,000km of pipe have increased by 23% from 2020 to the start of 2025. And total pollution Incidents have increased by 45%.

Not only have water companies in England failed to deliver their own promises, they have failed to deliver the target set by the Environment Agency to reduce total pollution incidents by 40% from 2016 levels between 2020-2025. With pollution incidents in 2024 up by 30% from 2016 levels.<sup>21</sup>

**FIGURE 15**

Percentage change in total pollution incidents and pollution incidents per 10,000km 2020-24



### Where does the money go?

Dig deeper into the pipework behind the water industry and you'll see more and more examples of companies failing to deliver on their commitments.

Going back to the 2015-2020 investment cycle, water and sewerage companies actually underspent by 5% on their wastewater facilities compared to promised spend.<sup>22</sup>

Between 2020 and 2022, eight companies underspent their budget for improving their wastewater network. Yorkshire Water spent just 20% of the budget set aside for improvements to sewage works; South West Water spent only 39%. We need faster improvements, not slower.

Delays or under delivery means a broken system that continues to fail the people it's supposed to serve, and sewage pollution continuing to destroy the UK's coastline, rivers and lakes at the alarming rate we see today.

**THAMES WATER SET ASIDE £474 MILLION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS. FIVE YEARS LATER, IT'S BEING INVESTIGATED FOR FAILING TO DELIVER THESE SCHEMES, WHICH CUSTOMERS HAVE ALREADY PAID FOR.**

## HOW CAN WE TRUST THEM?

We're being asked to believe that the next five years will be different...

That those same companies, being watched over by those same regulators, will take all that investment and use it to achieve their targets this time around.

We simply don't buy that.



## FRESH VISION: WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

We need transformational reform of the sector. The water companies are taking us for a ride, promising us they will change but delivering next to nothing. And our regulators stand idly by while the same patterns repeat themselves again and again.

### WE'RE DEMANDING: TOUGH INDEPENDENT REGULATION



Regulators should have a clear, legal duty to protect public health and the environment so they make decisions in the public interest. They must be empowered to stand up to and punish the water companies when they fall so painfully short – instead of rewarding them for doing so.



# DIRTY MONEY FAILED BY FINANCE

Water companies are routinely polluting our coastlines, rivers and lakes and despite rising bills, they consistently fail to deliver on their promises. Why? Because in England they are ruthlessly driven by profit, prioritising pay-outs to shareholders, over investing.

In 1989, the water industry in England and Wales was privatised and its debt wiped clean, in a bid to attract much-needed investment.

Several decades on, water companies have racked up £69.2 billion in debt and paid out £74.2 billion to shareholders.

Recent research has shown that over decades shareholders have taken out more money from the water industry than they put in.

When the industry was privatised, new shareholders injected £3.6 billion, equating to £8.2 billion in 2023 prices. However, in March 2023 the amount shareholders invested in water companies was just £3.4 billion. In real terms this means the shareholders have withdrawn £4.8 billion, almost 60% of the original shareholder capital.<sup>23</sup>

**AND WHAT DO WE HAVE TO SHOW FOR IT? 450,398 SEWAGE DISCHARGES INTO ENGLAND'S WILD WATERS, IN 2024 ALONE.**

## SPENDING MONEY LIKE WATER: THE LEAKS, DETECTED

COMPANY	DIVIDENDS (2023-2024)	DIVIDENDS (1990-2023)
Severn Trent	£301.4m	£12.1bn
Thames Water	£195.8m	£10.6bn
United Utilities	£320m	£13bn
Northumbrian Water	£108m	£4.2bn
Yorkshire Water	£84.1m	£7.7bn
Anglian Water	£79.9m	£12.7bn
Wessex Water	£66.5m	£4.3bn
South West Water	£45m	£4.6bn
Southern Water	0	£2.3bn
Dŵr Cymru	0	£2.7bn
<b>Total</b>	<b>£1.2 bn</b>	<b>£74.2 bn</b>

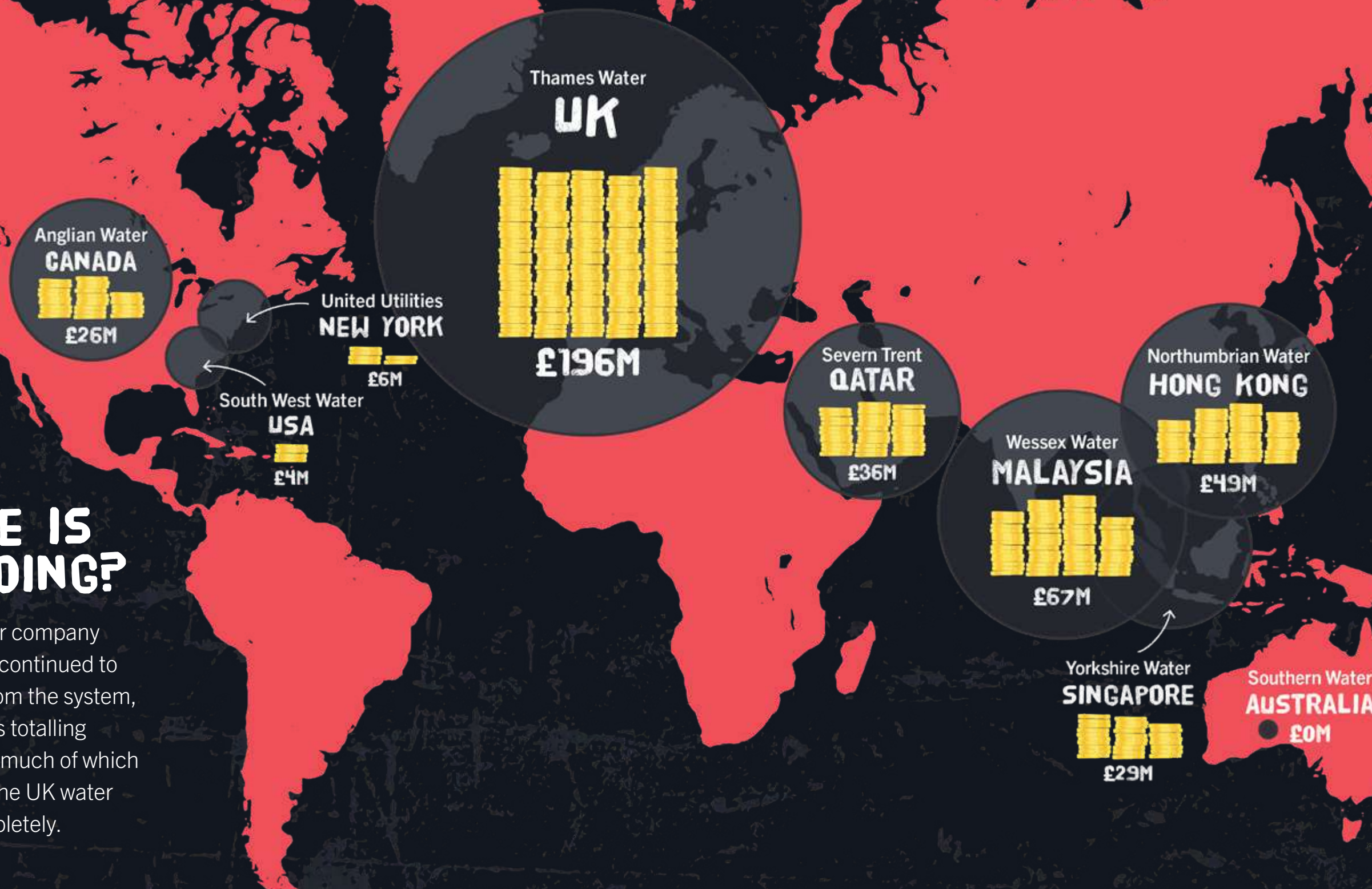


## WHERE IS IT GOING?

In 2024, water company shareholders continued to pull money from the system, with dividends totalling £1.2 billion – much of which will have left the UK water industry completely.

**FIGURE 16**

Water companies' largest shareholder locations and amount paid to them in dividends in 2024. See appendix for full details.





# MONEY DOWN THE DRAIN

Government suggests it could cost up to £63 billion to deal with the worst of the UK's sewage pollution (although there are ways it could be done for much less), but that sum falls far short of the outrageous £74.2 billion paid out to shareholders in the past few decades.<sup>24</sup>

Had that money been reinvested to maintain and upgrade the existing water network, it would have stopped millions of litres of raw sewage entering our coastlines, rivers and lakes.

**THE MONEY BEING POCKETED BY INVESTMENT BANKERS AND HEDGE FUND MANAGERS SHOULD HAVE BEEN INVESTED BACK INTO THE WATER SYSTEM FOR THE SAKE OF PEOPLE AND THE PLANET.**

The recently completed Thames Tideway Tunnel<sup>25</sup> – a super sewer designed to tackle pollution – cost £5 billion to build. According to Thames Water, the new system may cut sewage discharges into the Thames by around 95%, holding back nearly 640 Olympic swimming pools of sewage and stormwater at any one time.

£74.2 billion could have built 14.8 more 'super sewers' like the Thames Tideway Tunnel and stopped roughly 9,544 Olympic swimming pools of sewage and stormwater from entering our coastlines, rivers and lakes at any one time.

## Nature knows best

'Grey' infrastructure – like super sewers – is favoured by water companies, however investing in catchment scale 'green' or nature-based solutions could achieve even greater results.

This approach is being adopted across the world at a fraction of the cost of massive engineering projects, while also increasing biodiversity and resilience in the face of climate change.

For example, Philadelphia's Green City, Clean Waters program is reducing the volume of stormwater entering combined sewers using green infrastructure, while expanding stormwater treatment capacity with traditional infrastructure improvements.<sup>26</sup>

**£5BN  
COST OF ONE  
'SUPER SEWER'**

**£74.2 BN**  
**SHAREHOLDERS' DIVIDENDS 1990-2023**

**SHAREHOLDERS' DIVIDENDS  
COULD HAVE BEEN SPENT BUILDING  
14.8 MORE 'SUPER SEWERS'**

## Why is this happening? The perils of short term thinking

Water Companies in England are driven by the need to deliver short-term profit for shareholders, with environmental considerations just an afterthought.

This has become especially apparent over the past few years, as the type of shareholder investing in water companies has changed. Investors seeking low-risk, stable and sustainable rewards – where keeping delivery on track is critical to deliver long-term profit – have been replaced by those seeking short-term gains.

**HAVING MADE A QUICK PROFIT, SHAREHOLDERS CAN JUMP SHIP – LEAVING THE COMPANIES TO WALLOW IN THE DEBT THEY RAISED TO DELIVER THEIR DIVIDENDS.**

These shareholders are pushing for more dividends, faster. Water companies take on debt to make pay-outs to them, and then, having made a quick profit, shareholders can jump ship – leaving the companies to wallow in the debt they raised to deliver their dividends.

## Macquarie masquerade

The poster child for this behaviour is Macquarie Asset Management, Thames Water's biggest shareholder for a decade. For five of those years, dividends exceeded the amount of profit Thames Water was making. As a result, the company's debt more than quadrupled, from £2.5 billion to over £10 billion.<sup>27</sup> But rather than triggering the Government and Ofwat to investigate the damage this was doing to our water industry, **Macquarie was simply allowed to move on.** It became a majority owner in Southern Water instead.





## CUSTOMERS PAY THE PRICE

It's not just Thames Water. Spiralling debt, soaring bills, and streams of pollution are a problem for all of England's water companies.

In 2024, water companies on the whole were paying dividends at an average of 11% of their total revenue. Severn Trent paid out dividends worth 215% of profit after tax. Yorkshire Water paid out dividends worth 124% of profit after tax.

What's more, companies that weren't even profitable were also doling out the cash, with South West Water's owners making a loss, yet still paying out millions to shareholders.

Water companies have enough money from customer bills to provide their service and fund the bare minimum investment in the water system.<sup>28</sup>

It's catering for profit-hungry shareholders' appetites for dividends that have led them to borrow – and struggle to repay – vast amounts of money.<sup>29</sup>

This has a huge impact on customers. Analysis by leading experts has shown that in 2023-4 the 10 water companies had revenues of almost £14 billion but shelled out £3.7 billion on finance costs and over £1 billion on dividends. This means on average, 35p in every pound of customers' bills was being used to pay back debts and finance dividends rather than fix the broken sewerage system.<sup>30</sup>

**IN 2023 ON AVERAGE, 35P IN EVERY POUND OF CUSTOMERS' BILLS WAS BEING USED TO PAY BACK DEBTS AND FINANCE DIVIDENDS RATHER THAN FIX THE BROKEN SEWERAGE SYSTEM.**

The average water bill is set to rise 36% by 2030.<sup>31</sup> The average customer will be paying £160 more in bills in 2030 than they paid in 2024.<sup>32</sup> And water companies are trying to mislead customers about what's happening and where the bill increases are going.

In 2024, Thames Water claimed that just 3% of customer bills went to paying lenders back. In fact, the average Thames Water customer was paying 28% of their bill to tackle the company's £18 billion debt.<sup>33</sup> Attempts to turn the tide have led nowhere. Vast quantities of sewage are still polluting our waters. And water companies keep failing to deliver on their promises.

Even well-intentioned interventions have failed, because the incentives are stacked in the wrong way, prioritising profit for shareholders over fixes that are urgently needed.

**IF THINGS STAY THIS WAY, HISTORY WILL KEEP REPEATING ITSELF. WE WILL KEEP HURTLING DOWN THE PLUG HOLE OF DEBT, WHILE A DELUGE OF DISCHARGES CONTAMINATES OUR OCEANS.**



## FRESH VISION: WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

**We can change things, if we change the way our system is run.** Across the globe, the norm is to manage water at a local level through a mixture of public, private and not-for-profit ownership rather than the 100% private ownership model in England.



### WE'RE DEMANDING: A FULL RESET

The priorities of the entire water sector need to change completely to end pollution for profit and establish a fair and transparent system – one that prioritises public health and value for customer money and delivers healthy coastlines, rivers and lakes.







06

SICKENING SEWAGE

# SICKENING SEWAGE

We're living through an escalating public health disaster. The UK's population and natural environment are being exposed to a potentially lethal concoction of human faeces and toxic wastewater – full of harmful pathogens and viruses, chemicals, heavy metals, and microplastics. It has to stop.

11.6 million adults took part in some form of outdoor water sports in 2023, continuing a year-on-year trend of more people reaping the vast mental and physical benefits of getting into the UK's wild waters.

These blue spaces are where people dip, paddle, surf and swim. They've become the heart of entire communities. People get in coastal waters, rivers and lakes to forget about their problems, connect with friends, exercise, and simply feel a sense of release.

## BUT THE POLLUTION OF THESE SPACES IS MAKING PEOPLE SICK.

### Poisoning our communities

For the past six years, we've been collating Sickness Reports through our Safer Seas and River Service (SSRS), to discover exactly what effect sewage pollution is having on the health and wellbeing of water users across the UK.

**SINCE 2020, WE'VE RECEIVED A TOTAL OF 6,053 REPORTS, FROM OVER 1,000 DIFFERENT LOCATIONS, WITH 1,853 SUBMITTED IN 2024 ALONE.**

These aren't just statistics. They tell the story of thousands of human lives put needlessly at risk.



Minimising ingestion of human faecal pathogens bacteria, viruses and parasites- remains a **PUBLIC HEALTH PRIORITY**. Whilst sewage effluent has undergone treatment processes which significantly reduce the risk, it still can contain viable **HUMAN BACTERIA** and **VIRUSES** which have the potential to cause **SERIOUS DISEASE IF INGESTED."**

**CHRIS WITTY**

Chief Medical Officer for England



06

## DEEP DIVE INTO 2024 DATA

**11.6 MILLION** PEOPLE TOOK PART IN OUTDOOR WATER SPORTS IN 2023

**1,853** SICKNESS REPORTS



were submitted to us. That's an average of 5 people getting sick every day for a year – that we know of.

From these reports alone, people had to take a total of

**3,425** SICK DAYS OFF WORK

**4 DAYS**

**AVG. SICK LEAVE**

On average, people who had to take time off work used 4 days of sick leave.

**331** PEOPLE HAD TO SEE A DOCTOR



**79%**

of them said their doctor **ATTRIBUTED THEIR SICKNESS TO SEWAGE POLLUTION**

**£493,200**

of productivity was lost due to sick days.





# CATCH OF THE DAY

**EYE INFECTION**  
74 cases

**EAR, NOSE & THROAT**  
119 cases

**RESPIRATORY**  
208 cases

**GASTROENTERITIS**  
1,390 cases

**SKIN INFECTION**  
90 cases

**NON-SPECIFIC VIRAL**  
66 cases

The most common waterborne sicknesses in 2024.

## CASE STUDY

### SICK OF IT: THE WELLBEING COACH

**ALDWICK,  
WEST SUSSEX**



**"I BECAME CRITICALLY ILL AND SPENT SIX WEEKS IN HOSPITAL..."**

Sea swimming offers a huge range of health benefits, from quality cardio exercise to immune system-boosting wellness. But when water quality is shamefully neglected, it's an activity that can make you extremely sick rather than keep you healthy.

Suzi Finlayson told us how she first started feeling unwell in December 2023, but that it wasn't until 14th January 2024 that it became clear why: she had a blood infection that had led to endocarditis, an inflammation of the inner layer of her heart. No prizes for guessing the root cause.

"Sewage dumping at Aldwick Beach was rife, but I wasn't aware of how serious it was at the time," Suzi explained.

"When I later looked at the reports, I was shocked. I had been sea swimming there about three times a week, all year round, since 2019."

Taking a deeper dive into Suzi's case, we found that one sewage overflow from Southern Water in December 2023, into the waters of Aldwick, had lasted 343 hours.

That's 14 straight days of raw sewage pollution being pumped into Suzi's swimming spot.

I became critically ill and spent six weeks in hospital care, including intensive care, followed by six months of recovery from open-heart surgery for a mitral valve replacement," said Suzi. "I required weekly hospital visits for blood tests, rehabilitation, and ongoing follow-ups. My business, focused on mental health and wellbeing life coaching with valuable council and NHS contracts, had to close as a result. I'm working towards rebuilding but can't work in the same way as before. I tire easily and can't commit to contract hours anymore."

Suzi went on to explain how the illness affected not just her business, but every aspect of her life, including her home and family. For six months, she couldn't walk her dogs, drive, or manage her house.

It's unacceptable that illegally-dumped sewage has had such a detrimental impact on Suzi's life. And she's not the only one. Across the country, everyday people are struggling with the fall out of sewage pollution just like Suzi. And we're all sick of it.



# WE'RE PAYING FOR THIS TWICE

Based on the average UK salary of £37,430<sup>35</sup>, the economic hit from taking time off work with sewage sickness in 2024 reached **£493,200** – just taking into account the sick days recorded in our reports.

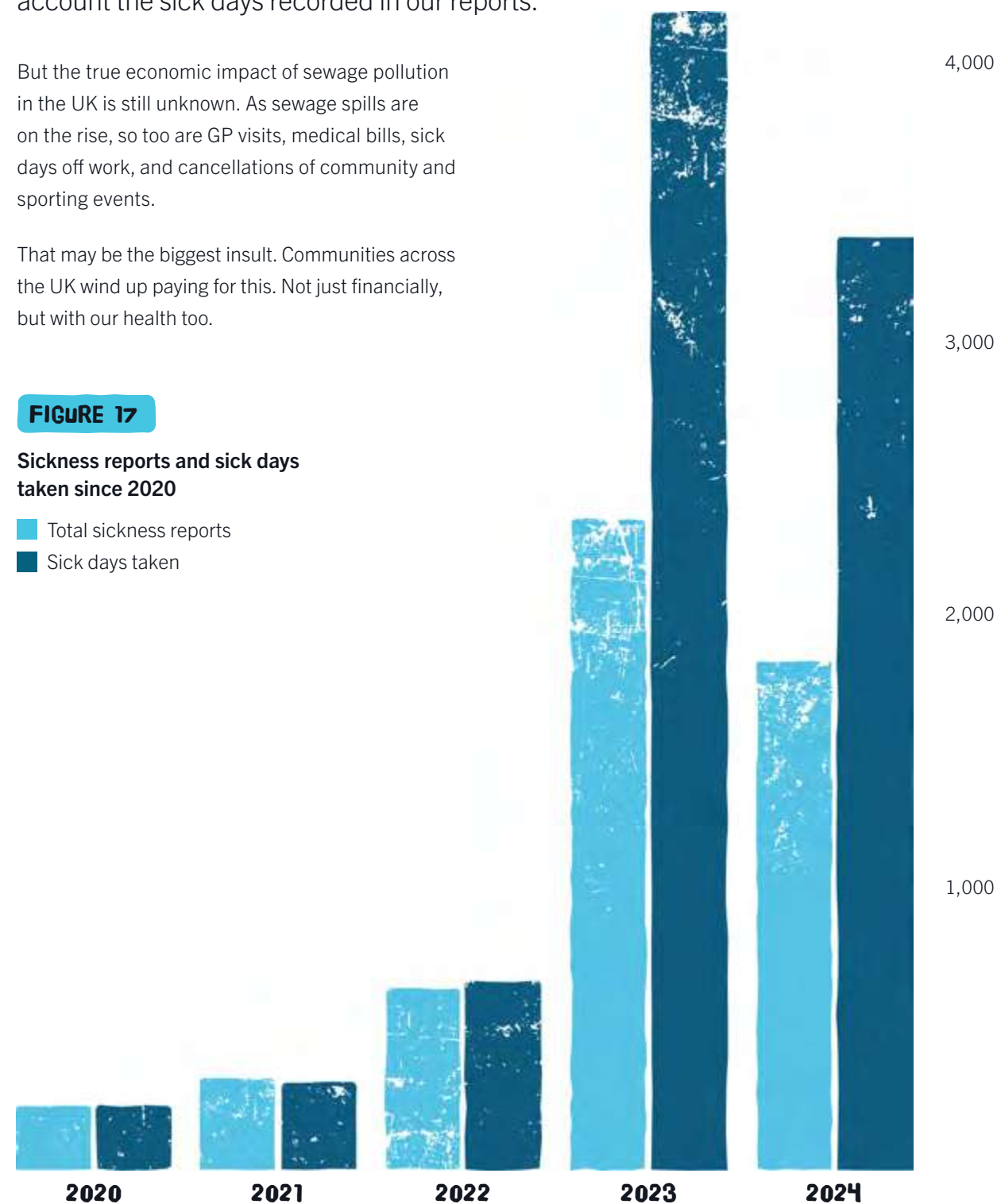
But the true economic impact of sewage pollution in the UK is still unknown. As sewage spills are on the rise, so too are GP visits, medical bills, sick days off work, and cancellations of community and sporting events.

That may be the biggest insult. Communities across the UK wind up paying for this. Not just financially, but with our health too.

**FIGURE 17**

**Sickness reports and sick days taken since 2020**

■ Total sickness reports  
■ Sick days taken



## CASE STUDY

### SICK OF IT: THE CARAVAN PARK OWNER

STAITHES,  
NORTH YORKSHIRE



Staithe Chalet and Caravan Park is a privately-owned site deep in the ravine. During heavy rain, three sewer inspection hatches on the land have been bursting and sending untreated sewer effluent into Staithe Beck. For 12 years.

John Reeve, a Surfers Against Sewage rep, was approached in August 2024 to help the site owner, Kim, because the issue had been going on so long – with nothing more than a series of patch-ups and promises from Yorkshire Water that it was addressing, instead of the complex wider issues. In all that time, Kim has been unable to develop the camping field. The commercial value of the property has shot down, while flood damage to the riverbank and site bridge support has cost Kim over £10,000 in repairs.

That's where this becomes a story of can-do spirit and democratic decision-making. John and Kim pulled together an action group, to meet on-site with representatives from Yorkshire Water, National Parks UK and a local councillor to diagnose and fix the problem.

"Yorkshire Water attempted minor changes and system cleansing initially, but we saw further flooding and inadequate repair jobs," says John. "There is now a major catchment-wide investigation underway, because with every failure we just turned around and said: 'You still haven't done anything' and reinforce that with 'no change to the system, results in no change to the problem'."

**"THERE IS NOW A  
MAJOR CATCHMENT-WIDE  
INVESTIGATION UNDERWAY..."**

Thanks to pressure from the local community, Yorkshire Water eventually accepted culpability for the damage to the bank at the bridge location and has now reimbursed Kim for the costs. Yet issues are still evident on the site.

"We're monitoring and reporting every failure, while Yorkshire Water formulates a permanent solution," says John. "Something they have failed to commit to finding for the previous decade."

John tells us that, while a permanent solution may be elusive, his collaboration with sympathetic organisations like the National Parks UK has been instrumental in delivering action on the ground.

This is more proof that decisions around water management shouldn't be left to executives in distant boardrooms who have shareholders to please. They should be taken democratically, with the people and organisations who are invested in the issue having a proper say.



## NOT WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED

In 2024, people made 331 doctor appointments because they'd fallen ill after swimming in polluted waters in the UK. 15 people reported being hospitalised.

We don't yet have the granular data to establish just how much sewage pollution is costing the health service, but we are starting to see growing trends.

Figures revealed last year showed hospital admissions for waterborne diseases in England were up 60% between 2010 and 2023<sup>34</sup>. One study found individuals engaging in sea bathing had a **29% HIGHER LIKELIHOOD OF REPORTING GASTROINTESTINAL ILLNESSES**; while official stats tell us that gastrointestinal diseases place a staggering financial burden on the NHS: £1.3 billion each year.<sup>36</sup>

**IN SHORT, WATER POLLUTION ADDS EVEN MORE DEAD WEIGHT TO A HEALTH CARE SYSTEM THAT'S ALREADY FIGHTING TO STAY AFLOAT.**



### CASE STUDY

## SICK OF IT: THE NHS MENTAL HEALTH WORKER

**GODREVY, CORNWALL**

Miriam Oates, a mental health worker for NHS Cornwall, told us how she had two bouts of sickness after entering the water in 2024: one after surfing at Newquay's Great Western beach, and one following a swim further down the coast at Godrevy.

"I took time off work for both episodes," she told us. "I was then put on a formal sickness review. In total, I had six days off work and was also unwell during the weekend."

Miriam is fortunate enough to get paid sick days, so the illness didn't affect her financially. However, it did have an impact on her work.

**"SOME OF MY PATIENTS HAD THEIR APPOINTMENTS CANCELLED, WHICH WASN'T FAIR ON THEM."**

### CASE STUDY

## SICK OF IT: THE ATHLETE

**CLEVEDON, SOMERSET**

In September 2023, Charles went to swim at the Marine Lake in Clevedon, a place ideal for practising open water swimming and train for an upcoming Ironman event. The following day, he collapsed, hitting his head and losing consciousness.

After being rushed to hospital, tests revealed heart attack-like symptoms. Over the next four months, further tests showed that a virus contracted while swimming had caused a drop in blood pressure, leading to a minor heart episode and damage to the pericardium, the heart's outer lining.



"The diagnosis significantly impacted my life," Charles told us. "I couldn't raise my heart rate during recovery, making everyday tasks, like commuting by bike, challenging. My main social activity is sport, which was put on hold for months, affecting my confidence and isolating me."

Charles was quick to stress that he's far from alone here. The health impact of polluted waters affects whole swathes of society.

"Sewage pollution has created a perception of inaccessibility in our community when talking about sea swimming and wild swimming," he said. "Coastal communities are suffering hugely – their natural asset is losing its value rapidly."

**"MY MAIN SOCIAL ACTIVITY IS SPORT, WHICH WAS PUT ON HOLD FOR MONTHS, AFFECTING MY CONFIDENCE..."**





## CASE STUDY

# SICK OF IT: THE COMMUNITY STRIKES BACK



Fed up with getting sick from sewage spills, residents and businesses in Exmouth are resisting the tide and fighting for their health and principles. In a UK first, they're taking South West Water to court for treating the places they love to swim, surf, and play in like a sewer.

"We're at the end of an estuary, and there are hundreds of sewage outflows in the catchment of the River Exe," said Nicky Nicholls, who is coordinating the legal action.

"Last year, one had this massive burst, which went straight into the bathing waters in the middle of August. We rely on our tourism. The red flags went up on the beach."



Nicky recalls how she walked the length of the sea front, canvassing opinion from the 26 businesses there. The anger was unanimous.

"Some of them were literally crying about losing 30% of their business that week, and how they couldn't afford to keep trading if it kept going on," she says. "The impact is absolutely huge. And it ripples through the community."

Teaming up with law firm Leigh Day to take South West Water to court<sup>37</sup> for the public nuisance it has caused, the community is hopeful they can turn the tide, and show how people power can shape better environments.

"As a community, we get stronger by doing this," says Nicky. "We're going to come out of it with a cleaner and greener beach. And hopefully other people will see that Exmouth won a case and do the same thing in their towns."

**"WE RELY ON TOURISM.  
THE RED FLAGS WENT  
UP ON THE BEACH."**



## WILDLY UNHEALTHY

All this pollution isn't just harming human health.

When sewage contaminates our wild waters, it **WREAKS HAVOC ON ENTIRE ECOSYSTEMS**. The ecological impact of raw sewage in our water ranges from disease and poisoning in animals, to reproductive issues, food chain contamination and habitat destruction.

In 2019, only 16% of England's waterbodies — rivers, canals, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters — were in high or good status. The effects of sewage on each of these individual waterbodies can be severe, with both **IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM IMPACTS**. But to make matters worse, the interconnected nature of our world means sewage-polluted waters in the UK are having an effect on a global scale.

A recent report found that sewage pollution is turning seagrass, a vital yet rapidly declining ocean habitat, **FROM A VALUABLE CARBON SINK INTO A DANGEROUS CARBON SOURCE**.<sup>38</sup>

So, while water company bosses and shareholders are busy lining their pockets, our planet and precious wildlife is dying as a result.

**SEWAGE POLLUTED WATERS  
IN THE UK IS HAVING  
AN EFFECT ON A  
GLOBAL SCALE.**



## FRESH VISION: WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

We are living through a sewage-induced public health nightmare. It's time for a fresh vision that puts public and environmental health first and gives local people a say in how water is managed.



### WE'RE DEMANDING: LEGAL PRIORITISATION

Water companies must have a clear, legal priority to protect and improve public and environmental health. This means they should put first any action that protects the health of millions of water users, wherever they swim, surf and play.



### DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING

Water should be managed at a regional and local level, with the input of local stakeholders including waters users, customers, local authorities, environmental groups and engineers. Crucially, these stakeholders must have real decision-making power.

## WATER MADE YOU ILL? TELL US

We're collecting sickness case studies to build up a bank of evidence so we can hold water companies and the UK Government accountable. Report your sickness to the Safer Seas and River Service (SSRS) app.

# WE ARE AMID A SEWAGE INDUCED PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS.

## IT'S TIME TO PUT PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH FIRST.

## SEWAGE SPOTLIGHT

### A WORD ON BATHING WATERS

#### What are Bathing Waters?

Officially designated bathing waters are our most popular bathing spots and the only place where water quality is regularly monitored by regulators, with legal obligations placed on polluters to clean up their act.

#### What's going wrong?

This year, the UK Government will be changing the rules on how bathing water designation and testing work. One of these changes creates more barriers to improving water quality in England and Wales.

The new change states that a "feasibility test" will be required for a proposed bathing water. This step could mean that sites deemed too polluted risk being immediately denied this designation, and therefore unable to receive the monitoring and investment needed to make blue spaces cleaner and safer for the communities that swim, surf, paddle or kayak there.

If this legislation was in place in 2020 there would be 20 official bathing sites that may have never been granted bathing water status as they received a 'poor' classification. This means people who use the water would have no tools to stay safe or to improve their water quality.



The reform will directly benefit the polluters by giving water companies a way to argue that it's too expensive to stop polluting a site that people swim in.

#### What needs to happen?

The UK Government needs to immediately scrap this planned change. Instead, it needs to make changes that protect water users, including:

- 1 Testing water quality all year round.
- 2 Counting all recreational water users when deciding whether to designate a bathing site.
- 3 Testing for emerging pollutants.

[PROTECTINGWILDWATERS.ORG.UK](https://protectingwildwaters.org.uk)







# FRESH THINKING FOR CLEAN, HEALTHY WATER

WE CAN SEE A BETTER FUTURE



The UK water industry is broken. Despite new plans, laws, and regulation appearing over the past few years, the sewage pollution problem is just getting worse – and so is the public health crisis it's causing.

There were 592,478 confirmed discharges in 2024 for a total of 4,786,038 hours. If we compensate for the data black hole in Scotland and Northern Ireland, **WE EXPECT THE FIGURE TO BE MORE LIKE 994,499 DISCHARGES.**

Last year alone, SAS received **1,853 SICKNESS REPORTS.** They detail the equivalent of nine years-worth of sick days, with a productivity hit to the economy of £493,200 – just from those who reported to us.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, governments are sweeping the pollution problem under the rug, while pointing the finger at everyone else. But this veil of secrecy is lifting, as people become more aware of what water companies are up to. In Wales, ineffective regulation and an incompetent water company means sewage was released daily in first two months of 2025. In England, water companies are driven by a need to pay out billions to profit-hungry short-term investors. They've consistently failed to improve, or even maintain, their infrastructure.

## THE RESULT: BROKEN PROMISES, MISSED TARGETS AND WIDESPREAD ENVIRONMENTAL HARM.

In 2024, water companies in England paid out £1.2 billion in dividends – bringing the grand total paid to shareholders since privatisation to a **WHOPPING £74.2 BILLION.** All while our bills keep shooting up to service the ever-growing debt pile being used to pay shareholders.

## IT'S A DIRTY MESS THAT LEADS US TO A VERY CLEAR CONCLUSION: WE CAN'T TRUST THE WATER COMPANIES. AND WE CAN'T TRUST THE SYSTEM AS IT STANDS.

We need transformational reform of the industry, a shift that ends pollution for profit and delivers a fair and transparent service that prioritises public health and value for customer money, while ensuring a healthy coastline, rivers and lakes.

The good news is we have a clear opportunity to create change, thanks to several positive developments...

### Independent Water Commission

In 2025, the Independent Water Commission will look at how to reform the water sector in England and Wales, with recommendations for the UK and Welsh government to act on. This has the potential to be a **HISTORIC TURNING POINT**, starting the restoration of our coastline, rivers and lakes for the good of people and the planet.

But it requires the Commission to be ambitious and consider all the available evidence. It can't simply bow to pressure from vested interests.

### Devolved elections

Over the next three years, people in the devolved nations will be heading to the polls to elect their next set of representatives. In the 2024 UK General Election we saw the strength of feeling about the state of our waterways and how that played a crucial role in shaping people's votes. The same thing will happen here. We need all parties to adopt our fresh vision for water in their manifestos, to ensure everyone in the UK is protected from the scourge of sewage pollution.

### New systems

We need a whole new water system – one that's fair and transparent, which ends pollution for profit, prioritises public health and value for customer money and delivers a healthy coastline, rivers and lakes.

That new system must be built on the five key principles of a fresh vision for clean and healthy water we've laid out throughout this report:





# AMAZED? APPALLED? FRUSTRATED?

The state of the UK water industry makes for a sobering read that sparks intense feelings in all of us. Luckily there is a way to put that rage to good use and use your power and voice to do something about it.

Here are four simple ways to get started...

## SAY YOUR BIT AND SIGN YOUR NAME

Respond to our survey and get your voice heard by the Independent Water Commission:

## JOIN THE PADDLE OUT PROTEST '25

17.5.25

Grab your gear, head to the water and show the polluters that we've had enough of their lies.

## GET THE FREE APP

Download our free Safer Seas and Rivers Service app to instantly check if your local bathing water is polluted with sewage. If it is, don't wait—send an email to your local MP or water company CEO and demand change.



## FUEL THE FIGHT BACK

BECOME AN SAS MEMBER  
AND HELP DRIVE THE  
CAMPAIGN TO  
END SEWAGE  
POLLUTION



# APPENDICES

## REFERENCES & FOOTNOTES

- 1 This graph uses all available data across the four nations. Monitoring levels vary by nation, so the total figures are not directly comparable. Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water does not publish a summarised total of discharges; instead, we've included all available data from Sewer Overflows, Emergency Overflows and Unpermitted Overflows – categories we do not currently have equivalent data for in England. 100% reporting was achieved in England at the end of 2023, therefore figures before that date are not directly comparable with monitoring in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland where coverage isn't 100%.
- 2 This data uses real-time discharge alerts from water companies. It hasn't been verified or processed using the same methods as official annual figures. For example, short discharges (e.g. one-minute events) are shown individually here, whereas annual reports might group multiple short discharges into a single event. Official statistics use the 12/24 discharge count method, which we don't apply. This means our figures will show a higher number of discharges than those reported annually. The 12/24 counting method, counts the first 12-hour block with a discharge as one, and each subsequent 24-hour block with a discharge as additional, until a 24-hour block with no discharge occurs.
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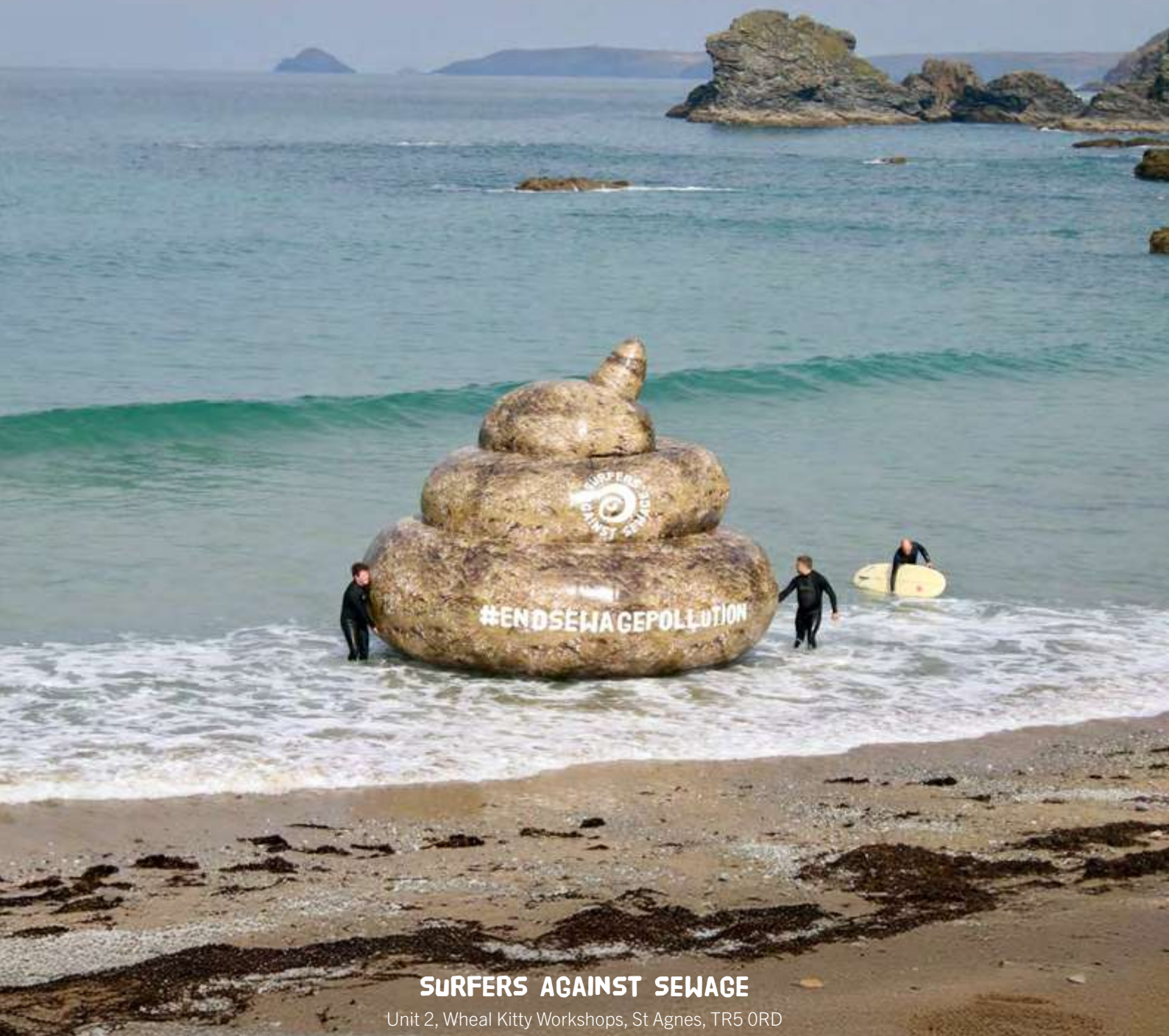
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SHAREHOLDER DATA

Water companies’ largest shareholder locations and amount paid to them in dividends in 2024.

Water Company	Main Shareholder	Dividends for Main Shareholder 2024
Severn Trent	Qatar Investment Authority (Qatar)	£36m dividend
Thames Water	Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System (Canada)	£0 paid to shareholder but £195.8m paid to parent companies
United Utilities	Blackrock Investment Management Limited (New York, USA)	£5.67m dividend
Northumbrian Water	CK Hutchinson Holdings (Hong Kong)	£49.35m dividend
Yorkshire Water	GIC Special Investments (Singapore)	£28.59m dividend
Anglian Water	Canada Pension Plan Investment Board (Canada)	£26.29m dividend
Wessex Water	YTL (Malaysia)	£66.5m dividend
South West Water	Lazard Asset Management LLC (USA)	£4.05m dividend
Southern Water	Macquarie Asset Management (Australia)	£0m dividend








## **SURFERS AGAINST SEWAGE**

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