

MID-YEAR IMPACT REPORT 2026



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A MESSAGE FROM GILES

SIX MONTHS INTO 2026, ONE THING IS CLEAR: THIS MOVEMENT HAS NEVER BEEN STRONGER AND MORE DETERMINED TO FORCE REAL CHANGE.

That passion is clear for all to see in people like Julie Maughan, who has been a huge inspiration for me this year. Julie's daughter Heather Preen died, aged 8, after a family seaside holiday in Devon. She's turned that grief into some of the fiercest campaigning I've ever stood alongside.

In February, her story reached the whole country — Channel 4's *Dirty Business* dramatised what happened to Heather and exposed the horrifying reality of our broken water system.

Over 3 nights of the broadcast, millions more people came to share the anger and urgency for change that our community has carried for years.

And people didn't just watch. They acted, and they haven't stopped since. What started as outrage has become something far more powerful — organised, sustained pressure that the Government can no longer wave away.

When we launched our Judicial Review to defend Bathing Water protections, and when we sat down with ministers who'd rather this all just went away, it was people like Julie who made sure we couldn't be ignored.

This fight has never really been about data or legislation. It's about what happens to people in the water, and we don't let anyone forget it.

None of this happens in isolation. Every legal challenge, every meeting in Whitehall, carries more weight because of the tens of thousands of people standing behind it — testing water quality, cleaning beaches, emailing MPs, paddling out with boards held high. That's where our real strength has always come from, and this year it has shown up louder and more organised than I've seen in a long time.

The scale of what we're up against hasn't shrunk. If anything, this looks set to be one of the worst years on record for sewage dumping in our seas, rivers and lakes.

But for 36 years, people have stood with us in this fight, and I've never felt more confident that we're close to real change. Thank you for being part of it. The next 6 months matter more than ever.

Giles Bristow
Chief Executive 



THE YEAR IN NUMBERS

(JAN-JUNE 2026)

2026 is already demonstrating the power of people. In the first 6 months of the year, communities across the UK have kept up unprecedented momentum, mobilising at scale to demand clean rivers, safer seas, and an end to plastic and sewage pollution. These numbers show a growing, determined force that is impossible to ignore.

PEOPLE MOBILISED

500,000+

people engaged in action for cleaner waters

514,000+

users of the SSRS app accessing real-time sewage alerts

15,300+

people emailed water company CEOs and MPs



ENDING SEWAGE POLLUTION

300,000+

signatures on our #PeopleBeforePayouts petition

37,000+

people responded to our consultation on the Government's water sector White Paper

8,000+

people mobilised across 56 Paddle Out Protests

ENDING PLASTIC POLLUTION

112,000+

volunteers taking action through Million Mile Clean

212,000+

miles cleaned across the UK

71,000KG

of plastic pollution removed



GROWING THE MOVEMENT

3,600+

Plastic Free Schools

6,000+

businesses and

620

Plastic Free Communities



REACHING THE NATION

831,000+

visits to sas.org.uk and Data HQ

513,000+

social media followers

3,200+

media mentions nationwide



PEOPLE POWER IN ACTION

When we talk about ocean activism, we're talking about people power — everyday folk coming together to protect the seas, rivers and lakes they love, and communities refusing to accept pollution as inevitable. That might mean volunteers testing water quality, children turning ocean plastic into art, local groups organising beach cleans, or thousands of people paddling out together in protest.

You might not think of yourself as an activist. But if you care about clean waters, healthy ecosystems and stronger communities, you already are one.

As one member of our community put it:
"Activism does not have to be loud to be powerful. It can be steady, thoughtful, collective, and just a little bit sparkly."

The scale of the challenge has never been greater. Our 2025 Water Quality Report concluded that there were almost 600,000 confirmed sewage dumps into UK waters, with the true figure likely closer to 1 million.

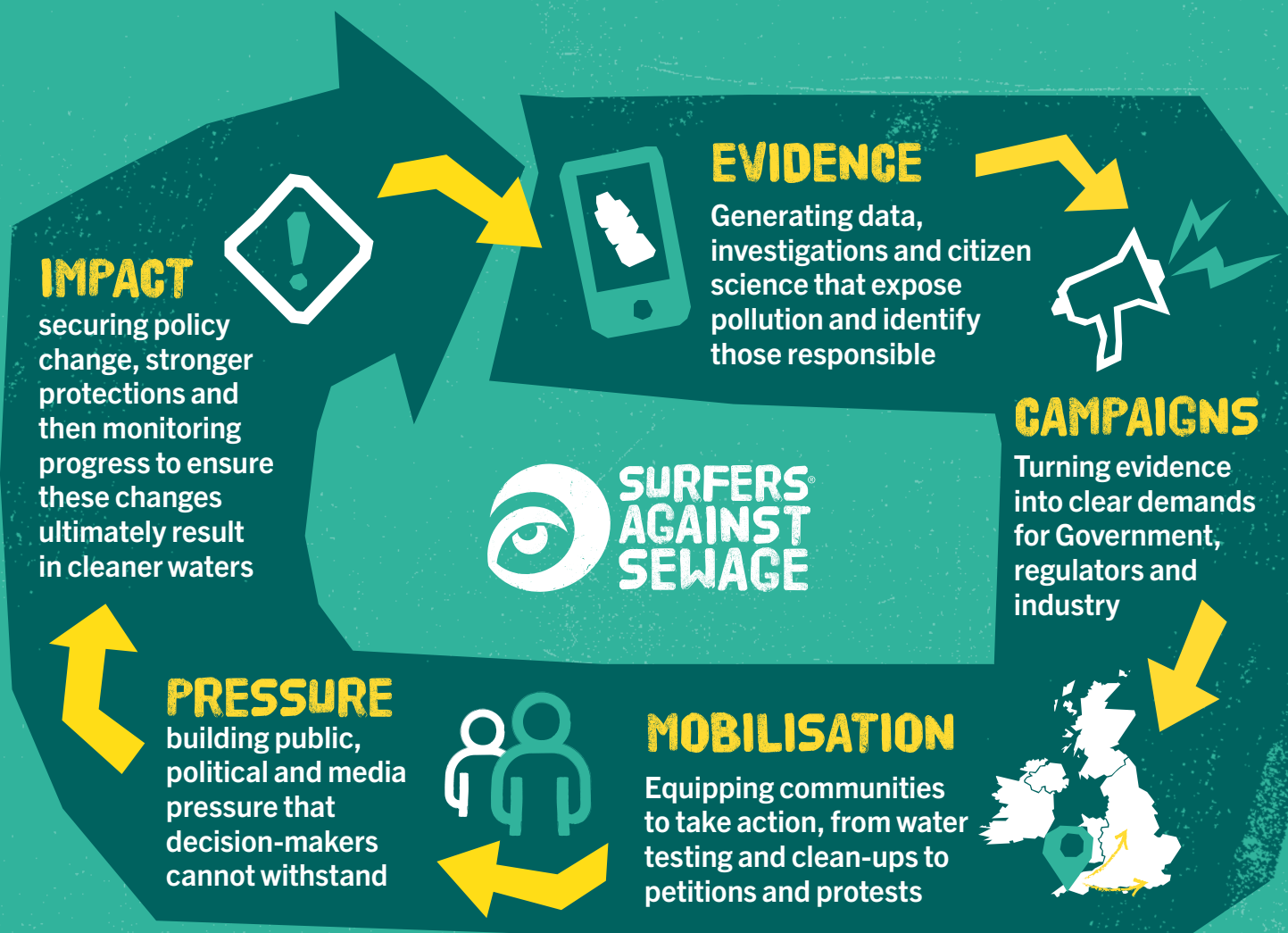
BUT IF POLLUTION IS POWERED BY SYSTEMS, CHANGE IS POWERED BY PEOPLE.

This is why we combine long-term policy and advocacy work with action on the ground: mobilising communities, amplifying local voices, and giving people the tools to demand accountability.



HOW WE MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN

PEOPLE POWER, APPLIED WITH PRECISION AND PERSISTENCE, FORCES SYSTEMIC CHANGE. OUR THEORY OF CHANGE WORKS AS A FLYWHEEL, EACH STAGE FEEDING THE NEXT.



OUR PROGRAMMES:

SAFER SEAS & RIVERS SERVICE APP P7

500,000+ users receiving real-time sewage alerts

PROTECTING WILD WATERS P8

30 inland communities supported to secure official bathing water status

REGIONAL REPS P17

183 super-volunteers driving local and national action

MILLION MILE CLEAN P14

150,000+ volunteers removing plastic pollution each year

PLASTIC FREE SCHOOLS P15

3,600+ schools reducing plastic use

PLASTIC FREE COMMUNITIES P16

6,000+ businesses, 620+ towns/villages removing single-use plastics

ENDING SEWAGE POLLUTION

PUBLIC PRESSURE ON SEWAGE POLLUTION HAS REACHED A TIPPING POINT. WHAT BEGAN AS GROWING AWARENESS HAS EVOLVED INTO A POWERFUL MOVEMENT DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY FROM GOVERNMENT AND THE WATER INDUSTRY.

In 2026, this momentum has been catalysed by Channel 4's docu-drama *Dirty Business* and driven by our campaign actions, including our public consultation on the Government's water sector White Paper, the *#PeopleBeforePayouts* petition, and the UK's largest-ever Paddle Out Protests.

In May, the Government announced plans for a Clean Water Bill, a clear response to the scale of the crisis and the strength of our campaigning. Progress has also been secured on the ground, with new bathing waters designated across England, Wales and Scotland so far this year, strengthening accountability for polluters and regulators alike.

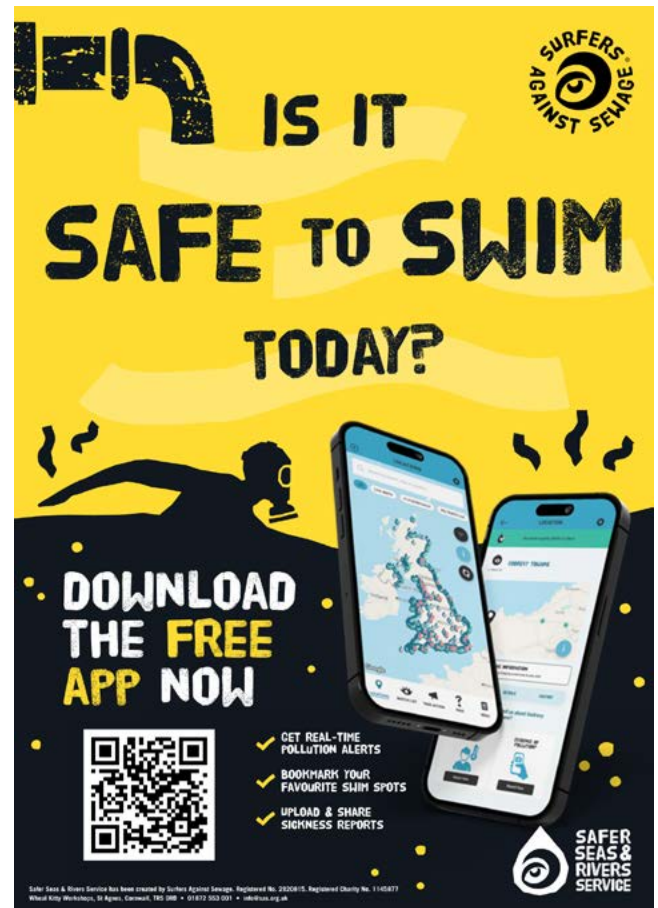


SAFER SEAS & RIVERS SERVICE APP (SSRS)

datahq.sas.org.uk/sewage-data-hq/is-it-safe-to-swim

Data and evidence sit at the heart of our work, and the Safer Seas & Rivers Service (SSRS) app is where that comes to life. Free to use, its sewage pollution alert system gives people a clear, real-time view of water quality where they live, surf and swim, helping them make safe decisions and, when needed, hold decision-makers to account. It's now recognised in the Government's Swim Healthy guidance.

This year we focused on strengthening the platform's reliability and data quality, aligning datasets with official sources and challenging inconsistencies directly with water companies. The SSRS app has also become a serious campaigning tool in its own right — Freedom of Information investigations and app-data analysis have helped trigger national media investigations across broadcasters including Channel 4, ITV, BBC and LBC.



KEY STATS IN 2026 SO FAR:

114,565

new users (514,570 total)

8.9 MILLION

app uses (17 per user, on average)

18,771

sewage overflow pipes monitored in real time

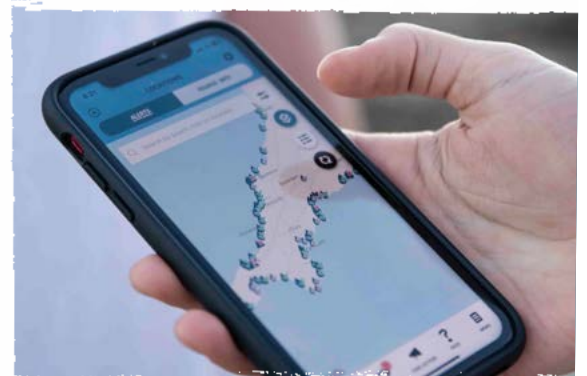
15,334 PEOPLE

emailed their water company CEO or MP (188,126 lifetime)

FROM ALERTS TO ACTION

With the University of Exeter and University of Galway, we studied whether the SSRS app changes behaviour, not just awareness.

Released in June 2026, the findings confirmed it does — users report avoiding or reducing time in polluted waters after an alert, though the research also flagged information fatigue and confirmation bias as challenges to manage. A full peer review is expected in September 2026.



PROTECTING WILD WATERS

SURFERS AGAINST SEWAGE

Launched in 2022, Protecting Wild Waters (PWW) helps communities secure official Bathing Water designation for inland waterways, a legal protection that requires regular testing and compels authorities and water companies to act. Designation drives monitoring, investment and improvement plans, creating long-term pressure for cleaner waters. It's the same mechanism that has already transformed UK coastlines, where over 400 bathing waters are now designated and 98% meet water quality standards, up from just 28% in the 1990s. We're now bringing that same protection inland.

The trajectory has been striking. When PWW launched, only 2 UK rivers had Bathing Water status; today there are 22, and 56 inland sites in total, 30 of them supported by PWW.

In 2026 alone, 8 of the 10 new English designations, and all 3 in Wales and Scotland, were PWW-supported. We also began monitoring PFAS "forever chemicals" this year, and 15 further applications are in progress. Beyond individual sites, PWW is shaping national policy through our *Make Our Waters Count* campaign and the Testing the Waters Consortium, which has helped put citizen science on the Government agenda.

2026 IMPACT:

- 8 of 10 new English designations supported
- All 3 Welsh/Scottish designations supported
- 15 applications in progress
- 35 citizen science communities engaged

LIFETIME IMPACT:

- 150 communities engaged
- 30 of 56 inland designated sites supported

protectingwildwaters.org.uk

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF CITIZEN SCIENCE

<https://arcg.is/1rvGei4>

This year, 35 communities monitored 47 inland and coastal sites, contributing over 1,000 water samples using the same methodology as environmental regulators, building one of the most comprehensive year-round datasets on recreational water quality available. Published in our report *The Ripple Effect*, it shows that communities are not just reporting pollution; they are generating evidence capable of changing policy. The report found that 81% of monitored sites failed to meet minimum water quality standards. That evidence now underpins our advocacy for year-round, real-time monitoring and broader pollutant testing, building on our campaigns including *I'm Not a Bather*, which challenges how current regulations fail to reflect the diverse ways people use UK waters.



TAKING THE GOVERNMENT TO COURT

sas.org.uk/updates/sas-vs-the-government

In January, we instructed environmental lawyers at Leigh Day to launch a Judicial Review challenging proposed changes to the Bathing Water Regulations. The issue is a new "feasibility test" that would let ministers refuse designation where improving water quality is deemed too difficult or costly, effectively writing off popular rivers, lakes and coastal waters as "too polluted to protect."

Designation is more than a label; it triggers monitoring, requires improvement plans, and gives the public vital information about harmful bacteria. The case will progress through the courts over the coming months.



37,000 VOICES, ONE CLEAR MESSAGE

sas.org.uk/updates/end-sewage-pollution-campaign-update

In January, the Government published its long-awaited White Paper on water reform, a landmark moment that included welcome steps such as a stronger independent regulator, more local decision-making, and an openness to reviewing water company ownership. However, it stopped short of addressing the root cause — a privatised system that puts shareholder profit ahead of public and environmental health.

THE GOVERNMENT DIDN'T LAUNCH A PUBLIC CONSULTATION SO, WITH 38 DEGREES, WE RAN OUR OWN. OVER 37,000 PEOPLE TOOK PART — 82% SAID THE GOVERNMENT ISN'T DOING ENOUGH, AND JUST 1% BELIEVE CURRENT PLANS WILL FIX THE PROBLEM.



We used this evidence base to brief MPs and engage ministers directly, and by May the King's Speech confirmed a Clean Water Bill would follow. But with its scope largely unchanged, this once-in-a-generation opportunity still risks falling short, and so we're focusing our campaigning efforts on making sure it delivers.

ENDING SEWAGE POLLUTION

DIRTY BUSINESS AND #PEOPLEBEFOREPAYOUTS



sas.org.uk/updates/dirty-business-real-people-sewage-drama

In February, Channel 4's *Dirty Business* drama exposed the human cost of the sewage scandal, including the death of 8-year-old Heather Preen, to 4.2 million viewers. Channel 4 also installed *The Fountain of Filth*, a public artwork on London's South Bank depicting people vomiting polluted water and featuring SAS Ambassador Sophie Hellyer, which drove significant coverage across the media and our communication channels.

We launched our *#PeopleBeforePayouts* petition alongside the broadcast, demanding an end to a system where bills rise, billions are extracted, and pollution continues unchecked.

**AT THE TIME OF WRITING THIS
REPORT, THE PETITION HAS PASSED
300,000 SIGNATURES.**

TELL YOUR POLITICAL
REPRESENTATIVE TO

**#END
SEWAGE
POLLUTION**

FROM PUBLIC PRESSURE TO PARLIAMENTARY ACTION

In February, over 2,300 supporters emailed their MPs ahead of a parliamentary debate on the water sector White Paper and Independent Water Commission, reaching 504 of the UK's 650 MPs and helping secure a dedicated debate led by APPG (All-Party Parliamentary Group) Vice Chair Ed Morello MP, in which 24 MPs spoke.

Our joint Water Pollution APPG with River Action has become the backbone of this engagement, and the momentum has held all year — Surfers Against Sewage has been referenced 90 times in Parliament, and sewage pollution overall has been mentioned over 220 times in the first 6 months of 2026, evidence that a once-niche issue is now a national political priority.

PADDLE OUT PROTESTS

In May, our largest-ever Paddle Out Protests brought more than 8,000 people out across 56 locations, generating 239 pieces of media coverage from outlets including ITV's Good Morning Britain, Sky News, LBC and The Guardian, and causing a storm across social media. 29 MPs, 28 councillors and 3 mayors attended events, more than half of all locations hosted a political representative.

The impact carried beyond the day itself — our petition gained over 3,300 signatures between 15 and 18 May, and SSRS app downloads rose 123% the following week. Timed ahead of the Clean Water Bill, the protests showed that collective action drives engagement at the highest levels of decision-making.



sas.org.uk/updates/thousands-join-paddle-out-protests-2026

TAKING SICKNESS STORIES TO THE HEART OF GOVERNMENT



Between March and May, we secured 2 in-person meetings with the Water Minister at DEFRA and a further meeting with the Secretary of State. We brought lived experiences into the room, including Reuben Santer, whose personal story featured in *Dirty Business*, to make the human cost impossible to ignore. Alongside this, we've maintained ongoing engagement with Special Advisers at DEFRA and No.10, providing evidence including comparisons from across Europe and legal pathways to reform failing water companies.

A SYSTEM ON THE BRINK, AND A POLITICAL TURNING POINT



June marked a shift in both corporate behaviour and political direction. Our campaigning against the proposed private restructuring of Thames Water helped expose a deal that would have left the company unaccountable while customers and the environment paid the price. The Secretary of State subsequently opposed the deal, bringing Government intervention back onto the table.

At the same time, the Prime Minister's resignation turned national attention to the issue of water company ownership, with the new Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, making increased public control of utilities a key plank of his platform. Our campaigning, policy and advocacy actions have laid the foundations for the changes our waters need, and this groundwork is already informing the moves of the new administration.

DEVOLVED NATION ELECTIONS

Against a backdrop of major political turnover in Scotland and Wales, we co-created national manifestos with communities to reflect lived experience and presented them to more than 20 MSs and MSPs at launch events in the Senedd and Holyrood.

In Wales, all major parties adopted sewage policies, with the new Welsh Government signalling interest in a Clean Water Act. In Scotland, all but 2 major parties made commitments, a significant shift given historically lower awareness of the issue.

We backed this with an 8-stop hustings tour from Thurso to the Gower Peninsula, engaging over 230 people and almost 40 candidates. The impact is already visible — MSPs are calling for a Scottish Clean Water Act, and Welsh Ministers have publicly discussed greater public control of water companies.



ENDING PLASTIC POLLUTION

OUR 2026 PLASTICS WORK TOOK PLACE AGAINST A BACKDROP OF STALLED PROGRESS — DELAYS TO THE GLOBAL PLASTICS TREATY, UNCERTAINTY AROUND THE UK'S CIRCULAR ECONOMY STRATEGY, AND SLOW MOVEMENT ON A NATIONWIDE DEPOSIT RETURN SCHEME, COMPOUNDED BY GROWING EVIDENCE OF INDUSTRY LOBBYING AND GREENWASHING.

Our focus stayed clear — demonstrate the strength of public demand, expose the gap between corporate promises and reality, and keep plastic pollution on the political agenda. Through the Scottish and Welsh elections, we pushed for reductions in plastic production, helping secure Wales's UK-leading Deposit Return Scheme legislation and Scotland's commitment to embed plastic reduction in its Circular Economy Strategy. Million Mile Clean data fed our fifth *Brand Audit*, exposing the UK's biggest plastic polluters, amplified through the *#ReturnToOffender* campaign.



MILLION MILE CLEAN

sas.org.uk/plastic-pollution/million-mile-clean

MILLION MILE CLEAN (MMC) IS ONE OF THE UK'S MOST SIGNIFICANT PEOPLE-POWERED ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS — VOLUNTEERS CLEAR PLASTIC POLLUTION FROM COASTLINES, RIVERS, STREETS AND GREEN SPACES, ENGAGING OVER 150,000 PEOPLE ANNUALLY AND NEARLY 900,000 PARTICIPANTS SINCE 2021.

Beyond the clean-ups themselves, MMC generates one of the UK's most valuable citizen science datasets on plastic pollution, turning individual action into evidence and pressure for change. The data collected is used to identify major sources of plastic pollution, inform policy recommendations, and strengthen campaigns targeting producers and government.

MMC also serves as a gateway into wider campaigning and volunteering with SAS, helping to build long-term environmental engagement. A highlight of 2026 was an invitation to Buckingham Palace for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award 70th anniversary celebrations, recognising MMC's role in engaging young people.

Key stats in 2026 so far:

112,296

VOLUNTEERS

71,224kg

OF WASTE REMOVED

212,620 MILES

CLEANED

5,791 CLEANS DELIVERED



THE BRAND AUDIT

sas.org.uk/updates/top-plastic-polluting-brands-revealed

Published in May using 2025 data, our *Brand Audit* drew on over 158,000 volunteers across 2,500+ cleans to record over 100,000 polluting items, the UK's largest citizen science dataset of its kind.

It found that just 12 major household brands, the *Dirty Dozen*, were responsible for 52% of all branded plastic pollution recorded, and that nearly half of pollution collected could have been avoided through policies like a Deposit Return Scheme. The report received nearly 10,000 views and reached over 11,000 people on social media, amplified through the *Break Free From Plastic* coalition.



#RETURNTOOFFENDER

sas.org.uk/updates/digital-return-to-offender-is-back

Launched in May off the back of the *Brand Audit*, #ReturnToOffender puts direct pressure on the brands driving the crisis, particularly food and drink packaging, which makes up 82% of plastic waste, only 16% of which is recycled. It gives people simple actions — calling out polluters on social media, emailing them directly, and sharing evidence of branded waste.

THE CAMPAIGN HAS ALREADY DEMONSTRATED STRONG REACH AND ENGAGEMENT, WITH CONTENT REACHING OVER 24,000 PEOPLE ONLINE, HIGHLIGHTING A GROWING APPETITE FOR HOLDING BRANDS ACCOUNTABLE.



PLASTIC FREE SCHOOLS

PlasticFreeSchools.org.uk

Since 2017, Plastic Free Schools (PFS) has helped drive reductions in single-use plastics across more than 3,600 schools nationwide. In 2026, with a cohort of 220 schools, we're turning that near-decade of learning into a freely available, open-access framework for schools and home learners UK-wide.

The November 2026 Pupil Power Assembly will build on 2025's record-breaking event, which engaged over 26,000 pupils, and a new Youth Advisory Panel, selected from 135 applicants, will help shape the programme's next phase.



KEY STATS IN 2026 SO FAR:

3,613

total schools
(220 in the final cohort)

350

attendees at the Maritime
Museum for World Ocean Day

135

Youth Advisory Panel
applicants

21

teachers at the SAS X Teach
Earth training weekend

DIGITAL OCEAN SCHOOL

Digital Ocean School, a free online environmental education platform, has attracted more than 31,000 content views this year and is evolving into an open-access resource hub for schools and educators.



PLASTIC FREE COMMUNITIES

PlasticFree.org.uk

PLASTIC FREE COMMUNITIES (PFC) BRINGS RESIDENTS, SCHOOLS, BUSINESSES AND LOCAL ORGANISATIONS TOGETHER TO TACKLE SINGLE-USE PLASTIC AT SOURCE.

By reducing avoidable plastic use, influencing local practices and building public support for change, PFC creates measurable impact in communities while strengthening the case for national policy reform.

IN 2026, PFC PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN LAUNCHING #RETURNTOOFFENDER, HELPING EXPOSE THE BRANDS DRIVING PLASTIC POLLUTION AND BUILDING PUBLIC PRESSURE FOR STRONGER ACTION.

Communities also featured in high-profile partnerships, including a flagship clean in West Kirby with Team England, the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Campaign and Paralympic gold medallist Ellie Simmonds.



KEY STATS IN 2026 SO FAR:

6,093

Businesses signed up
(80% awarded)

621

Communities
(33% awarded)

5,183

community allies
(58 new this year)

3,094

events and actions
(76 new)

4,740

Individuals engaged
through action plans.



REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVES

sas.org.uk/take-action/regions

Reps are trained local volunteers who act as SAS's presence on the ground, running clean-ups and water testing, briefing councillors and parliamentarians, and mobilising their communities around our campaigns.

OUR 183 REPS ACROSS THE UK AND IRELAND (134 ENGLAND, 25 WALES, 18 SCOTLAND, 6 NORTHERN IRELAND) COMBINE NATIONAL REACH WITH LOCAL, TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS.

After *Dirty Business* aired, many used the surge in public awareness to grow their outreach, and that momentum carried into the Scottish and Welsh elections, where Reps engaged prospective parliamentary candidates with our manifestos and led hustings.

In May, Reps led 16 of the 56 Paddle Out Protests and drove flagship events including *The Big Swim* (1,200 women in the sea at Brighton and Poole, reaching more than 500,000 people on social media in 30 days) and the *North Sea Surf Film Festival* in Tynemouth.



Locally, sustained lobbying in the North East secured SSRS app integration across 7 council-managed waterfront locations in Redcar and Cleveland, and water sampling programmes at Llantwit Major and Belhaven Bay continue to build citizen science evidence. Reps also took the message into schools and youth groups nationwide, from Beaver Scouts to Brownies.

MEDIA & VISIBILITY

Campaigns succeed when people care enough to act — and communications is one of our most powerful tools for creating that change. In 2026, our involvement in *Dirty Business* and leading the UK's largest-ever Paddle Out Protests, covered by Sky News, Good Morning Britain, The Independent and The Guardian, turned the #EndSewagePollution campaign into a national conversation and kept sewage pollution on the public and political agenda.

KEY STATS IN 2026 SO FAR:

831,017

total website visitors across
sas.org.uk and Data HQ

£107

million in Average Advertising
Value of coverage generated

513,133

total social media followers

184,039

total email subscribers



3,203

pieces of total media coverage
(print, online, radio/TV)



ORGANISATION

sas.org.uk/about-us/our-team

NONE OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS IN THIS REPORT WOULD BE POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE TRUSTS AND FOUNDATIONS, BUSINESSES, PHILANTHROPISTS AND SUPPORTERS WHOSE INVESTMENT POWERS THIS WORK. THEIR BACKING ENABLES COMMUNITIES, CAMPAIGN TEAMS AND VOLUNTEERS TO TAKE ACTION EVERY DAY.

For 36 years, Surfers Against Sewage has evolved to meet the biggest threats facing our waters. In 2026, we launched a new organisational strategy through to 2030 that sharpens our focus and commits us to a new, bold, innovator culture aligned with the people-powered change we seek to create.

To deliver it, we launched *Sea Change*, an internal transformation programme spanning people, culture, systems and technology. Governance structures are in place, resources secured, and implementation is underway,

alongside investment in supporter engagement technology and CRM systems to better understand and mobilise our growing movement.

Staff turnover stood at just 9% in the first half of 2026, reflecting a stable, experienced team after a period of significant growth. Equity, Diversity and Inclusion is embedded throughout the new strategy and *Sea Change* programme, ensuring SAS becomes not only more effective but more inclusive, representative and accessible.



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