

KEEP YOUR
BOWEL MOTIONS
OUT OF OUR
OCEANS



SURFERS
AGAINST
SEWAGE

WATER QUALITY POLLUTION REPORT 2026



FOREWORD



It has been more than two decades since my daughter, Heather, died after contracting E. coli from sewage on a beach in Devon. If you've watched Channel 4's Dirty Business, you'll have seen the horrors that I lived through. No one should have to go through that. Ever. Going to the beach and getting in the water shouldn't put your life at risk.

And yet the analysis in this report shows that the system is still broken. Pollution is still taking place at a horrifying rate and people are still being put at risk all over the UK. People are still getting sick.

And people are rightly angry. In September I joined Surfers Against Sewage as they handed in a petition signed by more than 342,000 people calling for action.

My message to Andy Burnham is this: sort this mess out. Protect our children and protect our families. The evidence is irrefutable. The public are crying out for change. The solutions are there. You've promised a Clean Water Bill which could finally unlock change. Now, you have to get it right. **You have to fix this.**

Julie Maughan



image credit: Mat Arney

SURFERS AGAINST SEWAGE

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Andy Hughes (bottom)



image credit: Earthminutes

INTRODUCTION

Sewage pollution has made a stink, not only in our seas, rivers and lakes but on the public, political and media agenda.

The water system is undeniably broken. The sewage scandal impacts all of us. Every day. Pipes bursting in the middle of town. Water shortages. Hosepipe bans. Water bills going up *again*. Sewage pollution is pouring into our rivers, lakes and seas on an unimaginable scale. Our waters can and should be places for people to swim, surf and play. Places that boost our physical and mental health, and support thriving coastal businesses. Instead, they're flooded almost daily with raw sewage, threatening our ecosystems, and our health and mental wellbeing. The ongoing scandal is costing the economy and the NHS. It's turning family holidays and days on the beach into nightmares. It's forcing sports events to cancel and businesses to close. And it's making people seriously – even dangerously – sick.

This is a public health crisis.

The scale of the scandal is still unfolding. Channel 4's Dirty Business, and the ever-growing cases of devastating sickness, have blown the lid off the previously hidden reality: scores of sewage, poor regulation and shocking government complicity. All while polluters profit, strip the system bare and distribute staggering sums to shareholders.

The debate is no longer just focused on how serious the issue is, but now on **what exactly we do about it** – and, crucially, whether the government will do what is needed to protect our health and fix the water industry at its rotten core.

It's make-or-break in the fight for clean water. We have a golden opportunity, in the form of the Clean Water Bill, to radically transform the water industry in England. We need a new system that will put people before profit, end sewage pollution and restore our wild waters back to health.

The Government was elected on a promise to restore our rivers and seas. It **must** get the Bill right in order to deliver. And it's going to take all of us, standing up and using our voice, to ensure it does.

In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland we also have the opportunity to push for clean water legislation that tackles the unique sewage scandal in each nation. This could mean improved data and transparency, investment in infrastructure upgrades and tough independent regulators that have the powers they need to hold water companies to account.

In our latest annual report, we delve into the state of sewage across the UK. We expose the scale of pollution, including into designated bathing waters and during dry weather. We reveal the impact sewage is having on individuals, communities and wider public health and the ongoing failure to keep us safe (spoiler, the situation's worse than sh*t).

We also expose, for the first time, alarming delays in reporting discharge events by every water company in England.

What remains as clear as our waters should be, is that the time for transformational change is now.

We are ready to reclaim our waters and take back control of the system that's polluted them for far too long.

**THIS IS THE MOST PIVOTAL
MOMENT IN OUR FIGHT
AGAINST SEWAGE POLLUTION.**

A NEW VISION FOR WATER

We're calling for a transformational reset of the broken water sector in every corner of the UK. We need a water system that ends profit from pollution, puts public health first, delivers real environmental protection – and offers fair value for every customer.



OUR GOVERNING PRINCIPLES

Everything we are calling for flows from these five principles — the framework against which the water industry, its regulation and any Government policy should deliver.



LEGAL PRIORITY TO PROTECT PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Water companies must operate under a clear legal duty to provide clean and safe drinking water as well as to protect public health and the environment. This means prioritising action to protect the health of the millions of people who use the water and restore natural environments.



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.



OWNERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Water companies must not operate for profit. 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 is managed sustainably.



TOUGH INDEPENDENT REGULATORS

All regulators must 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.

UK

THE SCALE OF SEWAGE



In 2025, sewage alerts were in place at designated bathing waters for a total of

24,771 DAYS

meaning, on average, each bathing water had an alert in place for 37 days.



Since the start of the decade (2020-2025 inclusive), there have been at least 2,895,594 discharges lasting 21,092,749 hours. That's equivalent to 2406 continuous years –

NEARLY TWO AND A HALF MILLENNIA OF SEWAGE.

And is a significant underestimate.



In 2025, sewage was dumped more than half a million (500,554) times, lasting for over 3 million hours - that's the equivalent of sewage pouring for

342 YEARS CONTINUOUSLY.



9,361 SICKNESS REPORTS

across the UK since SAS began collecting data in 2019.

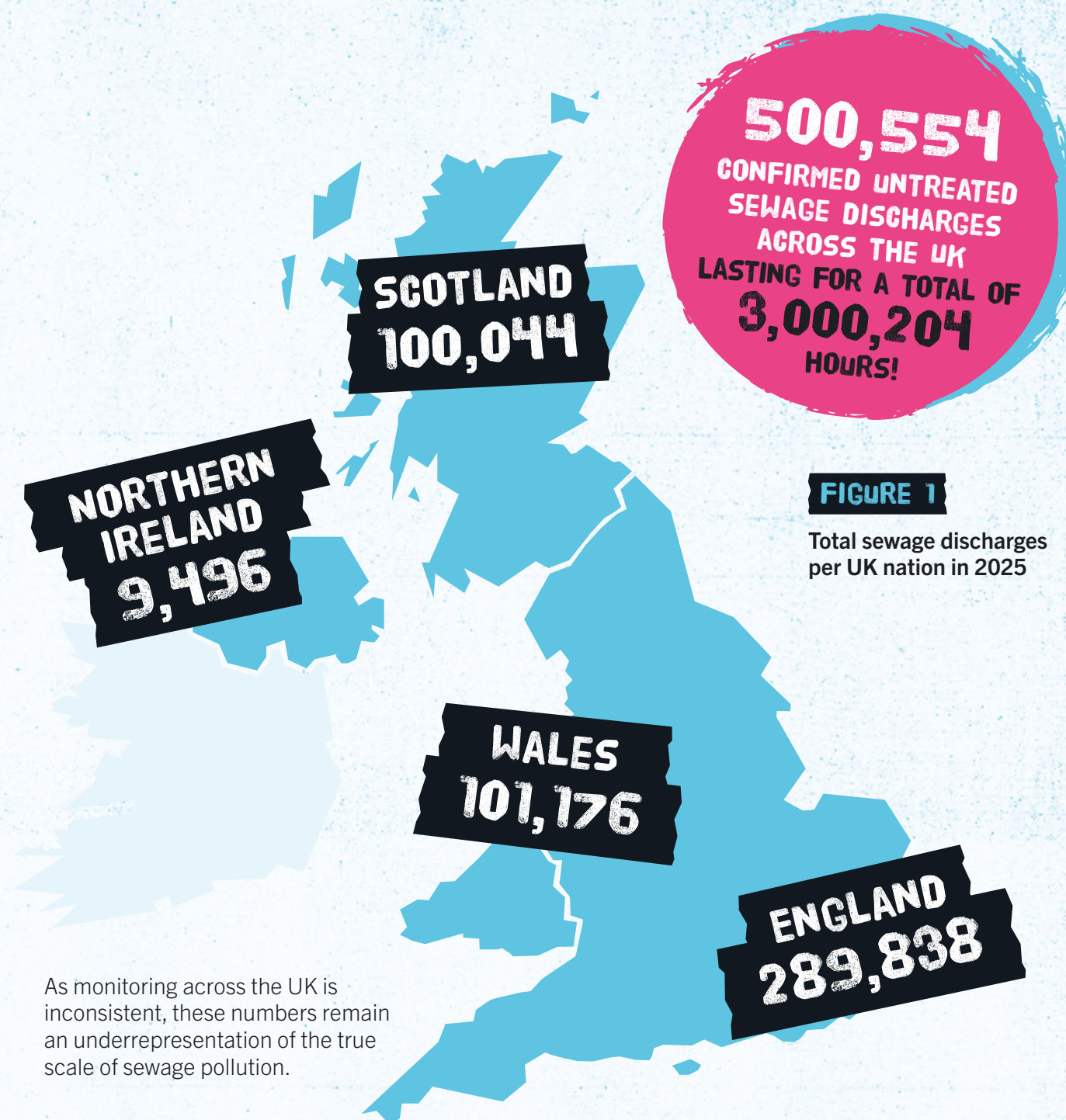


FIGURE 1

Total sewage discharges per UK nation in 2025

As monitoring across the UK is inconsistent, these numbers remain an underrepresentation of the true scale of sewage pollution.

TABLE 1 UK sewage discharges 2025: number, duration and percentage of network monitored¹⁻¹¹

COUNTRY	% OF NETWORK MONITORED	SEWAGE DISCHARGES	DISCHARGE DURATION (HOURS)
England	100%	289,838	1,866,017
Northern Ireland	20%	9,496	35,164
Scotland	30%	100,044	276,759
Wales	100%	101,176	822,265
Total		500,554	3,000,204

WHEN IT RAINS, SEWAGE POURS. EVEN IN DROUGHT, WE CAN'T ESCAPE FROM POLLUTION

2025 broke historical climate records. It was the UK's warmest and driest year on record with 2026 likely to be drier still. But despite the drought, there were 3,825 overflows that discharged raw sewage MORE times in 2025, than in 2024 – a year that was significantly wetter and experienced twice as many named storms.⁷

TABLE 2

UK overflows discharging more in 2025 than 2024^{1-7, 10, 15-18}

WATER COMPANY	NUMBER OF OVERFLOWS DISCHARGING MORE IN 2025 VERSUS 2024
Anglian Water	186
Northern Ireland Water	135
Northumbrian Water	293
Scottish Water	106
Severn Trent Water	474
South West Water	454
Southern Water	153
Thames Water	33
United Utilities	565
Welsh Water	827
Wessex Water	108
Yorkshire Water	491
Total	3,825



24,771 DAYS OF SEWAGE ALERTS AT BATHING WATERS IN PLACE ACROSS THE UK

Dry weather across the UK continued into 2026. At the height of summer, almost three-quarters of England and all of Wales were declared in drought. Yet in the first half of 2026, preliminary figures indicated there were **192,790 sewage discharges** (based on unverified data).¹⁴



image credit: Matt Hillier

A TREND OVER MANY YEARS

In this decade so far, sewage has been dumped at least 2,895,594 times, lasting 21,092,749 hours. That's the same as 2,406 continuous years – nearly two and a half millennia of sewage. And this likely is the tip of the iceberg due to incomplete monitoring.

Even with gaps in the data, we can see a staggering amount of sewage has and continued to pollute out waters – especially given the totals are likely to be a significant underestimate.

The UK discharge data comes from various published datasets that use Event Duration Monitoring (EDM) data. These include:

- **Combined storm overflows:** should only be used in “exceptional circumstances”, when the system is overwhelmed with heavy rain
- **Emergency overflows:** should only operate in rare, critical situations
- **Unpermitted overflows:** these are only used in Wales, when sewage is released without any of the appropriate environmental permits.

SEWAGE

IN UK BATHING WATERS

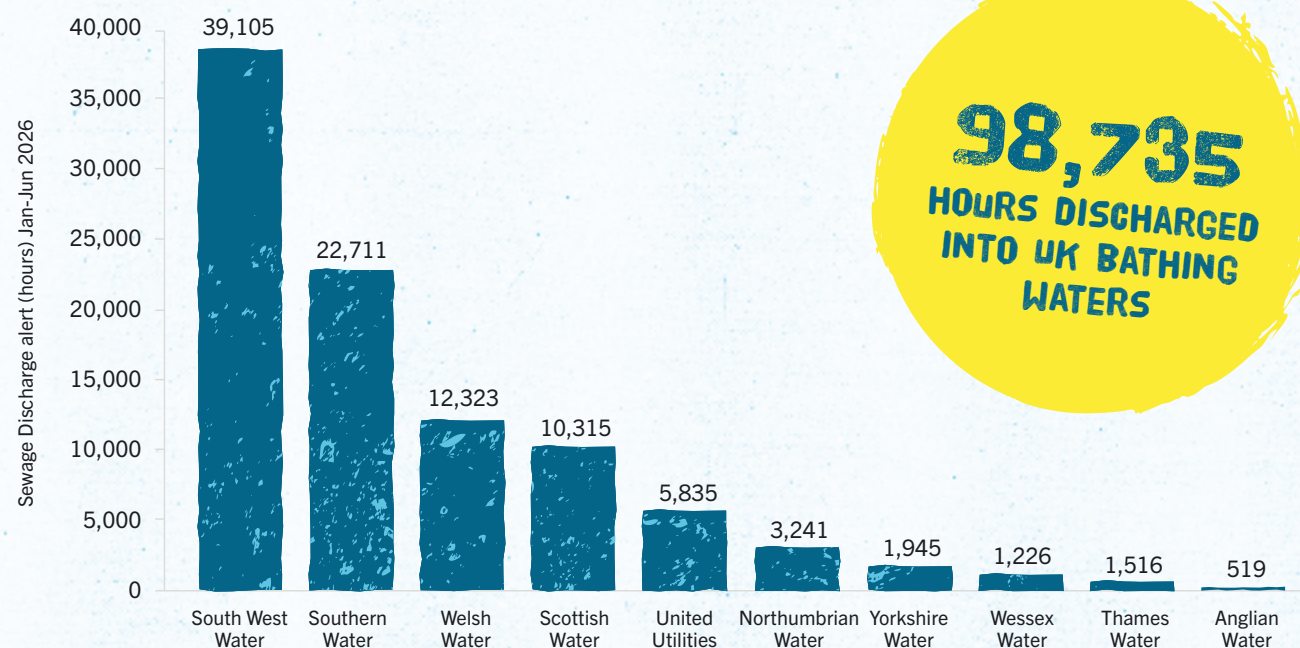
Across the UK, there are 701 designated bathing waters⁹⁻²². These are the areas that are supposed to be safe for public use and are often the beating heart of a community, attracting locals and holiday-makers to swim, surf and play in. They are the only places where the regulator is legally required to monitor water quality. In fact, **designated bathing waters and the associated bathing water regulations (as outdated as they are) remain the only legal protection in place to protect our health when we enter our wild waters.**

But even the waters with the most protection were still polluted by eyewatering amounts of sewage. It's posing serious risks to our health.

There were 35,000 sewage discharges into UK bathing waters in 2025, lasting for 191,000 hours.

The SAS Safer Seas and Rivers Service App issues alerts in real time when sewage impacts a designated bathing water, using a range of

UK hours of sewage discharged into bathing waters in the first 6 months of 2026¹⁴



Data from the SAS Safer Seas and Rivers Service App, using real-time reporting from water company APIs. The number of Bathing Waters varies per water company, with more coastal bathing waters compared to inland, which may influence the data above

water company data and models. If you want to know whether it's safe to enter the water – maybe you're running a surf lesson, hosting a triathlon event, organising an after school kids club, or simply going for a dip yourself – getting information about a sewage discharge as soon as it's happened is critical.

IN 2025, SEWAGE ALERTS IN OUR DESIGNATED BATHING WATERS RESULTED IN A TOTAL OF 24,771 DAYS 'LOST TO SWIMMERS AND SURFERS DUE AN ALERT BEING IN PLACE'. ON AVERAGE EACH BATHING WATER HAD AN ALERT IN PLACE FOR 37 DAYS.¹³

The pattern continues in 2026 with over 98,735 hours of sewage discharged into bathing waters and 12,782 days lost due to sewage alerts in the first half of the year. Meaning on average, each bathing water has already had an alert in place for 19 days so far - with the wettest seasons still to come.

This raises serious concerns about water quality at the UK's most popular beaches and rivers – the ones that are packed with tens of thousands of families and children during the summer holidays. We are sold a vision of 'blue flag' beaches and 'Excellent' clean and safe waters, but the reality is far from that.²³ And the risk to public health as a result is significant.

Each day that sewage is dumped at a bathing water is likely a day's swimming, kayaking, surfing or playing lost – or waters users risking getting dangerously sick – and communities, businesses, clubs and organisations take a serious hit as a result.

SWIM AT "EXCELLENT" BATHING WATER ENDS IN HOSPITALISATION

Katharine contracted cryptosporidiosis and a bacterial infection after swimming in contaminated seawater at Hove, an "Excellent" Bathing Water.

Her swim resulted in a serious illness, hospitalisation and complications affecting her kidney transplant.

“ The infection became particularly serious. I was admitted to hospital where I required prolonged treatment, including intravenous fluids, specialist antibiotics, and close monitoring by the renal team to protect my transplanted kidney. My kidney function deteriorated during the illness, putting my transplant at risk. I have only recently been discharged from hospital after a lengthy admission and am still recovering, with ongoing gastrointestinal symptoms, fatigue, and follow-up care. The illness has had a significant impact on my health and daily life.

Katharine, 2026



Sewage is being discharged into the waters where we surf, swim and play.
And it's making us sick.

In 2025, a total of 1,568 people submitted sickness reports to Surfers Against Sewage, telling us that they or a loved one had become ill after entering the water, the equivalent to 52 classrooms full of people. Collectively they took a **total of 3,146 days off work or 12 years of full-time working days.**²⁴

These aren't just numbers. Each sickness case reported is a devastating story impacting real lives. Hospitalisation, forced days off work, financial hits, holidays ruined and, heartbreakingly, fear of entering the water again.

In 2026, the human cost of pollution continues. Between January and August 2026, 1,687 people told us they became unwell after using the water and 1,923 days taken off work.²⁴

In total, 9,361 sickness reports have been submitted to SAS between 2019 to August 2026.²⁴ Reported sickness is likely to represent only a small proportion of the actual number of people who become unwell following exposure to polluted water, as there is no formal reporting system other than voluntarily reporting to SAS.

A deep dive into the impacts of sewage on public health are on page 46.



1,568

people submitted sickness reports to Surfers Against Sewage in 2025.



3,146

days off work collectively in 2025

In 2026, after swimming in her local waters during the summer heatwaves - like hundreds of others - Clare fell sick from sewage.

“

I contracted diarrhoea and experienced stomach pain. It passed after a few days and after going in the water a couple of weeks later and getting sick again, I'm now deterred from swimming somewhere that I used to love. I'm very angry and feel like my right to enjoy nature safely has been violated. There is no respite from these heatwaves as my local beach has made me sick. The summer is becoming something I dread rather than look forward to.”

CLARE, 2026

It's a fundamental right to access clean water. Everyone should be able to take a dip and cool off in the UK's rivers, lakes and seas, especially during extreme heatwaves which are only becoming more frequent. It's outrageous that we're having to risk our health in return. We urgently need long-term investment to ensure the resilience of our most vital national infrastructure to protect human health and the environment.



ENGLAND

Despite the dry weather in 2025, English water companies still discharged sewage **289,838 TIMES** equivalent to 794 times a day in 2025

This resulted in more than **1.8 MILLION HOURS** of sewage pouring into England's waters across the year - an average of **5,100 HOURS** every SINGLE day



Over the past 6 years, water companies have discharged sewage at least

2,260,000 TIMES for **16,500,000 HOURS**

In 2025, sewage discharged at least **24,729 TIMES** into English bathing waters, lasting **146,564 HOURS**

Our data suggests water companies in England have discharged **143,000 TIMES** in the first 6 months of 2026

In the first half of 2026 alone, we recorded over **50,000 SEWAGE DISCHARGE EVENTS** in England that were reported with an illegal delay

1,310 PEOPLE in England submitted sickness reports in 2025 after becoming ill. **A FURTHER 1,409** were reported between January and August 2026



Data from the Environment Agency shows that in 2025, **14,873 SEWAGE DISCHARGES** were on completely dry days

In 2026, data confirms there has been at least **70,400 HOURS** of sewage discharged on dry days and **7,450** 'dry spills' in the first 6 months of the year

ENGLAND

THE SCALE OF SEWAGE



England is the global outlier; the world's only fully privatised sewage system. Since privatisation, England's water companies have paid out an estimated stomach-churning **£85 billion to shareholders and racked up £69.2 billion in debt – all whilst hiking our bills.**^{25,26}

Decades of neglect, underinvestment and illegal sewage discharges have left us with some of the most polluted rivers, lakes and seas in Europe. This is the direct result of a system built to extract profit, while the regulators – Ofwat and the Environmental Agency – look the other way. For decades, both regulators have failed to hold water companies to account, instead enabling an environmental and public health crisis to unfold.

Since 2023, 100% of England's storm overflows have been fitted with Event Duration Monitors (EDMs), providing comprehensive data that exposes the true scale of sewage flooding our rivers, lakes and seas.¹ And the stats are sickening...

Despite exceptionally dry weather and regulations that only allow discharges in exceptional circumstances, 2025 EDM data show English water companies still **discharged sewage 289,838 times**, or around **794 times a day.**^{1,12} This resulted in more than **1.8 million hours**

of sewage pouring into England's waters across the year – an average of **5,100 hours every SINGLE day of the year.**¹

Now, as millions across the UK face water shortages and restrictions on their water use, water companies in England are on track to record their worst year for pollution, with 59 serious incidents in just the first six months of 2026. If pollution continues at this rate, the number of serious incidents will be over 50% higher than in 2025.²⁷

Sewage pollution is nothing new. There are over 14,300 Storm Overflows in England. **So far this decade (2020 to 2025), water companies have discharged sewage at least 2,260,000 times for 16,500,000 hours.** That is equivalent to 1,884 years of continuous discharge in England alone.

The trend continues and based on our data, in the first 6 months of 2026 there were 143,000 sewage discharges from English water companies.¹⁴

**1.8 MILLION
HOURS OF SEWAGE
POURING INTO ENGLAND'S
WATERWAYS IN 2025**

image credit: Mat Arney



SEWAGE ALERTS AT ENGLAND'S BATHING WATERS

Bathing waters in England are places recognised by the government and water companies as locations frequently used by the public and are designated to protect public health.

Yet in 2025, **sewage was discharged 24,729 times into English bathing waters, lasting 146,564 hours.**¹⁴

The SSRS app provides water users with real time alerts when sewage is impacting a bathing water. **In 2025 bathing waters had sewage alerts in place for a total of 16,341 days and in the first 8 months of 2026 there have been 5,678 alerts.**^{13,14}

TABLE 4

Days lost at bathing waters due to sewage alerts in 2025

WATER COMPANY	DAYS WITH SEWAGE ALERTS IN PLACE 2025
Southern	5,391
South West	4,579
United Utilities	3,378
Yorkshire	1,185
Northumbrian	824
Anglian	501
Wessex	365
Thames	118
Total	16,341

Data from SSRS app. Alerts are based on a range of models and data, which vary depending on the water company.

SICK OF IT

Epic channel swim trashed by E. coli infection.

Loretta Cox was swimming at Looe, Cornwall, ahead of a channel swim between Jersey and France in 2025 when she contracted E. coli. After a full year of training and thousands of pounds of financial investment, Loretta was left severely ill and exhausted from two lots of strong antibiotics to fight the infection.

Loretta is one of 1,339 people in England who submitted sickness reports to Surfers Against Sewage in 2025 after becoming ill. Sickness reports are only increasing, with a further 1,450 cases reported between January and August 2026 in England.²⁴

Bill payers, victims of sewage sickness, and entire communities across the UK are being forced to pay the price for a scandal we never asked for. For as long as pollution remains profitable, water companies can't be trusted. We urgently need a Clean Water Bill that will tackle the root of the issue, to end sewage pollution and protect people and the environment.



“

Getting E. coli at my age, I was lucky to be here. It took a month to recover.

We don't want Poo in Looe. All to put profits into shareholders pockets. IT MUST STOP.

We live in a tourist area. Tourists won't come to a contaminated place. It will affect the whole town.

LORETTA

WATER COMPANIES ARE BREAKING THE LAW

DRY WEATHER AND DRY SPILLS

Water companies are not allowed to release untreated sewage in anything but “exceptional weather events,” such as during extremely heavy rain. But we know all too well that water companies don’t follow the rules – and regulators persistently fail to hold them to account.

Data from the Environment Agency shows that 14,873 sewage discharges in England in 2025 were on **completely dry days** – without a drop of rain in sight – and these discharges lasted for a total of 158,395 hours. South West Water was the worst offender, responsible for 30% of all the dry-day spills. This outrageous behaviour is **illegal**.²⁸

TABLE 6 Dry spills into English waters by company in 2025²⁸

WATER COMPANY	SITES WITH DRY DAY DISCHARGES	DRY DAY DISCHARGES	DRY DAY DISCHARGE DURATION (HOURS)
South West Water	448	4,345	46,586.34
Thames Water	205	1,983	25,807.46
Severn Trent Water	297	1,610	18,401.24
Anglian Water	380	1,583	11,832.43
Wessex Water	209	1,474	22,225.26
United Utilities	311	1,216	10,613.93
Yorkshire Water	328	1,204	8,877.60
Southern Water	136	857	10,061.89
Northumbrian Water	151	491	3,277.37
Dwr Cymru	21	110	711.69
Total	2,486	14,873	158,395.23

Environment agency dry spill data obtained via Freedom of Information Request

Discharging sewage during dry weather is illegal for good reason. It can pose a higher risk to public health and have catastrophic impacts on rivers, beaches and wildlife, especially if water levels are already running very low. Without rainfall and freshwater mixing to dilute the sewage, pollution is much more concentrated – with dangerous bacteria and toxic chemicals far more potent in the water.

DRY SPELL SICKNESS

A stool sample from the Doctors confirmed that Michael Thomson, aged 60, contracted giardiasis after swimming in the river Thames during a dry spell. He experienced severe gastrointestinal symptoms, weight loss and incontinence, which required antibiotics to heal.

Dry spills are prevalent as we move into 2026, with data from an FOI confirming there has been at least 70,400 hours of dry spill discharge and 7,450 dry spills in the first 6 months of the year*.¹¹ The worst offenders were Severn Trent, South West Water and Thames Water – closely followed by Yorkshire Water.

“

The Thames has always been part of my life. Now I question whether it is safe.

The irony is that I was using the river because I considered swimming to be a healthy activity. Instead, I ended up with a significant parasitic infection which has affected my health and my confidence in using the river.

As conditions were very dry, I thought the risk from sewage was smaller than usual. How wrong was I!”

MICHAEL THOMSON



image credit top: Imagecomms

2026. NEW YEAR, SAME SH*T

ILLEGAL DELAYS IN REPORTING SEWAGE

Water companies in England are breaking legal requirements by failing to publish real-time data on sewage discharges within one hour – and public safety is being put in danger as a result.

Since **1 January 2025**, new legal duties under the Environment Act 2021 require all water and sewerage companies in England to publish storm overflow discharge data **within one hour** of an event starting and ending. This data must be made available in a way that is “readily accessible and understandable to the public”

In the first half of 2026 alone, we recorded 50,000 sewage discharges in England that were reported more one hour after they happened. That is 12% of all reported discharges we processed.¹⁴

THE WORST OFFENDERS

We’ve analysed average delays across all English water companies. Some are performing far worse than others.

TABLE 7 Discharge alerts issued more than 1 hour after the event¹⁴

WATER COMPANY	NUMBER OF SEWAGE DISCHARGES REPORTED WITH ILLEGAL DELAYS (JAN-JUN)
Yorkshire	13,007
Anglian	12,183
Southern	8,326
United Utilities	5,080
South West	3,089
Severn Trent	3,034
Wessex	2,441
Northumbrian	2,259
Thames	873
	50,292

Even at bathing waters, we’ve still seen over **4,000** sewage discharges with a delay of more than one hour in 2026.¹⁴

Analysis of delays is based on the best available real time information from national storm overflow hub public APIs.¹⁶ A sewage discharge for the purposes of this analysis is where there is a defined start and stop date to show a sewage overflow discharge. This does differ from the definition of a sewage spill in annual data which uses the 12/24 count method.

A sewage spill event is logged each time there is a start and stop time for a discharge and is measured from the national storm overflow hub public APIs. Gaps and errors in water company reporting may affect the figures.

An hour illegally late is bad enough. But many delays are hundreds of hours late. And regulators have been letting water companies get away with it.

When we asked Ofwat what they were doing to enforce timely reporting, they said: “Ofwat doesn’t deep dive into every delay or inefficiency in the system, unless it breaches rules it has a remit to investigate.”

We have found no evidence that any prosecution has taken place.

This is more evidence of the undeniably broken system.

Data from the SAS Safer Seas and Rivers Service App, using real-time reporting from water company APIs

WATER COMPANIES NO WAY NEAR MEETING INCOMING TARGETS

In the Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan, published under the Environment Act 2021, there is a requirement that **no storm overflow in England should exceed 10 discharges a year on average by 2050.**²⁹ Current water company performance is nowhere near these targets.

There are over 14,300 Storm Overflows in England. In 2025, HALF of them discharged sewage more than 10 times.¹

AND THEY’RE NOT JUST BREACHING TARGETS; THEY’RE EXCEEDING THEM BY MILES.

More than a fifth (24%) of all England’s overflows met the “high frequency spillers” definition in 2025 — discharging more than 30 times.¹ All 3,445 of these ‘high frequency spillers’ should be formally investigated by the Environment Agency.

Some overflows are even spilling hundreds of times over the limit. Croyde Wastewater Treatment Works, located near one of Devon’s most popular surf spots, was the worst offender in England with an eye-watering 253 discharges in 2025. That’s equivalent to almost five sewage spills every week,^{1,13} thanks to South West Water.

THE WATER COMPANY ANNUAL RETURNS DEFINE A SINGLE DISCHARGE AS LASTING UP TO TWELVE HOURS. EVERY TWENTY-FOUR-HOUR PERIOD THEREAFTER COUNTS AS ONE MORE OCCURRENCE. THIS IS THE ‘12/24 METHOD’.

TABLE 8 Top 5 overflows with the most sewage discharges in 2025

	STORM OVERFLOW TITLE	WATER COMPANY RESPONSIBLE	SEWAGE DISCHARGES IN 2025
1	CROYDE WASTEWATER TREATMENT WORKS	South West Water	253
2	MELTON STW	Yorkshire Water	245
3	SALCOMBE REGIS WWTW CSO	South West Water	235
4	HORNS CROSS SEWAGE TREATMENT WORKS	South West Water	230
5	LOCK LANE PARTINGTON CSO	United Utilities	217

Data sourced from EA, annual EDM returns

In September 2025, the CEO of Penmon, who own South West Water, said that the company was accelerating investment to meet the government target of fewer than 10 spills per overflow per year **“a whole decade early.”**³⁰ But data from South West Water’s own overflows tells a different story.

South West Water operated both the longest-running and the most frequently spilling overflows of any water company in England during 2025, as well as the highest spilling overflow that impacts a bathing water. They’re not even close to meeting the 10-spill target.

In the first half of 2026, according to our data, 47% of South West Water’s storm overflows have already exceeded 10 spills. In 2025, the figure was bleak at 63.3%. And let’s not forget that in 2024, South West Water’s average number of spills per storm overflow was a whopping 41.3!¹

WATER COMPANIES ARE ON TRACK TO KEEP FAILING TARGETS IN 2026

In the first half of 2026, our data suggests that 34% of England’s storm overflows have already exceeded 10 discharges – despite the likely wettest and stormiest seasons still ahead of us. So far, the top offenders are South West Water, Northumbrian Water and Yorkshire Water, who all have more than 36% of their storm overflows breaching the 10 spill target already.¹⁴

BATHING WATERS TAKING A BLOW

Whilst sewage overflows everywhere are bad news, the scale of pollution into bathing waters – where public health is a priority - is even more egregious. From the overflows impacting bathing waters, over 500 spilled more than 10 times in 2025.¹



TABLE 9 Top five worst performing overflows impacting England’s Bathing Waters in 2025¹

WATER COMPANY	CSO TITLE	BATHING WATERS IMPACTED	BATHING WATER CLASSIFICATION	SEWAGE DISCHARGES	DISCHARGE DURATION (HOURS)
South West Water	TOWN QUAY PUMPING STATION	Ready money Cove	Good	198	635.04
United Utilities	BRAYSTONES WWTW	Seascale	Good	168	1,082.40
United Utilities	WALLASEY WW PUMPING STATION	Wallasey	Good	164	768.96
		Moreton	Good		
Southern Water	LIDSEY WWTW	Bognor Regis East	Sufficient	157	2,406.96
		Felpham	Good		
		Middleton-on-sea	Excellent		
United Utilities	KEEKLE PUMPING STATION	Seascale	Good	147	1,533.12

Source: Data sourced from EA, annual EDM returns

From the bathing waters associated with the highest-spilling CSOs, outlined in the table above, we received **28 reports of sickness during 2025.**²⁴

THE BIGGEST OPPORTUNITY IN A GENERATION

The situation is stark. Our seas are full of sh*t.
Things are not getting better. YET.

The Clean Water Bill provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create the legal and regulatory framework needed to transform the system. If we get it right, we could finally start to see the change we desperately need. Get it wrong and we are locked into the same failed privatised industry, with no second chance in sight. Water companies have spent decades dumping sewage, hiking bills and paying out to shareholders. This has got to stop.

As it stands, proposed plans for the Bill do not go far enough and will not deliver the clean water we were promised. To end sewage pollution and protect people and the environment in England, we are calling for a Bill which will:

1 RECLAIM THE SYSTEM

END THIS FAILED PRIVATISED MODEL AND SET OUT A CLEAR ROADMAP FOR A WATER SYSTEM THAT WORKS FOR PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT, NOT SHAREHOLDERS.

2 PROTECT OUR HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

MAKE WATER COMPANIES LEGALLY ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE HARM THEY CAUSE TO PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT.

3 STOP THE POLLUTERS, STOP THE SEWAGE

INTRODUCE TOUGH INDEPENDENT REGULATORS, LOOPHOLE-PROOF ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ENFORCEMENT THAT MAKES POLLUTERS PAY.

Now, finally, the Government is looking at alternative ways to own and run the water industry. This is a huge win for everyone who has fought for the waters they love... We're calling on MPs to take action to ensure change happens and to strengthen the upcoming Clean Water Bill by supporting the Surfers Against Sewage campaign to Clean the Bill. MPs work for us, not the water companies, but they only fight for what the public tells them matters.

For a deep dive into our demands and to join the campaign and fight for the waters we love visit:

CLEANTHEBILL.ORG



SCOTLAND

In 2025, Scottish Water discharged at least
100,044 TIMES
 for 276,759 hours



Those numbers come from just
30% OF THE NETWORK
 which is monitored in Scotland

In 2025 we received
30 SICKNESS REPORTS

In the first half of 2026, we received
27 NEW SICKNESS REPORTS
 resulting in 16 sick days missing from work or education

The average number of spills per overflow is

78

In 2025, Scottish Water discharged
4,617 TIMES for a total of
4,851 HOURS
 near bathing waters

Our data suggest in the first 6 months of 2026, Scottish Water have discharged sewage
21,450 TIMES
 with 1,136 discharges near bathing waters



image credit: Carys Griffiths

SCOTLAND

THE SCALE OF SEWAGE

Scotland's water and sewerage system is operated solely by Scottish Water, which is publicly owned and regulated by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). With no shareholders, every penny of profit is reinvested in the system to improve services for its customers.

Unlike England and Wales, not all storm overflows in Scotland are currently monitored and, whilst coverage is expanding along with near real-time overflow alerts, there is still a huge disparity between the pollution in our waters and the scale of action to address it. We're still being left in the dark, with most sewage discharges going unmonitored and unreported.

Scotland boasts incredible coastlines, lochs and rivers, but many of these waterways are under threat from sewage pollution - which is endangering the health of the ever-growing number of water users.

IN 2025, SCOTTISH WATER DISCHARGED SEWAGE AT LEAST 100,044 TIMES FOR 276,759 HOURS. BUT THAT'S ONLY THE SEWAGE WE KNOW ABOUT.

These figures are from just 30% of overflows, so the true number could be as high as **326,000 discharges lasting over 900,000 hours.**^{5,6}

That equates to over 22,759,248 m³ of sewage, equivalent to **9,100 Olympic-sized swimming pools***. From a network that is still barely monitored.^{5,6}

**Scottish Water is the only water company to publish volume data. Event Duration Monitors (EDMs) used to monitor sewage across the UK do not record data on volume. But in some cases, Scottish Water is required to report volume or an estimated volume, which is why some volume data is published.*



THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF SPILLS PER OVERFLOW IS 78
which is significantly higher than in England, where the average was 20

MORE DATA... BUT SLOW PROGRESS & REGULATORY BLIND SPOTS

This year, we have a more accurate picture of the scale of sewage pollution in Scotland than ever before. But Scottish Water still has a long way to go to address the issue and protect our health.

In August 2026, Scottish Water added sewage discharge and duration data for 1,009 new overflows into its "non-reported" data. This is a strange term, and it gives Scottish Water a scandalous loophole. Effectively, discharges covered in this "non-reported data" are simply ignored by the regulator as they fall outside their permit requirements.^{5,6}

Scottish Water claims that in total 50% of its 4,800 overflows are monitored, but publishes annual data for just 30%.^{5,6}

Despite expanding monitoring infrastructure in recent years, the majority of Scotland's sewage network still remains invisible to the public. The regulator, SEPA only requires a minuscule **4% of overflows to actually be reported to them.** If even the regulator doesn't know what's happening, there's next to no chance that water-users in Scotland will truly know if their waters are safe.

TABLE 11

The five worst performing overflows with the most sewage discharges between 2021 and 2025 (where data is available).^{5,6}

CSO TITLE	SEWAGE DISCHARGES	DISCHARGE DURATION (HRS)
HELENSBURGH WWTW - POST-PST SSSO	6,109	26,831.89
STORNOWAY SSSO CSO NB445308	2,624	14,367.76
FINSTOWN HEDDLE ROAD PS CSO	2,425	8,980.98
CLACHAN BALVICAR WWTW CSO 2009 NM771177	2,376	10,687.6
TIGHNABRUAICH WWTW - POST-PST SSSO	2,268	10,867.67

Data sourced from Scottish Water, annual EDM returns

The trend continues into 2026 and based on our data, in the first 6 months of 2026 there has been **21,450 sewage discharges with 1,136 near bathing waters.**^{5,6}



SEWAGE POURING INTO SCOTTISH BATHING WATERS

BATHING WATERS IN SCOTLAND ARE PLACES WHERE PEOPLE'S HEALTH SHOULD BE PRIORITISED AND PROTECTED.

In 2025, Scottish Water discharged 4,617 times for a total of 4,851 hours near bathing waters.

One of Scotland's most heavily spilling sewage overflows is the Peterhead Long Outfall CSO, which is located within 2km of the Peterhead (Lido) bathing water – classified as "Excellent". But data shows it's far from excellent.^{5,6}

In fact, spill frequency has worsened in recent years, culminating in **559 spills in 2025**.^{5,6} This deterioration is particularly striking since Scotland saw less rainfall in 2025 compared to 2024, experiencing its driest autumn in 100 years. Despite the lack of heavy rainfall that would normally drive increased overflow activity, the CSO still recorded hundreds of spill events and more than 1,000 hours of discharge – fuelling concerns that the issue is continuing to get worse.

SCOTLAND IS SICK OF IT

Since we began collecting data in 2019 we have received a total of **120 sickness reports** from water users in Scotland, with 46% coming from 'Good' or 'Excellent' rated bathing waters.²⁴

In 2025, we received 30 sickness reports which resulted in 68 sick days taken off work or school. In just the first half of 2026, we received 27 new sickness reports resulting in 16 sick days missing from work or education. A concerning 62% of these sickness reports were from bathing waters classified "Good" or "Excellent".²⁴

One swimmer who entered the water at Barassie Beach, a bathing water rated as 'Good', in June 2026 said:

“

THE WATER WAS REALLY MURKY WITH BITS OF SANITARY TOWELS VISIBLE. A KAYAKER STOPPED TO WARN ME AND MY FRIEND THAT HE HAD SEEN FAECES FLOATING IN THE WATER THE DAY BEFORE AND THAT HE WOULDN'T WANT TO SWIM IN IT. I ASKED MY GROUP OF SWIMMING FRIENDS IF THEY HAD EXPERIENCED ANY ILLNESS AND ONE REPLIED TO SAY SHE'D HAD A 'SQUIFFY BELLY' AFTER SWIMMING ON SATURDAY. 12 HOURS AFTER MY SWIM I HAVE EXPERIENCED DIARRHOEA.

”

A group of 5 Kitesurfers were also victims to Scottish Water's sewage pollution, and all got terrible sickness and diarrhoea after a session in March 2026. One of them said, after checking the SSRS app:

“

I WAS NOT SHOCKED TO SEE THE RED ALERT FOR SEWAGE AT TROON BEACH

”

One member of the group also noted **"This has not been the first time it's happened."** Another remarked

“

WHY IS THERE SEWAGE LIKE THIS STILL HAPPENING IN THIS DAY AND AGE?!

”

WE NEED FULL TRANSPARENCY

Scotland cannot tackle sewage pollution without knowing where, when and how often it occurs. That is why 100% monitoring of sewage discharges is an urgent priority. This monitoring helps the public to know when it's safe to swim, but it also enables clear accountability when improvement targets are missed.

The need for action could not be clearer. In 2024, Environmental Standards Scotland found that publicly available data existed for just 8% of Scotland's storm overflows and emergency overflows, leaving the vast majority of potential sewage discharges hidden from public scrutiny. Until every discharge is monitored and reported, Scotland cannot fully understand the scale of the problem, let alone solve it.

Scottish Parliament needs to bring forwards a Scottish Clean Water Bill that delivers comprehensive monitoring, public reporting and effective enforcement to end this sewage scandal, and enable the public to enjoy the water without fear.



WALES

In 2025, sewage discharged into Wales' waters more than **100,000 TIMES** equivalent to around 274 discharges every day, or **ONE EVERY 5 MINUTES**. These discharges lasted for a total of 822,265 hours



Our data suggest in the first half of 2026, there has been 1,492 discharges at bathing waters lasting

OVER 12,323 HOURS



Since 2019, we've received **992 SICKNESS REPORTS IN WALES**

— equivalent to 88 football teams - leading to 2,258 days off work

In 2025, there were 90 bathing waters in Wales impacted by **4,083 SEWAGE DISCHARGES** lasting a total of 35,669 hours.

SCALE OF SEWAGE IN WALES



In Wales, Dŵr Cymru (Welsh Water) provides sewerage services to the vast majority of Wales. This water company is structured differently to others in the UK, being a not-for-profit. This means it has no shareholders and, theoretically, every penny should go back into the system and protect Welsh waters.

A second company, Hafren Dyfrdwy, also operates in Wales, though on a much smaller scale serving around 22,000 customers. This company is part of Severn Trent and is privately owned like the rest of England's water companies.

With sewage services being run predominantly by a not-for-profit company, in principle Wales should have clean, thriving waters and a resilient water system. Sadly, this isn't the reality that water lovers in Wales are witnessing...

IN 2025, SEWAGE DISCHARGED INTO WALES' WATERS MORE THAN 100,000 TIMES - THAT AVERAGES OUT AS 274 DISCHARGES EVERY DAY, OR ONE EVERY FIVE MINUTES.^{2,3,7,9,10,16,31}

THESE DISCHARGES LASTED FOR A TOTAL OF 822,264 HOURS - EQUIVALENT TO 94 YEARS STRAIGHT.

There is no publication giving standardised summaries of sewage discharges from Welsh water companies. So, we've combined all available datasets to provide the most accurate picture of sewage pollution, including where the most pollution comes from...

In 2025, there were **3,358 discharges from emergency overflows**.^{3,10} Are we really supposed to believe there are an average of nine critical emergencies across the Welsh network **EVERY SINGLE DAY?** That sounds less like an emergency, and more like normal operation.

Meanwhile more than 7,000 'unpermitted' sewage discharges — a category of discharge unique to Wales where there are no permits in place - occurred last year. Llanfachraeth WwTW, which doesn't have a permit discharge, was responsible for 366 discharges — the equivalent of one unpermitted sewage discharge almost every single day of 2025.⁷



TABLE 14

Wales' worst performing overflows with the most sewage discharges in 2025^{3,7,10,31}

OVERFLOW	SEWAGE DISCHARGES	DISCHARGE DURATION (HRS)
LLAN FFESTINIOG WASTEWATER TREATMENT WORKS	419	4,104.75
LLANFACHRAETH WWTW	366	5,498.25
CWRTNEWYDD WASTEWATER TREATMENT WORKS	363	4,408.75
CONNAHS QUAY SYPHONS TO STW	318	2,368.75
WATERSTON WWTW INLET CSO	314	2,307.25

Data sourced from Welsh Water, annual EDM returns



The trend continues and based on our data, in the first 6 months of 2026 there have been **27,683 DISCHARGES BY WELSH WATER.**¹⁴



Image credit: Carys Griffiths

SEWAGE IN WELSH BATHING WATERS

IN 2025, BASED ON WELSH WATER'S ANNUAL DATA, THERE WERE 90 BATHING WATERS IN WALES IMPACTED BY 4,083 SEWAGE DISCHARGES LASTING A TOTAL OF 35,669 HOURS.

Our data suggest in the first half of 2026, there has been **1,492 discharges** at bathing waters lasting **12,323 hours**

TABLE 15

The five Welsh Bathing Waters with the most sewage discharges in 2025

BATHING WATER	CLASSIFICATION	TOTAL DISCHARGES	TOTAL DURATION (HRS)
Llyn Padarn	Excellent	247	1,614
Swansea Bay	Good	224	1,019.5
Llandudno West Shore	Good	184	606.5
Llanfairfechan	Excellent	176	484.25
Tywyn	Excellent	156	818.5

Data sourced from Welsh Water Annual EDM Returns More than one overflow may impact the same bathing water, with cumulative discharges included in these figures. We used a mapping of overflows to bathing waters that is provided by Welsh Water to inform our Safer Seas and Rivers Service app.

SEWAGE SICKNESS

SINCE 2019, WE'VE RECEIVED 992 SICKNESS REPORTS FROM LOCATIONS IN WALES, LEADING TO 2,258 DAYS TAKEN OFF WORK - EQUIVALENT TO 445 WORKING WEEKS.²⁴

215 of these were reported in 2025. From the start of 2026 to the end of August, we received 187 reports of sickness. Of the people who used the water at a designated bathing water, a staggering 90% were linked to those classified as 'Good' or 'Excellent'.²⁴

TABLE 16

Five locations with the most sickness reports in Wales, (Jan 2020 - Aug 2026).²⁴

LOCATION	NUMBER OF SICKNESS REPORTS
Rest Bay (Porthcawl)	67
Caswell Bay	51
Ogmore By Sea	40
River Dee - Upper Dee Lane	36
Langland Bay	33

Data sourced from SAS sickness reports

FAMILY RIVER SWIM TURNS INTO 10 DAYS IN HOSPITAL

After swimming in the Taf Fechan in May 2026, Ollie (aged 10) became severely unwell 13 days later. He had a temperature over 40°C, vomiting, rigors and delirium. He spent 10 days in hospital and required seven days of strong antibiotics for a severe but unidentified infection that the doctors attributed to sewage pollution. Fortunately, he has made a recovery and is pending ultrasound and further examination.

This scary experience has unsurprisingly left long-lasting impacts on Ollie and his family – not only with ongoing doctors visits – but sadly with their relationship to the water too.



“ I hated being in hospital, it was the worst week ever. I’ve learnt to check the SSRS app now before going near any rivers and I’m sad that I can’t swim in rivers anymore.”

OLLIE, AGE 10

WELL-RESOURCED, INDEPENDENT REGULATION IS ESSENTIAL

The scale of sewage pollution is well evidenced by the water companies’ own spreadsheets. Despite being not-for-profit, sewage is still dumped on a daily basis. They are clearly failing the public, but so is the regulator. **Natural Resource Wales (NRW) has been found to be under-funded and systemically mismanaged** such that a Senedd committee determined it was unable to hold polluters accountable.³²

A not-for-profit water company offered promise, but the state of sewage in Wales unfortunately demonstrates that regardless of water company

structure, a tough, independent regulator with proper resourcing and funding from the Welsh Government is essential. Such a regulator can enforce the law, ensuring that people can safely access blue spaces across Wales and enjoy the benefits to health, economies and communities.

System transformation – regardless of the region – must include water companies, regulators, and the Government’s commitment through powers, staff and funding. This Senedd has an exciting opportunity to make this a reality for Wales.

NORTHERN IRELAND

In 2025, Northern Ireland Water recorded

9,496 SEWAGE DISCHARGES

lasting for 35,164 hours which is a major underestimate considering just 19% of the network is monitored:

ONLY 466 OUT OF THE 2,441 STORM OVERFLOWS.

In 2025, Northern Ireland Water discharged

1,396 TIMES for **4,326 HOURS**

into designated bathing waters

If the known overflows are representative of the wider network, this would equate to an estimated

49,700 SEWAGE DISCHARGES

lasting around

184,000 HOURS

across Northern Ireland in 2025



SCALE OF SEWAGE

The Northern Ireland sewerage system is provided by Northern Ireland (NI) Water, which is a publicly owned company, and is regulated by the Utility Regulator and Northern Ireland Environmental Agency (NIEA). With domestic households not currently paying direct sewerage charges, the company is largely funded by government subsidy. In terms of monitoring and reporting sewage discharges, they are lagging significantly behind the rest of the UK.

80% OF THE NETWORK IN THE DARK. AND ZERO REAL-TIME DATA.

For the first time, the data we're able to report on for Northern Ireland has more than quadrupled! The catch? We're still lacking the majority of their network.⁴

EVEN FROM THE LIMITED DATA WE DO HAVE, THE SITUATION IS NOTHING SHORT OF DIRE.

In 2025, Northern Ireland Water recorded **9,496 sewage discharges lasting for 35,164 hours**. This number represents data from just 466 out of the 2,441 storm overflows, a measly **19% of the network**.⁴

If the known overflows are representative of the wider network, this would equate to an estimated 49,700 sewage discharges lasting around 184,000 hours across Northern Ireland in 2025 — or a sewage discharge approximately once every 11 minutes. Without the data, we can't know for sure. The situation could be even worse than we fear.

Northern Ireland Water has said around 1000 EDMs are planned to be installed by 2028 giving circa 40% coverage of all storm overflows. But how long will we have to wait — and how many more water-users, families and children will risk getting sick — before we get 100% coverage?

“

As someone with underlying health issues I am aware that choosing to swim in waters where I don't have up to date data is an increased risk. This has resulted in ear infections etc which could potentially have been avoided had I had access to water quality data.”

SWIMMER, NORTHERN IRELAND, 2026

SEWAGE POLLUTING NORTHERN IRELAND'S BATHING WATERS

BASED ON ANNUAL EDM DATA, THERE WERE AT LEAST 1,396 SEWAGE DISCHARGES INTO NORTHERN IRELAND BATHING WATERS IN 2025, LASTING 4,326 HOURS.

TABLE 17
Northern Ireland's five most polluted Bathing Waters, in terms of sewage discharges (hours) in 2025⁴

BATHING WATER	CLASSIFICATION	TOTAL DURATION (HRS)	TOTAL DISCHARGES
Browns Bay	Excellent	838.0	171
Ballyholme	Good	701.6	171
Newcastle	Sufficient	479.3	180
Portstewart	Excellent	397.6	137
Waterfoot	Good	370.4	77

Data sourced from Northern Ireland Water EDM Annual Data.

Despite 2025 being a significantly drier year, 135 overflows had more spills in 2025 than 2024, and 148 had longer total duration. Of the increases, 44 are at overflows that discharge into a designated Bathing Water.

TABLE 18
The top five overflows impacting bathing waters that spilled MORE times in 2025 compared to 2024

OVERFLOW	BATHING WATER(S) AFFECTED	BATHING WATER CLASSIFICATION	SEWAGE SPILLS IN 2024	SEWAGE SPILLS IN 2025	SPILL INCREASE ON 2024
BUSHFOOT WWPS	Portballintrae Salmon Rock	Excellent	73	122	^ 49
CASTLE PARK BANGOR 2 WWPS	Ballyholme	Good	24	54	^ 30
LUKES POINT WWPS	Ballyholme	Good	21	46	^ 25
TULLYBRANNIGAN ROAD CSO	Newcastle	Sufficient	25	50	^ 25
GROOMSPORT POINT WWPS	Groomsport; Ballyholme	Good	7	31	^ 24

Data sourced from Northern Ireland Water EDM Annual Data

NO REAL-TIME DATA.
BACKTRACKING
ON PROGRESS.

Despite promises from Northern Ireland Water to pilot near-real-time sewage data back in 2023, Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK where water users still cannot access any sewage discharge information in real time. Water users are left guessing whether it's safe to enter the water or not. This is despite NI Water now operating 466 Event Duration Monitors (EDMs), including at Bathing Waters and shellfish areas, providing validated information on the frequency and duration of sewage spills.⁴ Whilst the data exists, the people using that water to swim, surf and play – the people whose health is at risk in real time – have no way of knowing when sewage is polluting the water. **It is over a year after a discharge when Northern Ireland finally release this information.**

Elsewhere in the UK, information on sewage discharges is often made available within an hour, enabling people to make informed decisions about whether the water is safe. **Northern Ireland's water users should have the same access to information, and the right to know whether sewage was discharged into the waters they love.**

NORTHERN IRELAND GOING BACKWARDS ON PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH.

The Swim NI system, which launched in 2022, provided vital daily predictions of water quality during the bathing season - with alerts covering six popular Bathing Waters across Northern Ireland: **Ballyholme, Ballywalter, Castlerock, Newcastle, Portrush (Curran) and Waterfoot.** For many water users, this information provided the only accessible indication of potential sewage pollution risks. Surfers Against Sewage previously incorporated these alerts into the SSRS app, consequently issuing 127 pollution risk warnings between June and October 2025.¹³



image credit: Mat Arney

TABLE 18Alerts issued via Swim NI's predictive alerts in 2025.¹³

BATHING WATER	ALERTS ISSUED
Ballyholme	21
Ballywalter	49
Castlerock	2
Newcastle	52
Waterfoot	3
Total	127

Source: Safer Seas and Rivers Service App using Swim NI data feed.

However, the Swim NI project closed in 2026, removing important public safety information, and preventing any equivalent warnings from being issued during the 2026 bathing season. While some known pollution incidents such as algae blooms can still be flagged, these are limited and are no substitute for comprehensive, timely information about sewage pollution which can help to protect our health. This retraction of information is made even more concerning by Northern Ireland Water's continued failure to provide real-time sewage alerts.

Without real-time information on sewage discharges, and with the loss of Swim NI's pollution risk predictions, water users in Northern Ireland are being left largely in the dark. Water users in Northern Ireland deserve to know when pollution may put their health at risk. Instead, in 2026, they outrageously have even less information than they did last year.

SICK OF SEWAGE

With sickness from sewage widespread across the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland is no different. People use Northern Ireland's beautiful waterways all year round, for a variety of different activities, and their health is being compromised as a result of sewage infested waters.

In our 2026 Wild Water Survey to Northern Ireland residents, 36% of respondents reported becoming unwell after interacting with the water, with a further 15% saying they may have become unwell.³³ Reported symptoms included the familiar gastrointestinal and respiratory issues, as well as skin and ear infections. Many of the reported illnesses were from designated bathing waters, including sites classified as 'Excellent'. Yet more than half of the people surveyed avoided entering the water due to potential pollution events.



“

As someone who is regularly in the water for work and leisure, it's not the first instance I have felt some sort of sickness after being in the sea. I have also heard of other lifeguards having stomach sickness after being in the water, especially more recently. There were water quality checks taken from the stream at east strand which showed higher levels of bacteria, so this is of course a concern as the stream leads into the sea. However, we have been told that tests from the main sea bathing areas are fine.”

ANNIE JAGOE, PORTRUSH

WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT SH*T WE'RE DEALING WITH, IN REAL TIME

NORTHERN IRELAND WATER MUST BECOME TRANSPARENT ABOUT THE SCALE OF POLLUTION ACROSS THE COUNTRY, AND GET SERIOUS ABOUT TACKLING IT. IT'S AN OUTRAGE THAT THERE ARE NOT YET LEGALLY BINDING TARGETS TO END UNTREATED SEWAGE DISCHARGES AFFECTING BATHING WATERS AND POPULAR RECREATIONAL WATER USAGE AREAS BY 2030.

Transparency goes beyond annual reporting, it's about communication of that data too. The public must know about sewage discharges in real-time so they can make informed choices and when or where to enter the water. The gold standard in this area would be to introduce a world leading recreational water quality testing regime that monitors emerging pollutants and protects water users wherever, whenever, and however they use the water. For this system to work, beyond the data, Northern Ireland needs an independent, and adequately resourced, Environmental Protection Agency too.



image credit: Jody Cusack

A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Public health and sewage – not a new crisis, just increasingly impossible to ignore..

The findings in this report aren't just about numbers. They're people. Every one of us is impacted at a human level by this ongoing crisis – whether that's with direct sickness, concern for loved ones, or not being able to access a blue space that adds value to our lives.

Dirty Business has brought the public health implications of sewage back to the fore. The programme has been a powerful reminder of the need for urgent, systematic change. Sadly, it's also a reminder of how long these injustices have been wrecking lives.

Heather Preen died in 1999. 27 years on, the same strain of E. Coli responsible for her death left seven-year-old Rex in a life-threatening condition after contaminated water exposure. Neither of these families should have experienced these tragedies.³⁴ None of the thousands of people reporting sickness to us each year should experience this.

This is a public health crisis. One where people are getting sick and the authorities have their heads in the sand. But if we address this crisis, the public health benefits are huge.

Each year, 20.5 million people participate in water and boating sports. That's 20.5 million people for whom water quality can be a risk.³⁵

People also risk illness without entering the water – via aerosols in the air that can impact those living, working or walking near sewage treatment works.³⁶

The most common illnesses are gastrointestinal, respiratory, ear and eye-related illnesses,³⁷ but sickness does not impact everyone equally. Children, elderly, pregnant and those with reduced immunity are at greater risk.³⁸ Various pathogens and viruses can cause diseases,³⁹ and raw sewage can carry antibiotics into waterways, which in turn can drive bacteria to develop resistance, making infections harder to treat.⁴⁰ Regulation has not kept pace with reality - the Environment Agency tests for just two bacteria, through part of the year, and at a fraction of the sites where people use the water.^{22,41}

20.5 MILLION
UK people are risking sickness



THE SCALE OF HARM? UNDERESTIMATED, IF NOT UNKNOWN

It's not just what's in the water that we don't fully have transparency on – it's also the real number of people getting sick. At the time of writing (September 2026), a total of 9,361 people have told us that they or a loved one had become sick after using the water.²⁴

1,568 SICKNESS CASES REPORTED
in 2025, resulting in
3,146 days off work.

Between Jan and August 2026,
1,687 SICKNESS CASES REPORTED,
resulting in
1,923 days off work,
the equivalent of one person being
off work for more than 7 years.



THE SUMMER OF 2026: RECORD TEMPERATURES RECORD SICKNESS



In 2026, of 1,568 sickness reports, 787 came from people getting sick after taking to the water during the summer heatwaves (Table 19). 84% of the reports at bathing waters came from bathing waters rated 'Excellent' or 'Good', further demonstrating how broken the system is.²⁴

TABLE 19

Sickness reports during 2026 summer heatwaves²⁴

HEATWAVE	DATE RANGE	TOTAL REPORTS	GOOD / EXCELLENT
Heatwave 1	22 May – 31 May 2026	200	100
Heatwave 2	19 June – 28 June 2026	205	90
Heatwave 3	4 July – 26 July 2026	261	142
Heatwave 4	11 August – 16 August 2026	121	71
Total		787	403

Source: Surfers Against Sewage sickness reporting data¹⁴



image credit: Ziran Bybella

THE SCARIEST THING ABOUT OUR STATISTICS, IS THAT WE THINK THEY'RE JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Despite claims about UK water quality improving, that's more people telling us they're getting sick. It's a public health crisis. And yet **there is no formal national reporting procedure for sickness caused by sewage.**

The absence of a coordinated response puts patients at risk. When people do get sick, water quality-related diseases often aren't familiar to medical professionals, sickness diagnosis can be incorrect or delayed.⁴²

The true scale of sickness caused by sewage across the UK is likely to be significantly higher than we report here. Not everybody in the UK is aware of our reporting service, or remembers to use it.

By comparison, food poisoning is considered a public health issues and all suspected sickness must be reported to the UK Health Security Agency by registered medical practitioners.⁴³ The importance of this was demonstrated in a recent Salmonella outbreak. In 2026, 207 confirmed cases across 13 months triggered national surveillance and investigation apparatus – interviews, tracing, hospitalisation data, and more.⁴⁴ The national reporting procedure is vital to ensure that country-wide information is available and outbreak responses can be coordinated. Where is this response for the thousands of people telling us that they got sick from using the water?

An official public health response to the sewage scandal is vital and long overdue. It cannot be left to patients to self-report to a charity based in Cornwall.

In 2026, a Public Health Taskforce was set up by the UK Government. Their remit includes advising UK Government on public health risks associated with recreational water use, but so far, **we've heard nothing.** We're yet to hear their recommendations, and to what extent Government will implement them.⁴⁵



“

Doctors and medical professionals working in coastal areas need to be alert to the risks from polluted waters as routine tests may not identify the type of germ responsible. As doctors, we know that sewage is causing sickness in our patients - colleagues of mine use the SAS app every time before they choose where to surf. It's remarkable that there's no coordinated response.

PETER SELLEY, RETIRED DOCTOR

SICKNESS IS JUST PART OF THE STORY.

Public health isn't just about not getting sick, it's also about promoting good health. And we know that getting in, on, or near the water can bring extraordinary physical and mental health benefits. Benefits that everyone should be able to safely access.

PUBLIC HEALTH DEFINED

The science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting health through the organised efforts of society.⁴⁶

Mental ill health is the number one cause of UK sick leave. Access to water - seas, rivers and lakes - is strongly linked with a reduction in poor mental health, alleviation of stress-related illnesses, and improvements in mindfulness, self-belief and productivity.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹ Blue and Green social prescribing — i.e. getting into nature - is recognised as an effective intervention for mental illness. This isn't just a nice-to-have — **it's a financially-favourable treatment option.**⁵⁰

CASE STUDY

ONE POLLUTION INCIDENT, A WHOLE LIFE CHANGED. COMPTON BAY (SOUTHERN WATER).

When many of us think about sickness, we often think about it as a temporary blip, but there is some nasty sh*t in our waterways. Heartbreakingly, the path to recovery isn't always so simple.

Amanda Kitson used to regularly enjoy both the mental and physical health benefits of swimming. It wasn't just something she did for fun, but a free, accessible and essential activity to manage a chronic health condition. Unfortunately, they developed a serious facial infection and repeated ear infections following water exposure.

Physical benefits are huge too — including relief and recovery for chronic pain, arthritis, musculoskeletal issues and cardiovascular conditions.^{47,48}

When our waterways are full of sh*t, people miss out on these benefits. Channel 4 polling showed that after *Dirty Business* aired, over half of viewers would stop swimming in the UK's rivers and seas after viewing.⁵¹ As a charity founded on a love of being in the ocean, we struggle with this statistic, but we can also understand it. Who wouldn't be scared, when we know the outcome of polluted waters can be genuinely deadly?

Lost opportunities are particularly hard-hitting for those who benefit the most from using the water, including beginners to sport, children, neurodivergent, and disabled people.^{52,53}

“

The fear of getting sick, knowing the serious consequences for me if I do, has meant I have been able to swim less and less. Without swimming, managing my condition has become really difficult rehab has been harder, my mental health has taken a hit, and physically, my pain levels have increased, my mobility has decreased. I miss the water — it was free, and it was medicine... and now I can't access it in the same way.”

AMANDA KITSON

This represents the reality for so many people who have the most to gain from using the water.



WE NEED PUBLIC HEALTH TO BE PRIORITISED OVER PROFIT, AND WE NEED IT NOW

The Government has said water quality is vital for public health. It must grasp the opportunities to act — through the Clean Water Bill, Public Health Taskforce and Bathing Water Regulations.

We need data on the scale of harm, action to stop the pollution and accountability when people are put in harms way.

What we're calling for is not groundbreaking. The information and technology needed to enable real-time, and future pollution information already exists. Across the world, the public

who live by other coasts, cities, and rivers can see real-time and future projections for when pollution will make it unsafe to swim. We're falling behind, and in doing so, leaving people without the confidence to access their local blue spaces, even when it is safe to do so.

Why wouldn't the Government want to protect public health, and clean up our waters that bring such joy, community and wellbeing to people across the UK?

CONCLUSION

TIME TO RECLAIM OUR WATERS

IT'S A SCANDAL, AND AN OUTRAGE.

Despite the differences in each nation, what remains the same across the UK is that people are paying the price for failing water systems – we're paying financially, through catastrophic environmental damage and through the dangerous health risks posed by sewage pollution. Privatised water companies have shown us again and again that they will continue to prioritise profit over people. Even publicly owned and not-for-profit companies continue to threaten public health by failing to adequately invest in the system fast enough to improve ageing infrastructure, monitoring and transparency. Across the board, regulators have repeatedly failed to hold polluters to account – they're failing us, and the

environment. Successive Governments have failed to address the root causes of the public health crisis. We need Government ambition, we need Government action, and we need it now.

The pressure on our water system will not go away. We urgently need transformational reform of the water industry across the UK that ends profit from pollution and creates a water industry that works for people and planet, with full data transparency and a tough independent regulator to enforce the law.

The big opportunity right now is in England, with the Clean Water Bill expected later this year. But in every corner of the UK we need action.



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