

NATION FOCUS: SCOTLAND

SECTION EXTRACTED FROM THE SURFERS AGAINST SEWAGE WATER QUALITY REPORT 2023. SCAN TO READ THE FULL REPORT, OR VISIT:



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HOW IS SEWAGE MANAGED IN SCOTLAND?

Scotland’s public drinking water and sewerage services are provided by publicly owned, Scottish Water.

As a public company, the Scottish government and Scottish Parliament ultimately have the power to set out what Scottish Water should be focussed on, and to hold the company to account if they are falling short. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) is responsible for regulating Scottish Water’s environmental performance.

Unlike in England and Wales where nearly 100% of Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) are monitored, in Scotland under 4% of overflows are required to be monitored¹. This means the Scottish public are in the dark about the performance of the other 96% of overflows.

Scottish Water has set out plans to improve the monitoring of sewage pollution and reduce the number of discharges in their Improving Urban Waters Route map².

SCOTLAND’S HIDDEN SEWAGE

Scottish Water operates over 3,600 sewage overflows in Scotland, but last year only 103 of these were required to be monitored. What information is available is only published annually, rather than in real-time.

Data from the 4% of reported sewage overflows is made available due to their ‘high priority’ status, as defined by SEPA. This includes important sites such as bathing waters and shellfish areas – though importantly, not all bathing waters are reported. Even two popular locations for water users featured in this report, Thurso (a world-famous surfing location) and Portobello in Edinburgh (a popular beach, with thousands of visitors), have noticeably no reporting whatsoever.

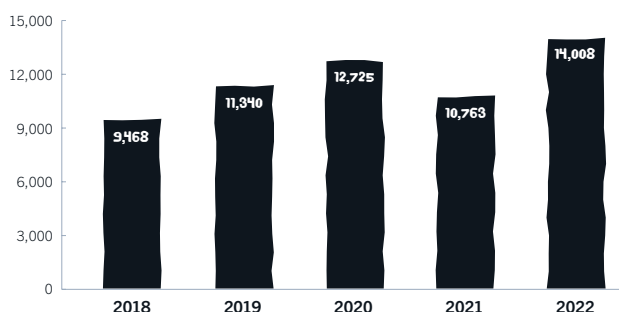
The impacts of untreated sewage overflows on blue spaces throughout Scotland therefore remain largely unknown, and Scottish water users rarely have any idea whether it’s safe to use their local water or whether they will unknowingly swim in sewage.

1 <https://www.scottishwater.co.uk/Your-Home/Your-Waste-Water/Overflow-Spill-Data>
 2 Improving Urban Waters Route Map, accessed 26 October 23, <https://www.scottishwater.co.uk/help-and-resources/document-hub/key-publications/urban-waters-improvements>

WHAT DOES THE DATA SHOW?

Just like in the rest of the UK, overflows in Scotland are only legally allowed to be used in ‘exceptional circumstances’ such as during periods of unusually heavy rainfall. However, over the last five years, untreated sewage has been released 58,304 times, and this is just from 161 sewage overflows in Scotland that were reported on. This amounts to 604,643 hours in total. In 2022 alone, untreated sewage was discharged at least 14,008 times for 113,230 hours.

Figure 15
Number of reported sewage discharges in Scotland between 2018 and 2022.



DISTRIBUTION OF DISCHARGES

Of the 22 Scottish counties which were monitored for sewage overflow discharges between 2018-2022, Argyll and Bute had the highest number, with a total of 12,085 over this period.

After this, South Lanarkshire had the highest number of discharges at 11,428 over five years. Whilst these two counties had higher numbers of monitored overflows – 34 and 24 respectively – even counties with fewer sewage overflows still received high amounts of discharge. For example, Perth and Kinross had just two monitored sewage overflows over the five-year period but this culminated in 299 total discharges.

HOW RELIABLE IS THE DATA?

Even the little data we do have is patchy. According to Scottish Water reports, three sewage overflows that were reporting annually are now only reporting for the bathing season due to the licence agreement. This means that SEPA is, in simple terms, rejecting more evidence of potentially illegal discharges.

Between 2018 and 2020, when all annual discharges were reported, these three overflows discharged a total of 381 times. Since then, the reporting of these events has become patchier, but this doesn't mean they aren't still having significant impacts. On top of this, some overflows that were previously monitored now go entirely unreported, having been labelled as having “no licence requirement for reporting. Therefore, was not included on returns for 2019 onwards”.

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN?

Approximately 96% of Scotland's sewage overflows are unreported, meaning that current data only shows a small fraction of the total amount of sewage that is being pumped into Scotland's waters.

This includes important locations such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Designated Bathing Waters, and other popular swim and surf spots. From reported data we do have, we know that untreated sewage has been discharged tens of thousands of times in the past five years, suggesting that the total amount being discharged from the 3,641 sewage overflows across Scotland is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands.

Scottish Water has promised to install monitoring equipment on 1,000 of the highest-priority sewage overflows by 2024. Whilst the remaining 2,600 are to be considered in terms of cost and benefit. Scottish Water has stated that they do not believe it will be beneficial to monitor due to an absence of evidenced environmental impact³. This means that it is unlikely we will get the full picture of the scale of sewage pollution in Scotland any time soon.

In addition to publishing retrospective data for overflows, we want real-time data so the general public can make an informed choice when entering the water. Whilst Scottish Water have outlined their plan to publish near real-time data by the end of 2024, this will only include monitors that are currently being reported.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE COST TO HUMAN HEALTH AND LIVELIHOODS?

Thurso is one of many well-used locations, with zero monitoring – does Scottish Water believe that it's not worth the cost to make Scotland's top surf location safe to use? We've interviewed local surfers and swimmers who are affected by regular discharges at their break (watch their interviews in the online report).

“I've had surfs where I've come out feeling really ill, I've had itchy skin, it's not been very pleasant. There's always loads of stuff getting swept out of the river whenever there has been rain. . . everything just ends up in that river and goes straight out to the lineup. . . . It would be a much nicer experience to be able to surf without being terrified that you're going to be spewing later on.”

- Finn MacDonald

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

Surfers Against Sewage are calling on the Scottish Government to direct Scottish Water to install event duration monitoring on all overflows and for that data to be freely and easily accessible to the public in real-time. We need the government to move forward and act on the sewage pollution we know is occurring by setting progressive sewage reduction targets to end untreated discharges into bathing waters, popular water usage areas and high priority nature sites by 2030.

³ <https://www.scottishwater.co.uk/About-Us/What-We-Do/Urban-Waters-Routemap>

Q SCOTLAND SPOTLIGHT: PORTY WATER COLLECTIVE

Charlie has been representing Surfers Against Sewage in his home city of Edinburgh for four years, he helped lead last year's Paddle Out Protest in Scotland and has been campaigning against plastic pollution through beach cleans on Portobello Beach.

This year, Charlie along with other locals from Portobello, are embarking on a new and exciting way to campaign. They've set up the Porty Water Collective, a hyper-local community dedicated to improving the ocean from their local beach.

"The Porty Water Collective is a collection of individuals, organisations, community groups and charities all committed to protecting the blue spaces in and around Portobello. Why we exist: There is SH*T in our water."

But what's different about this new collective? Charlie tells us that it's all about local connection and a greater sense of ownership, as well as a way to give a more diverse community a soft introduction to the world of activism.

"When people hear the word activism they get scared, they think activists are dangerous non-conformists. Whenever I speak at demos, I stress that activism is about care and an act of love.

It's okay to feel angry about plastic pollution or the water quality in the spaces we share. It does feel important to add that we are a collective, there is no template we are following, and no leader, although we are grateful to be backed and supported by local reps and SAS HQ."

The Porty Water Collective has been set up as a reaction to the ongoing poor state of water quality in the area, which is impacted by several sewage overflows which bring sewage downstream into the sea via the Figgate Burn (known locally as Figgy Burn).

"It's obvious from walking the beaches, from the number of baby wipes there is a massive sewage-related problem. Something that is ignored by SEPA and Scottish Water.

What we know from 2021 water quality testing (part of SAS 2021 Water Quality Report) and now with the Collective's water quality testing (backed by SAS) - is that there are dangerously high levels of E.coli and chloroforms in the Figgy Burn from CSOs further up it. Not all the locals know this."

Charlie proceeds to tell me how the water quality testing the Collective is now doing is helping to raise awareness in the local community. People are always interested in what they are doing, and the volunteers doing the testing are always happy to explain.

"Took a test on Monday afternoon, a mum walked by with a toddler, thinking what's that man doing, fishing for shitty water, what's it going to be like... The mum nodded. She already knew. There is an awareness but some cognitive dissonance as a society about lots of things going on with our natural world."

As I learn more about the Collective, Charlie reminds me that this is only the start, they have lots of plans for the next six months, year and onwards – and the collective is growing organically.



DEMO @PORTOBELLO BEACH!

The Porty Water Collective and local SAS reps are holding a demonstration at Portobello Beach on **SATURDAY 25TH OF NOVEMBER** to raise awareness of the sewage issue plaguing Scottish beaches. Join us in support, come down for a discussion on Scottish water quality issues or get in touch if you want to get involved in the future.

**CONNECT @SASSOUTHEASTSCOTLAND ON
INSTAGRAM AND FACEBOOK**

The Collective has plans to keep testing the water quality regardless of the official bathing season and wants to begin discussions with local government to get conversations started in the corridors of power.

They've been training up new volunteers to help test the water as they join the ranks, and are keen for more members.

"If people are concerned about water quality and the natural environment, looking after our local natural species in Portobello, in Edinburgh, contact

us and open a discussion! We are hoping as we progress and monitor what we are doing, we can draw on our experience to help collectives in other parts of Edinburgh or other cities around the UK."

It's clear that the Porty Water Collective have passion and drive to make a difference in their local area, and in time, their work will help influence changes in water quality legislation on a national level.

We'll be keeping in touch with Charlie and the Porty Collective to see the latest water quality results from the Figgy Burn and support them as their local campaign progresses.

Izzy Ross - Campaigns Manager

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

We are calling on this and the next government to;

REVEAL THE TRUTH

We need UK wide transparency about sewage pollution.



- ✓ Accurate and accessible real-time water quality information year-round
- ✓ A transparent bathing water application process
- ✓ Water quality testing that shows the full picture
- ✓ Transparency across the sewage system

PRIORITISE HIGH RISK POLLUTION

Take immediate targeted action to tackle the highest risk pollution events.



- ✓ End untreated discharges affecting bathing waters and popular water usage areas by 2030
- ✓ End untreated discharges affecting high priority nature sites by 2030



SCAN FOR THE FULL WATER QUALITY REPORT, WATCH THE HUMAN IMPACT STORIES AND SHARE THE FINDINGS.

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