

Tackling the environmental impacts of Storm Overflows in Wales

First published: [January 2023](#)



We call on Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water (DCWW) and Welsh government to reduce the harmful impacts of storm overflow discharges. To achieve this, we recommend:

- **By the end of 2024, define ecological harm** to reflect the harm resulting from discharges in a way relevant to both coastal and riverine waters
- **By 2027, set and meet reduction targets for number and duration of discharges** into coastal and transitional waters
- **By 2030, monitor the volume of discharges** to assess of the scale of sewage pollution
- **By 2030, screen all storm overflows** to reduce [Sewage Related Debris](#)

Background

In Wales, wastewater is processed by Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water (DCWW), a not-for-profit. The sewerage system utilises storm overflows, which includes Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) and Settled Storm Overflows. These overflows are designed to operate during unusually heavy rainfall to prevent sewage from backing up into homes. However, in 2022, 1,930 storm overflows in Wales discharged over 77,000 times.¹ When sewage spills, it includes a cocktail of [highly persistent chemicals](#), viruses, bacteria, and Sewage Related Debris (SRD).

Number of storm overflows	1,930
Percentage of storm overflows monitored	99%
Number of discharges	77,047
Average discharges per monitored overflow	35
Percentage of storm overflows discharging over 100 times	11%

What's being done to tackle sewage pollution in Wales?

The Wales Better River Quality Taskforce, formed in 2022, set a target requiring reporting of discharges within an hour by 2025.² The Taskforce also set a target of "100% installation of screens by 2050; with high priority screens installation by 2040". However, no coastal locations are included in this prioritisation.

The Taskforce pledged to conduct a "Full assessment of impact from all storm overflows by December 2027" – but 'all' refers only to riverine overflows. This means that the 673 storm overflows within 1 kilometre of coastal and transitional waters will not have the same assessment, despite spilling for 127,954 hours in 2022. In September 2023, Natural Resources Wales stated that "The Taskforce is currently reviewing its future priorities, and coastal waters are included in the review", though as of December 2023, no timeline was given for this. Similarly, DCWW acknowledges that "there is no industry methodology for assessing ecological impact in coastal and transitional waters", but indicated that they are "in discussion with NRW regarding an approach to assets that discharge to [coastal] waterbodies, for implementation in the next asset management period".

The Taskforce also pledged to set achievable targets for the prevention of ecological harm from riverine overflows by March 2023. However, as of December 2023, only a report on costs and benefits of different policy options for the regulations of storm overflows has been published³.

In July 2023, Natural Resources Wales downgraded DCWW's rating from three to two stars out of four, reporting that sewerage pollution incidents "rose by 7% in 2022".⁴ In addition, DCWW were responsible for "five serious sewerage pollution incidents", an increase compared to 2021 and 2020. Natural Resources Wales have previously "pushed Dŵr Cymru to aim to self-report at least 80% of their pollution incidents"—but in 2022, a self-reporting level of just 69% was achieved.⁴

Our recommendations in detail

DCWW planned to publish their 'Storm Overflow Manifesto' at the end of 2023. However, as of January 2024, this document has not been published. The Marine Conservation Society recommends that it should be published in early 2024 and include the following targets.

By the end of 2024, define ecological harm to reflect the harm resulting from discharges in a way relevant to both coastal and riverine waters.

DCWW states that "For investment in AMP8 (2025–2030), the outcome of our impact investigation programme will be used to prioritise investment based on ecological harm". DCWW further reference plans to utilise the Storm Overflow Assessment Framework (SOAF) process in scoping out environmental harm. However, the SOAF's method for identifying environmental harm is designed for riverine habitats. DCWW must go above and beyond this existing methodology in order to ensure that ecological harm in the marine environment is accurately measured, thereby enabling appropriate measures to be undertaken in not just the riverine environment, but also the coastal and marine environment.

By 2027, set and meet reduction targets for number and duration of discharges into coastal and transitional waters.

A full assessment of all storm overflows, including those discharging into coastal and transitional waters, should be completed. An action plan with target dates for improvements should then be created. Frequent spillers should be included within the upcoming Price Review, alongside those spilling into high priority sites*, with the rest included in the subsequent Price Review.

By 2030, monitor the volume of discharges to assess of the scale of sewage pollution.

While the number of discharges is an important metric, it makes no distinction between high and low volume spills. For example, a large sewer discharging at high volume is currently reported as equal to a small sewer discharging at low volume. Including volume in monitoring is therefore vital to understand the scale and potential harm caused by spills.

By 2030, screen all storm overflows to reduce Sewage Related Debris.

It's estimated that up to half of storm overflows in Wales will require some form of improved screening provision.⁵ This would help to tackle the Sewage Related Debris found on 75% of Marine Conservation Society beach cleans in Wales in 2022. However, the Taskforce currently plans to install screens by 2050 – during which time Sewage Related Debris will continue to accumulate in the environment.

Further reductions of Sewage Related Debris can be supported by Welsh Government's commitment to banning single use plastic products and improved labelling, combined with efforts to make reusable sanitary products more accessible.

See the [UK CSO policy](#) for our full CSO asks.

*Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), and Ramsar sites

References

1. [DCWW: Combined Sewer Overflows](#)
2. [Welsh Government: river quality action plan](#)
3. [Welsh Government report on Storm Overflows](#)
4. [Natural Resources Wales: DCWW Environmental Performance Report](#)
5. [Welsh Government: reducing visual impact](#)



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