# Tidal Thames clean-up lifts 180 tonnes of 'wet-wipe island', revealing scale of flushed plastics



A major clean-up of the tidal Thames near Hammersmith Bridge has exposed the scale of a largely invisible urban pollutant. Crews working on a 250-metre stretch of river removed an estimated 180 tonnes of congealed waste — a compacted mass widely described as a “wet-wipe island” — in an operation led by the Port of London Authority in partnership with Thames Water and the charity Thames21. Local volunteers and pupils from St Paul’s School were reported to have taken part in aspects of the work, which organisers said was intended to protect wildlife and restore river flow.

Speaking to the Evening Standard, John Sullivan, Thames Water’s head of Tideway integration, framed the exercise as part of the company’s wider duties: “Our purpose is to deliver life’s essential service, so our customers, communities and the environment can thrive. We are pleased to collaborate with the PLA and Thames21 to remove this mass of wet wipes. For us it is a visible reminder of the damage caused by putting the wrong things down the toilet because flushing something non-biodegradable like a wet wipe doesn’t just make it disappear.” The remark underlines the company’s message that much of the material removed originates from flushed, non-dispersible items.

Environmental groups warn the problem is not confined to a single mound. Thames21 and other river charities have documented vast quantities of plastic-containing wet wipes across the Thames foreshore, and say the products break down into microplastics that harm invertebrates, birds and fish and alter delicate habitats. The Rivers Trust has likewise described wipes as a significant threat to river health, fuelling sewer blockages and the formation of fatbergs while creating stubborn accumulations on shorelines. Those ecological consequences were cited by organisers as a primary reason for mechanically removing the mass near Hammersmith.

Volunteer monitoring has provided much of the evidence base for these concerns. A Tideway-supported survey of foreshore transects and citizen-science counts found tens of thousands of wipes recovered from stretches of the Thames over recent years; a separate Tideway statement noted around 64,000 wet wipes were picked up or catalogued by volunteers over a five-year period at hotspots including Hammersmith and Battersea. The community data, campaigners say, helps map pollution sources and build pressure for systemic fixes such as sewer resilience and storm overflow reduction. Tideway has also argued its Thames tunnel project will reduce the volume of sewage-derived litter entering the tidal river once fully operational.

Utilities acknowledge the behavioural side of the problem. Thames Water’s own research indicates that more than 24 million people in the UK have at some point flushed sanitary items such as wet wipes, tampons or pads — many of which contain plastics and are not intended to disperse in sewers. The company has warned that such items contribute to blockages, local flooding and the costly clearances crews must undertake across sewer networks, and has urged customers to look for dispersion accreditation and to bin non-dispersible products.

The clean-up comes amid a wider push by regulators, river advocates and politicians to reduce pollution in the tidal Thames. The Port of London Authority has published a Clean Thames manifesto and called for joined-up action on sewage spills and litter; recent reporting notes that three water companies have agreed to bring forward targets to end routine sewage discharges by 2040. Campaigners and environmental groups are pressing the government for tighter regulation of wet wipes, including a ban on plastic-containing products and clearer labelling so consumers know what can safely be flushed.

For now, the most immediate message from charities on the river remains simple and public-facing: “bin it, don’t flush it.” Thames21 and partner groups continue to run volunteer monitoring and clean-ups, while urging manufacturers to remove plastics from wipes, regulators to strengthen standards and water companies to invest in infrastructure to handle both daily load and storm-related overflows. The Hammersmith excavation has been cast by organisers as both a remediation and a data-gathering exercise to bolster those calls.

The sight of tonnes of compacted wipes being lifted out of the Thames was stark evidence of the problem’s scale, but campaigners and industry figures agree that visible removal alone will not restore river health. Officials point to infrastructure projects such as the Tideway tunnel and new industry targets as part of a longer-term solution, while charities stress behaviour change, product reformulation and better labelling will be essential if London’s foreshore and wildlife are to be protected for the future.

### 📌 Reference Map:

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html), [[6]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c72vw0wew5zo)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/joinacampaign/taking-action-against-plastic-in-wet-wipes-to-protect-our-rivers/), [[7]](https://theriverstrust.org/about-us/our-position-statements/wet-wipes-position-statement), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://tideway.london/news/press-releases/2022/november/volunteers-pick-up-64-000-wet-wipes-out-of-the-thames-over-five-year-period/), [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/joinacampaign/taking-action-against-plastic-in-wet-wipes-to-protect-our-rivers/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[5]](https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/twenty-four-million-people-admit-they-have-flushed-sanitary-products-or-wet-wipes), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[6]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c72vw0wew5zo), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html), [[7]](https://theriverstrust.org/about-us/our-position-statements/wet-wipes-position-statement)
* Paragraph 7 – [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/joinacampaign/taking-action-against-plastic-in-wet-wipes-to-protect-our-rivers/), [[4]](https://tideway.london/news/press-releases/2022/november/volunteers-pick-up-64-000-wet-wipes-out-of-the-thames-over-five-year-period/), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html)
* Paragraph 8 – [[4]](https://tideway.london/news/press-releases/2022/november/volunteers-pick-up-64-000-wet-wipes-out-of-the-thames-over-five-year-period/), [[6]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c72vw0wew5zo), [[5]](https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/twenty-four-million-people-admit-they-have-flushed-sanitary-products-or-wet-wipes)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/wet-wipe-island-river-thames-london-thames-water-b1242130.html> - An Evening Standard report describes a major operation to excavate an estimated 180 tonnes of congealed waste dubbed 'Wet Wipe Island' from a 250-metre stretch of the tidal Thames near Hammersmith Bridge. Led by the Port of London Authority with collaboration from Thames Water and Thames21, the mechanical removal aims to protect wildlife and restore river flow. The article quotes PLA and Thames Water representatives emphasising environmental harm from plastic-containing wipes and notes community involvement including St Paul's School. It also links the issue to wider sewage pollution, the Tideway tunnel and government proposals to ban plastic in wet wipes.
3. <https://www.thames21.org.uk/joinacampaign/taking-action-against-plastic-in-wet-wipes-to-protect-our-rivers/> - Thames21 explains how plastic-containing wet wipes are a growing pollutant in the River Thames, estimating billions are sold in Britain and many are flushed. The charity's Thames River Watch programme has recorded vast numbers of wipes on foreshores and run citizen-science counts to quantify the problem, collecting tens of thousands since 2017. Thames21 calls for a ban on plastic in wipes, clearer labelling and infrastructure investment to prevent sewer overflows. It highlights ecological harms, microplastic formation and impacts on wildlife, urging consumers to 'bin it, don't flush it' while continuing volunteer monitoring and advocacy to influence policy and manufacturers change.
4. <https://tideway.london/news/press-releases/2022/november/volunteers-pick-up-64-000-wet-wipes-out-of-the-thames-over-five-year-period/> - Tideway's press release reports volunteers and Thames21 citizen scientists removed or counted approximately 64,000 wet wipes from sections of the Thames over five years. The work was carried out in partnership with Tideway and the Port of London Authority, using geolocated transects and foreshore surveys to quantify pollution at sites such as Hammersmith and Battersea. Tideway highlights how wet wipes enter rivers via sewage overflows after being flushed, contributing to blockages and microplastic pollution. The release stresses the role of community science in providing data to support policy changes and anticipates the Tideway tunnel reducing sewage-derived litter entering tidal Thames.
5. <https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/twenty-four-million-people-admit-they-have-flushed-sanitary-products-or-wet-wipes> - Thames Water published survey results showing over 24 million people in the UK have at some point flushed sanitary items such as wet wipes, tampons or pads. The company warns many such products contain plastic and do not break down, causing sewer blockages, fatbergs, flooding and pollution. Thames Water's research indicates a significant proportion of the public do not think about disposal, with increased flushing since the pandemic. The firm urges consumers to bin non-dispersible items, look for Fine to Flush accreditation and highlights the costs and operational burden of clearing blockages across its network to protect waterways and customers.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c72vw0wew5zo> - BBC News reports the Port of London Authority launched a Clean Thames Manifesto committing partners to reduce sewage and pollution in the tidal Thames. The piece notes three water companies agreed to bring forward targets to end sewage spills by 2040 and highlights plans to remove a 'wet-wipe island' near Hammersmith Bridge. The PLA emphasises multi-stakeholder action, monitoring and regulatory changes to improve water quality. BBC coverage references concerns about sewage spills, the role of the Tideway tunnel and calls for bans on plastic wipes, underscoring the ecological and recreational importance of restoring river health for Londoners and wildlife benefit.
7. <https://theriverstrust.org/about-us/our-position-statements/wet-wipes-position-statement> - The Rivers Trust position statement explains why wet wipes pose a significant threat to rivers, noting most contain plastic and millions are flushed annually across the UK. Wipes clog sewers, contribute to fatbergs, cause pollution and form 'wet wipe islands' on foreshores, altering habitats and harming wildlife. The Trust urges collective action: government bans on plastic in wipes, stronger labelling, investment by water companies in infrastructure and public education to prevent flushing. It highlights Thames21 data on mounds of wipes and supports citizen science and clean-ups, calling for multi-stakeholder solutions to reduce microplastic pollution and protect freshwater ecosystems for future.