

I was a champion surfer - then I nearly died: why I believe sewage was to blame

As Channel 4 launches its hard-hitting drama Dirty Business, exposing the extent of the water companies' scandal, surfer Sophie Hellyer adds her voice to the campaign to highlight sewage pollution in UK waters

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Tue 24 Feb 2026 12.02 GMT

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 Sophie Hellyer: 'The ocean has always been my playground.'

As a former British and English junior surfing champion, Sophie Hellyer's life has been devoted to the water - a love of the sea that was almost cut short after she contracted pneumonia and pleurisy, she believes, from the waters near her home in north Devon.

"The ocean has always been my playground - I grew up by the sea, and was a national surf champion in my teens," says Hellyer, 38, now a swim and surf coach. "It's a huge part of who I am and how I live, and it always has been."

Hellyer is also one of a number of people who believe their health has been affected by untreated sewage being discharged into UK waters.

A new factual drama on Channel 4, *Dirty Business*, follows the decade-long investigation into England's water companies that helped to uncover one of the biggest corporate scandals in British history. The three-part drama also depicts the stories of some of the whistleblowers and people who believe their lives have been destroyed by the scandal.



Jason Watkins and David Thewlis in Channel 4's *Dirty Business*. Photograph: Rob Baker Ashton

Hellyer clearly remembers the incident in 2005 that led to her undergoing life-saving surgery.

"I went surfing at my local beach, Westward Ho!, and fell off my board," says

Hellyer, who now lives in Cornwall with her partner and four-year-old son. "I inhaled a tiny bit of water, and when I woke up the next morning, I couldn't breathe. It was terrifying.

"At the time I was living with my boyfriend and his parents, who took me to A&E. I was sent home three times in a single day, my symptoms dismissed as a panic attack or a pulled muscle even though I was struggling for breath. By the time I was admitted to hospital, I was seriously ill."

Eventually diagnosed with pneumonia and pleurisy, as well as empyema, a condition where pockets of pus develop, and abscesses on her lungs, Hellyer received intravenous antibiotics and underwent surgery to insert drains into her chest.

"My left lung had filled with pus and become solid," she says. "Every breath I took was excruciatingly painful - it felt like being stabbed. Overnight, I'd gone from being a sporty, active teenager who surfed every day and played football twice a week, to being at death's door.

"When the doctors treating me heard I'd been surfing the day before I fell ill, they suggested the infection had been caused by inhaling dirty seawater into my lungs. Although there was no way they could prove it 100%, I also believe that's what caused it.

"I grew up well aware of sewage issues at Westward Ho!" says Hellyer. "I'd often seen used sanitary pads, condoms and other waste floating by when I was surfing. Surfers in that area were always suffering from sinus and eye infections, but that was considered normal." By 2005 Westward Ho! had been designated a Blue Flag beach, but was still subject to storm overflow spills.

During a month spent being treated in hospital, Hellyer was confined to a wheelchair, unable to walk, and missed her A-levels and prom.

"By the time my 18th birthday rolled around, I was back home - albeit weighing less than six stone," she recalls. "Instead of planning a party like a normal 18-year-old, my big ambition was simply to walk upstairs."



📷 Hellyer has been able to resume competitive surfing, despite the long-term effects of her illness. Photograph: Jonny Weeks

Following her eventual recovery, Hellyer got back into the water and managed to surf competitively again. Yet today, she's still feeling the long-term effects of her illness. As well as permanently losing 20% of the capacity in her left lung, she has suffered three serious bouts of pneumonia.

Keen to raise awareness of the scandal of UK's polluted waters, she's currently an ambassador for Surfers Against Sewage, a UK charity that campaigns for cleaner waters, and is also depicted in a powerful art installation, commissioned by C4, that graphically highlights the stark issue of sewage spillage.

The Dirty Business fountain will be unveiled at Southbank Observation Point, on London's South Bank, on Monday 23 February – the day the drama's first episode airs. The installation includes models of real-life beachgoers spewing dirty water from their mouths and the figures featured include Hellyer's likeness, after she posed for 3D scans for the project.

"The fountain is very confronting, and will hopefully spark a lot of discussion around the issues of sewage in our waterways," Hellyer says. "Our water industry is broken, and I think it needs a radical overhaul to stop putting profit ahead of people and the planet.

"It's depressing that we have to go to such lengths to get attention on this issue, but I'm hoping that both Dirty Business and the fountain project don't just spark outrage - but result in meaningful change, too."

In the time it takes to read this article, sewage will be released four times, on average, into the UK's waterways - by 2024's most conservative figure: once every 54 seconds.

Channel 4's factual drama Dirty Business starts Monday 23 February at 9pm, airing over three consecutive nights

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