

Absolute waste

By BEN PIKE URBAN AFFAIRS REPORTER

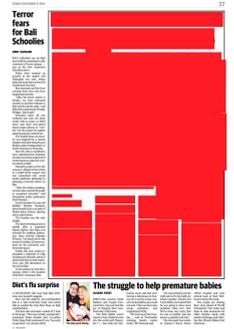
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The neglected stormwater drains polluting Sydney's Harbour

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EXCLUSIVE

TONNES of waste, including condoms, syringes and cigarette butts, is needlessly washing into Sydney Harbour and onto our beaches because of the city's neglected stormwater system.

A confidential audit of the City of Sydney's stormwater system has revealed 40 per cent of 68 gross pollutant traps (GPTs) are not working. The traps are located under street level, and filter stormwater waste before it gets into waterways.

In an embarrassing revelation for a council that prides itself on environmental protection, the August 2019 audit found many of the so-called "functional" GPTs are barely working with tidal surges pushing overflowing rubbish directly into the Harbour.

The report published dozens of pictures of GPTs that were overflowing with rubbish and clogged with sediment — many only metres from the Harbour.

The GPT at Lilian Flower Reserve in Newtown, for instance, was "230 per cent full". Another GPT at

Millers Point was 120 per cent full, meaning "the floatables can be lost".

The Sunday Telegraph has also obtained a second report from 2015, which reveals the City of Sydney has done very little to fix the problem in the past four years.

From 2015 until 2018 the council removed 561 cubic metres of pollutants, representing less than 7 per cent of the rubbish that washes through the city's stormwater system.

About 2500 cubic metres of rubbish goes into the council's stormwater drains every year, or about one cubic metre for every hectare.

City of Sydney Liberal councillor Craig Chung accused Lord Mayor Clover Moore of ignoring the issue.

"The Lord Mayor has been more concerned with showy protests and grandstanding about climate change rather than fixing what is a very real and very urgent environmental issue," Mr Chung said. "I have been to see these pipes and there is zero oxygen in the water flowing out into the Harbour. It's killing our marine life."

"The fact that 40 per cent of these GPTs are not working shows that this is a very real community risk."

The average stormwater drain contains 20 per cent litter, including

shopping bags, cigarette butts, containers, condoms and syringes as well as dead rats and cockroaches.

Eighty per cent of the ocean's plastic pollution comes from land-based sources via stormwater run-off.

Clean Up Australia chief executive Terrie-Ann Johnson said GPTs are the vital last line of defence between street litter and the ocean.

"It is really important that these are maintained as rubbish does all sorts of damage to the environment," she said. "The cost of remediating waterways is a lot higher than maintaining GPTs."

Mr Chung's motion pushing for a "Zero Litter to Ocean" target across the entire local government area by June 2030 was endorsed by City of Sydney council at their October 28 meeting. A City of Sydney spokeswoman said the independent auditors noted that the city's results are among the best of all councils across Sydney and NSW, and that our commitment to ongoing review and maintenance of GPTs demonstrates a best-practice approach.

"Following the audit, we have allocated \$350,000 for the cleaning and repair of the GPTs. Future budget allocation will meet all necessary upkeep costs," she said.



Stormwater drain pollutant traps clogged with rubbish and sediment.

Councillor Craig Chung at Rushcutters Bay with (right) some of the waste. Picture: Sam Ruttyn