2020 annual report

Photo: Steve Truluck

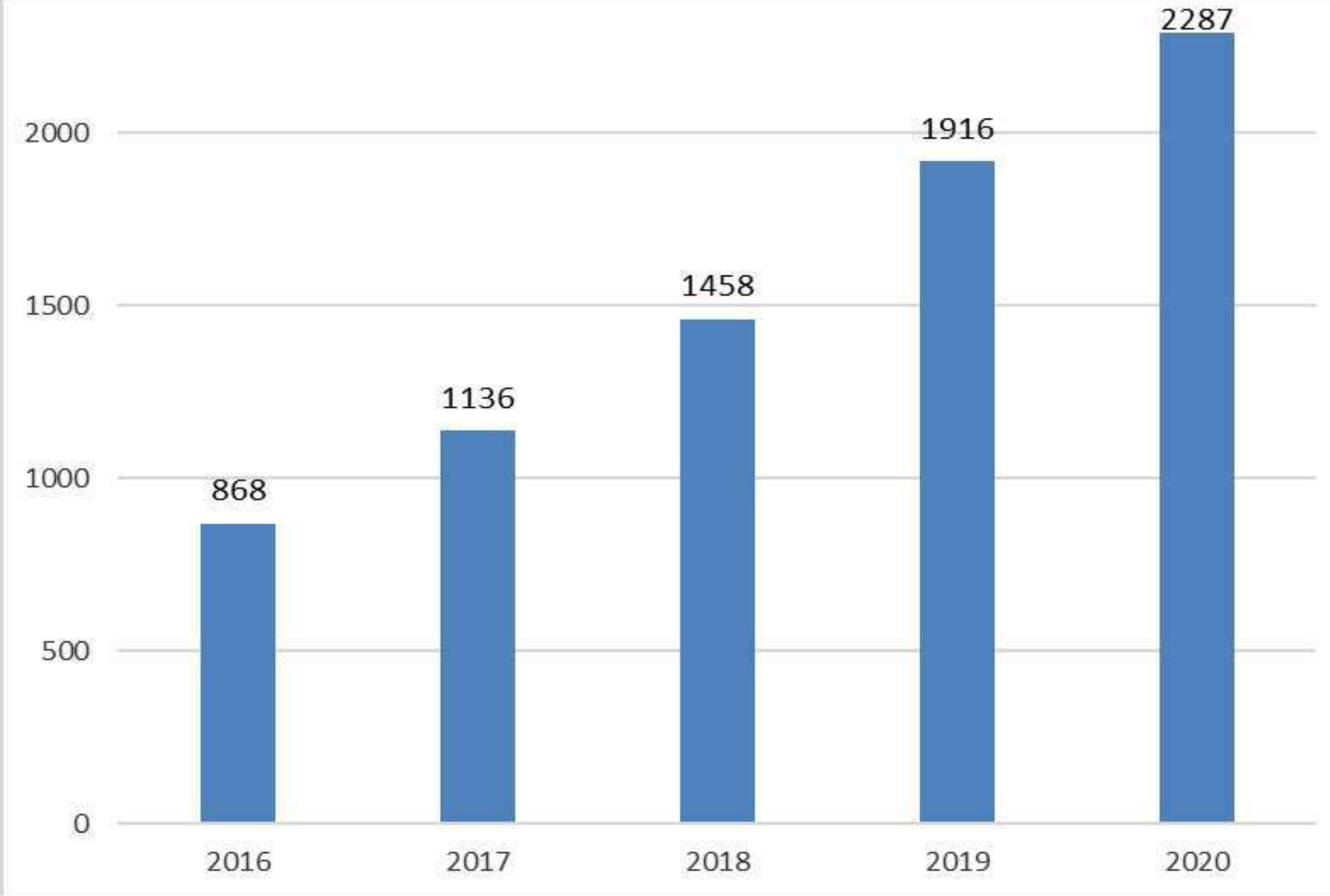
Callouts: overall

Total callouts for 2020 = 2287– highest on record again

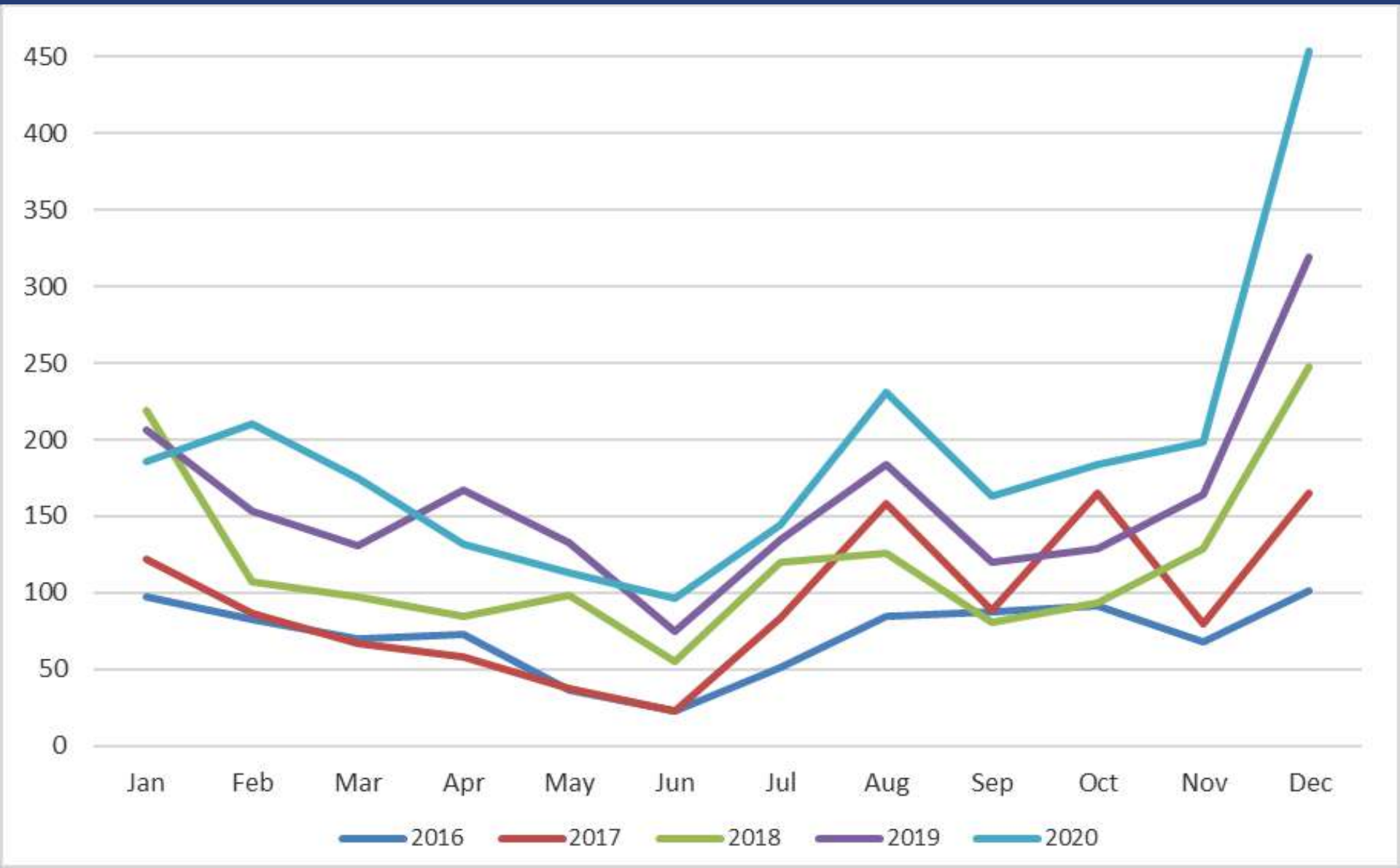
- In 2016 we had 874 callouts
- In 2017 we had 1136 callouts (30% higher than 2016)
- In 2018 we had 1458 callouts (28% higher than 2017)
- In 2019 we had 1916 callouts (24% higher than 2018)
- which makes 2020 19% higher than 2019…

So even though its another big jump in callout figures, the rate of increase is actually slowing down year on year, which is potentially a sign that callouts will eventually plateau at some point (they can't go up forever!). Its still pretty incredible that it was only in 2017 that we had our first year with 1000+ callouts, and three years later it has almost exactly doubled. If the trend continues this year then we could be expecting around 2500 callouts in 2021 – time will tell though!

Callouts: overall annual



Callouts: overall monthly



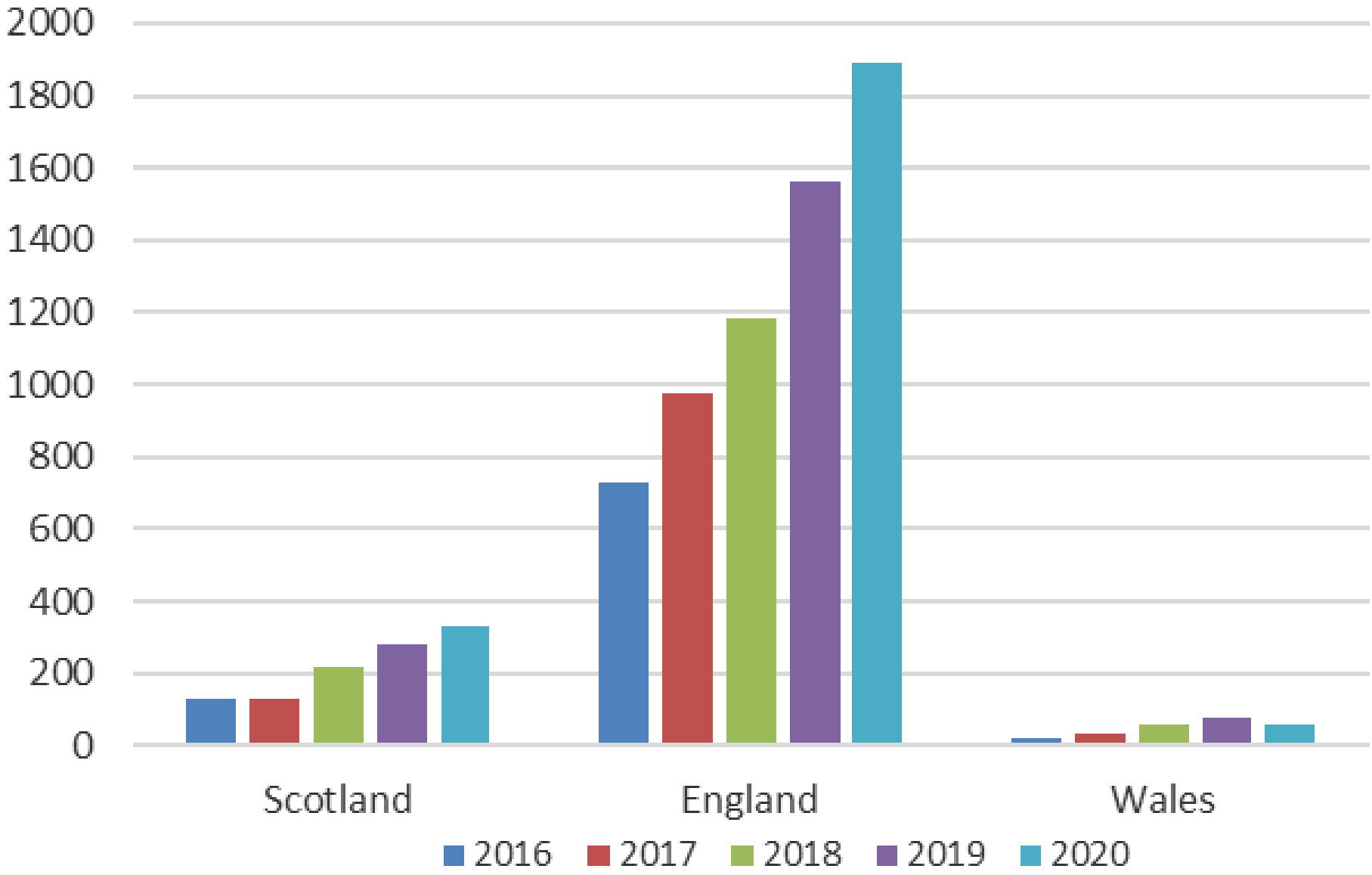
National callouts

Covid appears to have had no effect on callouts. All months except January, April and May were all new monthly records for the highest number of callouts. April and May are still the second highest totals for those months. February and August are notable for surpassing 200 callouts for the first time, while June remains the only month still in double figures (barely!). December was just ridiculously busy, beating all previous monthly records by a long way.

The rise in callouts can largely be attributed to:

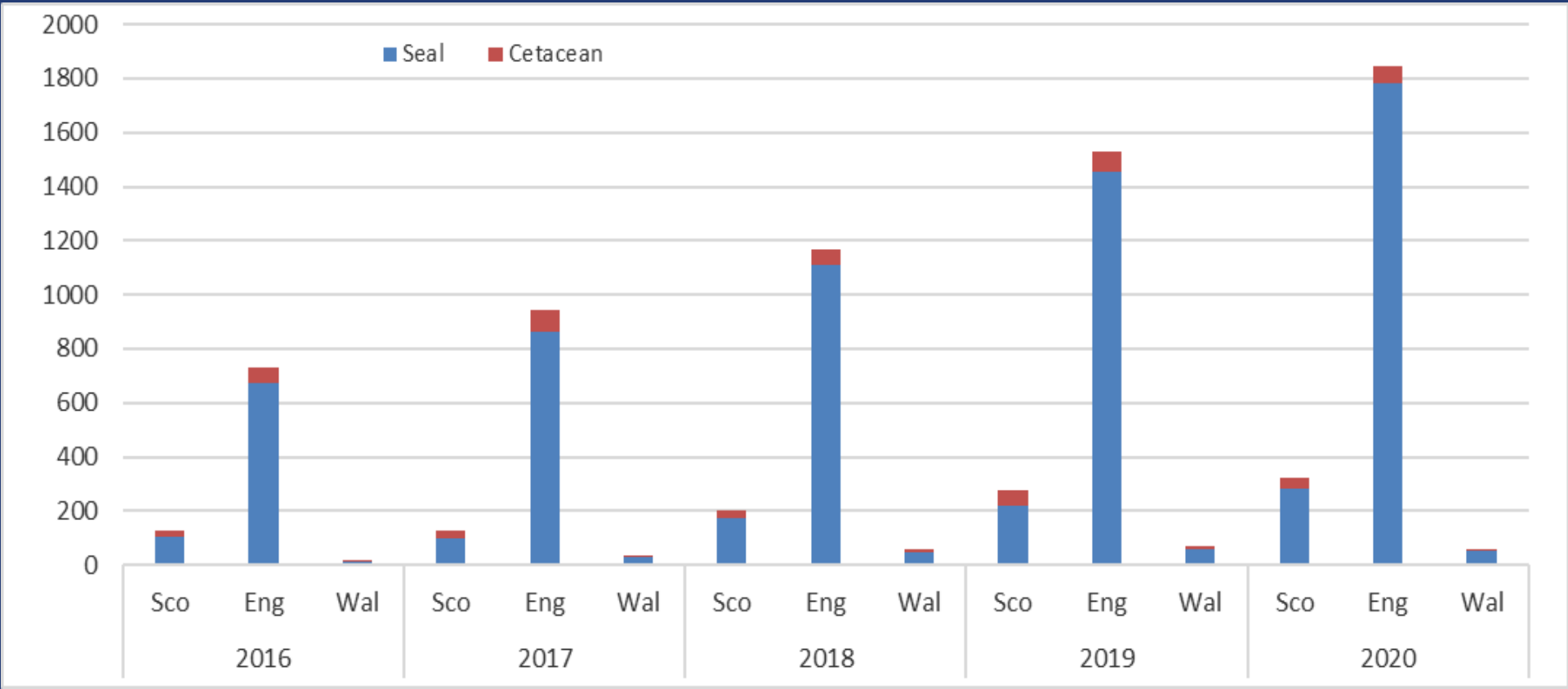
- Increasing awareness of BDMLR/access to information
    - Social media
    - Media
    - Signage/posters
- Increasing coastal human populations, year-round tourism and marine activity
    - Noticeable change in tourism behaviour over the last ten years in certain areas
    - New/greater uptake of outdoor activities e.g.: SUPs, kayaks, coasteering, walkers
- More frequent and severe Atlantic storms caused by climate change
    - Growing evidence for increased grey seal pup mortality, lowered reproductive success and pupping season timing shift in South West England (maybe other areas)
- Apparently poor health in the East England common seal population
    - Severe mouth infection issue still ongoing in pups through most of the summer

Callouts: countries



Callouts: countries

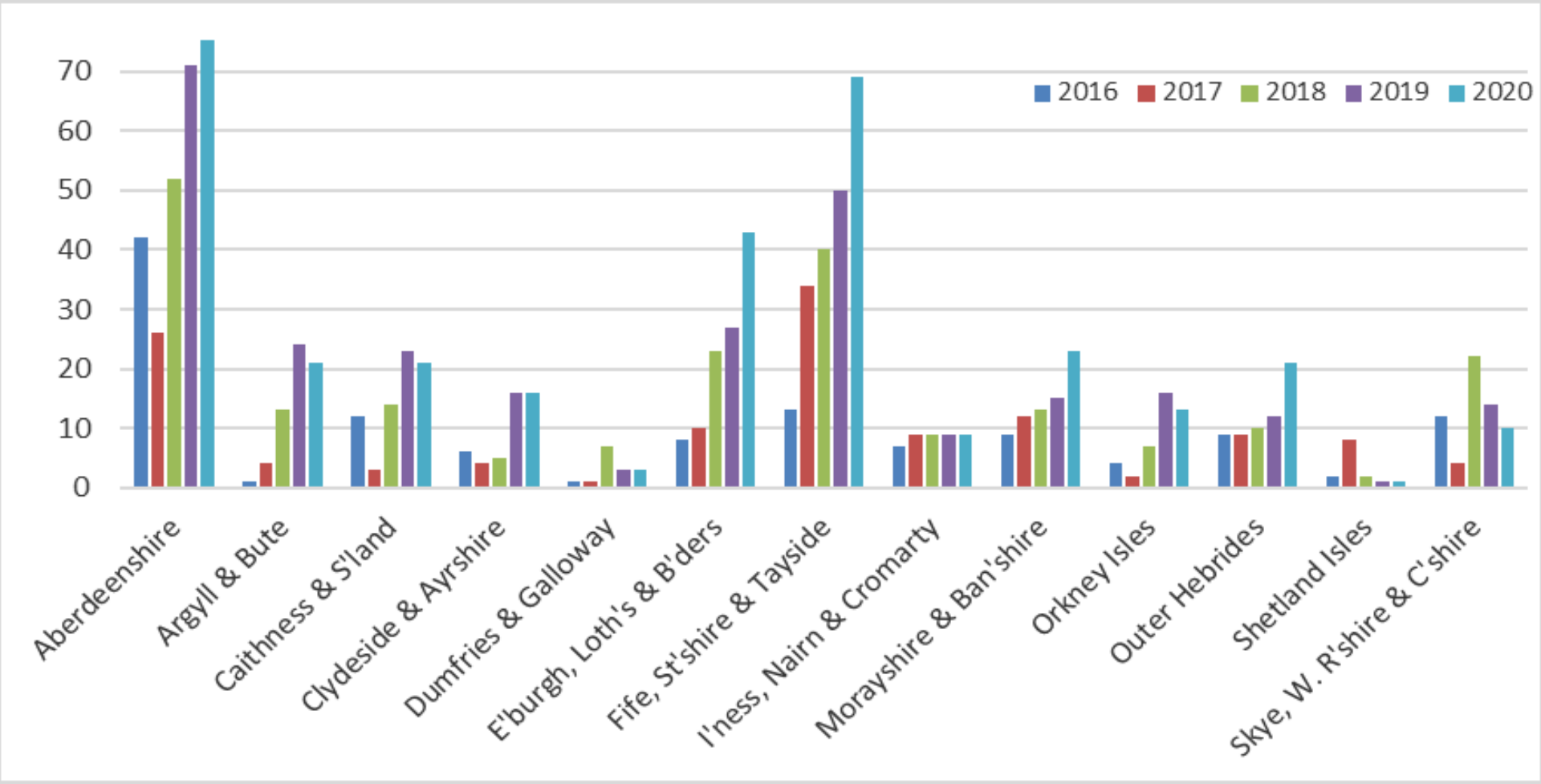
England is the busiest country, with the largest number of both seal and cetacean callouts, followed by Scotland then Wales. The rate of increase is still highest in England, and as with previous years likely ties into a number of factors including general public awareness, number of active volunteers etc. Interestingly though, this is not entirely true for all areas, as we are getting a more active team together in North Wales particularly in the last year or two, yet callouts in North Wales and Wales as a whole have decreased slightly.



Callouts: Scottish regions

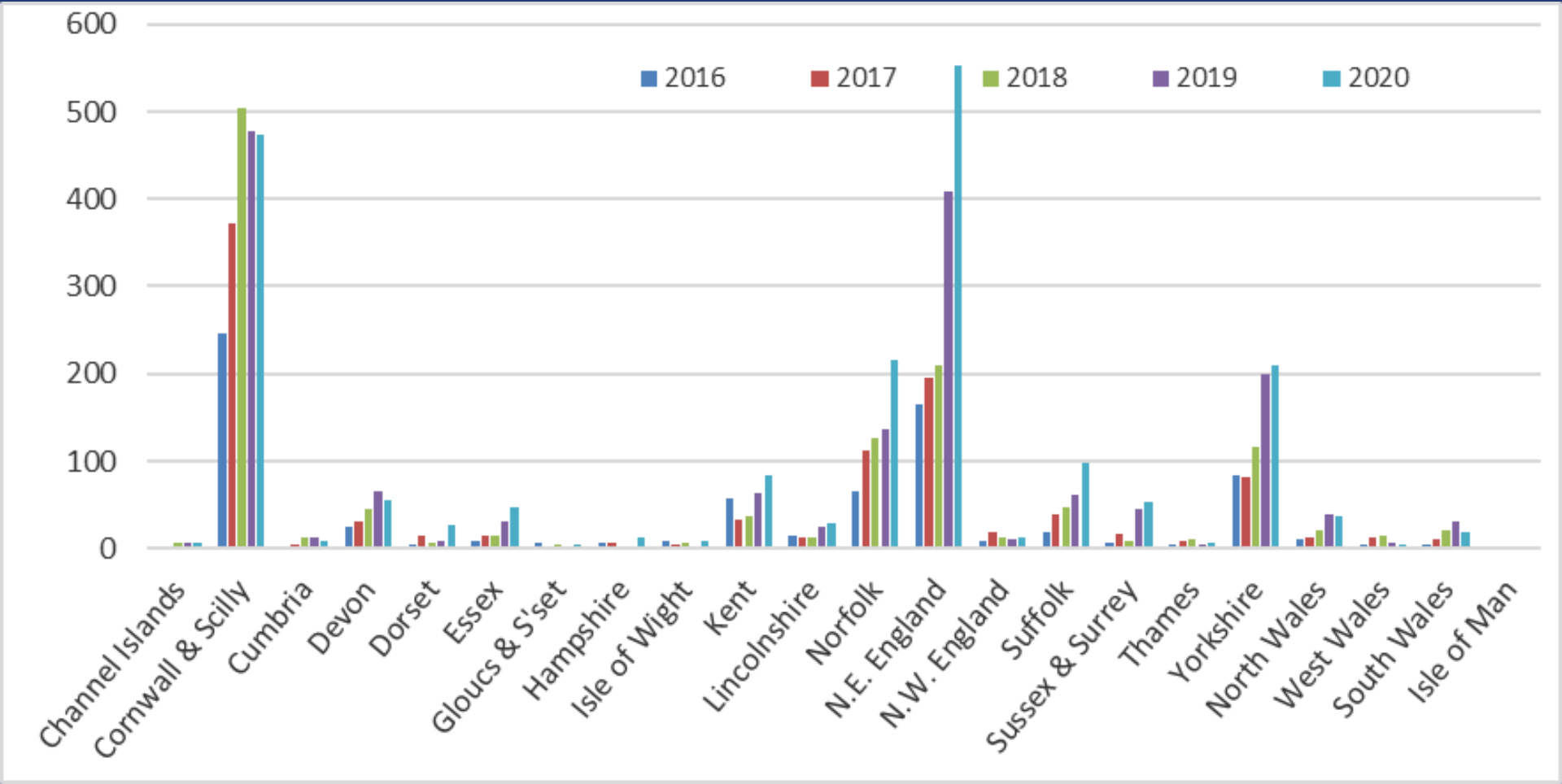
(Please note these are based on the old callout regions before the reorganisation in 2021)

Aberdeenshire remains the busiest region in Scotland, with the Fife, Stirlingshire and Tayside region following closely due to a jump in callouts there. The Edinburgh, Lothians and Borders region has also seen a significant jump. Callouts have increased in most other regions, except Argyll and Bute, Caithness and Sutherland, Orkney and Skye, Wester Ross and Cromartyshire.



Callouts: English and Welsh regions

North East England has overtaken Cornwall and Scilly as the busiest region of England and Wales, setting a new record for the number of callouts for any region annually. Yorkshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Kent and Dorset all saw notable increases over the previous year. Callouts actually decreased in Devon, Cumbria, and all three Welsh regions however.



Callouts: monthly species

January

Grey seal	165
Common seal	9
Common dolphin	2
White beaked dolphin	1
Pilot whale	1
Sperm whale	1

February

Grey seal	194
Common seal	5
Harbour porpoise	3
Common dolphin	1
White beaked dolphin	1
Fin whale	1

March

Grey seal	156
Common seal	4
Harbour porpoise	1

April

Grey seal	110
Common seal	5
Harbour porpoise	4
Common dolphin	1
Risso's dolphin	1
Bottlenose dolphin	1
Minke whale	1

May

Grey seal	94
Common seal	7
Harbour porpoise	1
Minke whale	1
Humpback whale	1
Fin whale	1

June

Grey seal	51
Common seal	18
Harbour porpoise	3
Bottlenose dolphin	1
Pilot whale	2
Minke whale	1
Fin whale	2

July

Grey seal	30
Common seal	90
Harbour porpoise	3
Common dolphin	2
Bottlenose dolphin	1

August

Grey seal	45
Common seal	133
Harbour porpoise	1
Common dolphin	4
Risso's dolphin	1
Sowerby's beaked whale	1
N. Bottlenose whale	2
Minke whale	1

September

Grey seal	76
Common seal	64
Harbour porpoise	3
Common dolphin	2
N. bottlenose whale	1

October

Grey seal	122
Common seal	40
Harbour porpoise	3
White beaked dolphin	2
Sowerby's beaked whale	2
N. Bottlenose whale	6
Minke whale	1

November

Grey seal	158
Common seal	14
Common dolphin	2
White beaked dolphin	1
Sperm whale	1
Minke whale	1

December

Grey seal	411
Common seal	6
Harbour porpoise	2
Common dolphin	7
Pilot whale	2
Sperm whale	1
Sowerby's beaked whale	1
Humpback whale	1

Callouts: species annual total

Pinnipeds: 2123
Grey seal: 1612
Common seal: 395
Unid. seals: 116

Cetaceans: 107
Harbour porpoise: 24
Common dolphin: 21
White-beaked dolphin: 5
Risso's dolphin: 2
Bottlenose dolphin: 3
Pilot whale: 25
Sowerby's beaked whale: 6
Northern bottlenose whale: 9
Sperm whale: 3
Minke whale: 7
Humpback whale: 2
Fin whale: 4
Unid cetacean: 16

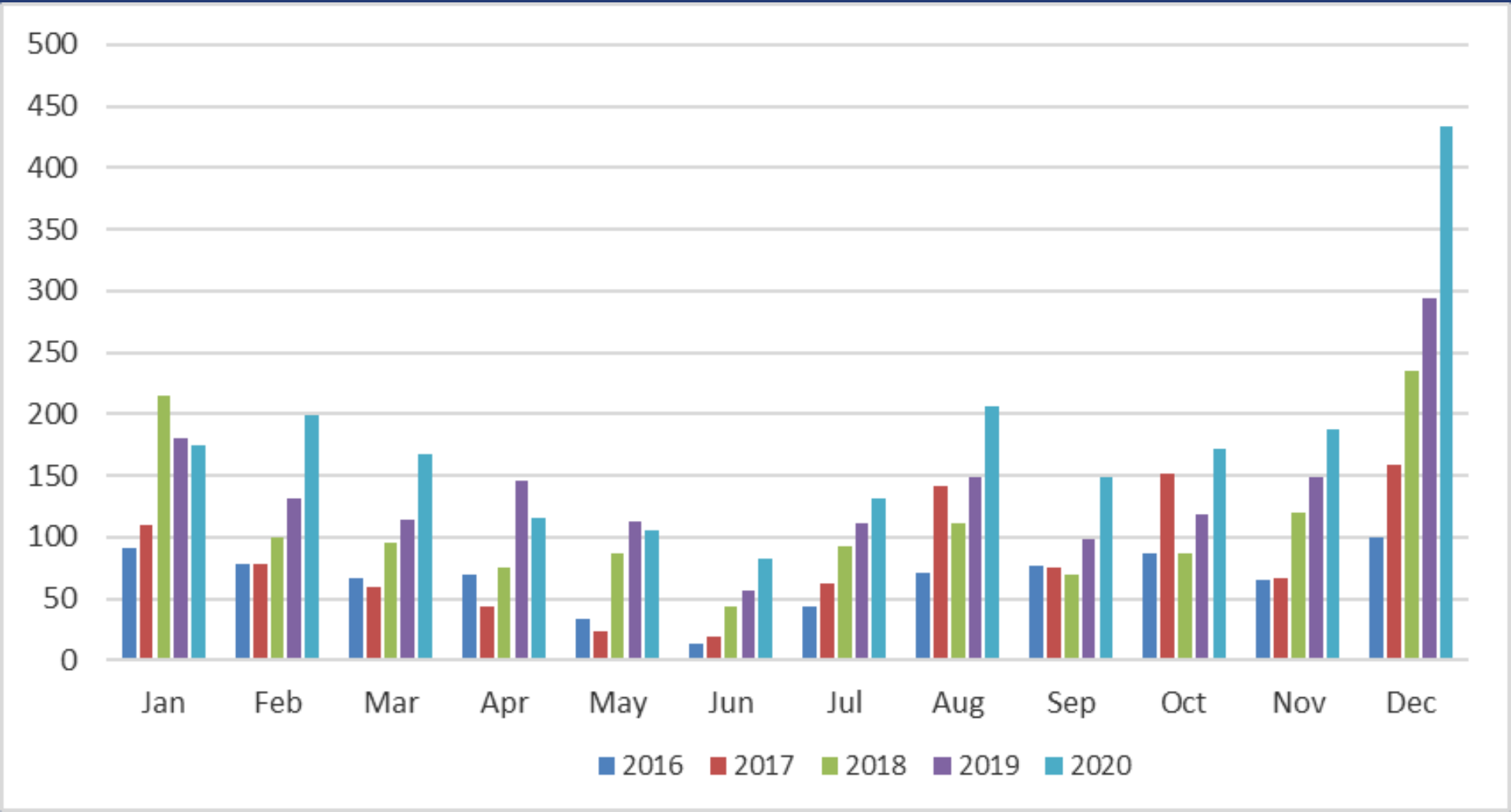
Seals of course drove up the callout figures this year with an increase for both species, whilst cetacean callouts actually decreased from last year (130).

Harbour porpoises were far fewer in number in 2020, and even missed some months. Similarly, common dolphin callouts were somewhat fewer and also missed months as well, whereas last year both species were represented in every single month.

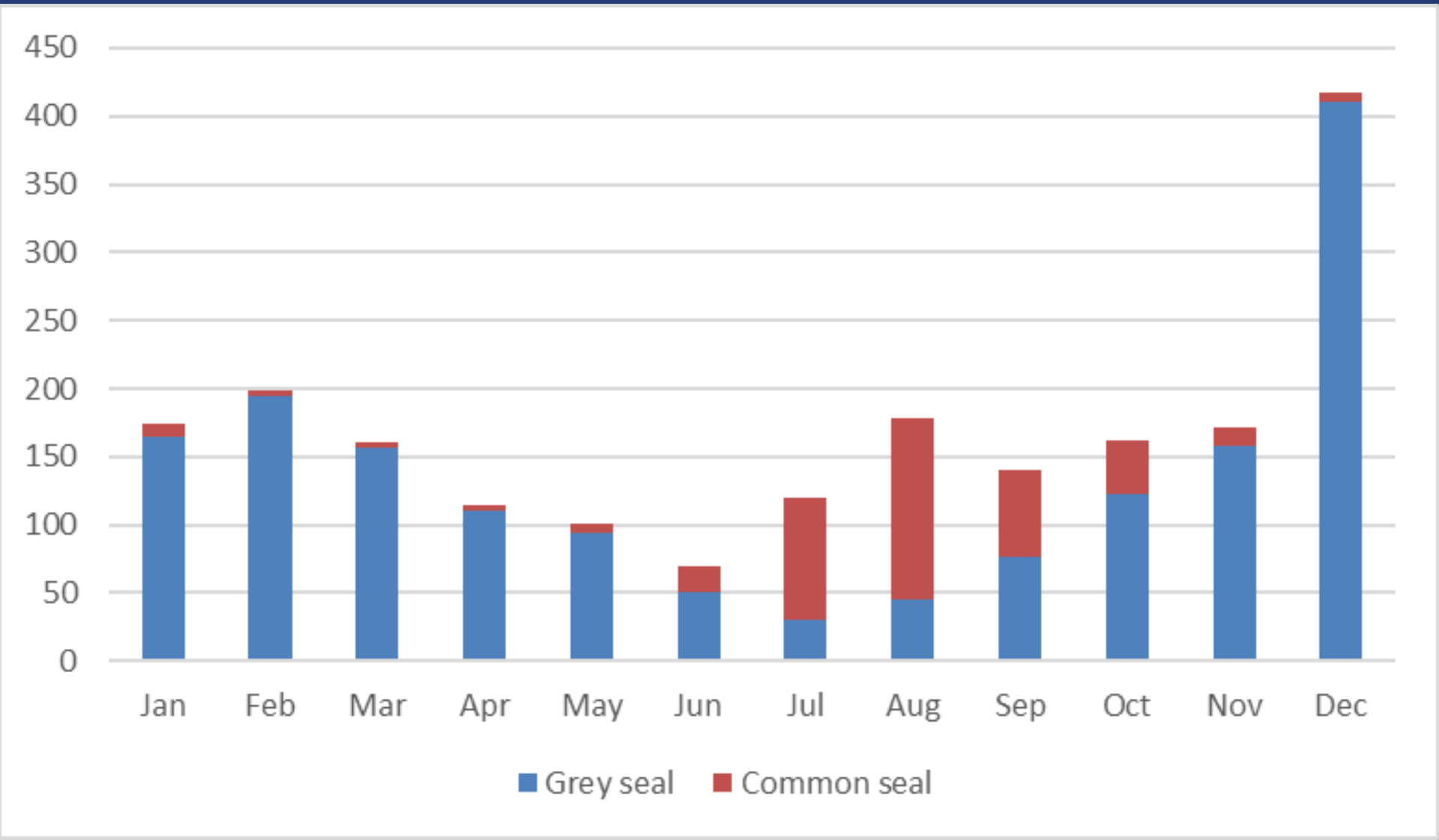
The number of calls to northern bottlenose whales was driven up by the group in the River Clyde during Autumn, who persisted in the area for several weeks.

Fin whales, which did not feature in any callouts in 2019, are represented by three live and one dead stranding here. Relatively speaking, it was a very busy year for this species.

Callouts: pinnipeds by month



Callouts: pinnipeds by species



Callouts: pinnipeds summary

The seasonal peaks for grey and common seals are evident as always. The common seal season seemed to linger on into the grey seal season in some areas, meaning the rehab centres still had a number of common seals in when the first grey seals were arriving.

Rehabilitation space was severely exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, with many centres furloughing staff and splitting into smaller staff bubbles, which significantly reduced the capacity available. As we know from previous years, capacity is becoming a major issue as demand is outstripping supply now. As a result, we had to review our triage protocols to encourage more monitoring of seals on beaches, increase overnight/short term holding opportunities, and work to relay seals much further distances than we previously would have had to. It is important to remember that we are acting on behalf of the animal once it is in our care to do what is best for its welfare, and cannot allow it to starve and suffer on a beach.

In the background we are working with others to increase seal rehabilitation capacity nationally, though we must appreciate that this is not a quick process as funding, staffing, facilities and other infrastructure need to be carefully planned and organised.

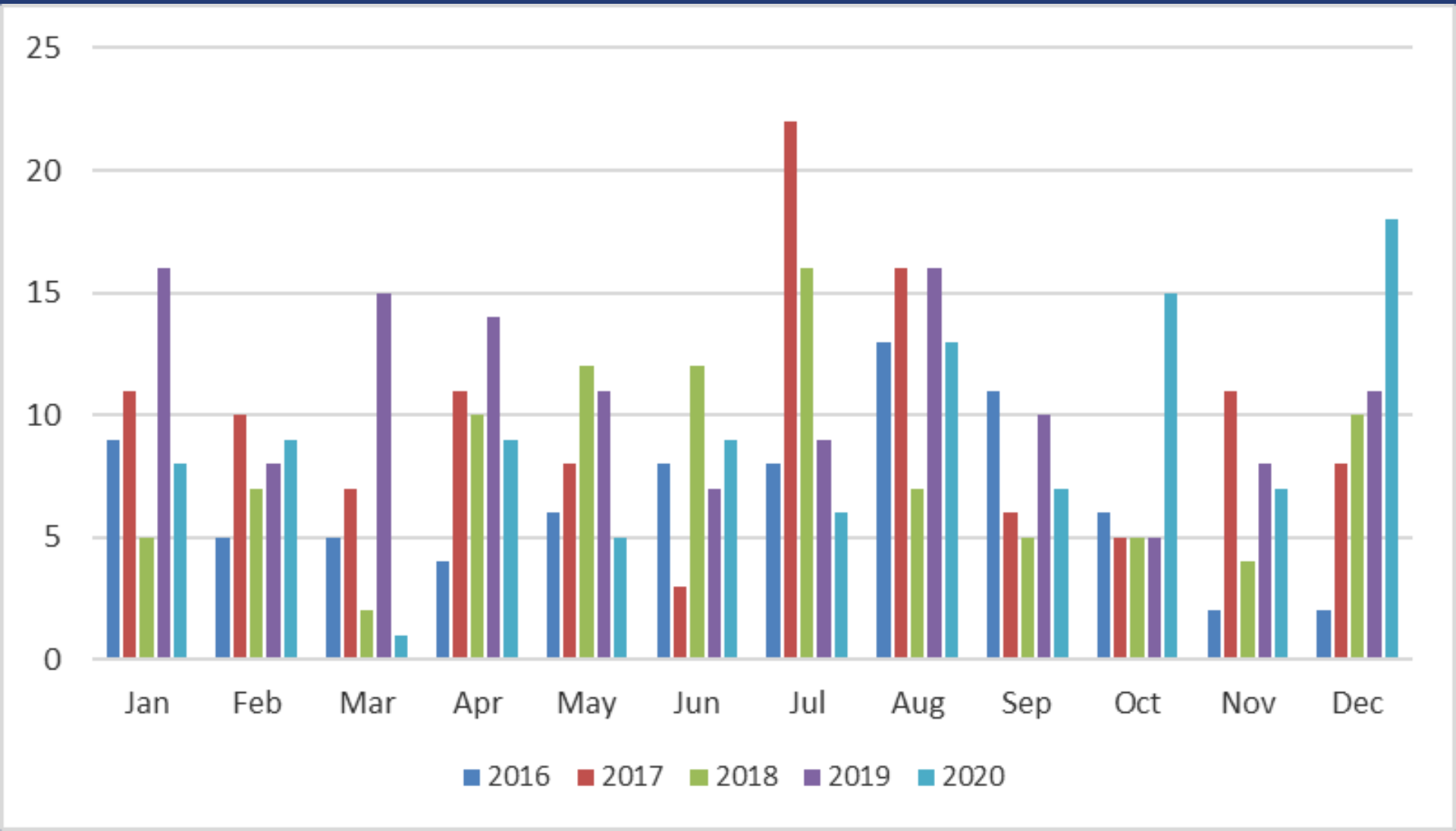
Callouts: pinnipeds summary

The 2019/20 winter season ended calmly, with few storms and even an earlier than usual tailing off of the grey seal season in South West England and Wales in January instead of February, which was most welcome.

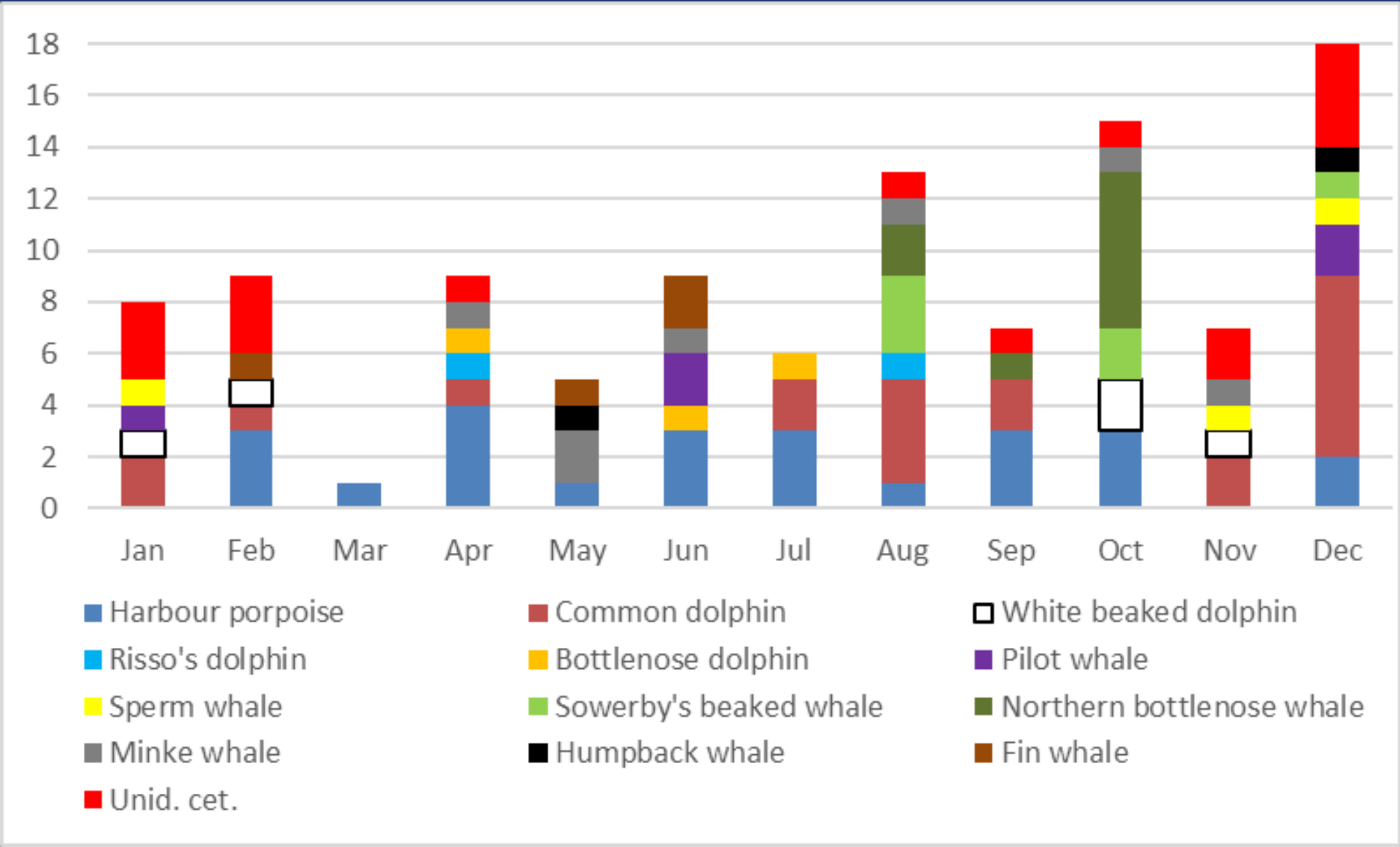
The 2020 autumn and winter months saw an average amount of severe storms in the West of the UK, and thankfully they largely avoided the biggest spring tides and pupping peaks on this side of the country. However, it is worth noting that the Atlantic saw its worst storm season in nearly 20 years, so things could have been significantly worse had some more of those storms headed our way. We simply got lucky this year as a number either fizzled out or missed us.

Evidence is growing to show that the storms of 2017/18 continue to affect us. In 2018/19, Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust recorded 46% less grey seal pups observed born around South West England compared with the previous season, despite a similar input of survey effort. In 2019/20 pupping returned to a similar level to that recorded in 2017/18, while the peak in pupping shifted two weeks earlier from mid-October to late September. The evidence supports the theory that in 2017 when many pups were lost, a significant proportion of breeding females did not become pregnant again until the following year and therefore fewer pups were born in 2018. Being in better body condition, this may have triggered an earlier timing of when they were ready to give birth in 2019, accounting for the shift in the timing of the peak. This is a critically important case study as evidence for an emerging population-level threat to grey seals as a result of human-driven climate change and certainly something we will be shouting about.

Callouts: cetaceans by month



Callouts: cetaceans by species



A sperm whale was monitored off the Kent coast at the end of January as it roamed the outer Thames estuary area. It was in poor condition and washed up dead a couple of days later, which was the expected outcome for an animal far out of its normal habitat.

In February a female fin whale live stranded at Parbean beach on the south side of the Helford Estuary, Cornwall. It was a remote site with limited access and was found by the team from Clean Ocean Sailing as they passed by on their boat, and had also observed it free swimming prior to stranding. The animal was in very poor nutritional condition and did not survive for long. A full post mortem examination was carried out the following day by CWTMSN and CSIP and it suspected to have had an infection.

In May, 19 pilot whales were observed distressed near South Uist, Outer Hebrides. They live stranded the next day and refloatation advice given over the phone to locals as no Medics live there. Permission was given for two Medics to go over on the ferry with rescue kit the next day (the island was Covid-free at the time), and the pod restranded again. 9 animals sadly died, while another one was euthanased. The remaining animals were successfully refloated. A newborn calf was found dead and it is thought the mother had difficulty giving birth, leading to the stranding.

On the same day as the pilot whale mass stranding, a fin whale live stranded in the Dee Estuary on the border between North Wales and England. It survived to the next high tide and swam out of the estuary, but was found restranded the next day in the same area. It again managed to survive the day, but the prognosis at this point was poor, and as expected it was found dead the next day.

A very rare live stranding of a basking shark occurred in July, and even more unusually it was in Yorkshire, where basking sharks are virtually vagrant visitors only. Attempts were made early on to refloat the animal, however it kept restranding and was listing to one side so it was eventually euthanased later in the evening. Interestingly at one point the animal was thought to have died, having been out of the water for some time and unable to breathe, however it was confirmed to have survived on land for four hours. We are now working on a basking shark live stranding protocol.

A juvenile/sub adult minke whale live stranded in Hartlepool in August on an incoming tide. The local BDMLR team worked with RNLI Lifeguards and the Coastguard to provide first aid and support while pontoons were attached, however once in place and inflated the animal managed to get free and swam out to sea. It returned later that evening inside the harbour, where there was nowhere it could strand easily, and the next day it had gone again.

Also in early August a common dolphin was found live stranded far up in one of the intertidal creeks of the Helford Estuary in Cornwall, which is a known strandings hotspot. It was in good condition and responded well to first aid provided by the Medic team, but due to the location could not be refloated in situ. A local resident was found who was able to offer their boat and drive the dolphin with four Medics approximately five miles downriver to the mouth of the estuary, where it was successfully refloated into open sea.

In mid-August, a female harbour porpoise that appeared to be pregnant live stranded in Lincolnshire. BDMLR Medics from the area plus the Midlands attended with the Coastguard and RNLI inshore lifeboat to tend to it. It was assessed to be in reasonable condition and refloated from the shore, however conditions were stormy and the animal restranded. It was then taken out by the inshore lifeboat and refloated further out to sea successfully.

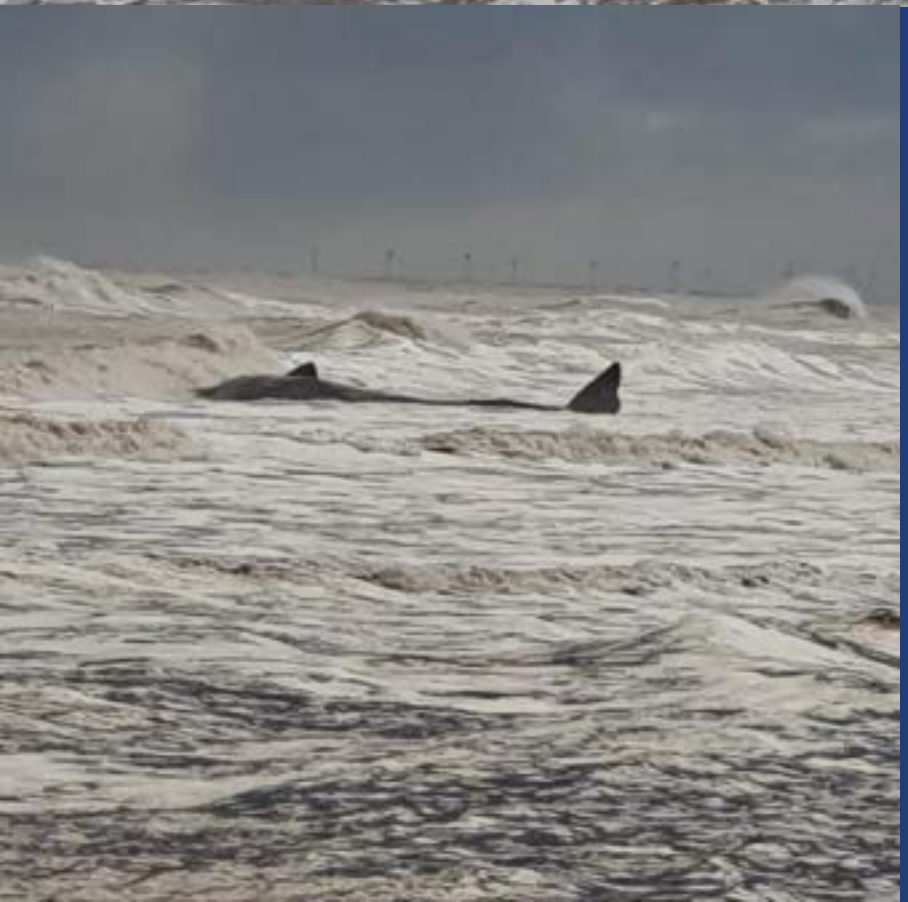
Through summer and into autumn a pod of northern bottlenose whales began frequenting various lochs and harbours around the River Clyde. There was quite a bit of concern around their being able to forage and feed, but they otherwise seemed to be alright and were monitored regularly by Medics with help from local residents. Luckily disturbance was not too much of an issue due to Covid keeping people away. Given that a pair turned up in the same area the previous year and left of their own accord after a couple of weeks, monitoring was prioritised in the hope that the same would happen this time. A major naval exercise that was planned towards the end of this ongoing incident resulted in a herding attempt being made to get them out to sea, which was partially successful. Most of the whales sadly eventually ended up being found dead or live stranded over the next month and either died or were euthanased.

Danny the social solitary bottlenose dolphin in Dorset was entangled for the second and third times that we know of in early 2020, both times in mooring buoy ropes, and both times was freed by the Portland Harbourmaster.

He became something of a local celebrity and attracted attention from many water users, as these dolphins often do. In the background we continued to assist with management advice alongside colleagues at the Marine Connection.

In autumn, a video emerged of him allowing himself to be petted over the side of a boat from one of the local trip operators, demonstrating his advancing habituation. This renewed calls for people to leave him alone for his own good. Sadly he was killed instantly after being accidentally hit by a tug's propellor in Portland harbour a week later. He has since been confirmed to be the dolphin known as 'Splashy/Pierre', who first appeared in Cornwall in 2017 as a new SSD.

A grey seal pup managed to get its head caught in a loop of a mooring rig and buoy in the harbour at Portreath, Cornwall, during December and was unable to free itself. Two Medics in drysuits and lifejackets entered the water with it attached by a safety rope to the team on the harbourside and successfully cut it free.



On Christmas Eve ten sperm whales were found stranded along the coast near Withernsea, Yorkshire, with some still alive. Conditions were rough and the tide incoming, so there was little the BDMLR team could do besides monitor the situation and assist the Coastguard and Police with crowd control as it was too dangerous to approach them. All of the animals had sadly passed away by mid-afternoon. CSIP were able to carry out limited sampling of a few of the animals a few days later, but it is thought to be another case of out of habitat animals getting lost in the North Sea. This is also the largest mass stranding of this species in the UK.

To end this section on a positive note, at about 23:40 on 31st December, a seal pup was reported on Porthmeor beach, St Ives, Cornwall. Dave, Lesley and Dan Jarvis attended and found the animal to be in reasonable condition, though public disturbance and nearby fireworks were an issue so it was relocated to a quiet place, being released at about 1am on the 1st January 2021. This is probably the first time for us that a rescue has taken place across two years!


CSIP
ZSL
INSTITUTE OF ZOOLOGY
Scottish Marine Animal Stranding Scheme
mmo
marine management organisation
INTERNATIONAL ANIMAL RESCUE
Seal Protection Action Group
SAC
BORN FREE
mca
AHVLA
Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency
Scottish Natural Heritage
All of nature for all of Scotland
orca
RSPCA
marinescotland
IFAW
DOLPHINARIA-FREE EUROPE
PROJECT JONAH NEW ZEALAND
ocean care
www.oceancare.org
Cefas
Marine Environmental Monitoring
bluereef
AQUARIUM, NEWQUAY
defra
NATURAL ENGLAND
Cornwall SEAL Group Research Trust
WDC
WHALE AND DOLPHIN CONSERVATION
HUMANE SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL
JNCC
MARINE STRANDINGS NETWORK
NATURELAND SEAL SANCTUARY
NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM
MARINE ANIMAL RESCUE COALITION
CORNWALL COLLEGE
National Museums Scotland
sea watch FOUNDATION
RNLI
SCARBOROUGH SEALIFE SANCTUARY
SEALIFE TRUST
Cornish Seal Sanctuary
THE wildlife TRUSTS
Cyfoeth Naturiol Cymru Natural Resources Wales
Mablethorpe
Cornwall Marine & Coastal Code Group
PORT OF LONDON AUTHORITY
SEALIFE
SCOTTISH SPCA
Scotland's Animal Welfare Charity
TYNEMOUTH AQUARIUM
The North East's Aquarium
Cardigan Bay Marine Wildlife Centre
Canolfan Bywyd Gwyllt Morol Bae Ceredigion
WEYMOUTH SEALIFE ADVENTURE PARK
Seal Rescue IRELAND
WILDLIFE COMPUTERS
DAERA
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
SMRU
IFCA
eXploris AQUARIUM
GSPCA
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YTHAN SEAL WATCH
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British Divers Marine Life Rescue

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