



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

The effect of COVID-19 on lifestyle behaviours that impact the environment: waves 1 and 2 (summary)

This report summarises two waves of survey data on lifestyle behaviours that affect the environment at different time points throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Contents

Contents

[Introduction and background](#)

[Main findings](#)

[Conclusions and recommendations](#)

[Contact details](#)

Introduction and background

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures put in place to tackle it, have had profound impacts on people's day-to-day behaviours ([Coronavirus and the social impacts on behaviours during different lockdown periods, Great Britain](#)). The scale of this change may have provided an opportunity for people to relinquish unsustainable ways of living and adopt more environmentally-beneficial habits.

In May 2020, the Welsh Government commissioned the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) and YouGov to undertake a survey of people living in Wales. The aim of the research was to examine the effects of COVID-19 on a range of lifestyle behaviours which have environmental impacts; respondents' environmental attitudes and future behavioural intentions were also captured, as were responses to various measures of wellbeing.

The report focuses on the first two waves of data collected. The first wave was

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collected in June 2020 during the first UK-wide lockdown; respondents were asked to answer questions relating to behaviours at that time (i.e., during the lockdown) as well as questions relating to behaviours before the first UK-wide lockdown began on 23 March 2020. The second wave of data was collected in November 2020. Respondents were asked the same series of questions, with the intention of assessing the extent to which behaviours had changed since the first wave of data collection in June 2020.

This survey was administered through the YouGov online panel, which is a voluntary panel in which participants sign up and participate in online surveys in return for financial reward. For this research only YouGov participants who reported living in Wales were invited to participate. A quota sample was used to generate a sample that would be representative of the Welsh adult population (age 18+). The first wave of data collection yielded a sample of 1,108 respondents, the same respondents were then contacted for the second wave of data collection which then yielded a usable sample size of 898 which equated to 81% of the original sample.

Throughout the report the behaviours referring to before the 23 March are referred to as time point A. The questions relating to the time of data collection during the first survey wave are referred to as time point B. The time point of the second wave of data collection is referred to as time point C throughout the report.

Main findings

Climate change attitudes

Respondents were asked how worried they were about various environmental and social issues; responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from 'not at all worried' to 'extremely worried'. At time point B, COVID-19 had been the issue causing greatest concern, followed by destruction of nature and wildlife, plastic pollution, and climate change. These four issues remained at the top of the table at time point C, however, destruction of nature, wildlife and biodiversity

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had overtaken COVID-19 as the issue of greatest concern.

Travel behaviours and intentions

During the first wave of data collection, respondents were asked about the frequency of homeworking and their typical home to work travel mode before the lockdown restrictions began on the 23 March 2020 (time point A) and during the first lockdown (time point B). There was a large reduction in the number of people travelling to work with respondent numbers dropping from 448 at time point A to 165 at time point B.

Respondents who reported working away from home were asked about their mode of travel to work. Between time point A and time point B there was a marked increase in the percentage of people travelling by car or motorbike (from 62% to 74%); a reduction in people car-sharing (7% to 1%), and a reduction in the number of people travelling by train (6% to 1%). These changes in behaviour are likely as a result on the Welsh Government's 'essential travel' restriction in place at time point B.

At time point C, more people were travelling for work again, and the respondent who reported doing so increased to 272. Between time point B and time point C there were small decreases in car use, and in the number of people using the bus, and small increases in all of the other travel mode categories.

Respondents were asked for the first time at time point C about their intentions to walk, cycle and drive for commuting, domestic or leisure purposes once all restrictions are removed. The majority of respondents reported intending to walk and cycle the same amount as before lockdown (64% and 76% respectively), 28% of respondents intended to walk and 9% of respondents intended to cycle a little or a lot more. Meanwhile, nearly a quarter indicated they intended to travel less.

Generally, respondents appeared to be slightly less averse at time point C to using virtual technologies for meetings and GP appointments than at time point B. However, there was less interest for using virtual technologies for social meetings in time point C compared with time point B.

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Food purchasing, dietary choices and waste

The proportion of people shopping in person in a large supermarket reduced from 72% in time point A to 61% in time point B, the proportion shopping in a local chain supermarket stayed almost the same (13%) while the proportion shopping online from a supermarket increased by 9% to 16%. The proportions remained broadly similar at time point C.

Respondents were asked about their eating habits; specifically, how many days in a typical week they ate red meat (for example, beef or lamb), white meat (for example, chicken or pork), and fish or seafood (for example, salmon or prawns). During time point B people ate red meat and white meat less frequently than before the pandemic (time point A). However, at time point C people reported eating red meat and white meat more often. Consumption of fish and sea food remained broadly similar across time points.

There were no considerable changes in food waste between any of the time points but fewer respondents reported no wasted bread or milk at time point C, suggesting food waste may be increasing.

Shopping behaviours

The introduction of lockdown (time point B) saw a decrease in the amount respondents spent per week on food from restaurants, canteens and takeaways in comparison to time point A as catering outlets of all kinds closed. There was an increase in spending in this category at time point C where there were fewer restrictions in place outside of the 'firebreak' lockdown but spending did not return to pre-pandemic levels.

Respondents were asked about how much they typically spent on themselves per month in four categories:

1. clothes and footwear
2. pets and pet food
3. beauty and grooming products

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4. phone, internet and TV contracts

Spending on clothes and footwear showed the greatest changes: findings suggest that spending reduced considerably between time point A and B. By time point C, spending had started to increase again, however this did not reach the level of pre-pandemic spending on clothes and footwear.

Energy-related behaviours, concerns and intentions

There was an increase in participants' level of concern regarding their ability to pay their energy bills from time point B to time point C. The proportion of those who said they weren't at all worried decreased from 53% to 43% and there were increases in participants reporting being worried 'a little' (from 23% to 28%), 'a moderate amount' (from 10% to 13%) and 'a lot' (from 4% to 7%). This change may be attributable, in part, to time point C relating to responses in November when participants may anticipate increases in energy usage as winter approached.

Of the five technologies asked about in the survey, installing loft or wall insulation was the energy efficiency measure that had the highest uptake. 57% of respondents stated that they had done this either in the previous three months or more than three months ago during time point C, an increase from time point B of 48%.

The smart meter option was the option that had been considered by the highest proportion of respondents. Only 16% of respondents at time point C had not thought about doing this (compared with 22% in time point B).

Water use

The data collected at time point B showed a decrease in the number of baths and the number of showers that people were taking per week from time point A to time point B and this remained broadly the same at time point C.

Leisure

Time spent visiting outdoor spaces (for example, green space such as a park or woodland, or blue space such as a lake, river, or the sea) reduced noticeably at time point B compared to time point A. With 20% of respondents reporting no time spent on these activities at time point A compared with 37% at time point B. This proportion decreased to 32% at time point C.

Pro-environmental behaviours

Generally, responses show a reduction in four pro-environmental behaviours at time point B compared with time point A. These pro-environmental behaviours then appear to increase again at time point C to differing extents.

For instance, when asked how many times per month respondents ate locally grown or in-season food, before the outbreak at time point A, 25% of respondents selected 'not at all', and this figure increased to 30% at time point B. At time point C, the proportion of respondents who said that they did not eat locally grown or in-season food at all dropped to 24% which is lower than time point A.

Before the pandemic at time point A, 36% of respondents said that they never repurposed something for a different use, this increased to 42% at time point B. Then, at time point C, the proportion reduced to 29% (i.e., lower than the pre-pandemic time point A level), and the proportion that reported repurposing items 'up to once a month' increased from 28% to 36%. This suggests an overall improvement in this particular pro-environmental behaviour.

Similar patterns also emerged relating to buying products with less packaging as well as buying second-hand items and borrowing or renting items, although for these two behaviours, levels in time point C had not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Conversely, use of single-use plastic items appeared to decrease at time point B, compared with time point A. Single-use plastic consumption appeared to

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increase again though at time point C.

Attitudes towards policy approaches

Participants were asked whether, in the economic recovery, it was important that government actions prioritise climate change. At time point B, 48% of respondents agreed with this, 32% were neutral and 20% disagreed. At time point C, 47% agreed, 31% were neutral, and 22% disagreed. This suggests slightly less support for this statement at time point C than there had been previously.

Participants were also asked if the government should focus on helping the economy to recover first and foremost even if that meant taking some actions that are bad for the environment. At time point B, 39% of respondents disagreed with this statement, and 35% agreed. By time point C, the proportion who disagreed had reduced slightly to 37% while the proportion who agreed had gone up to 39%. This slight overall shift from disagree to agree suggests that participants felt the prioritisation of the environment in an economic recovery was less important at time point C than time point B.

Wellbeing

The proportion of respondents who reported high or very high levels of life satisfaction increased from 46% at time point B to 49% at time point C. (The reporting convention for the ONS4 measures of satisfaction, life being worthwhile, and happiness are that scores of 0 to 4 are low, 5 to 6 are medium, 7 to 8 are high, and 9 to 10 are very high.) Increases were also seen in the extent to which respondents reported life was worthwhile (50% reporting this was high or very high in time point B and 54% doing so at time point C). There was a reduction in happiness between time point B and time point C with 51% of respondents in the high to very high category at time point C as opposed to 54% at time point B. Furthermore, there was an increase in anxiety with the percentage of respondents in the high anxiety category increasing from 28% at time point B to 34% at time point C and the number in the very low category

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dropping from 21% at time point B to 18% at time point C (The reporting convention for the ONS measure of anxiety is that scores of 0 to 1 are very low, 2 to 3 are low, 4 to 5 are medium, and 6 to 10 are high).

Maintaining behaviours after restrictions are lifted

Qualitative responses for a question on behaviours that respondents wished to maintain when restrictions were lifted, were categorised. Some respondents gave multi-answers and so totals exceed 100%. At time point B, almost a third of respondents (29%) either made no comment or indicated that they wanted to retain no aspect of their post-lockdown lifestyles or behaviours, with 3% expressing the view more forcibly that they just wanted life to return to the old normal. These values remained very similar at time point C, with figures of 31% and 3% respectively. Another 4% of respondents at both time points B and C said that their lives had not been particularly affected the restrictions.

Respondents listed a range of things that they were most looking forward to doing once COVID-19 restrictions were removed. The most common theme related to meeting up with friends and family, mentioned by 41% of respondents.

Conclusions and recommendations

At time point B, COVID-19 had been the environmental and/or social issue causing greatest concern, followed by destruction of nature and wildlife, plastic pollution, and climate change. These four issues remained at the top of the table at time point C, but destruction of nature, wildlife and biodiversity had overtaken COVID-19 as the issue of greatest concern.

There was a large reduction in the number of people commuting to work when the restrictions were imposed at time point B. When considering future intentions that might have an impact on travel, there was little indication that there would be a substantial increased growth in home working once the restrictions are lifted.

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There was a reduction in the proportion of people doing their main weekly food shop in a large supermarket at time point B compared to time point A, and an increase in the proportion of people doing their food shopping online.

In relation to dietary choices, people ate red meat and white meat less frequently at time point B than at time point A. However, respondents ate red meat and white meat more frequently in time point C than they had at time point B.

Large reductions in spending on clothing and footwear were reported in at time point B and, while this change was starting to reverse at time point C, levels of spending remained lower than before the coronavirus outbreak, at time point A.

There was an increase in concern about ability to pay energy bills at time point C compared with time point B. However, this may be partly attributed to the fact that data at time point C was collected in November, when increases in energy use may be anticipated moving into winter.

In terms of leisure, respondents spent less time visiting outdoor spaces, exercising, and doing sport in time point B compared to time point A.

In a series of questions exploring pro-environmental behaviours, responses showed a marked reduction in pro-environmental behaviour between pre-pandemic levels at time point A and time point B. However, the change reversed between time point B and time point C, with proportions recovering to very close to the pre-COVID levels, some slightly above and some slightly below.

In response to a question asking if the government should focus on helping the economy to recover first and foremost even if that means taking some actions that are bad for the environment, time point B results showed an overall shift from disagree to agree. This may reflect people's growing concern about the economy as the pandemic wore on.

For measures of well-being, there were increases in life satisfaction or the extent to which things in life feel worthwhile between time point B and C. However, there was also a reduction in happiness, and increases in anxiety and in stress between time point B and time point C.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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