



Public Attitudes Towards Inland Bathing Waters in Wales

Executive Summary

1. Introduction, aims and methodology

- 1.1 The Welsh Government's Programme for Government 2021-26 has committed to begin to designate inland waters for recreation through strengthening water quality monitoring to enable safer bathing.
- 1.2 Inland waters (or freshwater sites) refer to water sites such as rivers, lakes and reservoirs. Ensuring the high quality of inland water sites to protect human health aims to encourage recreational activities to be undertaken in these sites. Greater recreational use of inland waters will likely promote the physical and mental health of those participating, supporting the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act goals of a 'healthier Wales' and 'a Wales of thriving culture' through opportunities to exercise.
- 1.3 The study has been designed to better understand the Welsh public's attitudes towards, understanding of, and engagement with inland bathing waters in Wales. These results will help to shape related government policy, and public engagement, to help deliver on the Programme for Government commitment in beginning to designate inland waters for recreation. The research should also facilitate future research and education on inland bathing.
- 1.4 The survey used the Beaufort Wales Omnibus. A representative sample of 1,000 adults aged 16+ across Wales was surveyed using an online panel, with fieldwork conducted between 19 September and 9 October 2022. The survey used quotas to gain a sample intended to reflect the Welsh population on demographics of age, gender, local authority and social class.

2. Key findings

Use of inland waters in Wales for leisure or recreational purposes

- 2.1 The survey indicates that public engagement with inland bathing waters in Wales is reasonably high but is lower than people's engagement with coastal waters. Almost half those surveyed (45 per cent) had visited inland waters such as reservoirs, lakes or rivers for a day out or for leisure or recreational purposes in the last few years. More survey participants (almost eight in ten - 78 per cent) had visited coastal waters such as beaches for recreation in the same period.
- 2.2 The majority of visitors to inland waters (78 per cent) had travelled there by car. Twelve per cent had walked, while the percentages using other modes of travel were very low.
- 2.3 Almost six in ten respondents (59 per cent) expressed interest in at least one recreational water activity. Swimming generated the highest interest (at 44 per cent interested), while 17 per cent were interested in paddleboarding and kayaking/ canoeing, 13 per cent were interested in fishing and 7 per cent in surfing. Younger people aged 16-34 were more likely than other age groups to be interested in every recreational water activity. More people were interested in paddleboarding and kayaking/ canoeing than had taken part in these activities.
- 2.4 Almost six in ten of those interviewed (55 per cent) had participated in at least one recreational water activity in the last few years, rising to 74 per cent of those aged 16-34. Slightly more participants had taken part in recreational activity at a coastal location (29 per cent) than at a freshwater site i.e. inland waters such as rivers, lakes and reservoirs (26 per cent). Similarly, more 16-34-year-olds (42 per cent) had taken part in these activities at a freshwater site.
- 2.5 Swimming was by far the most popular activity, undertaken by 45 per cent of respondents in the last few years. Swimming was much more likely to have been carried out at the seaside or at an indoor swimming pool.
- 2.6 Participation levels for recreational water activities other than swimming were much lower - 14 per cent had undertaken kayaking/ canoeing, 12 per cent fishing and 11 per cent paddleboarding. However, kayaking/ canoeing, fishing and paddleboarding were all more likely to have been undertaken by participants at freshwater sites than in the sea.

Motivations for choosing to swim outdoors

- 2.7 Twenty-four per cent of those who had participated in swimming had done so at a freshwater location, rather than in the sea. When the number swimming at freshwater sites is calculated as a percentage of the total sample of adults surveyed, it equates to 10 per cent of respondents overall. When asked why they swam outdoors in rivers, lakes or reservoirs, the main reasons given (as open text answers) were the beautiful location/ setting (mentioned unprompted by 21 of the 98 participants in this group), for fun/ enjoyment and to cool down in hot weather (mentioned by 14 and 12 out of 98 respondents respectively).
- 2.8 Respondents who reported swimming in inland freshwater sites were also asked to choose from a range of predetermined answers about why they swam in rivers, lakes and reservoirs. They were able to choose as many reasons as they wished from the list

provided and could also add in other answers. Eighty-two of the 98 freshwater swimmers agreed that they did it for fun, while 55 said they did it for exercise and/ or training and a similar number (54 respondents) that it was for their mental health and well-being.

- 2.9 35 out of the 98 freshwater swimmers said they swam outdoors in rivers, lakes or reservoirs in Wales at least once a month. 22 out of 98 did so every few months, 31 out of 98 a few times a year, while the remaining 10 out of 98 did so less often.

Barriers to participating in recreational water activities at freshwater sites

- 2.10 The key barriers to taking part in recreational water activities at freshwater sites were concerns about safety and water quality. When asked what they thought put people off from taking part in outdoor activities at freshwater sites, around half those surveyed selected concerns about safety and concerns about water quality from a list of possible barriers (53 per cent and 49 per cent respectively). Around four in ten of those surveyed (44 per cent) felt that limited facilities at freshwater sites and a lack of information about the availability of suitable sites would deter people. Only 10 per cent overall did not feel there was anything that would put people off.
- 2.11 Opinion was divided on confidence in water quality at freshwater sites. While around three in ten respondents (31 per cent) were confident water quality was of a high standard, almost two in ten (19 per cent) were not. A high proportion (almost half - 49 per cent) had no opinion or could not answer.

Support for the designation of inland freshwater sites as bathing / recreational waters

- 2.12 The study demonstrates that there is a great deal of support for the designation of inland freshwater sites as bathing/ recreational waters. Sixty-four per cent of those interviewed agreed that they *would like to see inland freshwater sites like rivers, lakes and reservoirs in Wales designated as bathing/ recreational waters*. Only 5 per cent disagreed, while 21 per cent could not express an opinion. Younger people were most likely to be in favour of designation.
- 2.13 Just over one in three (35 per cent) participants agreed *there are not enough inland freshwater sites suitable for bathing/ recreational use in Wales*, around three times higher than the proportion who disagreed (12 per cent). Over half of those interviewed (52 per cent) were undecided or not able to answer, however.
- 2.14 The main spontaneous reasons for supporting the designation of inland freshwater sites as bathing/ recreational waters were that it would make it safer to bathe there, that it would improve water quality and that it would provide more places to swim (mentioned by 22 per cent, 15 per cent and 14 per cent of those in favour).
- 2.15 The principal reasons for opposing designation among the small minority against the idea were that it might lead to an influx of crowds which would spoil these places and that it might be dangerous to swim there (mentioned by 35 per cent and 29 per cent of this group respectively).
- 2.16 Almost half those interviewed (48 per cent) agreed they *would be interested in having access to real time data about the standard of water quality at freshwater sites in Wales*; fewer than two in ten (17 per cent) were not interested.

2.17 When prompted with a list of possible facilities that could be provided at designated freshwater sites, interest was highest in toilets and car parking (chosen by 75 per cent and 70 per cent of participants). Around six in ten would like to see cafés/ eating places and changing facilities (at 62 per cent and 59 per cent), while almost half (47 per cent) would like to see activity hire (e.g. for hiring canoes or paddleboards). In contrast, 9 per cent overall would not want to see any facilities, preferring the sites to remain completely natural. This proportion rose to 15 per cent of freshwater swimmers (that is, those who had swum outdoors at rivers, lakes or reservoirs in Wales in the last few years).

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Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/inland-bathing-waters-wales-public-attitudes>

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

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