



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

RESEARCH, DOCUMENT

# Survey of outdoor inland water swimmers in Wales (summary)

This research reports on the findings from a survey of outdoor inland water swimmers. The survey explores swimming habits and views on designation.

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# Introduction, aims and methodology

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.

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.

The study was designed to gain views from outdoor inland water (OIW) swimmers to build the evidence base on OIW use and views on designation. These results will help the Welsh Government to understand swimming habits, views on designation and qualities sought after at designated sites (e.g. access to information or facilities).

The survey was conducted via Smart Survey, between the 6th of February to the 6th of March 2023. The survey was available to complete in both English and Welsh.

The survey was disseminated in a variety of ways in order to reach individuals who had participated in outdoor inland water swimming. These included sharing the survey link with Swim Wales and Surfers against Sewage members, Adventure Smart Wales businesses and Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales official social media accounts. The survey was also promoted in another survey by Dŵr Cymru on related water issues.

This survey did not intend to be representative of the Welsh population or

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outdoor inland swimmers more generally. Demographics and characteristics of OIW swimmers were unknown, this made developing a valid sampling frame difficult. Therefore, findings should not be translated more widely to other OIW swimmers who did not participate in the survey. The survey aimed to engage as large a number of participants as possible. A large response rate (757 completed responses) was obtained which provides some confidence that findings reflect at least some of the variation in views amongst OIW swimmers.

## **Main findings**

### **Outdoor swimming activity**

The most common place to swim outdoors was in the sea (reported by 83% of 688 respondents) followed by unmanaged lakes/reservoirs, and rivers (reported by 71% and 65% respectively). Respondents reported swimming in managed lakes and reservoirs the least (36%). Overall, 93% of respondents had reported swimming in outdoor inland waters (OIW).

78% of the outdoor inland water swimming (OIWS) respondents reported swimming with others but not in the context of a swimming group (i.e. with friends). 46% reported swimming alone and 44% as part of a swimming group.

Many OIWS respondents reported swimming outdoors year-round, with over 63% swimming throughout the winter months. However, the highest proportion of OIWS respondents reported swimming during the warmer months (over 95%).

### **Outdoor inland swimming activity habits and experiences**

OIWS respondents were more likely to report having participated in outdoor swimming in rivers, lakes and reservoirs for 5 years or more (37%), and between

2 and 5 years (34%).

Most OIWS respondents reported swimming around once a week (38%) or a few times a month (26%). Only 1% of OIWS respondents swam every day.

Respondents reported that the most common reasons for swimming in OIW in Wales were for their mental health and well-being (85%), fun (71%) and exercise and/or training (67%). 40% of respondents reported that they swam for social reasons.

Water quality and water safety (e.g. safe entrance and exit points) were the factors ranked as the most important by the respondents when choosing where and when to swim in OIW, followed by proximity to home. Public transport links and a lifeguard on site were the factors least important to the respondents.

In terms of safety equipment and information that OIWS respondents looked for at OIW sites, respondents were most likely to report looking for water quality information (57%) and notice boards providing local information (30%). Almost a third (31%) of respondents reported not looking for any information or equipment, or none of the options listed.

## **Barriers to swimming in outdoor inland waters**

Factors that respondents reported might put off people from swimming in OIW the most were concerns about the water quality (84%), concerns about physical safety (66%), lack of information about the availability of suitable sites (54%) and not being allowed to use the open water swimming sites (50%). Only 1% of respondents reported thinking that none of the factors listed put people off from participating in outdoor swimming.

When OIWS only were considered, there was little difference in the percentage of respondents who reported certain factors putting people off: concerns about

water quality (85%), concerns about safety (67%) and lack of information about suitable sites (54%).

## **Designation of outdoor inland waters in Wales**

70% of respondents reported understanding what designation was. However, 48% reported understanding what was monitored and when monitoring took place at designated sites. Generally, there was a good level of support amongst respondents for OIW designation specifically: 90% of respondents reported an interest in seeing more OIW sites in Wales designated as bathing waters.

In terms of water quality, a smaller proportion of all respondents reported feeling confident (45%) in the quality of the water where they swim. 94% of respondents reported being interested in having access to data about the standard of water quality.

The method of communication that respondents preferred to receive water quality information were website (68%) and mobile app (67%).

The barriers to designation of OIW identified by respondents were concerns over water quality (61%), lack of information about availability of suitable sites to designate (48%), lack of access to open water swimming sites (46%) and concerns over physical safety (44%).

## **Facilities and accreditations at designated outdoor inland water sites**

Generally, there were a mixture of views related to the desire for facilities at designated bathing sites. 49% of respondents reported not wanting any facilities, preferring it to be natural. The facilities selected more frequently were car parking (48%), accessibility (33%) and toilets (32%).

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In terms of accreditations at designated OIW sites, the most selected was Blue Flag accreditation (51%) – although it should be noted that there is currently no process for Blue Flag accreditations at inland waters. The second most popular accreditation selected by respondents was ‘SAFE CYMRU’ (37%). 26% reported not seeing the need for any accreditations.

## General additional qualitative responses

The final question provided respondents with an opportunity to mention anything they felt had not been captured in the survey – 148 respondents chose to provide additional comments, including multipart answers. The responses were coded into relevant themes where possible. Many used this as an opportunity to reiterate views explored in previous questions.

### The issues most reported

- The need for high water quality and increased testing, many mentioning concerns about sewage being dumped into water (63 out of 148 respondents).
- Legality issues with using sites due to either private landowners or Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water reportedly not allowing access (42 out of 148).
- Concerns with increased number of people accessing the sites following designation (21 out of 148), specifically fear that remote locations would be lost (8 out of 21) and that it would pose new threats to natural habitats.
- Nine respondents suggested a variety of locations for designation which could resolve some of the concerns raised by respondents above.

A number of respondents used the free-text box to suggest areas they would like to see designated, these included: Cwm-parc, Cosmeston lakes, Lisvane reservoir, River Taff, Cardiff Bay, River Usk, North Dock Llanelli, Reservoirs in the Brecon Beacons, River Ogmore. The survey was not representative and

there was not a specific question on site designation, so this list is purely to demonstrate the types of sites suggested in the survey responses.

## Conclusions

The main reasons for choosing to swim in OIW were for mental health and well-being and for fun. This suggests promoting the mental health benefits of OIW swimming may be an effective way to encourage others to participate.

The most important factors for OIWS respondents when choosing where to swim were water quality and the water safety (outside of condition or quality issues) as well as sites which are close to home or local to respondents. Water quality information was the kind of information OIWS respondents were most likely to look for at OIW sites and they desired to see more of this information. Furthermore, respondents were most likely to report that concerns about water quality would put people off from swimming in OIW. Less than half of respondents felt confident in the water quality of where they swam, and the majority were interested in seeing more OIW designated as bathing waters and having access to data about the standard of water quality in an area.

Respondents highlighted the importance of a quiet area to swim that is connected to the beauty of nature. It was viewed by some that adding facilities to sites or advertising the site as an area to visit could make the area more crowded which could not only damage the natural habitat but make the waters less enjoyable to visit for existing swimmers. Views from this survey indicate that there is a potential balance to be struck between designating sites to ensure high water quality for those who already swim there and promoting their use to a larger group of people. A small number of respondents offered a solution in designating multiple sites, some with more facilities and others left relatively 'unspoiled'.



The issue of access was described in qualitative comments. In particular, there were frustrations amongst respondents about rights to access land and with landowners (private and Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water) not allowing swimming at their sites. Landowners were not considered as part of this survey, so further engagement with them would be beneficial.

Although the most popular accreditation was Blue Flag, there is no current process for a Blue Flag accreditation at OIW sites. This may have been the most popular accreditation because it is well known, indicating the importance of trust and understanding of accreditations that are used for OIW.

This research contributes to the overall evidence base to support Welsh Government thinking in relation to outdoor inland water designation, water quality monitoring and guidance. The Welsh Government will continue to undertake research to support future decisions to support the Programme for Government commitment to designate more inland waters for recreation.

## Contact details

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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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