

An aerial photograph of two people swimming in dark, rippling water. The man on the left is shirtless, wearing blue patterned shorts, with his arms outstretched. The woman on the right is wearing a pink swimsuit and a white swim cap with a green floral decoration, also with her arms outstretched. The water is dark and textured with ripples.

Trends in
**Outdoor
Swimming**

SECOND EDITION: MARCH 2022

*How has outdoor swimming
evolved, where's it heading and
what are the opportunities?*

~~~~~  
**Swimmer** OUTDOOR



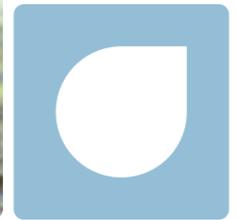
# Swim for Water

**As swimmers, the power of water unites us. But for 1 in 10 people around the world, water is a basic right they still don't have.**

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**Dive in at [wateraid.org/uk/swim](https://wateraid.org/uk/swim)**

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Images: WaterAid/James Kirby and WaterAid/HSBC/Habibul Haque



# Foreword



**Being an outdoor swimmer is not only good for us individually, it's good for the world**

Welcome to the second edition of Outdoor Swimmer's Trends in Outdoor Swimming report.

Outdoor swimming has, in many ways, had a good pandemic. The spot where I most regularly swim in the Thames near Teddington Lock has become a magnet for outdoor swimmers across southwest London. Previously, I struggled to find people to swim with. Now there are groups there nearly every morning, regardless of the weather or time of year. I used to know everyone who swam there. Now there are new faces every week. Other swimmers tell me the same thing is happening all around the country.

However, the point of our Trends report is not to share stories but to uncover what is really happening through data. Our principal source is our Attitudes to Outdoor Swimming survey, which ran through October and November 2021 and gathered responses from more than 4500 swimmers. This huge dataset allows us to identify patterns and behaviours that might not be immediately obvious, as well as confirm things we already suspected about outdoor swimming. Analysing this data is something of a labour of love but the results are fascinating, and we're delighted to share some of the key findings in this report.

The three themes that stand out most from

2021 are the ever-growing recognition of the value of outdoor swimming to our mental health and wellbeing, an increase in concern about the damage done to our natural waters through pollution, and the seemingly unstoppable rise of female participation in outdoor swimming. Women this year made up just short of three quarters of our survey respondents.

Our aim, as last year, is to use the power of data to show the importance and relevance of outdoor swimming. Being an outdoor swimmer is not only good for us individually, it's good for the world as becoming an outdoor swimmer pushes people to care more for the environment and to take action for positive change. We hope governments, both national and local, take note and do what they can to support the rise in this wonderful activity, starting with improving access to water and putting pressure on polluters to clean up. We also hope our findings are useful to everyone involved in outdoor swimming, from solo entrepreneurs creating new products and services for swimmers to event organisers, suppliers, governing bodies and tourist boards.

And if you're reading this and are not yet an outdoor swimmer, you really should give it a go.

*Swim wild and free*  
*Simon Griffiths*  
*Founder & publisher, Outdoor Swimmer*

# Headline Statistics



1 in 5 swimmers in England say worries about pollution stop them swimming as often as they would like



1 in 3 outdoor swimmers volunteer in some capacity within the sport



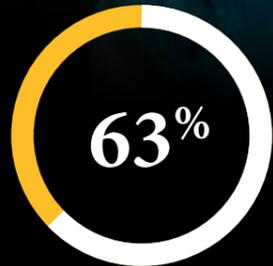
Two thirds of female outdoor swimmers say it is hugely important to their general sense of wellbeing



Female participation has increased from 65% to 73.5% in 12 months



of outdoor swimmers say they started in the previous 12 months, of which 1 in 5 did so for the mental health benefits



of women say outdoor swimming is hugely important to their mental health



of swimmers in England are confident that swimming is legal at their regular wild swimming spot compared to 83% in Scotland



of outdoor swimmers continue to do so at least once per week in winter

### Mental Health

Among swimmers living with a long-term mental health condition, 55% say outdoor swimming brings them a lot of benefits and a further 33% say it's a game changer and they would struggle without it.

### Disability

7.9% of outdoor swimmers say they have a long-term condition or disability that makes outdoor swimming or access to outdoor swimming more difficult.

### Pollution

One third of swimmers have taken action about water pollution such as writing to politicians, signing petitions and campaigning.

### Ethnicity

Ethnic minority groups are significantly underrepresented in outdoor swimming compared with the general population.

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Teaching Swimming & Saving Lives 1932-2022

# Contents & Key Findings



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## Section 1

### *How fast is outdoor swimming growing?*

As well as our observations in the field, our data and most other references suggest growth in outdoor swimming continued strongly through 2021. Around 19% of our survey respondents said they started in the previous 12 months, venue operators report continued growth from 2020 and suppliers say demand is good. Growth is fastest in Northern Ireland followed by Republic of Ireland and then England.



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## Section 2

### *What motivates people to start outdoor swimming and why do they continue?*

The pandemic was clearly a big motivator for starting outdoor swimming in 2020 and 2021. Before that, entering events was a common way to start. For people who started most recently, the mental health benefits were a key driver. Younger people were also more likely to have started for this reason. When it comes to sticking with outdoor swimming, health and wellbeing is the top reason. Access to safe water, worries about pollution and concerns about legality all feature as barriers, with England scoring badly on these measures compared to other countries.



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## Section 3

### *How important is outdoor swimming in people's lives?*

Swimmers rank 'general sense of wellbeing' as the most important benefit of outdoor swimming but mental and physical health score highly too. Women generally rank all benefits more highly than men. With mental health benefits, we see a pattern where the benefits peak between the ages of 30 and 60, which matches the pattern of prevalence of common mental disorders. Among female swimmers living with a long-term mental health condition, 35% say outdoor swimming is a game changer for them.



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## Section 4

### *Where, when and how often do people swim outdoors?*

Commercial outdoor swimming venues feature strongly as swimming destinations in England with 29% of swimmers using them weekly or more frequently. They are barely used elsewhere. Outdoor swimmers around the world also frequently swim in indoor pools. Overall, the most popular outdoor swimming location is the sea. Regarding swimming by season, women swim more often than men at all times of year, and their participation in winter swimming has increased this year compared to last, while it remained constant for men. Swimming frequency tends to increase with age.



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## Section 5

### *Outdoor swimming and disability*

People with disabilities are underrepresented in outdoor swimming compared to the general population. Of those who do swim, the majority said they feel supported by their community, event organisers and venue operators. However, a significant minority do not. Outdoor swimming offers a high proportion of swimmers with disabilities some relief from their condition.



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## Section 6

### *Ethnicity and outdoor swimming*

Participation in outdoor swimming by people from ethnic groups is significantly lower than their prevalence in the general population. There is demand for access to swimming from people of minority ethnic groups but also significant barriers. More needs to be done.



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## Section 7

### *How has becoming an outdoor swimmer changed you?*

As with last year, we found that outdoor swimming is important to people's identity. It is not just something you do, it is something you are and this is reflected in people's broader behaviour. For example, 12% of women and 15% of men volunteer at events. Volunteering tends to increase with age. Around two thirds of swimmers have taken action about water pollution, climate change, recycling and nature conservation.



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## Section 8

### *Outdoor swimming and travel*

Swimming holidays were again badly disrupted in 2021. Only 3% of people in our survey travelled to a different country for a swimming holiday, although two thirds of swimmers would like to do one at least once a year. The most popular reason to take a swimming related holiday is to explore a wild swimming location.



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## Section 9

### *What do swimmers use and how much do they spend on kit?*

The data revealed mostly what we expected in terms of kit use although goggle use was slightly lower than we expected and also showed geographic variation, with people in North America, Australia or New Zealand more likely to use them than swimmers elsewhere. Swimmers expect to spend just over £100 on average on kit over the next 12 months, with new costumes and goggles being the most likely items to purchase.



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## Section 10

### *Outdoor swimming and business*

Logistics and supply chain issues held the attention of kit suppliers this year and don't look like easing in the short term. Shipping costs have increased by a factor of 10. For swimming pools, increasing energy costs are a worry but the introduction of booking apps has provided rich data through which pool utilisation can be improved. Venues have done well but those that have done best have adapted to swimmers' changing needs and interests. Growth in outdoor swimming has resulted in a range of employment opportunities and there are shortages of swimming teachers and lifeguards.

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50 Acknowledgements  
Contributors and collaborators

# Section 1

## How fast is outdoor swimming growing?

Possibly the most frequent questions we are asked are: how many people regularly swim outdoors and how fast is outdoor swimming growing? We attempt to answer these questions but the picture is complex.



### NEARLY 1 IN 5 STARTED IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

In our survey for this report, 19.1% of respondents said they started outdoor swimming in the previous 12 months. Unless a similar number has quit swimming, that figure alone suggests significant growth. Among women, the percentage who started in the last year is even higher, at 21.2%. The fastest growing demographic is women aged 20 to 29 (1 in 3 started in the last 12 months) and women aged 30 to 39 (1 in 4 started in the last 12 months).

In 2020, many people discovered outdoor swimming while pools were closed and this was a significant factor in the growth trends that we observed (even if they weren't picked up by Sport England). We expected that the growth rate in 2021 would decline compared to 2020. However, this is not what our data show. At the end of 2020, the percentage of people starting in the previous 12 months was 19.3% – almost identical to what it is at the end of 2021.

### GROWTH IS EVERYWHERE EXCEPT IN THE OFFICIAL STATISTICS

Other organisations in the world of outdoor swimming also report significant growth in 2021. NOWCA, the UK's largest network of safe open water venues, for example, has seen a big jump in the number of swims at its partner venues.

### SPORT ENGLAND DATA AT ODDS WITH ALL OTHER FINDINGS

When we wrote our first Trends in Outdoor Swimming in 2021, we assumed a baseline of 444,900 regular outdoor swimmers in England, based on data from Sport England's Active Lives Survey, which asks what activities people have done in the previous 28 days. We then looked at various indicators such as Google searches for relevant terms (outdoor swimming, wild swimming etc.), data from venues, number of media articles and sales data.

Taken together, we concluded participation had increased by something like 1.5 to 3 times between 2019 and 2020.

A few months later, Sport England published their data for the period.

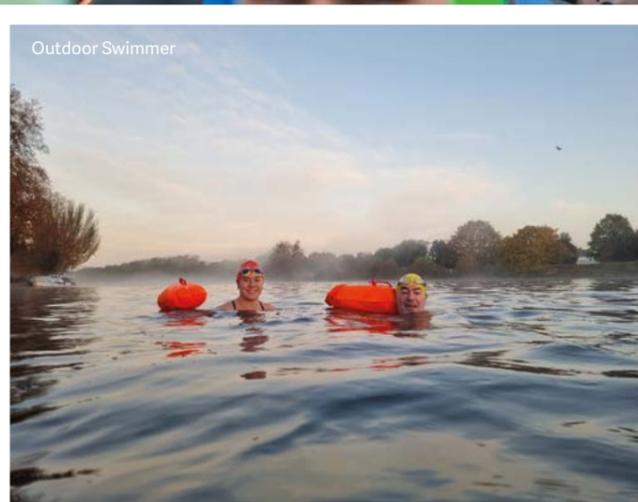
To our surprise, the Active Lives Survey said participation had decreased.

What is happening here? Is the Active Lives Survey data correct and do we simply see more outdoor swimmers because we're

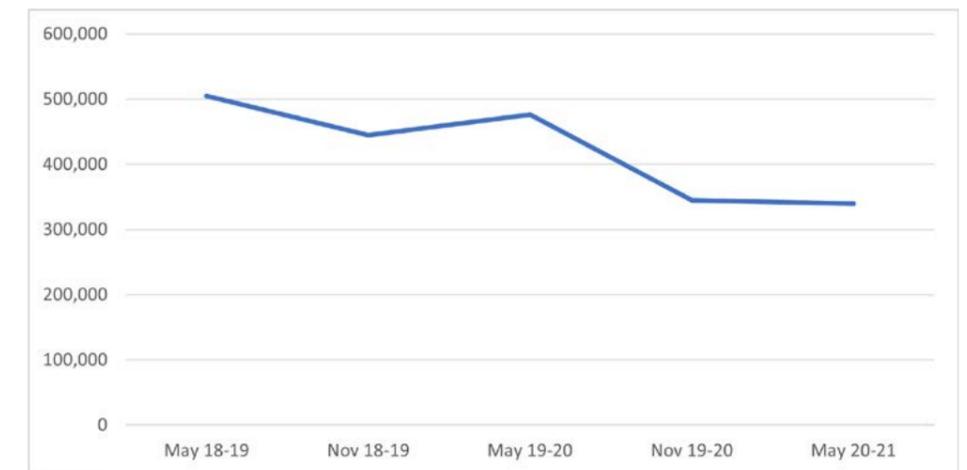
looking for them? Or is Sport England not capturing the true data for some reason?

We asked Sport England for their views on this. A possible explanation could be that the pandemic has concentrated outdoor swimmers into a smaller number of locations, such as popular venues, so if we look at these locations we would count more swimmers. Alternatively, what we see as more swimmers could be the same number swimming more frequently outdoors. This increase in frequency wouldn't be picked up in Sport England's data.

Or maybe, and this is speculation on our part, could Sport England's data collection have been impacted by lockdowns? Each of the last three periods in their dataset include times when England was in lockdown and regular activities were disrupted. The Active Lives Survey asks people about their recent activities, not whether or not they consider themselves to be an outdoor swimmer.

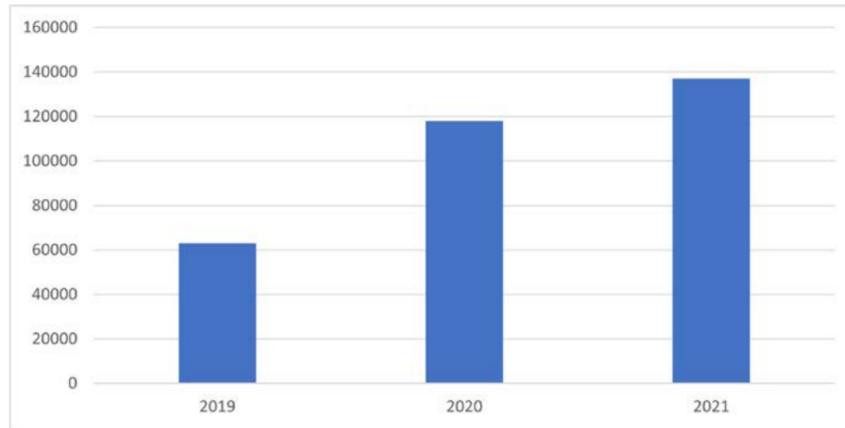


### Outdoor swimming participation, twice in the previous 28 days



Source: Sport England, Active Lives Survey

### Total swims at NOWCA partner venues



Data source: NOWCA

Note this data is for number of swims, not swimmers. It could therefore represent more swims by the same number of swimmers, rather than more swimmers – a point made by Sport England. On the other hand, our data don't show a jump in the frequency of outdoor swimming, so it's reasonable to conclude that this growth is due to more swimmers.

The Outdoor Swimming Society also reports growth in the number of people signed up for its regular emails and its social media following of 30% in 2020 and 25% in 2021, confirming our observation that the rate of growth triggered by the pandemic has continued. They also report that memberships of social media-based outdoor swim groups around the UK have increased by between 100 and 500%.

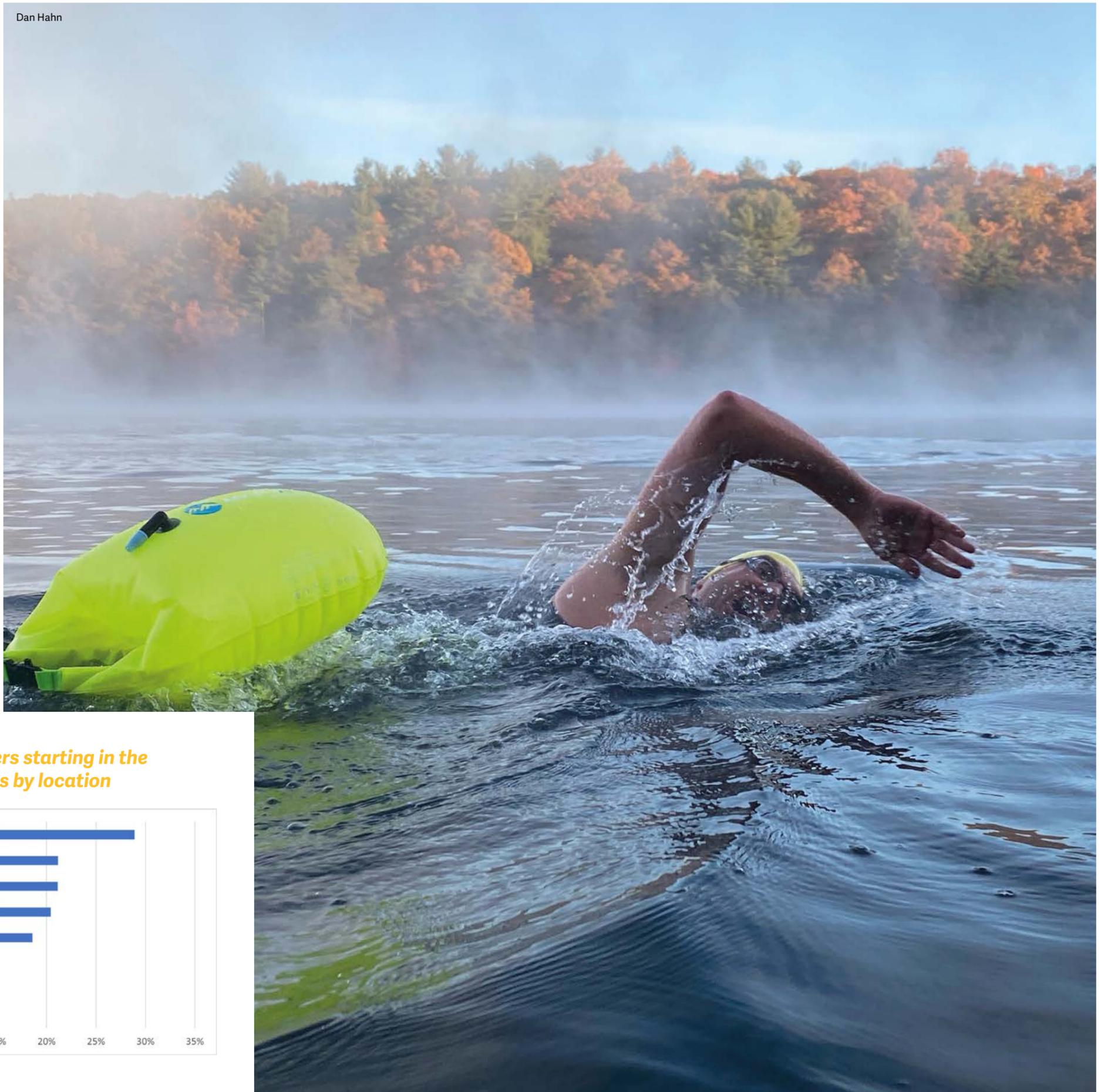
Andrew Clark, the Aquatics Manager for GLL, which operates West Reservoir in Hackney as an open water swimming venue, says the site was a phenomenon through the summer and received 130,000 visits between 1 June and 30 September, making it the fourth busiest facility across their entire estate. Ricky McMinn, the General Manager at West Reservoir, says they are hoping to stay open throughout the winter for the first time ever as he believes there is sufficient demand for cold water swimming to make it worthwhile.

Another person who believes outdoor swimming is growing fast is Dave Candler, CEO of the Swimming Teachers Association (STA). He says there is huge demand for STA's Open Water Coaching Qualification, and Keri-anne Payne, who now runs courses for new coaches, has qualified around 300 people in 2021. In addition, from a personal perspective, Dave – who lives in Littlehampton where he regularly swims in the

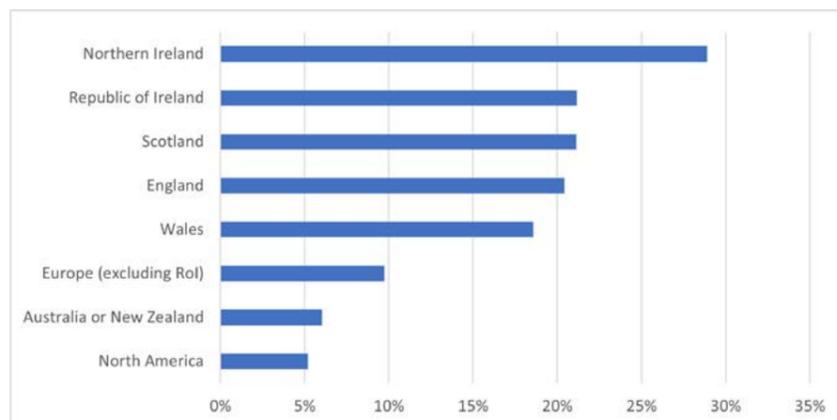
sea – says: "Swimming is happening all along the coast here, with large numbers of people who have never been sea swimmers before."

#### UK AND ROI LEADING THE WAY

Given the above, we're confident that outdoor swimming is growing in popularity around the world despite not showing up in official statistics. An annual growth rate of between 10 and 20% seems a reasonable, or even conservative, estimate for the UK and ROI. Given there appears to have been no significant reduction in growth in 2021 (despite widespread publicity of poor river water quality and pools returning to more normal operations), we are optimistic this trend will continue through 2022.



### Percentage of swimmers starting in the previous 12 months by location



# Section 2

## What motivates people to start outdoor swimming and why do they continue?

People’s motivations for starting outdoor swimming are not necessarily the same as those that keep them swimming. In this section, we also look at some of the reasons people don’t swim outside as much as they would like.

### GETTING STARTED

Motivations for starting outdoor swimming vary between men and women, by age and by the length of time people have been swimming outdoors. It’s a complex picture. However, overall, the most common reason for people starting outdoor swimming was simply because they “just felt like doing it”, which accounts for almost 1 in 5 people. Almost the same number of people say they have always done it, 13.5% say they started because of friends and family, 12.5% entered an open water event and 12.1% started because of triathlon.

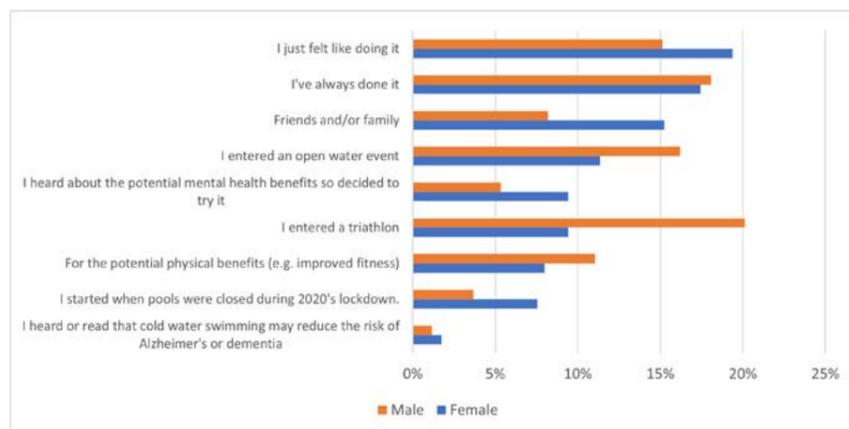
Given the recent amount of press coverage of the mental health benefits of outdoor swimming, it is perhaps surprising that fewer than 1 in 10 people state this as a reason for starting. However, for people who started in the past year, more than 1 in 5 say they

tried outdoor swimming for the mental health benefits – and for people who started six months to one year ago, this was the top motivation to start. Of those who have been swimming outdoors for five years or more, only 1% gave this as a reason. We see a similar pattern with the physical benefits: 15% of people who started in the last 12 months did so for the physical benefits compared to only 5.7% of people who have swum for more than five years.

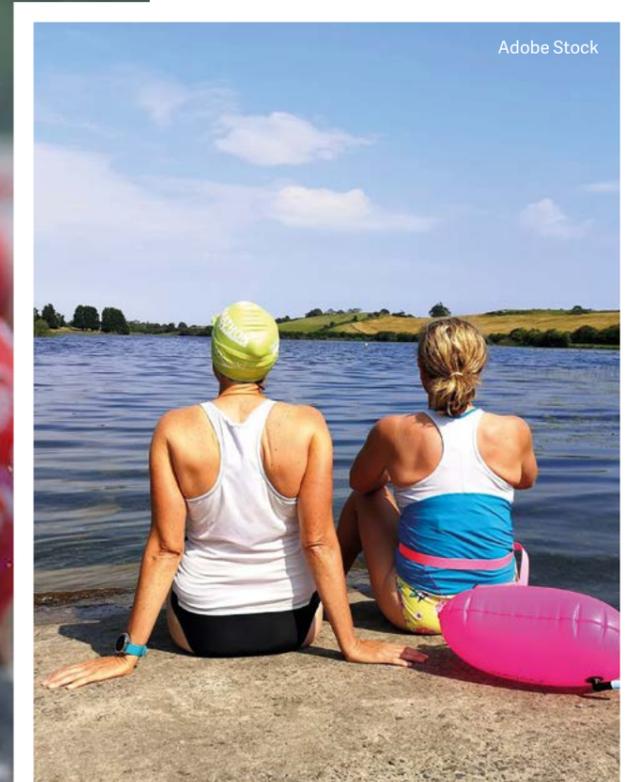
Similarly, younger people are around twice as likely to say they started for their mental health than older ones whereas around 1 in 12 people of all ages say they started for the physical benefits.

The impact of the first lockdown in 2020 comes out strongly. Of people who started one to two years ago (i.e. in 2020), “I started when pools were closed” was the

### What initially motivated you to try outdoor swimming?



Great Swim / Steve Ashworth



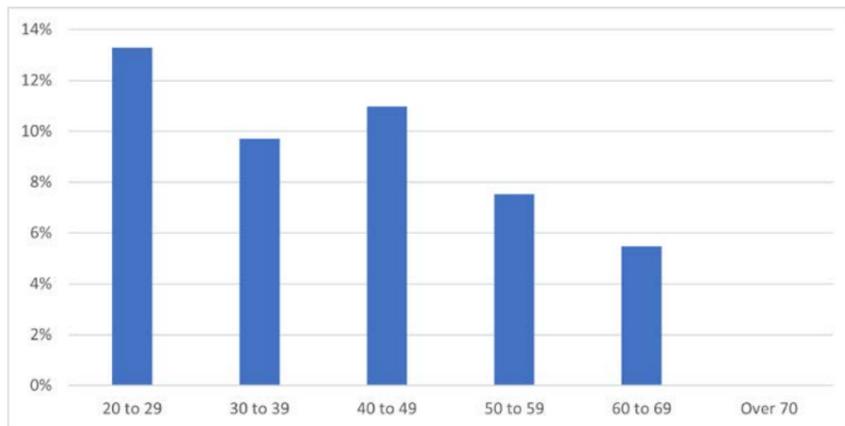
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most common reason at 21.5%. Subsequent lockdowns prompted 13% of those who gave outdoor swimming a go six months to one year ago.

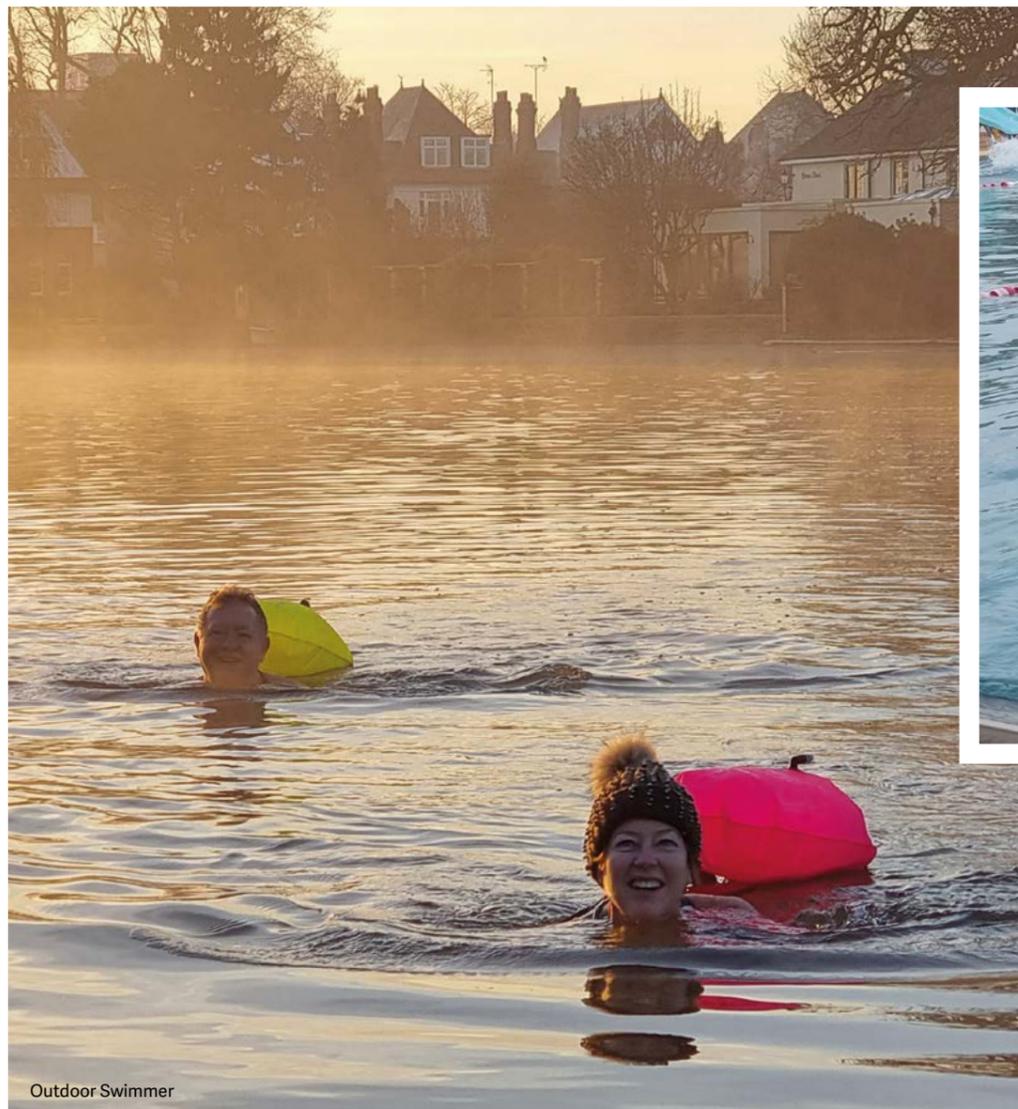
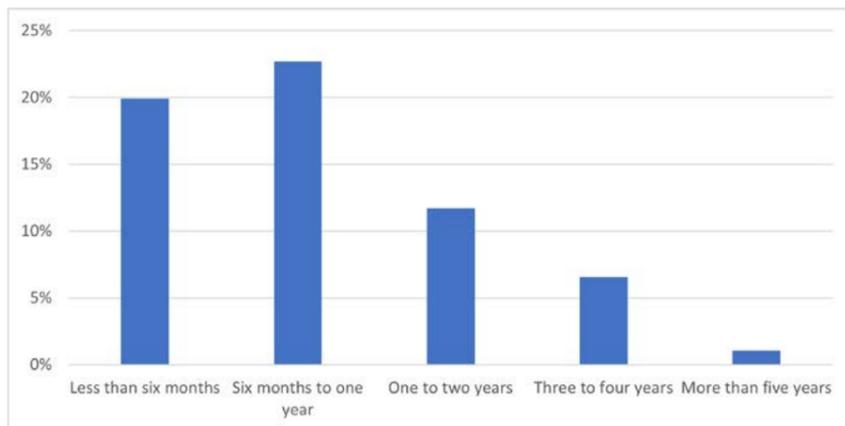
For men, the most common reason to start was to do a triathlon (20.1%, compared to 9.4% for women), while a further 16.2% of men started by entering an open water event (11.3% for women). Interestingly, entering events was a much bigger motivator to get into outdoor swimming for people who have been doing it for more than five years than those who started more recently.

**Younger people are around twice as likely to say they started for their mental health**

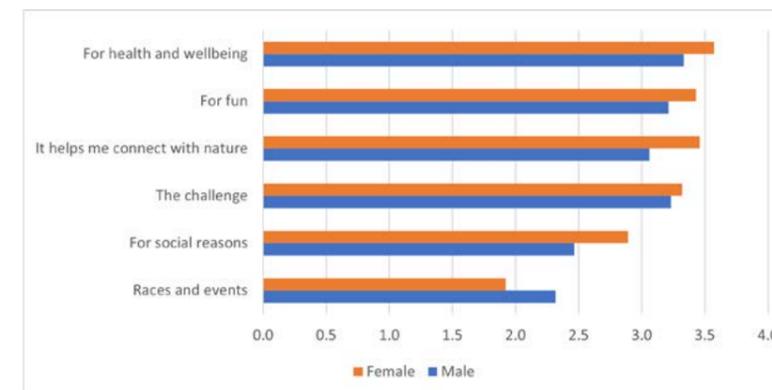
Percentage starting for mental health benefits by age



Percentage starting for mental health benefits by length of time swimming



Why do you swim outdoors? (average scores on 1 to 4 scale)



**WHY DO PEOPLE CONTINUE SWIMMING OUTDOORS?**

As well as asking why people took up outdoor swimming, we asked them to rate the reasons why they continue swimming outdoors on a scale of 1 to 4. We then looked at the average of these scores to give overall rankings on the reasons for swimming.

Interestingly, while entering a triathlon or an outdoor swimming event is a relatively common push to start outdoor swimming, it comes bottom of the list (for both men and women) as a reason to continue. In contrast, while only a small proportion start for the health and wellbeing benefits, it is the top reason to stick with it.

We also compared these scores by geographic location. Motivations to swim are broadly consistent around the world – at least in the places that responded to our survey. There were some small differences in magnitude but the overall order mostly

remained the same. For example, both Scotland and North America rated races and events in last place, but in Scotland, the score was just 1.7 compared to 2.5 in North America. Ratings were also consistent across age groups.

**BARRIERS TO OUTDOOR SWIMMING**

We also wanted to understand the barriers that prevent people swimming outdoors as much as they would like.

In the first place, to be an outdoor swimmer, it helps to have relatively easy access to safe water to swim in. A significant 38.3% of our survey respondents are lucky enough to have a wild swimming spot 15-minutes' travel or less from where they live. At the other extreme, 8.6% don't have anything close and a further 4.4% don't know how to find a local wild swimming spot. The

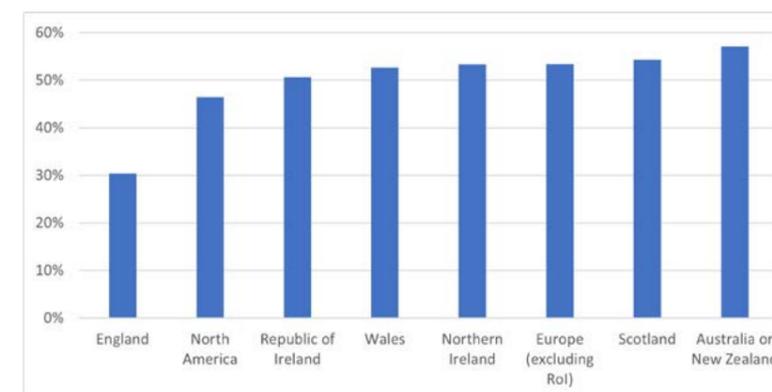
averages hide geographical variations and differences related to age, perhaps reflecting that younger people are more likely to live in urban areas (and maybe people under 20 still living with their parents).

In addition to easy access to swimming spots, people prefer to swim in clean water. Sewage pollution in rivers and oceans hit the headlines in England in 2021 due to the passage of the Environment Bill through parliament, investigative research by the Guardian and campaigning by groups such as Surfers Against Sewage. It is perhaps not surprising that 19.1% of people in England therefore said that worries about pollution and water quality often prevented them from swimming, higher than any other country or region. Only 9.9% said it never did. This is a significant change from last year when around 12% of people said worries about pollution often stopped them swimming, while 40% said they never did.

In Scotland, in contrast, only 9.1% said pollution often prevented them swimming as much as they wanted, while 17.3% said it never did.

**While only a small proportion start for the health and wellbeing benefits, it is the top reason to stick with it**

Do you have access to a wild swimming spot less than 15-minutes' travel from where you live? (by country)





Outdoor Swimmer

We next asked how people feel about the water quality at their regular wild swimming spot or beach on a scale of 1 (not confident at all) to 5 (it's excellent). England again came out badly, with the lowest average of 3.2, with Europe scoring top at 4.1.

Another barrier to outdoor swimming is legal access to the water. Again, there are big differences between countries and regions with England again doing badly and Scotland doing well. However, the Republic of Ireland, and Australia and New Zealand come out best.

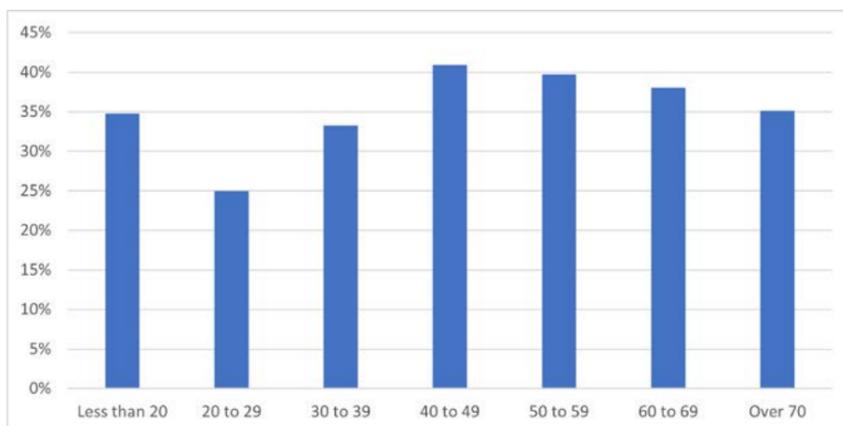
In fact, in England, only 45% of swimmers are completely certain that outdoor swimming is legal at their regular wild swimming spot. This compares to 83.2% in Scotland and 90.5% in Australia and New Zealand.

Overall, while we see lots of similarities around the world in people's motivations to swim and the benefits they get from it, there are significant variations in access and

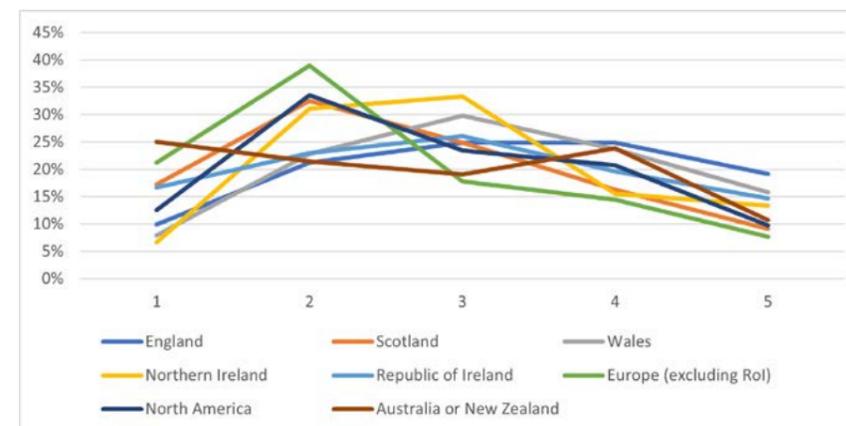
confidence in water quality. England scores relatively badly on a number of measures. Outdoor swimming is growing in England

despite these obstacles not because of a particularly welcoming environment for swimmers.

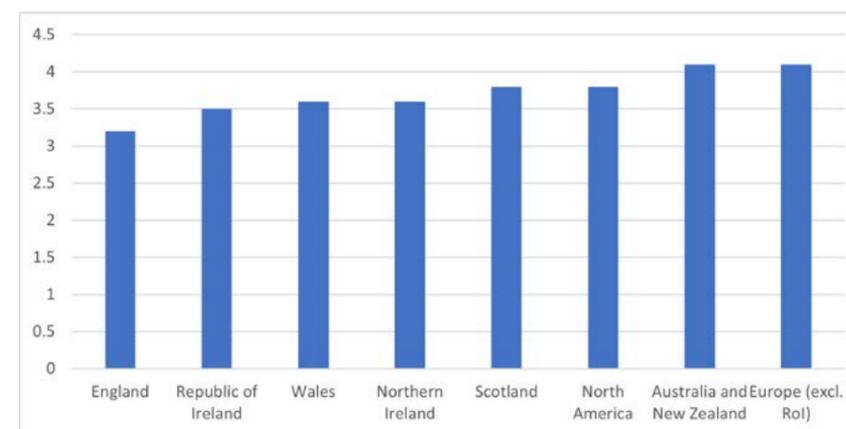
**Do you have access to a wild swimming spot less than 15-minutes' travel from where you live? (by age)**



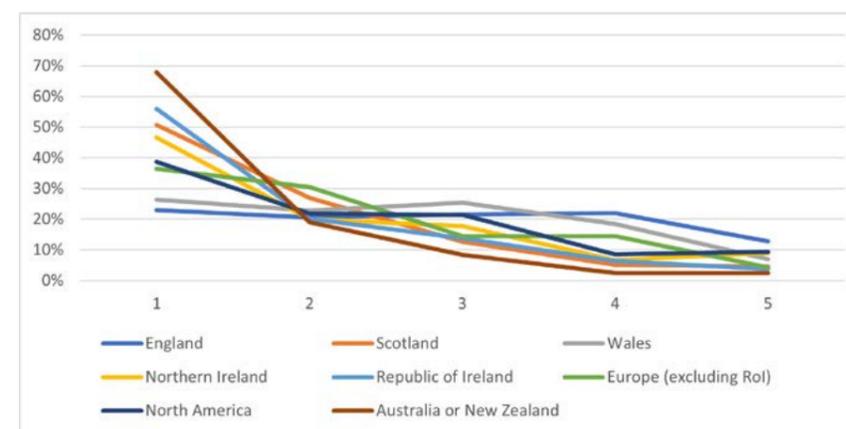
**Do worries about pollution and water quality prevent you swimming outdoors as much as you would like to? (by country)**



**How do you feel about the water quality at your regular wild swim spot or beach? (average by country)**



**Do worries about the legality of access prevent you swimming outdoors as much as you would like to? (by country)**



**19.1% of people in England therefore said that worries about pollution and water quality often prevented them from swimming**

# Section 3

## How important is outdoor swimming in people's lives?

Possibly the most frequent questions we are asked are: how many people regularly swim outdoors and how fast is outdoor swimming growing? We attempt to answer these questions but the picture is complex.

### GENERAL SENSE OF WELLBEING RANKS TOP AGAIN

In our first Trends report we identified that a significant portion of outdoor swimmers say the activity is an important factor in their lives across multiple dimensions including their physical and mental health, their physical fitness and their general sense of wellbeing. For example, last year three quarters of women said that outdoor swimming was essential or very important to their general sense of wellbeing.

For 2021, we asked the same questions using a five point scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (hugely important). This enabled us to give an overall score out of 5 for each of the areas we're interested in.

As with 2020, the importance of outdoor swimming to supporting our general sense of wellbeing comes out

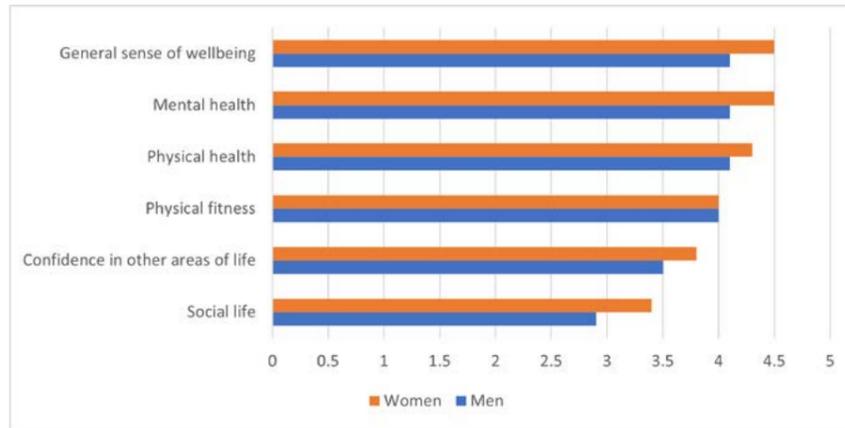
most strongly, scoring 4.5 out of 5 for women and 4.1 for men. The only slight change in responses between our surveys in 2020 and 2021 is that previously men ranked physical health marginally above mental health in importance whereas in 2021 they rank equally.

Interestingly, women and men rank the benefits of outdoor swimming in the same order but women rate all of them more highly. This is a repeat of the patterns we saw last year and suggest, on average, that either women have a better subjective experience of outdoor swimming than men or they are more likely to report and celebrate the benefits.

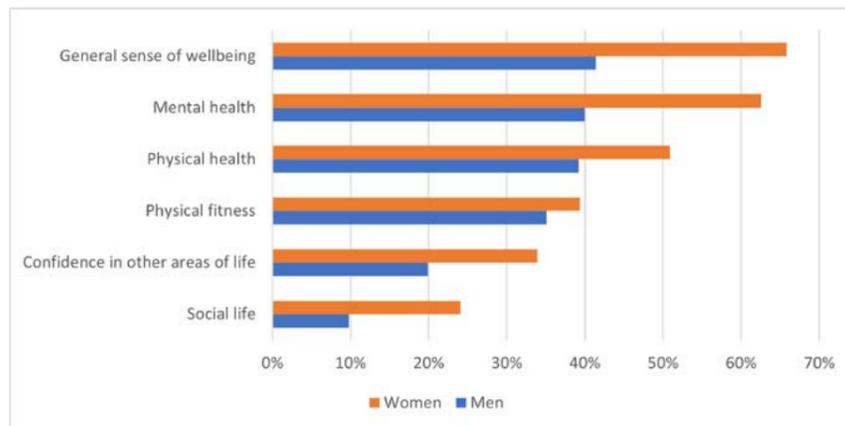
This comes out even more starkly when we look at the percentages who scored 5 on each of these areas.

**Women and men rank the benefits of outdoor swimming in the same order but women rate all of them more highly**

**How important is outdoor swimming in each category? Average scores.**



**How important is outdoor swimming? Percentage scoring 5 (hugely important)**



**The importance of outdoor swimming for mental health reaches a peak between the ages of 30 and 50 and then declines with older swimmers**

Almost two out of three female outdoor swimmers scored the activity 5 out of 5 for importance to their general sense of wellbeing. A further 25.8% rated it as 4 out of 5. An almost insignificant number – 0.5% – rated it as not at all important. With men, although only 41.4% scored 5 here, another 39.8% rated outdoor swimming as 4 out of 5. Thus 8 of 10 men and 9 out of 10 women rated outdoor swimming either 4 or 5 out of 5 on its importance to their general sense of wellbeing.

Overall, 59.5% of survey respondents rated outdoor swimming as 5 out of 5 on this measure, and this was mostly uniform across age groups. The only exception were 20 to 29-year olds, where only 46.9% scored 5. Across countries, 68.9% of swimmers in Northern Ireland and 75% of swimmers in Australia

and New Zealand said outdoor swimming was hugely important to their wellbeing, so there is some geographical variation.

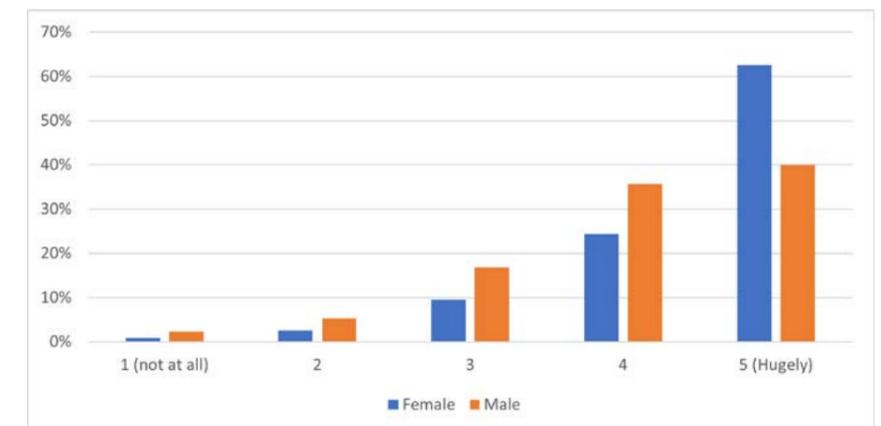
**MENTAL HEALTH**

Another theme that has remained consistent between our first Trends report and this one is outdoor swimming’s importance to mental health. As with wellbeing, there is a gender split. In addition, however, a pattern emerges when we compare the importance of outdoor swimming to mental health with age.

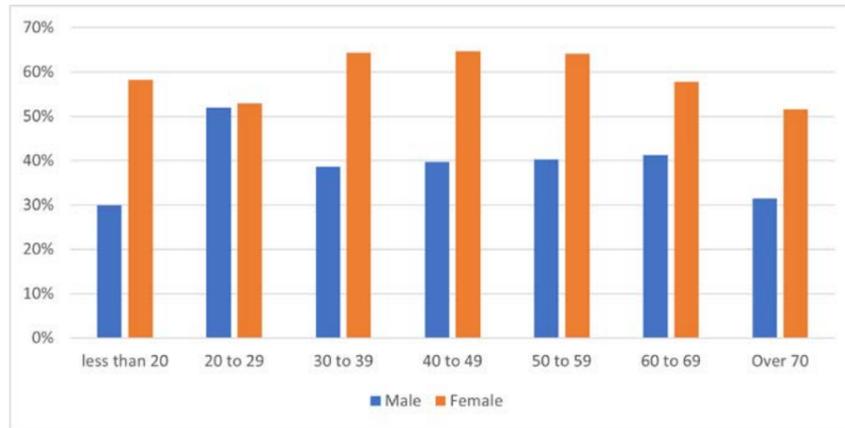
The importance of outdoor swimming for mental health reaches a peak between the ages of 30 and 50 and then declines with older swimmers. Interestingly, this pattern roughly follows prevalence of common mental disorders (CMD) by age in England,



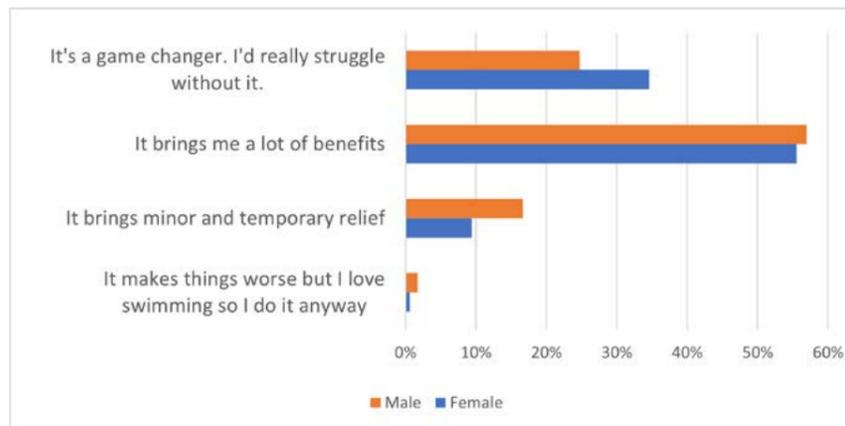
**How important is being an outdoor swimmer to your mental health? (by gender)**



**Importance of outdoor swimming to mental health, by age (percentage reporting 5 out of 5)**



**If you are living with a long-term mental health condition, how does outdoor swimming help you?**



Clearly there's a difference between supporting our mental health generally (in the same way we look after our physical health) and living with a diagnosed mental health condition. Moreover, these are subjective benefits rather than anything measured in a controlled scientific study. Nevertheless, it's surely significant that 1 in 4 men and 1 in 3 women living with a mental health condition report that outdoor swimming is a game changer and they'd really struggle without it. Additionally, more than 50% report that it brings a lot of benefits.

We looked at the motivations to start outdoor swimming separately, but less than

10% say they started for their mental health. The mental health benefits are therefore, in many cases, something people discover after they start. People swim because they love doing it: the benefits, often, are incidental. We can even see that some people – a small number, admittedly – love swimming so much that they continue doing it even though it makes their condition worse.

**PHYSICAL BENEFITS**

While we've focused primarily on general wellbeing and mental health benefits of outdoor swimming, we shouldn't overlook the

physical benefits. It's notable that both men and women rate the importance of outdoor swimming to their physical health more highly than to their physical fitness. In fact, despite races and events being the reason that 1 in 8 people start outdoor swimming, and a further 1 in 6 starting because of triathlon, competition was the lowest ranked reason for people to swim.

That said, more than 1 in 3 people says outdoor swimming is hugely important to their physical fitness and nearly half says it's hugely important to their physical health.



**1 in 4 men and 1 in 3 women living with a mental health condition report that outdoor swimming is a game changer**

# Section 4

## Where, when and how often do people swim outdoors?

Multiple factors influence where, when and how often people swim, but we can discern some patterns. We also look at what swimming activities people do.



Outdoor Swimmer

### COMMERCIAL VENUES POPULAR IN ENGLAND, LESS SO ELSEWHERE

Asking people where they swim turns up interesting geographic and gender differences. For example, commercial outdoor swimming venues are popular places to swim in England, with 29% of people using one weekly or more. Yet, in the Republic of Ireland, less than 1% of swimmers use one this often. In fact, 91% of swimmers in RoI never swim at a commercial venue. This most likely reflects that commercial open water swimming venues are an important part of the English outdoor swimming landscape but are not much of a feature elsewhere.

Sea swimming also shows wide geographic variation. Fewer than 1 in 4 outdoor swimmers in England dip in the sea weekly or more frequently, while 67% in RoI and 71% in Australia and New Zealand do.

Outdoor swimmers around the world make frequent use of indoor pools.

### Outdoor swimming participation, twice in the previous 28 days

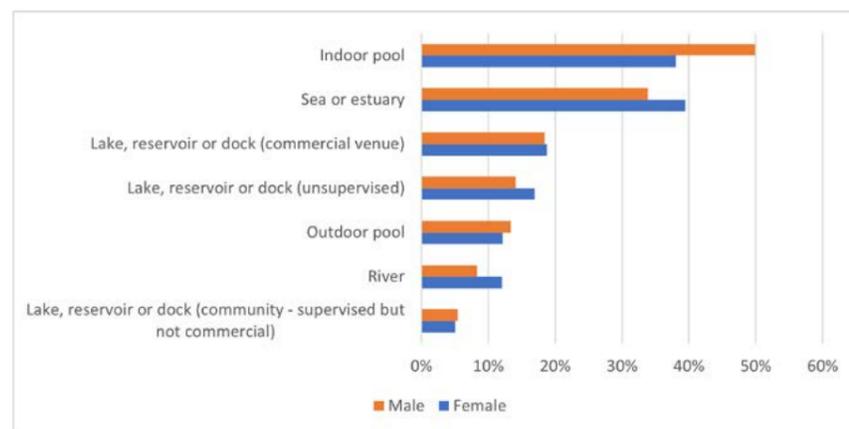


Chart shows percentage using each location at least once weekly

In England, 40% of outdoor swimmers use one at least weekly. This rises to 52% for Europe and 56% for North America. The biggest difference between men and women also shows with pool swimming, with 50% of men swimming at least once per week compared to only 38% of women.

With outdoor pools, Australia and New Zealand are far ahead with 71% using them at least weekly compared with 14% in England and just 3% in Wales. Availability surely plays a role in this.

### Outdoor swimming truly is a lifelong activity

### SWIMMING BY SEASON

When we wrote our first trends report in 2021, one of the things we noted was the growing popularity of winter swimming. For the majority of people responding to our survey, and especially for women, outdoor swimming is a year-round activity. There is no change this year. In fact, the percentage of people saying they swim outdoors at least once per week in winter has increased slightly: for women, it's 65% this year compared to 63% last year and for men it's consistent at 44% both years. At the venues it works with, NOWCA says it has seen a 450% increase in winter swims (n.b. not swimmers) since 2020.

Meanwhile, 25% of men say they never swim outdoors in winter compared to only 15% of women. Not surprisingly, people tend to swim outdoors more frequently in the summer than winter. And they swim slightly more frequently in autumn than they do in spring, as the water tends to hold its warmth after the summer. Women swim more often

than men at all times of the year.

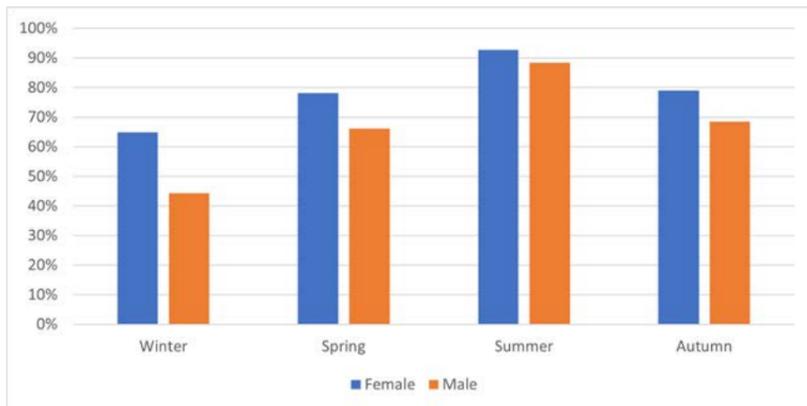
When we look geographically, we see that winter swimming is most popular in the Republic of Ireland (66% swimming outdoors at least once per week), Scotland (69%) and Northern Ireland (73%). If we look at women only in Northern Ireland, then fully 87% swim outdoors at least once per week in winter. However, note that these places also see the highest weekly participation rates at all times of year, not just winter.

### NOT SLOWING WITH AGE

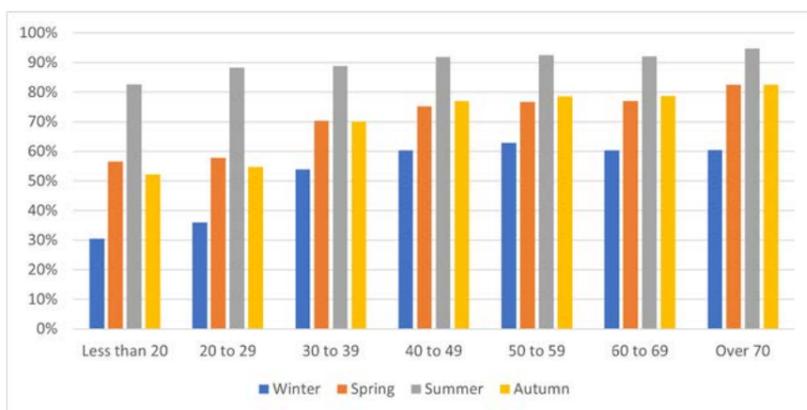
The number of people swimming at least once per week increases with age. This is true at all times of year except in winter, where it declines slightly for swimmers in their 60s and 70s.

There are, no doubt, multiple reasons for this, but it clearly demonstrates that outdoor swimming (like swimming in general) truly is a lifelong activity.

### Percentage swimming outdoors once per week or more, by season



### Percentage of people swimming outside at least once per week by age



### WHAT DO OUTDOOR SWIMMERS DO?

Outdoor swimming offers a wide range of activities including wild swimming, racing, long distance challenges and swimming holidays. As noted above, swimming at commercial supervised venues is primarily a feature of outdoor swimming in England, and only 17% of swimmers there say they never swim at one, while 53% do so frequently (fortnightly or more often). On the other hand, 60% of swimmers in Scotland never swim at a commercial venue.

When it comes to wild swimming (swimming in natural bodies of water without lifeguards or supervision), Scotland leads the way with 39% doing it several times a week and a further 49% wild swimming weekly or fortnightly. Less than 2% of outdoor swimmers in Scotland say they never go wild swimming, compared with 15% in England. Overall, women do more wild swimming than men.

A significant portion – 43% – never take part in open water races and events. However, 68% of men and 53% of women do. The mostly likely people to take part in events are age 30 to 39 (63%) and 40 to 49 (59%). By geography, swimmers in North America are most likely to take part in an event (78%).

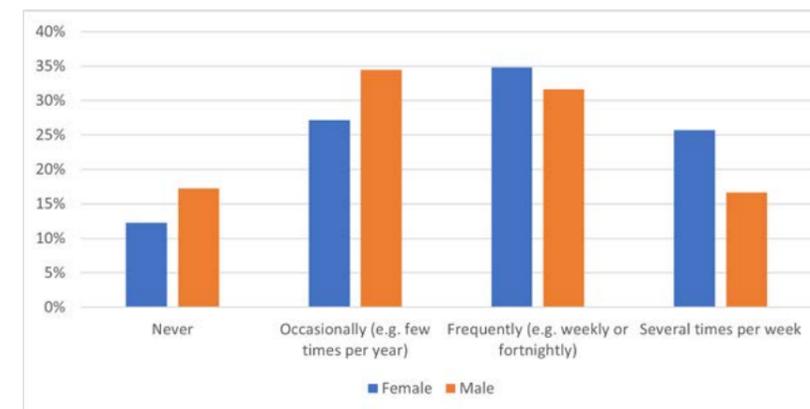
### SWIMMING FOR GOOD

When taking part in events, 9% of swimmers frequently use the opportunity to raise funds



for charity and a further 39% have done so occasionally. Another 31% haven't but think they might do in future while 20% say it's not their thing. Men and women are broadly similar here. There is a small increase in people who frequently or occasionally swim for charities with age but younger people say they are more likely to do so in future.

### How often do you go wild swimming?



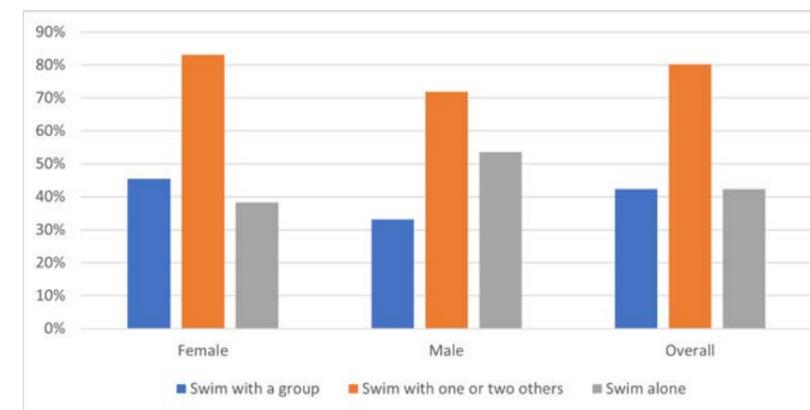
### SWIMMING ALONE

We always advise people to swim with other people but more than 4 in every 10 swimmers confess to sometimes swimming alone at unsupervised outdoor locations. For men, it's more than half. In Europe, two thirds of swimmers say they sometimes swim alone.

However, in general, people are most likely to swim with one or two others or with a group.

**More than 4 in every 10 swimmers confess to sometimes swimming alone**

### Who do you swim with at unsupervised outdoor locations?



Numbers add up to more than 100% as respondents could select more than one option



# JOIN THE UK'S LARGEST SAFE OPEN WATER NETWORK

Over 40 venues nationwide and  
35,000 passionate open water  
swimmers trust NOWCA to keep  
them safe every swim.



## BENEFITS FOR AFFILIATED VENUES

No joining or set up fees

**HARDWARE, BOOKING & SAFETY  
SYSTEM PROVIDED FREE OF CHARGE**

Fully integrated system for venue & swimmer safety, bookings,  
payments, session management and reporting

Earn an extra revenue stream, retain your  
swimming fees & keep your overhead costs low

Assistance & guidance to set up a successful venue  
such as EAP, NOP, RA, lifeguard & training support

“We are delighted  
to be partnered  
with NOWCA.  
The system keeps  
us safe and has  
reassured all our  
members of good  
systems and  
process.”

*Chelmarsh Sailing Club*

Discounts on water testing,  
insurance, coaching & courses

Exclusive trade & retail Perks  
from our trusted partners

Free programmes including  
NOWCA Swims and Sub10 Club

Marketing support to promote  
your venue & brand

## BECOME A NOWCA MEMBER

£15 = 1x   
A YEAR = A MONTH

Access to over 40  
safe open water venues

Insurance cover for  
personal accident & injury

Free ACTiO app to manage  
your account, bookings,  
payments & swim stats

Up to 70% off top brands  
at NOWCA Perks

**NOWCA WELCOME PACK**  
with generous vouchers & offers  
for new members & renewals

**COMING SOON**

**An essential app for  
safe wild swimming**

### KEY FEATURES:

- Insurance protection for every wild swim.
- Automated notification to your emergency contact.
- Identify associated risks for your chosen swim location.
- Get expert safety advice and guidance.
- Find, save, rate and share swim locations.
- Save your swim stats.

**SAFETY**  
for wild swimmers  
**ASSURANCE**  
for family & friends

## INTRODUCING NOWCA WILD

The rising popularity of open water swimming in recent years has meant more people are taking up swimming in the wild.

The new NOWCA Wild app is tailored to support the safety of wild swimmers, who often do not have the lifeguards or safety crew that exists at a safely managed venue.

The wide range of built-in safety features on NOWCA Wild is what makes this app so unique. Its robust emergency centre with automated notifications to family & friends provides assurance of your safety. It is also the only app that gives insurance cover for personal accident & injury once a wild swim is activated.

The NOWCA Wild app is integrated with NOWCA's existing technology enabling a safe and seamless open water experience each and every time.

NOWCA Wild is undoubtedly an essential app for safe wild swimming.

**NOWCA.ORG**  
Scan QR code  
for more info



For more information  
contact our Venue  
Support Team at  
[hello@nowca.org](mailto:hello@nowca.org)



Sign up now on  
**ACTiO**



# Section 5

## Outdoor swimming and disability

Are people with disabilities able to access outdoor swimming? Do they feel supported when and where they swim? And what benefits do people with disabilities get from outdoor swimming?



### ARE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES UNDER-REPRESENTED IN OUTDOOR SWIMMING?

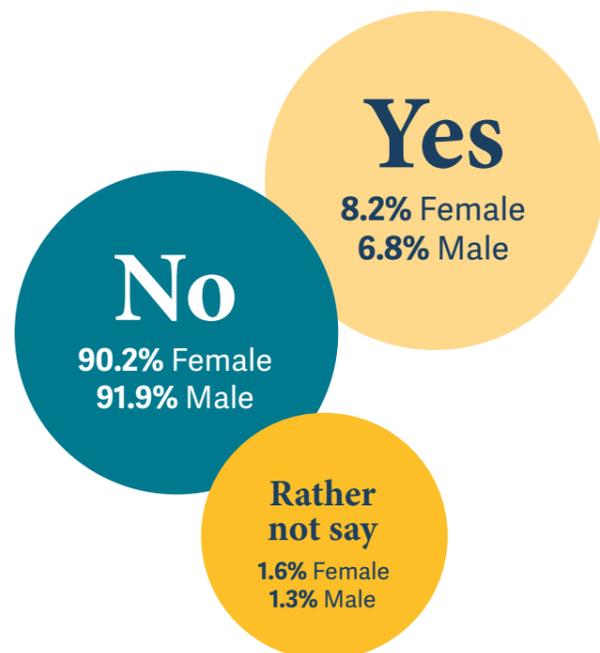
According to the disability charity, Scope, 19% of working age adults in the UK are disabled. This rises to 46% of pension age adults.

Based on that, swimmers with disabilities are currently under-represented in outdoor swimming compared with the general population.

We also looked at these figures by country and age but found little variation by either geography or years on this planet. Of swimmers age 60 to 69, 8.7% reported that they had a long-term condition or disability, only marginally above the average, and in our over-70s, the figure was 11.4%.

These numbers need to be interpreted with a degree of caution. We didn't ask for details of any conditions nor specify what should be included. Nor have we asked this question in previous years, so we can't yet track how outdoor swimming is doing in broad terms in improving access for people with disabilities. This is something we plan to do going forward. What is apparent is that nearly 1 in 10 outdoor swimmers are living with a condition or disability that makes

Do you have any long-term condition or disability that makes outdoor swimming or access to outdoor swimming more difficult?



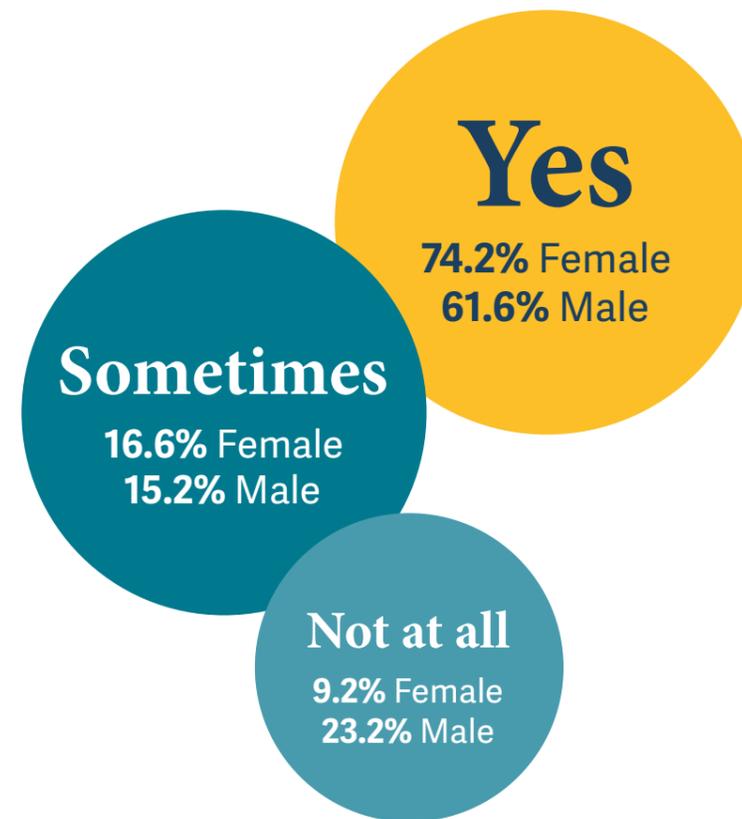
Not only do we need to ensure adequate support is in place to improve access for those already swimming, we need to do more to open up outdoor swimming to other people with disabilities

access to swimming more difficult, and this has implications for swimmers, swimming groups and businesses involved in outdoor swimming. Not only do we need to ensure adequate support is in place to improve access for those already swimming, we need to do more to open up outdoor swimming to other people with disabilities.

### COMMUNITY SUPPORT

For people who answered yes to our question on disability, we next asked if they feel supported by their local swimming community. After removing those who responded with "not relevant" or left the question blank, 64.3% said yes, 23.9% said sometimes while 11.8% said no. Interestingly, there was a big difference between men and women here with 23.7%

Do you feel supported at your local supervised venue?



of men saying they didn't feel supported compared to 8.5% of women.

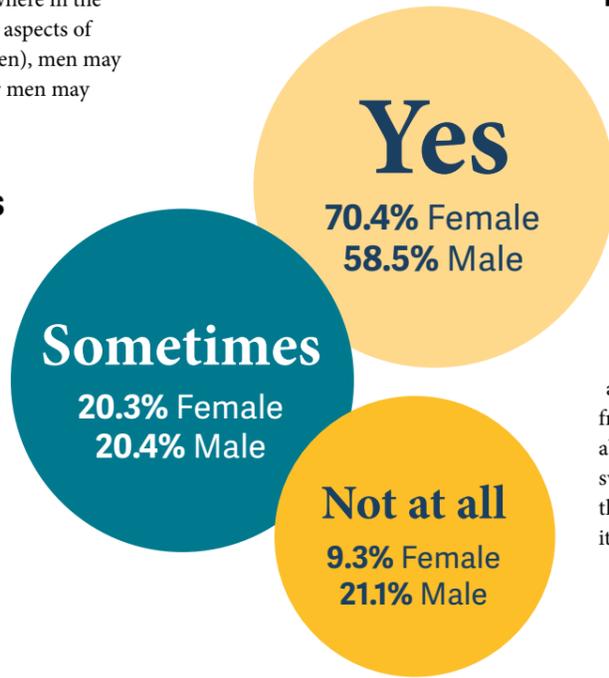
It's not clear what is driving this difference and the question is worth exploring further. Possible explanations could be that fewer men are part of supportive and social swimming groups (we see elsewhere in the data that women rate the social aspects of swimming more highly than men), men may be less willing to ask for help or men may have more hidden disabilities.

**VENUES AND EVENTS**

We also asked how swimmers with disabilities feel about the support they receive from venues and events. Here the results also differ by gender.

Again, we can only speculate about the causes between men and women here: are men less willing to ask for help,

**Do you feel supported at events?**



do their disabilities cause greater access problems than those of women or do they have higher expectations?

**OUTDOOR SWIMMING BRINGS HUGE BENEFITS**

One statistic that stands out clearly, for both men and women with long-term conditions and disabilities, is that outdoor swimming is a huge positive factor in their lives. Nearly 28 per cent of women and 19 per cent of men say outdoor swimming is a game changer and that they would really struggle without it. A further 49% of women and 55% of men say it brings them a lot of benefits. Smaller proportions (16 and 18%) get minor and temporary relief from outdoor swimming. Interestingly, for about 8% of both men and women, outdoor swimming makes their condition worse but they love swimming so much that they do it anyway.

# Lived experience



Statistics of course will only ever tell part of the story. Sophie Etheridge suffered a life-changing injury in a bike accident as a teenager. She is now a regular outdoor swimmer, an outdoor swimming coach and runs a Facebook support group for other outdoor swimmers with disabilities. At the end of 2021, the group had more than 600 members. She said she's not surprised by our survey's findings and that they correspond to her experience.



Orca

"There are a lot more people than you think living with long-term conditions and disabilities," Sophie Etheridge explains. "Often, these conditions – such as fibromyalgia, for example – are not necessarily visible. Moreover, there's an expectation to hide our disabilities, like people without disabilities do with their moods."

Because of this tendency to downplay or hide the extent of disability, people don't always get the help they need.

Sophie also feels people are quick to judge. She gives an example from her own experience. While she is able to use crutches to cover short distances, she finds it much easier and less painful to use a wheelchair. While her disability remains constant, she finds that people assume she is more disabled when she's using the wheelchair. Conversely, she has occasionally been accused of being an attention seeker while using a wheelchair because of the fact that she can manage short distances on crutches, albeit painfully. Again, because of these experiences, people with disabilities may feel the need to downplay the

difficulties they face and feel awkward about asking for assistance.

There's also a lack of information for outdoor swimmers with disabilities. Before she created the Adaptive/Disabled Swimmers Facebook group, there was virtually none. Through the group, swimmers can share tips on accessible swim spots and venues, and which events provide the best support.

With swim groups, one problem – and this is partly due to the nature of outdoor and wild swimming – is that people often meet in places that can be difficult to access. While this is sometimes unavoidable, there are occasions when a small change in location could make a big difference to someone with a disability.

Sophie's final observation is that often people lack the confidence to offer help, even when they are willing. Many people in outdoor swimming have come to the activity relatively recently and may be anxious about their swimming abilities. However, even if they can't help in the water, this doesn't mean they can't help in other ways.

**There are a lot more people than you think living with long term conditions and disabilities**

# Section 6

## Ethnicity and outdoor swimming

Access to outdoor swimming and participation in it are unequal, but that doesn't mean there isn't demand for it.



In addition, for the Muslim women she works with, other factors include being made to feel welcome, privacy for changing and having the right costumes, especially for those who want to cover their full body and head. She also says there is an element of community stigma against women taking part in outdoor activities, some women are discouraged or prevented from swimming by their husbands, and a lack of transport makes access difficult. Managing costs, finding suitable places to swim, and overcoming perceptions that it's a White people's area all need to happen to improve access.

On the other hand, Wafa says that if these barriers can be overcome and people can be made to feel safe, they will be happy to swim outdoors. "I think, if people have the right information, they will take on the adventure and try it with family and friends together."

For Wafa, the effort is worth it. "I always feel relaxed and happy after each time I swim outdoors and get the opportunity to enjoy nature. It's real happiness."

Improving accessibility for people from different ethnic and social groups is something everyone involved in outdoor swimming can assist with. These can be small changes from the choices of images used in marketing to larger ones such as actively seeking members of different communities to join product development focus groups or ensuring there are appropriate changing facilities at venues and events.

### ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS UNDER-REPRESENTED

We know from discussions with the Black Swimming Association and Open Minds Active that there are huge barriers to outdoor swimming for people from certain ethnic groups and very low participation rates. This year, for the first time, we asked about ethnicity in our survey using the classifications from the UK census. However, we found these classifications do not work outside of the UK, so we're only reporting here on the UK and RoI data.

Data from the 2011 Census of England and Wales (2021 Census data isn't yet available) shows that that people from the White British ethnic group made up 80.5% of the population, followed by people from any Other White background at 4.4%. The next biggest group was Indian at 2.5%. In our survey, only 0.1% of respondents in England stated this as their ethnic background (and it was zero elsewhere). Similarly, people of Black African background made up 1.8%

of the population in England and Wales but only 0.1% of our survey respondents.

This could, in part, reflect the ethnic make-up of our audience rather than outdoor swimming participants. However, both the Black Swimming Association and Open Minds Active (an organisation that works with marginalised groups in Bristol) shared our survey. The more likely reality is that many ethnic groups are under-represented in outdoor swimming compared to their prevalence in the overall population.

The barriers are many, and complex, but evidence from NOWCA suggests there is demand. NOWCA ran a pop-up lido for Newham Council for three weeks in the summer of 2021 where they offered free coaching and provided water safety cover. Francesca Ridgard from NOWCA says users were predominantly non-white and often new swimmers. Some made multiple visits during the three weeks. We also know from

Open Minds Active, who work with women from Muslim communities, that there is strong demand for their introduction to outdoor swimming courses.

Omie Dale of the Black Swimming Association (and also a contributor to Outdoor Swimmer magazine) says 95% of Black adults and 80% of Black children don't swim and, anecdotally, participation in outdoor swimming among these people is even less than their participation in pool swimming as it's easier to go to a leisure centre on your own than for an open water swim. She says that additional barriers to outdoor swimming include the costs (both perceived and real), apprehension and lack of knowledge. People assume you need a lot of kit whereas you don't really.

Being unable to swim is a barrier to people from other ethnic groups, according to Wafa Suliman, who is a community activity manager with Open Minds Active. In

### What is your ethnic group?

|                            | England | Scotland | Wales | Northern Ireland | Republic of Ireland |
|----------------------------|---------|----------|-------|------------------|---------------------|
| White*                     | 92%     | 92%      | 92%   | 96%              | 94%                 |
| Any other White background | 5%      | 6%       | 4%    | 2%               | 3%                  |
| Prefer not to say          | 1%      | 2%       | 2%    | 2%               | 1%                  |
| All other ethnic groups    | 2%      | 1%       | 2%    | 0%               | 2%                  |

\*(English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/Irish/British)

# Section 7

## How has becoming an outdoor swimmer changed you?

Taking up outdoor swimming changes the way you think and may also lead to behavioural change.

### SENSE OF IDENTITY

In our trends report last year, we observed that outdoor swimming isn't just something you do. For many people, it becomes part of their identity. An outdoor swimmer is something you are.

Our findings this year on this question are remarkably consistent with those from 2020.

As before, a significant majority of both women and men identify with outdoor swimming, with women scoring noticeably higher – on our scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being “hugely important”, women’s average rating was 3.9 for both 2020 and 2021, with men at 3.6 and 3.5 for the two years.

To explore this further, we introduced a new set of questions for Trends 2 to see if and how becoming an outdoor swimmer might prompt people to change other habits, and to improve our understanding of how outdoor

swimming impacts our lives in a broader sense.

It is so taken for granted that outdoor swimmers love cake that we didn't consider including a question on it in our survey, although it did feature in several of the free text answers. We did, however, ask people if their eating habits had changed using a scoring system of 1 (less healthy) to 5 (more healthy), with 3 indicating no change.

Despite the prevalence of cake in outdoor swimming circles, nearly a quarter of women, and 28 per cent of men, said their eating had become more healthy. Less than 2% of both men and women said their eating habits had become less healthy. These numbers were consistent across age groups and geographic regions, with the notable exception of the over 70s, where no swimmers reported eating less healthily. Nevertheless, while the



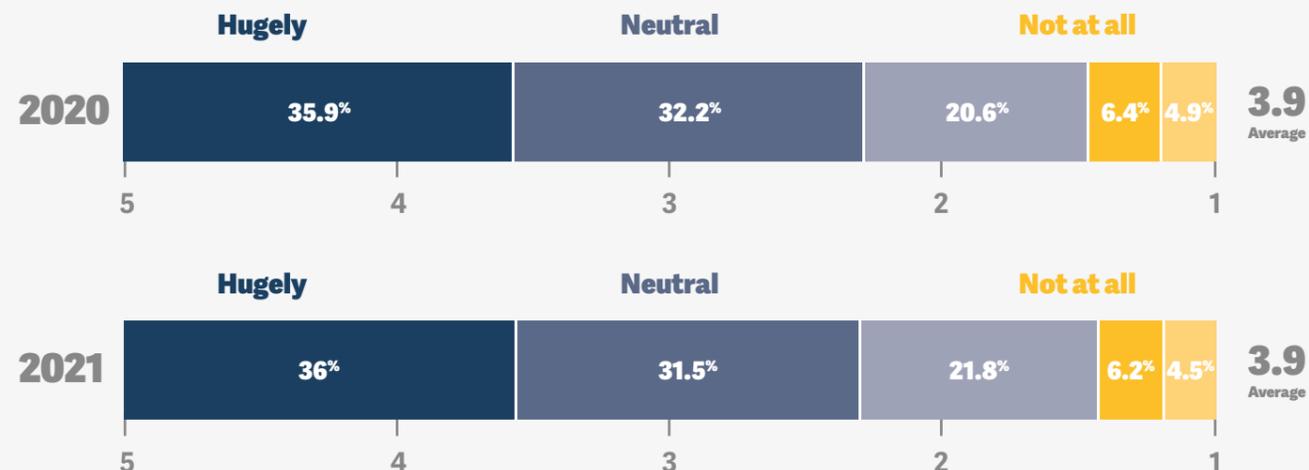
trend towards healthier eating is positive, the impact is relatively small with almost three quarters of respondents saying their eating habits were unchanged. The average score on our 1 to 5 scale was just 3.3.

Not surprisingly, we saw a bigger impact on people's exercise habits. Scoring from 1 (I exercise less overall), through 3 (no change), to 5 (I exercise more overall), the average score for both men and women was 3.7. This score was also consistent across age groups and geography. Overall, 51.2% exercise more since becoming an outdoor swimmer, 47% reported no change in their overall exercise quantity, and just 1.8% exercise less.

**Around 1 in 3 swimmers volunteers in some capacity**

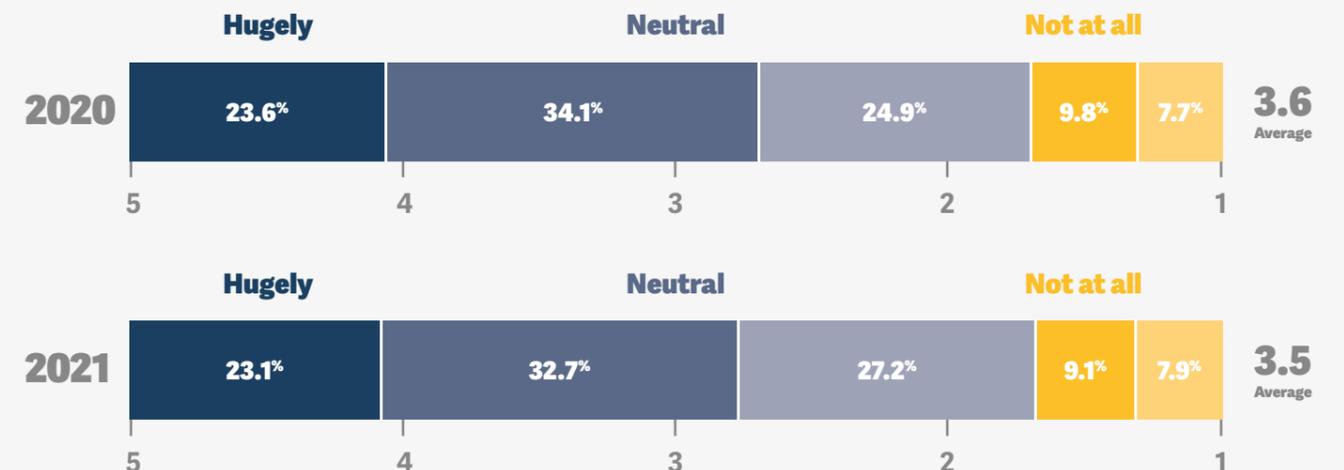
How important is outdoor swimming to your sense of identity?

## Female



How important is outdoor swimming to your sense of identity?

## Male

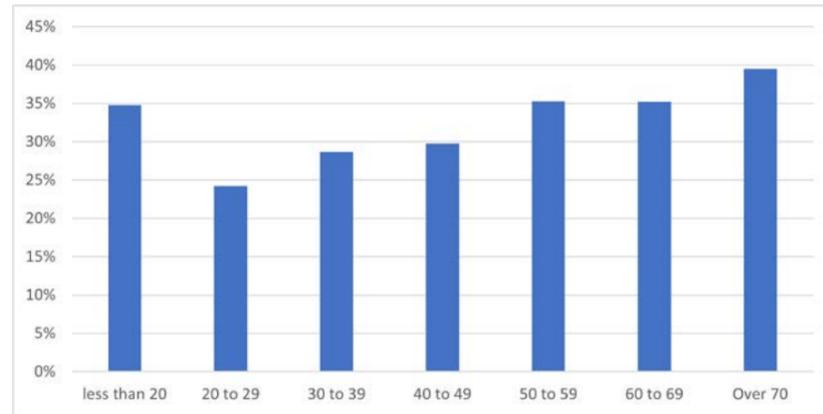


**VOLUNTEERING**

Outdoor swimming relies on volunteers for its continued growth and success. This includes everything from informally encouraging and helping people who are new to outdoor swimming to campaigning, the formal organising of community swimming groups and volunteering at events. Overall, around 1 in 3 swimmers volunteers in some capacity, with some people giving up their time in several different ways.

Interestingly, there is a trend towards increasing volunteering with age, with the exception of the under 20s. However, our sample size in this age group was small at 0.5% of the database, so this result should be treated with caution.

*Percentage of swimmers who volunteer by age*



**ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS AND ACTIONS**

There isn't much that gets you closer to the environment than removing your clothing and stepping into a natural body of water. The all-over bodily contact not only means you experience the benefits of outdoor swimming but that you put yourself at risk of harm from litter and pollution. These concerns lead to almost two thirds of swimmers taking action of some kind. This could either be a personal lifestyle change, a direct action such as joining a campaign or signing a petition, or both.

Water pollution generates the most concerns and pushed more than one third of swimmers to take direct action including

(but not limited to) signing petitions, writing to MPs and supporting campaigns.

For example, Michelle Walker, Technical Director at the Rivers Trust, says: "What really stands out to me is how swimming outdoors motivates people to take direct action on water pollution, and we've really seen the impact of that in the last year. Tens of thousands of people contacted their MPs to demand amendments to the Environment Bill, and as a result government were forced to change direction."

Thousands also took to social media to express their disgust at sewage pollution in rivers and more than 115,000 people signed a petition that called to make the dumping of sewage in water courses illegal.

"This is people power in action, and is a real cause for hope. We can effect change if we show government and polluters that we will fight to protect our beautiful rivers, lakes and seas," says Walker.

The next highest area of concern was wildlife and nature conservation. Swimmers like to swim in beautiful unspoilt places. There is a danger, as highlighted in 2020, that fragile ecosystems can be damaged if overwhelmed with visitors. As outdoor swimming becomes increasingly popular, swimmers will have to take steps to ensure they don't cause harm to the places they love. For example, care needs to be taken to avoid the introduction of invasive species and not to damage riverbanks.

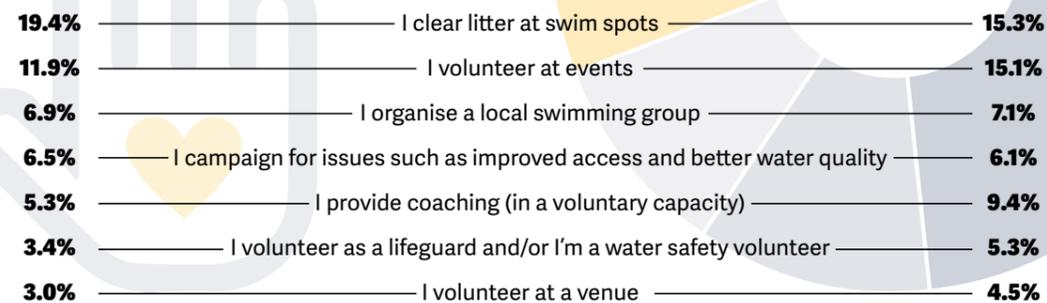
*Concerns and actions driven by outdoor swimming participation*

|                                   | How do you feel? |                | Have you taken action? |        |       |       |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------------|------------------------|--------|-------|-------|
|                                   | About the same   | More concerned | Lifestyle              | Direct | Both* | Total |
| Water pollution                   | 21%              | 79%            | 30%                    | 20%    | 15%   | 65%   |
| Climate change                    | 53%              | 46%            | 42%                    | 8%     | 12%   | 62%   |
| Ethical sourcing of products      | 59%              | 39%            | 51%                    | 4%     | 8%    | 63%   |
| Recycling and re-use of materials | 54%              | 45%            | 54%                    | 5%     | 9%    | 68%   |
| Wildlife and nature conservation  | 38%              | 61%            | 45%                    | 8%     | 12%   | 65%   |

**Volunteering activities**

**Female**

**Male**



Geographically, volunteering is strongest in Europe (43.2%), Australia and New Zealand (54.8%) and North America (59.4%). In the latter two, volunteering at events is popular, with 25.0% and 35.5% of people giving up their time in this way in each location respectively. North America also has the highest proportion of people who say they provide voluntary coaching (21.1%), organise a local swimming group (23.4%) and clear litter at swim spots (25%).

See next page for a selection of what swimmers do to support the outdoor swimming community.

**Other volunteering activities**

- Auditor for local swim club
- Fundraising
- International Ice Swimming Association Board Member
- Marathon swims reviewer and ratifier
- Mental Health Swims swim host
- Mentor to new outdoor swimmers
- Provide support to swimmers with disabilities
- Provide teaching for international swim charity
- Run a swim group's Facebook page
- Safety kayak
- Running a venue
- Support friends who want to start outdoor swimming
- Swim club admin support
- Swim guide for visually impaired swimmers
- Therapy instructor for adults and children with mental and physical disabilities
- Water safety volunteer
- Work with swimming related charity

# Section 8

## Outdoor swimming and travel

Swimming is an ideal activity to do when travelling as swimming kit takes up so little space in your baggage and around 70% of our planet is covered with water. While many trips were cancelled last year, there is undoubtedly demand for swim-related travel when it's available.

### SWIM HOLIDAYS CURTAILED IN 2021 BUT DEMAND STRONG FOR 2022

With travel still massively disrupted in 2021, it's not surprising that the swim travel business struggled. Overall, fewer than 3% of people in our survey went to a different country on a commercial swimming holiday. A further 6% had a swimming holiday planned that was cancelled or postponed because of Covid while 13% wanted to travel to a different country to swim but were unable to because of travel restrictions.

On the other hand, while international travel was reduced, 7% of people in our sample instead went on a commercial swimming holiday in their own country

and 15% organised their own in-country swimming break.

In general, women are keener on swimming-related travel than men, but men are more likely to travel to take part in events.

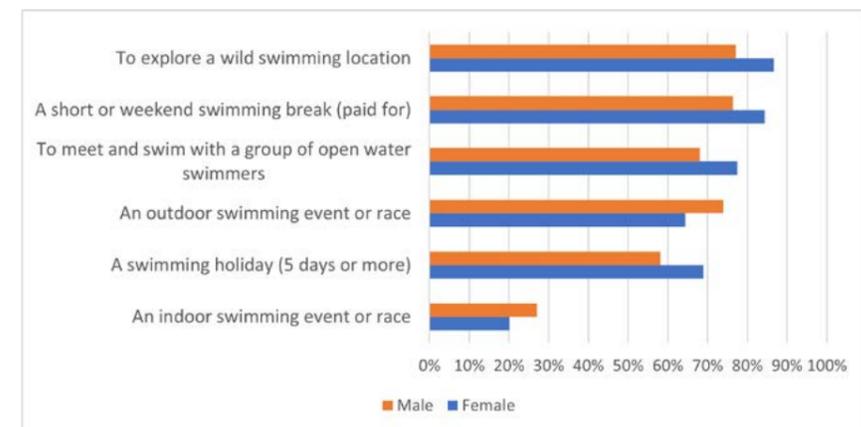
When considering swimming-related travel, 62% of people seek recommendations from friends, 32% seek out information on swimming-related websites while 31% respond to articles and promotions in print magazines. Women are more likely to be influenced by recommendations from friends (65% versus 53%) but are broadly similar on other measures. Also, older people are less likely to act on recommendations from friends than younger swimmers.

### EXPECTATIONS DASHED

When we asked about plans for swimming-related travel at the end of 2020, around 1 in 5 swimmers didn't see themselves travelling in 2021 and a further 10% said they would need a lot of reassurance before travelling. However, more than 1 in 3 wanted to travel but didn't yet want to commit and 1 in 4 were actively looking at options and were excited to go. About 1 in 12 had already booked.

Clearly, many of these swim-travel plans didn't come to fruition and we can only hope that things turn out better in 2022.

### What would motivate you to take a swimming related trip or holiday?



# Section 9

## What do swimmers use and how much do they spend on kit?

In this section we find out what swimmers use in summer and winter, and what they want to buy in the next year.

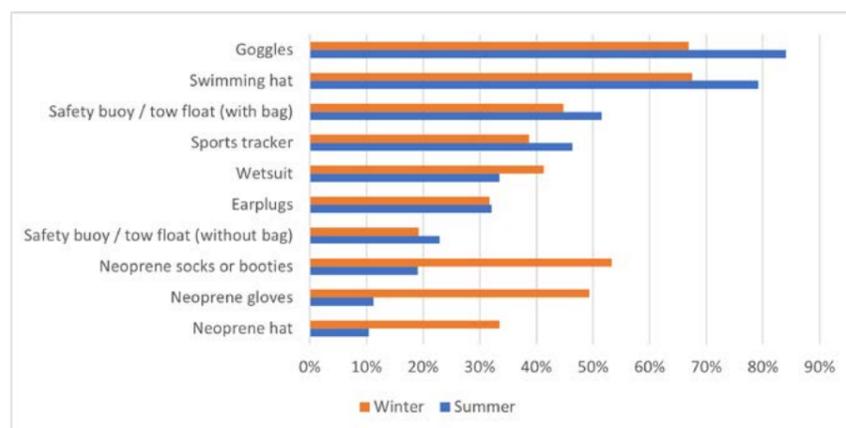


Katia Vastiau

Adobe Stock

Adobe Stock

### What kit do people use while swimming?



Interestingly, goggle use varies by country or region. In Europe, North America and Australia or New Zealand around 95% of people use them in summer. In Scotland it's 78% and in Wales it's 76%.

### WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT?

As well as asking people what they already use, we asked what they plan to buy or replace in the next 12 months. For women, the most popular item to renew is their

costume, while for men it's their goggles.

Around 1 in 5 people do not expect to replace or buy any kit in the next 12 months but there is some variation with age. People age 40 to 49 are the most likely to be planning to replace something (at 83%) whereas only 67% of the over 70s do.

### SPENDING

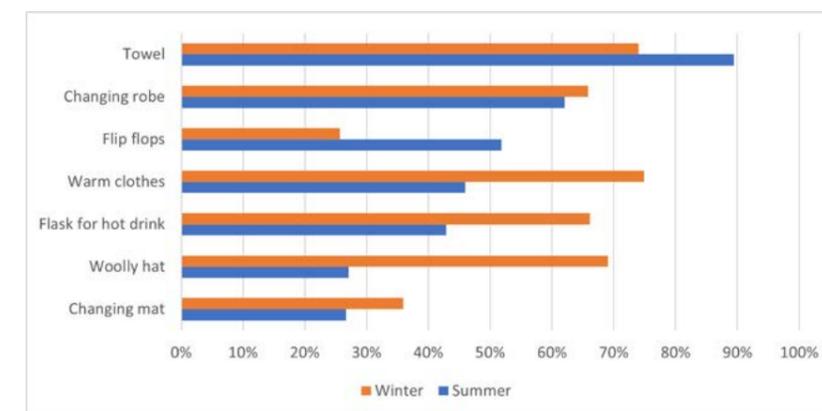
Although 20% of our survey population said they do not expect to buy any new kit in the

next year, only 5% said their spending would be zero. However, 26% said they wouldn't be spending more than £50 (\$70) – enough, for example, for an emergency replacement of a pair of goggles or costume. Almost 9% think they will spend more than £250 (\$345), equivalent to the cost of a mid-range wetsuit.

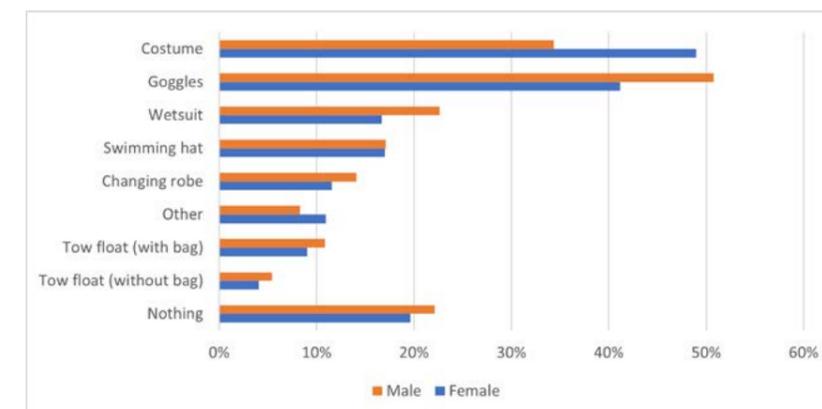
Based on the above, we estimate an average expected spend of around £110 for women and £125 for men. Geographically, swimmers in North America and Australia or New Zealand expect to spend the most at £145 (\$200) and £153 (\$215) on average while those in Northern Ireland think they will spend the least at £96 (\$134). There is less variation in expected spending by age. The average for swimmers between the ages of 30 and 60 is constant at £115 (\$160), it then drops to £106 (\$148) for those 50 to 69 and £80 (\$112) for the over 70s.

We also saw some variation in expected spending by length of time swimming with those who started in the previous six months likely to spend the most at £123 (\$172), while those who have been swimming five years or more planned to spend the least at £84 (\$118).

### What kit do people use after swimming?



### What do you expect to buy or replace in the next 12 months?



### How much do swimmers expect to spend on kit over the next 12 months?

| Amount                        | Female | Male  | What this might cover                             |
|-------------------------------|--------|-------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Zero                          | 4.2%   | 6.2%  | Nothing                                           |
| Less than £50 (\$70)          | 26.8%  | 25.7% | Goggles, costume, tow-float, neoprene accessories |
| £50 to £100 (\$70 to \$140)   | 36.6%  | 31.1% | High-end costume, changing robe                   |
| £100 to £250 (\$140 to \$345) | 24.9%  | 23.9% | Entry level wetsuit, luxury changing robe         |
| More than £250 (\$345)        | 7.4%   | 13.1% | Mid to high-end wetsuit                           |

# Section 10

## Outdoor swimming and business

It's been a bumpy year for businesses connected to outdoor swimming, and while businesses are adapting, 2022 won't be plain sailing. Nevertheless, many see opportunity in the sector.



Henley Swim

### NO RETURN TO NORMALITY YET

2021 started with lockdowns and ended with panic about the Omicron variant and new travel restrictions. In the middle, we managed a short spell of something like normality, with events and travel restored, albeit with differences and limitations. Less visible, but also impacting many businesses connected to outdoor swimming, have been supply chain disruptions, energy price increases and Brexit-related administration. These issues don't look like disappearing soon, but businesses are adapting.

In addition, we have seen an injection of new market entries looking to target the growing market of outdoor swimmers. Brands that have historically talked more to triathlon or indoor swimmers are moving towards outdoor swimming, which they see as a growing and loyal market. Equally, we have seen a raft of new businesses target outdoor swimmers with everything from nutrition to hair care, underlining again the opportunity brands see in this community.

### SUPPLY CHAIN DISRUPTIONS

According to Mark Hammersley of Zoggs, "every step of the supply chain has issues, from raw material availability and multiple price increases, Covid-related factory shut-downs, to electricity shortages and a ten times increase in shipping container costs."

Angus Greenwood, of Yonda, says the same thing, and that order lead times have doubled or tripled. Deposits now need to be paid up to a year in advance and he had already placed his orders for 2023 stock in December of 2021. And at Zone3, Mike Storey says: "I've never seen such a volatile supply chain."

On the other hand, due to growth in outdoor swimming and water sports more generally, demand has been strong, which meant many suppliers ran out of stock.

"We had a good year but we could have done better," says Storey, who admits Zone3 were taken a little by surprise by the demand for accessories and women's wetsuits, which were in their top five sales category for the



Henley Swim

first time, reflecting the growth in women's participation.

Ian Clarke from Orca adds that as well as simply getting hold of stock, logistics issues have made it more difficult to move stock to where it's needed.

These suppliers are planning ahead, placing their orders sooner and updating order quantities to reflect both the disruption to supplies and changes in the outdoor swimming market. From a customer perspective, it's inevitable that supply chain issues will eventually lead to higher prices, and we could see jumps of 10% or more in the cost of some products over the next year.

### VENUES

As noted elsewhere, commercial open water swimming venues are a big feature in England but barely show up in the data elsewhere. After indoor pools, commercial venues are the most popular place for outdoor swimmers in England, with 29% of people using them at

least once per week. The next highest usage is in Wales, at 9% using a commercial venue once per week. Scotland is at 3%.

We know from last year's Trends report that venues experienced huge demand for swimming in 2020. Jenny Vincent of Beyond Swim, which offers accreditation for swimming venues, says that growth continued through 2021, although in some places this growth was capped by capacity constraints.

She also notes a change in use. "Five years ago, it was all about triathlon but there's been a big shift towards more recreational and social swimming with coffee and cake – or, in one case – 'swim & gin'. Venues that have leaned into this are the ones that have done well."

To give an idea of the scale that can be achieved, West Reservoir, in Hackney, had 130,000 visits between 1 June and 30 September in 2021.

Additionally, Francesca (Chess) Ridgard, who looks after development at NOWCA, says they have seen membership double since 2020, and have also noticed the change in use. They have seen a relative decline in people training for triathlon and have been working to ensure their venues offer something for all types of swimmer and swimming ability.

"Venues need to offer education and support as well as a place to swim," she says.

Staff are encouraged to watch out for swimmer wellbeing and be ready to help anyone from first time floaters to squad swimmers at all levels. Lifeguards are not just there to rescue but to promote best practice, which means talking to swimmers and engaging with them, and helping them feel part of the community. Chess also says that mental health has become a big driver for trying outdoor swimming.

**West Reservoir, in Hackney, had 130,000 visits between 1 June and 30 September in 2021**



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### CHANGES IN POOLS

Some pandemic induced changes in swimming pool operation look set to stay. Like them or loathe them, the use of booking apps will probably be a permanent feature. Some people like that they can secure swim spots in advance and see which sessions are most crowded. Others grumble about the loss of spontaneity and frustrations in booking for groups.

Andrew Clark, the Aquatics Manager for GLL, says booking apps provide them with rich data on pool usage, which helps optimise pool programming and staffing. As a result, he thinks fitness swimming is in a good place, although he acknowledges that the booking app may be a barrier to people who don't use modern phones. Swimming membership is up by 41% compared with 2019.

Diccon Loy, who runs Marathon Swims, a 10km pool-based swimming event, also sees benefits from the introduction of booking

apps. "Swimming definitely needed a tech upgrade," he says, but then adds that some systems are virtually impenetrable. He also speculates that apps could potentially lead to pool operators becoming more commercial and introducing things such as dynamic pricing for swim slots like airlines do for flights.

Looking forward, one of the biggest challenges facing pools will be increasing energy costs. Heating pools is going to get a lot more expensive, which will add to financial pressures in the sector.

Could the growth in outdoor swimming be a risk for pools? Dave Candler of STA wonders if some pool swimmers who discovered outdoor swimming during lockdown won't go back. On the other hand, outdoor swimming is attracting people who didn't swim anywhere previously, and our survey found that around half of outdoor swimmers also use pools at least twice per month and only 25% say they never use them.

### SWIM TEACHER SHORTAGE AND DEMAND FOR OPEN WATER LIFEGUARDS

Another threat to the future of all swimming is a shortage of teachers. Dave Candler says that 85% of swim schools have a waiting list for lessons but many are unable to increase capacity because there aren't enough swimming teachers. On the other hand, this creates opportunities for swimmers who want to become swimming teachers, either as paid work or as volunteers.

Meanwhile, Helen Bowker-Steer at RLSS UK says they've seen a growth in demand for their open water lifeguard courses and need more assessors to qualify people. This is partly driven by a growth in aqua parks (inflatable playgrounds on lakes). There are now around 68 of these in England, up from a handful a few years ago, and Helen estimates there may be more than 100 next year. Some of these also operate as outdoor swimming venues.

### COACHING

Growth in outdoor swimming has resulted in increased demand for coaches and coaching services. Keri-anne Payne, who (among other things) runs courses for outdoor swimming coaches, says there is a big demand for coaching qualifications from people who love swimming and want to pass on their passion. In many cases, money isn't a driver. People want to be a good "swimming friend" and do it safely and well, she says.

Jason Tait, who coaches at Lake 32 in the Cotswolds and from an endless pool in Swindon, says that while coaching for events takes up a good amount of his time, his introduction to wild swimming courses have been the most popular. "There's lots of demand from first timers, mainly doing head-up breaststroke, but wanting to ensure they are swimming safely." He adds that it's very clear that people have a genuine interest in taking outdoor swimming seriously. "People want to learn to swim properly but more for self-improvement than for events."

### OUTDOOR SWIMMING AND EMPLOYMENT

The majority of our survey respondents are recreational swimmers. However, we have observed increasing numbers of swimmers looking to use their passion for outdoor swimming to earn a living, or to supplement their income. The most common way is through coaching, with just over 4% saying they do this. Out of these, the majority are part-time self-employed coaches. For 1% of our respondents, coaching is their main occupation.

A further 1.5% of swimmers are also lifeguards, primarily part-time and self-employed again. A similar number work in various capacities with outdoor swimming

event organisers and outdoor swimming venues. Other areas providing a handful of employment opportunities for outdoor swimmers include swim holiday companies and product suppliers.

Given the growth in outdoor swimming as an activity and the observations from key figures in the sector about the demand for coaches, teachers and lifeguards, we expect the sector to create more job opportunities in the future. In our survey, we provided a free text option for people to add any other paid work people did in outdoor swimming. The responses show the diversity of opportunity and people's creativity in turning their passion into an income.

### PAID JOBS CONNECTED TO OUTDOOR SWIMMING

- Academic
- Aqua phobia coach
- Aquatics director
- Author
- Blue health coach
- Carer
- Charity fundraiser
- Chill therapy coach
- Coastguard
- Crew for English Channel swims
- Director of outdoor recreation programme
- Environmental activist
- Event medic
- Festival lakes manager
- Fundraiser
- Graphic designer
- Guidebook researcher
- Influencer
- Kayak safety support
- Lifeguard and coaches qualifier
- Lifeguard trainer
- Mermaid
- Merman
- Paddleboard yoga instructor
- Photographer
- RNLI staff
- Safety advisor
- Social media for an outdoor swimming brand
- Sports administration
- Surf instructor
- Surfwell instructor
- Swim host
- Swim pilot
- Swim yoga teacher
- Swimming teacher
- Triathlon coach
- Water phobia specialist
- Water rescue instructor
- Writer

# Looking forward



**Ella Foote, editor**  
(since March 2022)  
and former contributing editor,  
Outdoor Swimmer

It is no surprise to me that outdoor swimming continues to grow. You can visibly see the increase in swimmers on riverbanks, beaches and at open water venues. Winter used to be a time for more solitary swimming and guaranteed comments from passers-by, exclaiming that we are mad! Dog walkers don't seem to take much notice now, it is normal to see another swimmer while in the water and unsurprising to see clusters of robed, shivering people clasping at hot drinks beside easily accessible water.

It also doesn't surprise me that there are still barriers to outdoor swimming. To those who have been plunging into the water for a while, no matter the weather or season it can be easy to forget those first nervous swims you embarked on. But if you don't see someone like you beside the water, this has a huge impact on feeling like there isn't a place for you in outdoor water – representation is so important. Equally important is access, as an able-bodied swimmer it is a huge privilege to be able to head for a swim without any concern for how I will exit or enter the water safely or the being well enough to swim in the first place. Looking forward the industry needs to work on these hurdles, with Outdoor Swimmer magazine we work hard to elevate all people, but I am aware we have a lot of work to do.

While we still face issues with access to open water in England, problems with pollution and water quality, I am excited for the future of outdoor swimming. With a growing number of people in outdoor and wild water it puts increased pressure on political and corporate bodies to tackle environmental concerns and the climate crisis. As well as power in numbers as people start to grow business and contribute to the economy through swimming enterprise it will be hard to ignore our concerns and need for action. I love that so many people are turning their passion into a lifestyle and career. Making money from being a mermaid is brilliant and if you are looking to do similar, I urge you to look into the opportunities to train and become a swimming teacher or lifeguard.

I am grateful to everyone who took time to contribute and be a part of our report, the information is invaluable to our business partners and community, but especially useful to me as I look ahead to best serve our readers and those new to outdoor swimming. I am glad to see that the younger generation are increasing in numbers and that women have found their place in the water. Let's see how we can encourage even more people to dip their toes!

Responding to news reports of British swimmers drowning, Open Water Lifeguard Trainer Mark Smith knew a solution was needed. He found it at the World Conference on Drowning Prevention in Germany where he met Restube founder Christopher – who had designed the lifesaving device after almost drowning himself.

Restube are committed to making outdoor swimming safe and enjoyable:

1. Targeting swimmers who use no safety equipment to encourage them to 'return home safe'
2. Working with international lifesaving organisations to develop innovative solutions such as a drone-delivered Restube Automatic
3. Creating specific solutions for at-risk water users to improve their experience, like the Spine Alignment feature for serious swimmers and a CE certified PFD for paddleboarders
4. Increasing likelihood of device use by improving comfort and performance with a redesign of Restube Active for 2021 to streamline and make more compact

Restube is subtle while swimming but significant when needed to rest, support others and signal to shore.



# Acknowledgements

Our main source of data for this report was our Attitudes to Outdoor Swimming survey that ran in October and November 2021. We collected responses from 4,463 people. We're incredibly grateful to everyone who took the time to fill in the survey and leave comments.

The following organisations helped us design and distribute the survey:

Swim England, STA, Beyond Swim, WaterAid, Swim Ireland, Swim Wales, NOWCA, RLSS UK, London Marathon Events, Her Spirit.

And the following people helped us with additional data and information:

- Ali Couch, Outreach Officer, Outdoor Swimming Society
- Andrew Clark, Aquatics Manager, GLL
- Angus Greenwood, CEO/Founder, Yonda
- Dave Candler, CEO, STA
- Diccon Loy, Founder, Marathon Swims
- Francesca (Chess) Ridgard, Development, NOWCA
- Helen Bowker-Steer, Head of Commercial Services, RLSS UK
- Ian Clarke, Orca UK and Ireland Brand Manager
- Ian Thwaites, Founder, Level Water
- Jason Tait, Head Coach, South West Swim
- Jenny Vincent and Xander Bryce, Beyond Swim
- Keri-anne Payne, Founder, Straight Line Swimming
- Mark Hammersley, CEO, Zoggs
- Mike Storey, General Manager, Zone3
- Ned Denison, Head Administrator, International Marathon Swimming Hall of Fame
- Omie Dale, Co-founder, Black Swimming Association and Outdoor Swimmer contributor
- Ricky McMinn, General Manager, West Reservoir
- Sophie Etheridge, adaptive swimmer, swimming coach and disability advocate
- Wafa Suliman, Community Activity Manager, Open Minds Active

## About our contributors and collaborators

### BEYOND SWIM

Beyond Swim's mission is to give swimmers the safest and best experience possible. Our first step is to approach the venue and offer guidance and support through our accreditation process. Partnering with venues means that not only can the venue feel reassured they are offering a safe operation, but they also feel part of an open water swimming community which connects both swimmers and venues nationally.

### HER SPIRIT

Her Spirit is a global community of like-minded women all getting fitter, stronger and healthier together.

### LONDON MARATHON EVENTS

In addition to the iconic London Marathon, London Marathon Events runs Swim Serpentine, a mass-participation open water event in London.

### NOWCA

NOWCA is the UK's largest network of safe open water venues, supporting in excess of

40 locations nationwide. More than 35,000 members benefit from swimmer insurance, perks, discounts and safe access to all the NOWCA affiliated venues. They are trusted by the swimming and venue community because they advocate for and prioritise open water safety. Over the past 10 years, they have pioneered safe open water swimming through the use of cutting-edge technology, education and training, and reinvest a large portion of their membership fees to support affiliated venues and the open water industry. NOWCA's ambition is to continue to expand its network to ensure open water swimming is a safe and accessible activity for the wider community.

### RLSS UK

The Royal Life Saving Society UK is a national charity advocating safe participation in aquatic activities. As the leading provider of lifesaving and lifeguard training in the UK and Ireland, their purpose is to enhance communities, so everyone can enjoy being in, on or near water safely – because every life is worth saving.

### SWIM ENGLAND

Swim England is the national governing body

for aquatic sports (including open water swimming) in England.

### SWIM IRELAND

Swim Ireland is the national governing body for swimming, water polo, diving and synchronised swimming across the 32 counties of the island of Ireland.

### SWIM WALES

Swim Wales is the national governing body of diving, swimming and water polo, in Wales.

### SWIMMING TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION (STA)

The Swimming Teachers' Association is an international award-winning charity working towards the objective of preserving human life by the teaching of swimming, lifesaving and survival techniques.

### WATERAID

WaterAid provides clean water, decent toilets and hygiene knowledge to people who don't yet have access to them.

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# wild, healthy, natural rivers.

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trees



Opened up  
**6,138**  
km of river for fish passage



Addressed  
**630**  
pollution incidents and water quality improvements



Engaged with  
**12,400**  
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[therivertrust.org](https://therivertrust.org)



@therivertrust





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[outdoorswimmer.com/outdoorswimmerfamily](https://outdoorswimmer.com/outdoorswimmerfamily)



## Get involved

To engage with our passionate following of outdoor swimmers across all our platforms for a deep dive into the data behind this report, please contact Yvonne Turner – [yvonne@outdoorswimmer.com](mailto:yvonne@outdoorswimmer.com)

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