The Water Forum

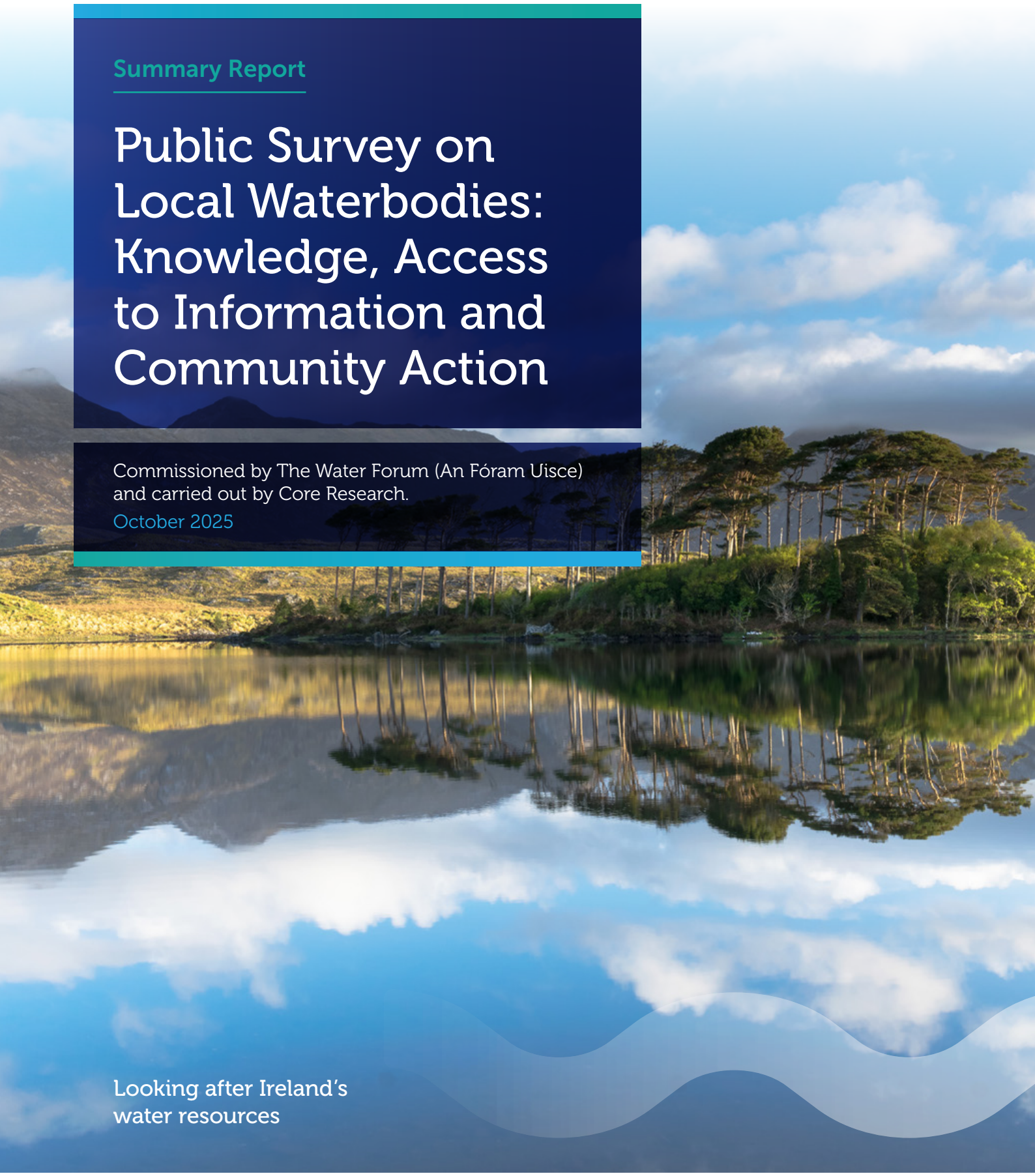
AN FÓRAM UISCE

Summary Report

Public Survey on Local Waterbodies: Knowledge, Access to Information and Community Action

Commissioned by The Water Forum (An Fóram Uisce) and carried out by Core Research.

October 2025



Looking after Ireland's water resources

Contents

Introduction: Public Survey on Local Waterbodies — Knowledge, Access to Information and Community Action

Key Insights from the National Survey

Survey Objective

Scope of the Survey

Research Aims

Survey Results and Key Learnings

- Personal Connection to and Knowledge of Local Waterbodies
- Knowledge of Water Quality, Local Groups and Access to Information
- Communicating Water Quality Issues
- Community Involvement in Water Protection
- Personal Responsibility

Behavioural Insights

Key Differences: Public vs Stakeholder Engagement

Conclusion

Introduction Public Survey on Local Waterbodies: Knowledge, Access to Information and Community Action

The Water Forum (An Fóram Uisce) has commissioned a national survey on local waterbodies to gain insights into public knowledge, access to information and community action. The online survey was carried out by Core Research on behalf of the Water Forum.

Key Insights from the National Survey

1. **Personal connection to local waterways:**
   Most people feel a strong connection to local waterbodies, often walking or spending time near them, but this emotional bond doesn't always translate into awareness or action. This represents an untapped opportunity to turn passive appreciation into practical action.

2. **Quality and pressures:**
   While many recognise that water quality is under pressure, for example from sewage, agriculture, and litter, the understanding of specific causes (e.g. runoff, misconnections) is limited. Visual cues like dirty water and litter are the main signals people rely on.

3. **Knowledge of local groups / access to information:**
   Awareness of local water groups and initiatives is very low, and many don't know where to find trustworthy, easy-to-understand information. There is a strong appetite for more accessible, centralised sources, especially through local councils and online platforms.

4. **Knowledge on status / health of our waters:**
   Over half of people check online to understand water health, but technical language and scattered sources create barriers. People often rely on how the water "looks," which may not reflect actual quality, highlighting the need for clearer public guidance.

5. **Pollution events and response:**
   Experiences with pollution events are mixed: some report fast and helpful responses, while others encounter delays, lack of feedback, or no action at all. Trust in institutions is shaped by how transparent and timely the response is perceived to be.

6. **Community involvement in water protection:**
   While current levels of involvement in citizen science or local water groups are low, interest in learning more is high. Time, perceived cost, and uncertainty about what's involved are common barriers but some may be persuaded if activities are local, flexible, and low-cost.

7. **Personal responsibilities:**
   People want to do the right thing, 69% said they pick up litter, and many already conserve water or limit chemical use. However, fewer understand the less visible sources of pollution (e.g. detergents, fibres, misconnections), and only a third believe their daily actions impact water quality. This suggests a major opportunity for targeted education.

Survey Objective

"To gain an understanding of what people know about their local waterbodies and gather learnings from individuals and communities about what information and supports are needed to help them get involved in protecting water"

Scope of the Survey

The online survey, which took place at the end of May 2025, consisted of a nationally representative sample of 1000 adults in the Republic of Ireland. The sample is demographically representative of the adult population based on age, gender, religion and social background and has a margin of error of +/- 3% at the 95% confidence level.

Research Aims

The Research findings were considered under the following headings:

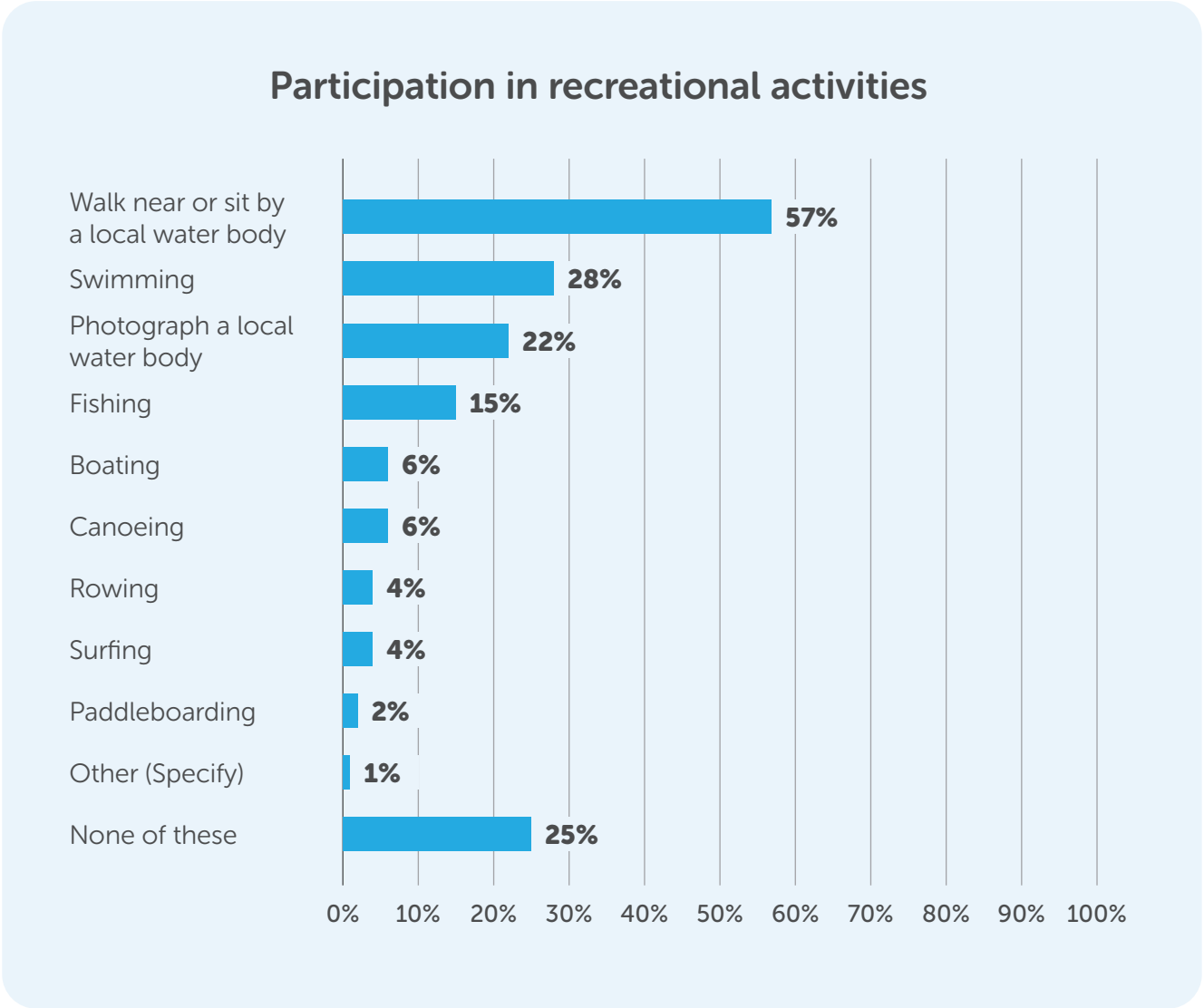
1. **Awareness and Connection to local waterbodies** - knowledge of pressures on water quality, where to access such information and understanding how public complaints are managed.
2. **Engagement and Participation in community actions for water protection** - opportunities and barriers to getting involved.
3. **Knowledge of individual impact on water quality** - how everyday activities can result in water pollution.

Survey Results and Key Learnings

Personal Connection to and Knowledge of Local Waterbodies

The majority of the population claim to live relatively close to their nearest waterbody

More than half of the population (60%) claim to live within a km of their nearest waterbody. Just over 1 in 5 (22%) live less than 100m away from their local waterbody, while just shy of 2 in 5 (38%) live up to 1km away.



Most engage by walking near or sitting by a local water body

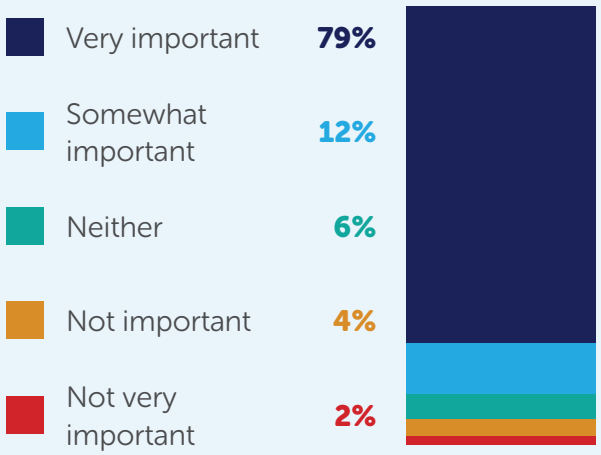
Over half of the population (57%) enjoy taking the time to walk near or sit by a local water body. Swimming and photographing a local waterbody are also popular activities. Meanwhile, 1 in 4 claim to not engage in recreational activities in/near a local waterbody.

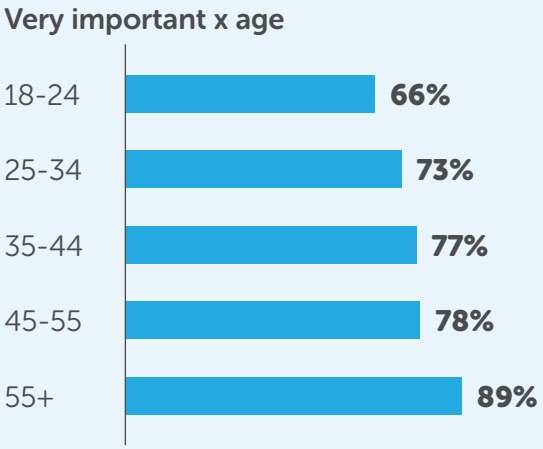
Knowledge of Water Quality, Local Groups and Access to Information

The importance of healthy waterbodies is universally acknowledged

Almost 4 in 5 (79%) people agree that it is 'very important' for waterbodies to be clean, healthy and unpolluted, while 12% think it is "somewhat important". Younger people are less engaged with water health, with only 66% agreeing on its importance compared to 89% of those aged 55 and over.

Importance of rivers / streams / lakes / other waterbodies to be clean, healthy and unpolluted





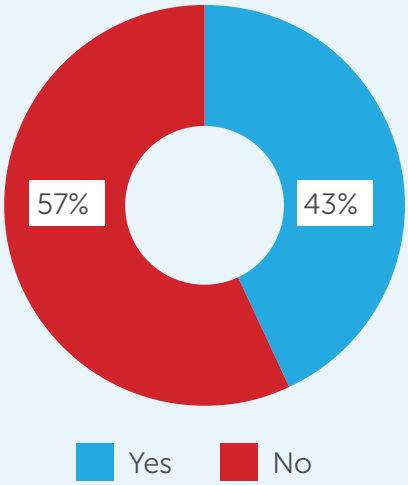
Only a third of people have concerns about the health of their local waterbody

Only 3 in 10 (29%) have concerns about the health of their local waterbody but these concerns are widespread and multifaceted. People report visible pollution, litter, sewage discharges and agricultural runoff alongside fears about swimming safety, biodiversity loss and climate change impacts. The overall picture is one of growing concern, driven by what residents see, smell and increasingly question about the health of their local waterways.

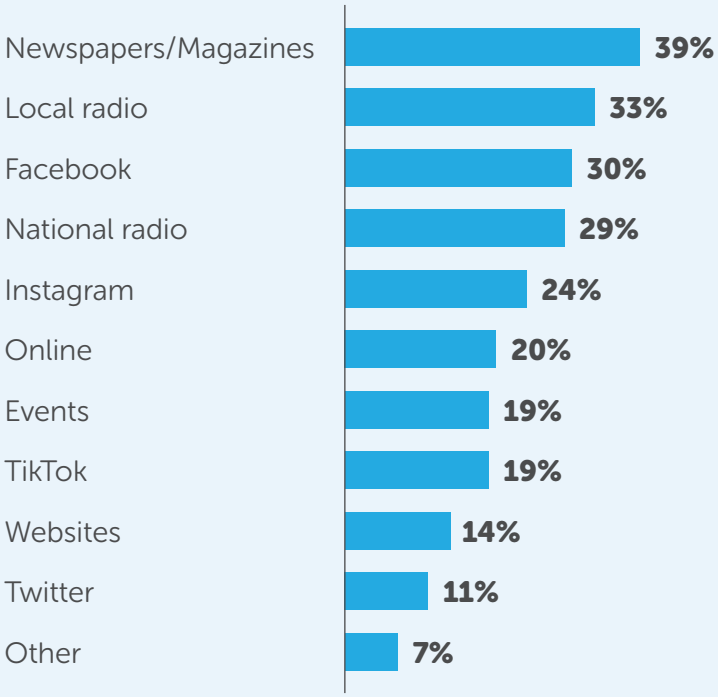
Knowledge of where to find information is somewhat limited

Just over 2 in 5 people (43%) claim to know how to find information about water quality but the majority (57%) are still unsure. For those that claim to know, newspapers and magazines are the most commonly used source of information at 39%, followed by local radio (33%) and Facebook (30%), while Instagram is gaining traction at 24%.

Knowledge about finding information



Sources of information



Young people claim to be more water aware versus older cohorts

Over half of those aged 18-24 (55%) claim they know where to find information about water quality, ahead of all older groups. This digitally native audience is more confident and connected, with Instagram emerging as their primary source of information (45%).

Low awareness of groups engaging in water protection activities or water management

Among those surveyed, there is very little awareness of local groups engaging in water protection or water management activities. More than half of those surveyed (58%) cannot name any groups engaging in water protection or management activities. Just over 2 in 5 (42%) can name a local group involved in water protection, and this awareness increases with age, with 55% of the those 55 and over aware of groups involved in protecting water. This highlights a need for groups to get more involved in local communities and find ways to attract younger cohorts to their activities.

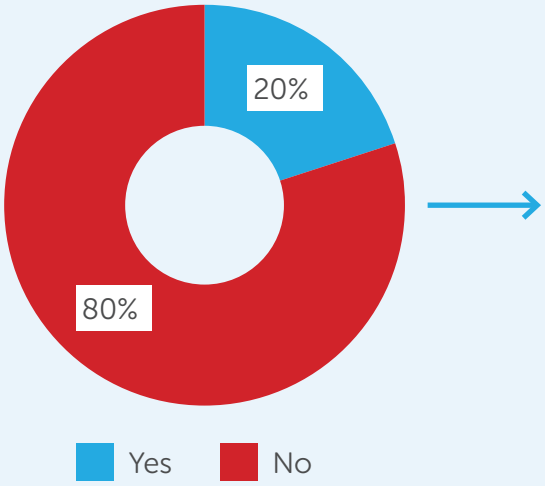
Knowledge of local funding initiatives to support water, biodiversity and climate action is negligible with just 4% claiming to know of local funding initiatives relating to water, nature and climate. This points to a significant gap in the visibility of local water-related efforts and suggests a strong need to promote these opportunities within local communities and community groups.

Knowledge about ecological status of waterbodies is low

Ecological status refers to the overall health of water bodies, including rivers, lakes, and coastal waters, based on the condition of their ecosystems. Ecological status is determined by assessing the water quality (e.g. concentrations of nutrients and chemicals), biology (fish, insects and plants living in the water) and the physical habitat of each water body. An ecological status of 'high' or 'good' is considered satisfactory to support a healthy ecosystem; a status of 'moderate', 'poor' or 'bad' is unsatisfactory.

Only 7% of those surveyed claim to know the ecological status of their local waterbody. Knowledge is slightly higher (10%) in the 55 and over cohort, and men report more knowledge than women.

Knowledge of where to find information on the health or ecological status of your local water body



Sources Mentioned
Waterways Ireland
Irish Water / Uisce Éireann
General online searching / Google
Local authority / county council websites
Government websites
EPA

Only 20% of those surveyed knew where they might find information on the health or ecological status of their local waterbodies, with older adults (55+) relying more on official institutions and traditional sources like local authorities, EPA websites, and local radio or newspapers when seeking water quality information. In contrast, younger cohorts (18-24) tend to favour quicker, digital first routes such as Google and social media.

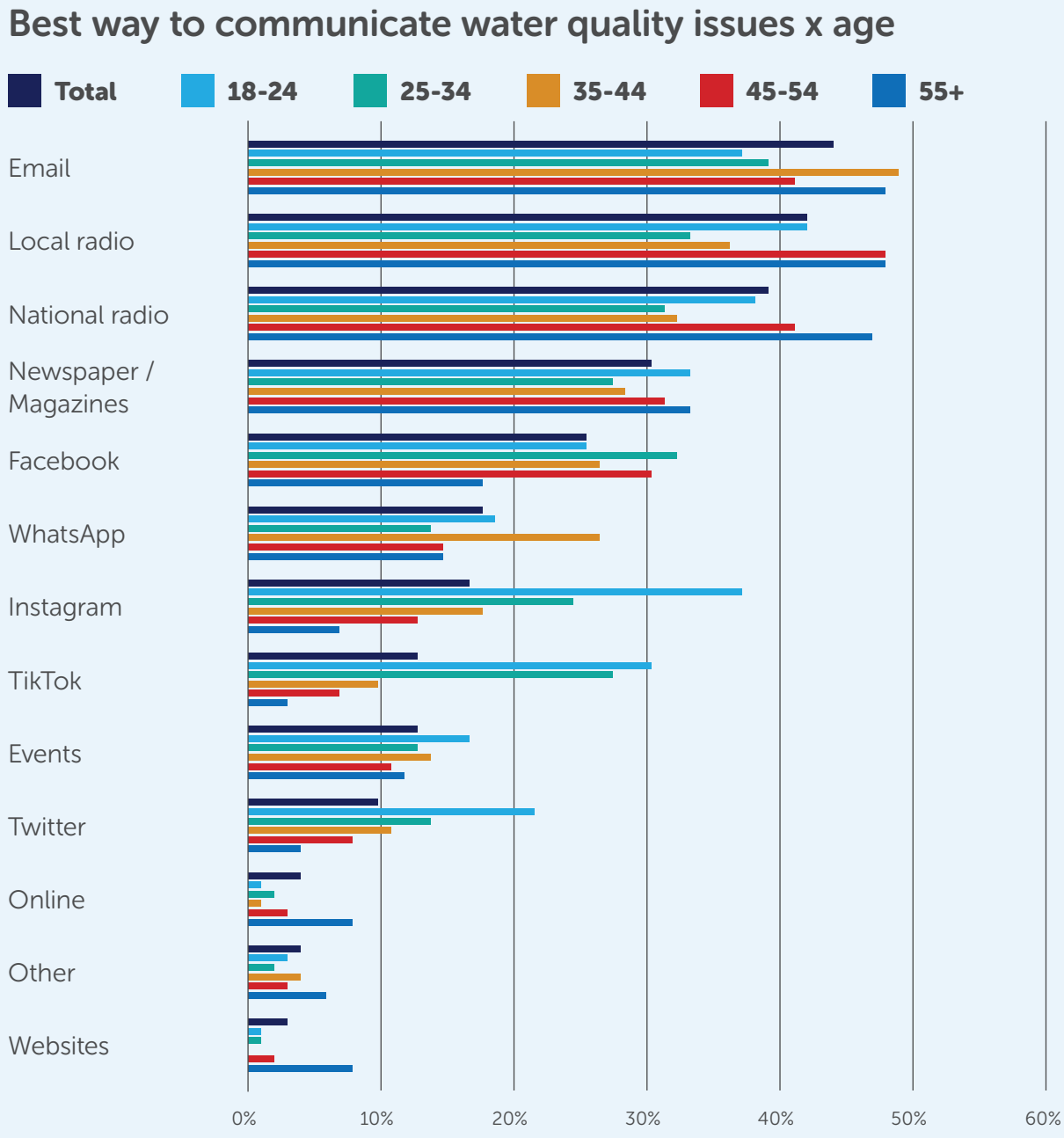
The majority of people are uncertain how to report a water pollution incident

1 in 3 (33%) claim to know what to do if they see a pollution incident or how to report water pollution and water quality issues, nevertheless the majority of people (67%) are uncertain. Claimed knowledge is higher among those aged 55 and over (40%).

Communicating Water Quality Issues

> *Clear difference in preferred communication channels between the age cohorts*

Younger people have a clear preference for social media whereas older cohorts prefer traditional channels such as local and national radio, email, newspapers, while Facebook is a source for all age groups. Young people have a strong preference for Instagram, Tik Tok and Twitter, while WhatsApp is a strong preference for 35-44 year olds.



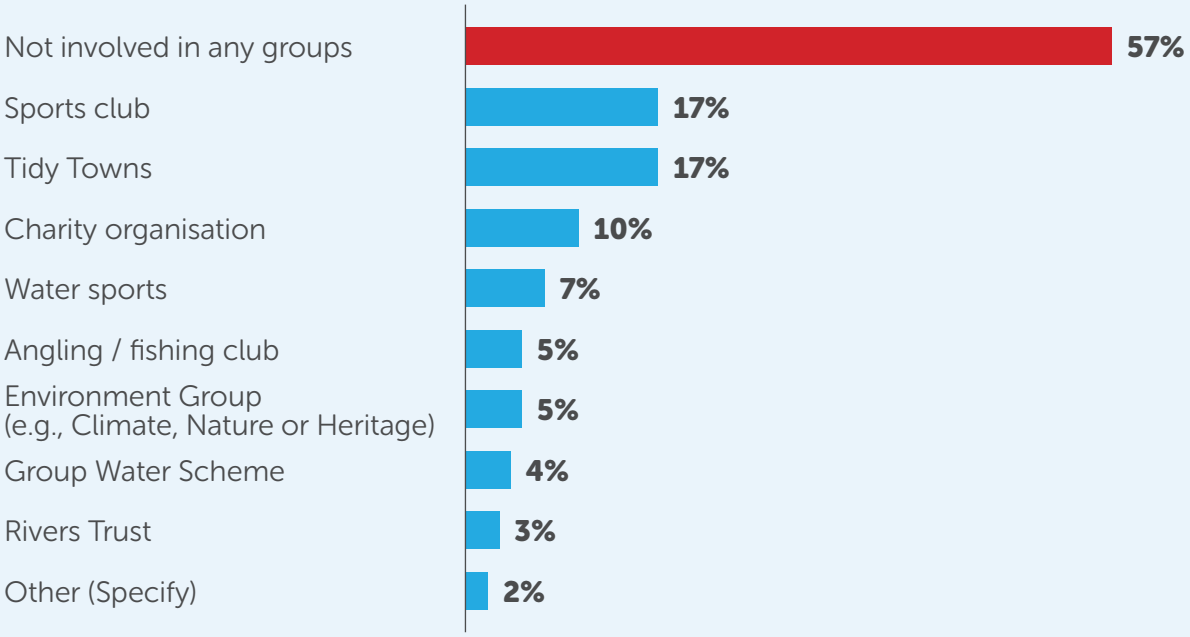
Community Involvement in Water Protection

> *Over half of respondents report no involvement in any local group related to water, environment or community activity*

Over half of respondents (57%) report no involvement in any local group related to water, environment or community activity. Amongst those engaged, Tidy Towns groups and sports clubs are the most common, with charities, water sports and fishing clubs also playing a role. Fewer than 1 in 10 (7%) claimed their local group is involved in water or water quality initiatives, highlighting opportunities to deepen local engagement and visibility over time and encourage Tidy Towns and sports clubs to become more involved in local water-related initiatives.

Furthermore only 3% of people surveyed report being involved in citizen science projects and 1 in 7 (14%) are unaware such opportunities exist. Participation is slightly higher in younger adults (10%), highlighting an opportunity to raise awareness and visibility of citizen science as a way to engage the public in water monitoring and environmental action.

Involvement in local community groups / initiatives



Barriers to getting involved

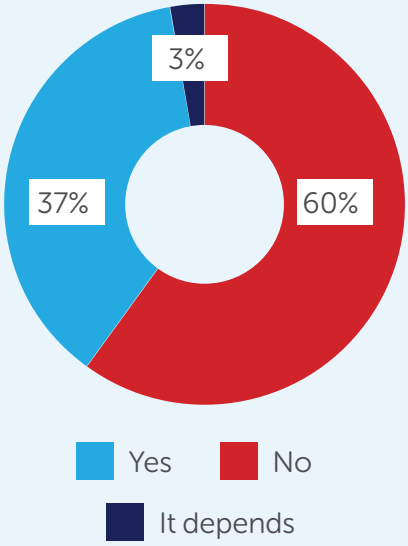
> *Lack of information and time are the greatest barriers to involvement in community action for water*

Practical barriers like not knowing how to get involved, location and cost also play a role. While level of interest is also a challenge, clearer communications and more accessible opportunities could help bridge the gap over time.

Benefits of getting involved

Over 60% of those surveyed believe the benefits of getting involved in community groups are 'doing their bit for the environment' and 'doing something good for the community'. Many are also drawn by the chance to improve water quality (59%), while learning something new (50%) and connecting with others (40%), highlight a strong appetite for meaningful social connection via community action.

Interest in knowing more about local action groups



Reasons behind "it depends"

Time & availability constraints:
"Don't have a lot of time to commit"

Group purpose:
"If I find their operations interesting"

Preference for independent involvement
"Would rather just read the stuff myself"

Accessibility and location barriers:
"in suburban Dublin it is more difficult"

Potential for overwhelm:
"Don't want to be bombarded"

Situational interest:
"Should water quality become an issue then I would get involved"

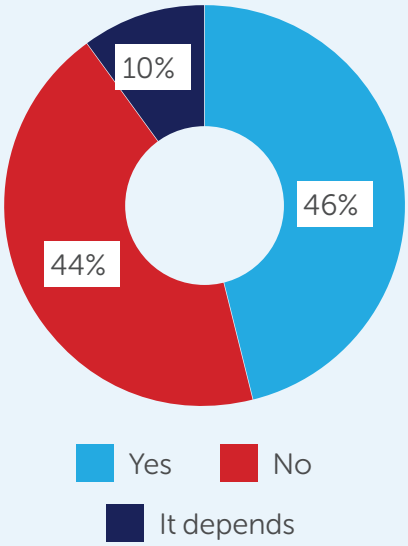
Interest in learning more

60% of people say they would like to know more about local action groups for water and nature, while under 4 in 10 (37%) claim to have no interest. This points to a good opportunity to increase visibility and participation in community based environmental effort.

Willingness to get involved

46% of people surveyed said they would be willing to get involved in community action for water whereas 44% said they would not be interested. A further 1 in 10 (10%) were unsure owing to time commitments, lack of information or accessibility issues. This could suggest a curious but cautious audience where clarity, accessibility and relevance could help tip the balance towards greater participation.

Willingness to get involved in community led water quality projects



Reasons behind "it depends"

Time commitment:
"If I have the time"

Need for more information:
"Depends on what it entails"

Location and accessibility:
"Would rather just read the stuff myself"

Accessibility and location barriers:
"Depends how far I need to travel"

Cost concerns:
"Depends on cost & when it takes place"

Group dynamics:
"If others involved didn't have secondary agendas"

Improving public awareness

When asked for ideas on how to improve water quality awareness some concrete ideas were offered such as greater education, public campaigns and meetings, local messaging and signage, greater community involvement and collaboration with farmers. This highlights a public willingness to contribute, however, there is a clear need for leadership and guidance.

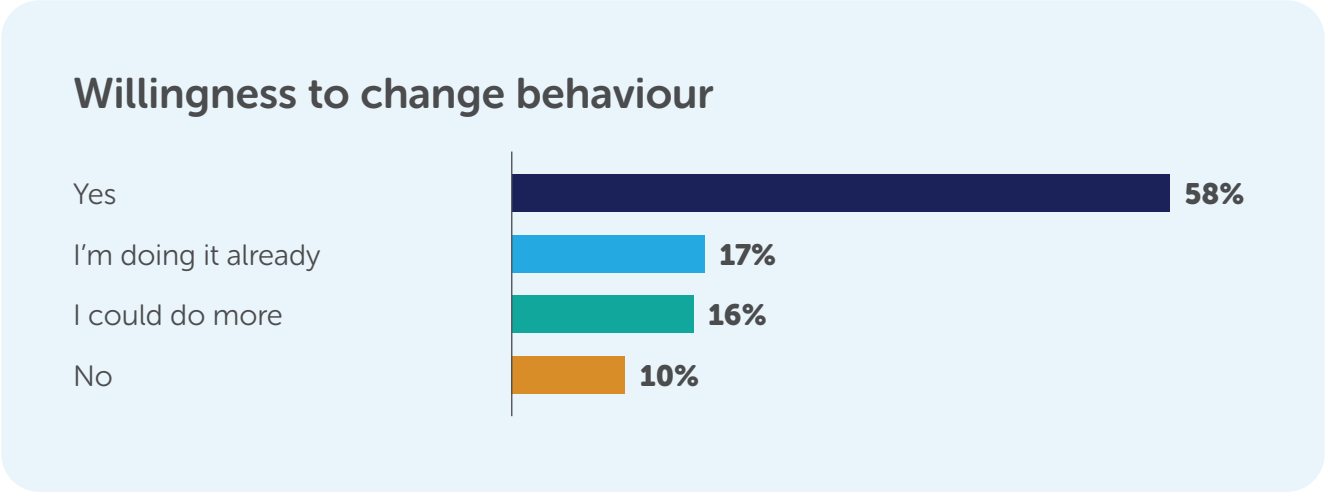
Personal Responsibility

Lack of awareness of the impact of daily activities

Only 1 in 3 people (33%) believe their daily activities impact local water bodies, while 67% believe they do not. 47% of young people feel their activities contribute to water pollution. This highlights a significant perception gap, suggesting a need for greater public awareness around how everyday actions can affect water quality.

People are willing to act to protect water

More than half of people surveyed (58%) claim they would change their practices to protect water quality if they knew how, and almost 1 in 5 (17%) feel they are already doing so. 16% feel that they could be doing more, while only 1 in 10 (10%) are unwilling to change their practices. This suggests a highly receptive public where clear guidance and practical tips could unlock more meaningful action.



Interest in learning how to reduce personal impact

25% of people surveyed are very interested in learning more about how to reduce personal impacts on the water environment, with an additional 31% of people somewhat interested. Only 12% are not very or not at all interested. One third of people (33%) sit in the neutral middle (not sure), highlighting a clear opportunity to further engage and inform the wider public who could be encouraged to start taking action.

Behavioural Lens

Social Norms

People are strongly influenced by what others around them are doing or what they believe others expect of them. We look to social cues to guide our own behaviour, especially in uncertain or unfamiliar situations.

Why it matters

Many people support the idea of protecting water but don't always see relevant action being taken by peers or public bodies which can dampen motivation. However, many are already doing simple things day to day (like picking up litter or conserving water). Highlighting this helps create a virtuous cycle where pro-environmental behaviours become seen as "just what people like us do."

Suggested actions

- Share local success stories and testimonials
- Emphasise positive statistics e.g. "69% of people already pick up litter"
- Encourage people to act together, not alone.

Friction Costs

Behaviour is often more about ease than motivation, people tend to favour convenience over long-term benefits. Even if people support initiatives, small barriers such as hard-to-find information, confusing sign-up processes or too many steps, can discourage action.

Why it matters

Many cited "not knowing how", "not enough information", or "not having time" as reasons for not getting more involved in water protection activities. The intent is there but friction is stopping follow-through.

Suggested actions

- Make actions seem as simple and effortless as possible
- Centralise public information and remove jargon
- Engage local partners e.g. Tidy Towns, sports clubs etc. to distribute simple water protection tips

By understanding these invisible forces, we can design smarter, more human centred interventions, making it easier for people to protect and care for Ireland's waters. To drive public engagement, we must design communications and initiatives that **motivate** people with relevance and emotion, **enable action** by making it easy and accessible and **trigger** behaviour with timely visible prompts.

Key Differences Public vs Stakeholder Engagement

Following on from the National Survey, a targeted survey of 155 stakeholders took place to establish if there were learnings to be gained or differences in responses between stakeholders already engaged in water and the public. The stakeholders were connected to community groups or environmental and agricultural organisations that have representatives on the Water Forum, including:

- Agriculture / Macra na Feirme
- Irish Rural Link
- National Federation of Group Water Schemes
- National Youth Council of Ireland
- Rivers Trusts
- Sustainable Water Network
- Water Recreation Organisations

Awareness and Access to Information

> *Stakeholders report relatively high personal awareness*

- 76% know the ecological status of their local waterbody
- 67% say they know where to find information about local water quality, biodiversity or habitats

In contrast, only:

- 28% of the general public know how clean or healthy their local waterbody is
- Just 7% can name its ecological status
- And 57% say they wouldn't know where to find that information

What this shows

Stakeholders are far more connected and informed, but this may not reflect the general experience. Need to avoid the risk of overestimating baseline public knowledge when designing communications or engagement strategies.

Engagement in Local Water Initiatives

Stakeholders are:

- Highly active: 54% say they've already been involved in a water quality initiative
- Many report participation in citizen science, catchment groups, or biodiversity efforts

Public engagement is:

- More limited: Just 26% of the public have been involved in any water-related initiative
- Public engagement is more likely to come through sports clubs, Tidy Towns, or informal local action than structured environmental projects

What this shows

Stakeholders are deeply embedded in local action, while the public may need easier access points and more visibility into how to get involved.

Willingness to get Involved

68% of stakeholders say they would be willing to get involved in community led water quality projects. There is very low outright rejection among stakeholders, only 16% said they were not at all interested.

Public: 46% of the general public say they would get involved, which is lower put still positive, while 44% would not get involved.

What this shows

The stakeholder audience is already primed and ready to take action. Public appetite is strong, but many need more structural, visible, low-barrier opportunities to convert interest into action.

Barriers and Motivations

Stakeholders cite nuance barriers like:

- Lack of time or Burnout from previous involvement
- Distrust of Institutions ("tokenistic", "toothless" or "paperwork-heavy")
- Fear of Social Conflict with neighbours or vested interests

Public barriers are more practical:

- Time (42%)
- Lack of information (41%)
- Not knowing how to get involved (20%)

What this shows

For stakeholders, the issue is often frustration or cynicism about impact. For the public, it's more about uncertainty and invisibility of options.

Conclusion

This survey reveals that while there is public interest in protecting water quality, it is tempered by practical barriers, information gaps, and communication challenges. With the right strategies-focused on clarity, visibility, and accessibility - this motivated audience could be mobilised into meaningful, grassroots environmental action.

The Water Forum
AN FÓRAM UISCE

Civic Offices, Limerick Road
Nenagh, Co. Tipperary

www.thewaterforum.ie

info@nationalwaterforum.ie