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The voice for water consumers
Llais defnyddwyr dŵr

Awareness and perceptions of river water quality

Summary Report
April 2022

ccwater.org.uk

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Foreword



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Over the past year, there has been growing concern about river water quality in England and Wales, and the frequency with which storm overflows are used. The Storm Overflows Taskforce for England conducted research to understand public perceptions on this topic in May 2021. Our research, conducted in December 2021, allows us to understand how customers' views in England and Wales have changed since then. The research has shown that untreated sewage is now seen as the biggest cause of river pollution in the eyes of the public. This has overtaken litter, fly tipping and business waste/chemicals since May 2021.

As the sector moves forward with putting things right, it is essential that the views and best interests of all consumers in England and Wales are taken into consideration. Our programme of work around People and the Environment will seek to raise public awareness of the ways in which our use of water and sewerage systems affects the water environment. As part of this, sewerage companies must proactively do more to inform their customers about the steps they are taking to improve the environmental credentials of their operations. In addition, making information publically available on environmental performance will help both raise awareness and rebuild trust.

Dr Mike Keil

Director of Policy, Research and Campaigns



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What are storm overflows?

Most sections of our sewerage network - those built before the 1960s - rely on just one, combined, pipe to take away our sewage and the rainwater. When there is very heavy rain, this system can become overwhelmed, creating the risk of sewage flooding peoples' homes, businesses and communities. Storm Overflows exist within the system to prevent these things from happening, by releasing some of the excess rain and sewage from the system into nearby rivers and streams. To understand more on this subject, have a look at our [Factsheet](#).

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary (1)



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Concerns about the Environment

- Without prompting, people are most likely to identify climate change as the biggest threat to the environment (16%), followed by transport emissions (14%). Sewage pollution was specified by 5% of respondents.
- When shown a list of environmental issues that affect the UK, and asked to pick their top three, people are most concerned about: micro plastics in the environment (59%); air pollution (53%); and flooding from rivers and the sea (46%). River pollution from sewage (40%) comes fourth.
- Untreated sewage has overtaken litter, fly tipping and business waste (chemicals) as the biggest cause of river pollution in the eyes of the public.

River Safety

- People mainly have positive rather than negative associations with rivers and streams. They are more likely to see them as habitats for wildlife or for community use than to notice if they are dirty or littered, or have low levels of water.
- Generally, rivers and streams are thought to be safe for recreation nearby or on the water, though less so for activities which involve entering the water.
- For most activities, people in Wales are happier with the safety of rivers and streams than people in England.

Executive Summary (2)



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Recall of media coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The number of those who have 'definitely seen' media coverage about river or stream quality has risen by 8% since May 2021.• Around half (48%) do not recall seeing media coverage about river or stream water quality.
Customer Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The majority (65%) want planned improvements to ensure that the river is a healthy habitat for wildlife. 10% think that ensuring that rivers are safe to swim in is most important.• In principle, 58% would pay more on their water bill to support investment to reduce the need to use storm overflows, subject to the detail and cost.• 31% would not be prepared to pay more.
Differences in views between England and Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People in Wales are more likely to visit local rivers, streams and coastlines than people in England.• For a number of activities, people in Wales are happier with the safety of rivers and streams than people in England.• There is higher awareness of farm waste amongst those in Wales when asked about the greatest cause of river pollution in the UK, however when asked more specifically about the rivers / streams they're most familiar with, those in Wales are more likely to say it's full of life at least some of the time compared to those in England.• People in Wales are more likely to be aware that water companies are investing to reduce river pollution.• Welsh customers are more likely to want investments to prioritise ensuring that rivers are healthy habitats for wildlife.

How have perceptions changed since May 2021?



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- More people spontaneously cite pollution from sewage as a threat to the environment, up from 1% to 5%. This is a significant increase, though still a small proportion.
- When prompted, more people identify river pollution from sewage as an environmental concern, up from 36% to 40%.
- Perceptions of the safety of rivers and streams for recreation have fallen slightly.
- The number of people who would expect to be able to swim in a river safely is declining, from 64% to 57%.
- The number of those who have 'definitely seen' media coverage about river or stream quality has risen from 16% to 24%.
- Untreated sewage is now the most commonly cited cause of river pollution in England and Wales (35%, up from 21%).
- In May 2021, 21% felt that the river they were most familiar with was at least some of the time polluted with farm waste. In December 2021 this was significantly higher at 26%.
- In May 2021, 52% felt that the river they were most familiar with was at least some of the time full of litter, e.g. fly-tipping. In December 2021, this was higher at 57%.



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Background, objectives and methodology

Background and Objectives



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This research builds on an initial survey commissioned by Defra and Water UK in May 2021 looking at public engagement with the environment and awareness of the use of storm overflows by water companies in the UK. The survey was repeated in December 2021 to see how consumer views had changed and with a specific focus on England and Wales. The objectives were:

1

To identify what people currently see as the most concerning threats to the environment

2

To identify current awareness of issues around water quality and the environment

3

To explore the perceptions around water quality and pollution issues, in particular what the respondents think might be causing it

4

To examine any differences by consumer demographics, sub-groups, and how this has changed since earlier in 2021

Methodology



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Overview



Online survey of 2,187 adults (aged 18+) in England and Wales



Fieldwork conducted 17th – 19th December 2021



The full sample has been weighted to be representative of England and Wales combined based upon the 2021 PamCo profile. The boost sample has been weighted down to be representative of Wales

Approach

CCW commissioned Yonder Consulting to undertake an online omnibus survey in England and Wales. The previous wave was conducted as a nationally representative omnibus of the UK.

Yonder own and manage a highly engaged online panel of 180,000 UK adults and this resource was used as the primary source of sample for the online survey.

Yonder conducted 2,187 online interviews with consumers in England and Wales. Boost interviews were conducted among consumers in Wales to allow for robust analysis and weighted back into the overall sample at the correct proportions. The previous wave did not include a Wales boost.

The first question in the survey identified responsibility for paying water bills. All respondents with responsibility, were asked all questions in the survey. 37% pay for their water bill solely and 49% pay for it jointly.

Sampling

A stratified sampling technique was employed using multiple demographic groupings to select respondents randomly from Yonder Consulting's online panel. This approach helps to minimise selection bias and ensure certain segments of the population are not over- or under-represented.

Quotas were set on age, gender, region and social grade. The data was then weighted based upon the 2021 PamCo profile of England and Wales combined. Rim weighting was applied for age, gender, government office region, social grade, taken a foreign holiday in the last 3 years, number of cars in the household, and working status. Tenure was weighted based upon the England and Wales profile as individual nations. The boost sample was weighted down to match the 2021 PamCo profile of Wales.

Scope and Limitations of this Report



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Scope

This report aims to establish attitudes and behaviours of the overall England and Wales population and highlights results at an overall level as well as by the key sub-groups as outlined in the Table 1. It provides a robust sample to be able to analyse the data on this basis.

The statistical reliability of the data at 95% confidence level is outlined in Table 1

In addition to highlighting key subgroups significantly different to the total, results are also charted for other sub-group categories of interest when data is significantly different to the total.

Statistical differences legend (at 95% confidence)

- ↑ Statistically **higher** than the **total**
- ↓ Statistically **lower** than the **total**
- ★ Statistically **higher** than the **first wave**
- ☆ Statistically **lower** than the **first wave**
- ⊕ Statistically **higher** than all other categories **within the subgroup**
- ⊖ Statistically **lower** than all other categories **within the subgroup**

Table 1	Key subgroups	Sample Size	Margin of Error for response of 50%
	Total sample	2,187	+/- 2.1%
Region	England	1,755	+/- 2.4%
	Wales	432	+/- 4.7%
Social grade	ABC1	1,281	+/- 2.7%
	C2DE	906	+/- 3.3%
Urban/rural	Urban	1,727	+/- 2.4%
	Rural	460	+/- 4.6%

Limitations

This research was completed online. In general, online respondents are more technically knowledgeable and are more likely to be early adopters of new technology products and services.

Online survey respondents are also incentivised to complete surveys. To counter this, rigorous quality control procedures were implemented to maximise the attention paid by respondents when participating in the survey and avoid 'happy clicking' or rushing through surveys to reach the reward at the end.

Wave comparisons

The changes between waves are presented either as a separate chart or in brackets next to the wave 2 number, with (-) indicating no change.

It must be noted that the sample size for Wales for Wave 1 is 89, which limits the comparisons we are able to make.

Understanding how the public's views changed between May and December 2021: Ensuring comparable samples



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- This research took place in December 2021 and repeated a survey that took place in May of the same year.
- The sample in May 2021 covered the UK, comprising 1,760 people in England, 178 in Scotland, 99 in Wales and 59 in Northern Ireland.
- The sample in December 2021 comprised 1,755 people in England and 432 in Wales.
- The data was tested to see if the differences in the sample composition account for the significant changes in views seen between the two surveys.
- This was done by: removing Scotland and Northern Ireland from the May data, to create a 'May England and Wales' sample; weighting the 'May England and Wales' sample to match the December data; then testing for significant differences between this adjusted 'May England and Wales' sample, the 'May UK' sample and the 'December England and Wales' sample.
- This found that the differences in the sample composition do not account for the significant differences found between the 'May UK' sample and the 'December England and Wales' sample.
- For consistency with what has previously been published, the May data reported here fully reflects the original UK sample.

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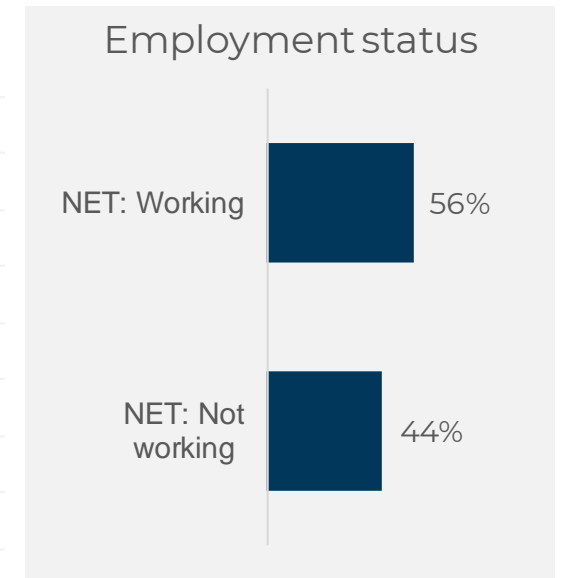
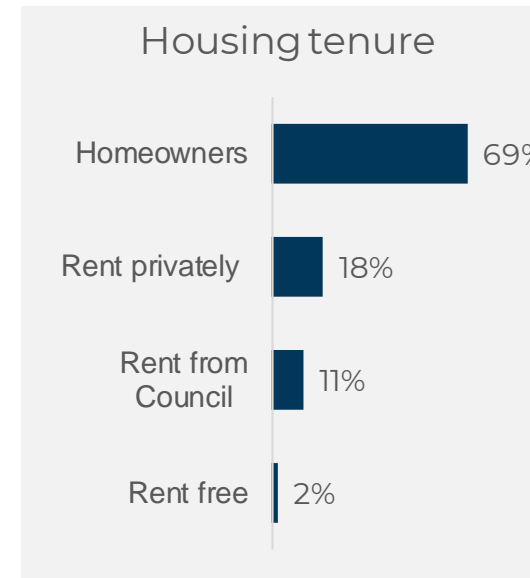
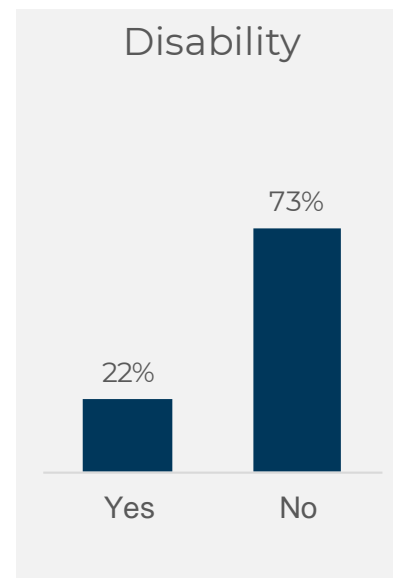
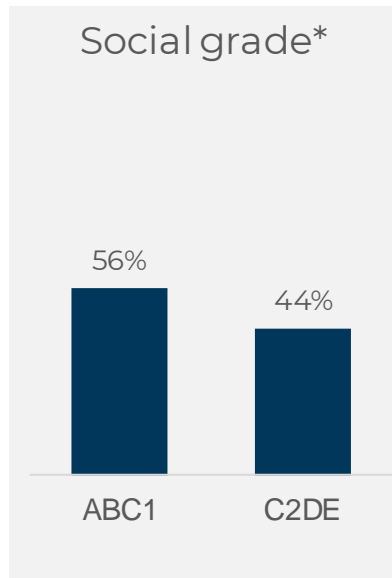
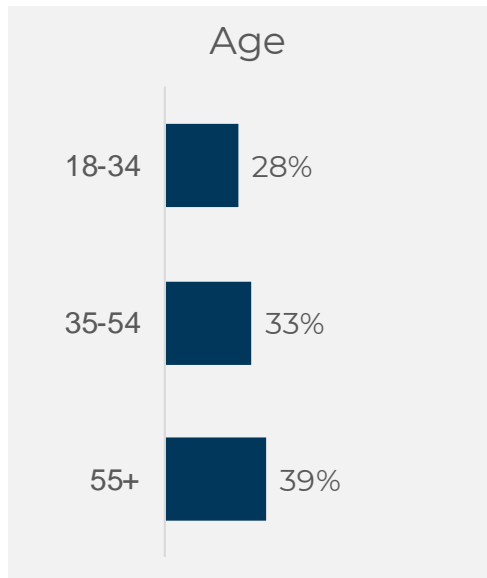
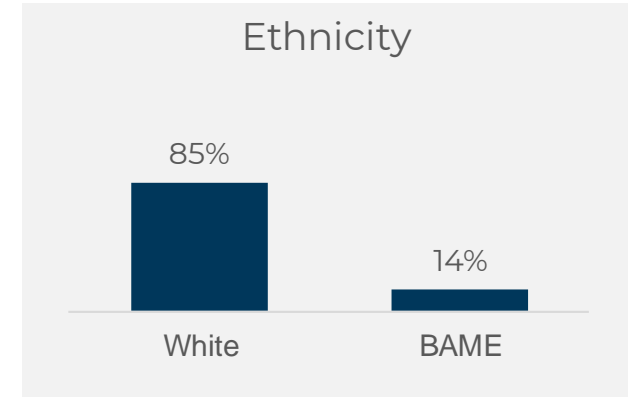
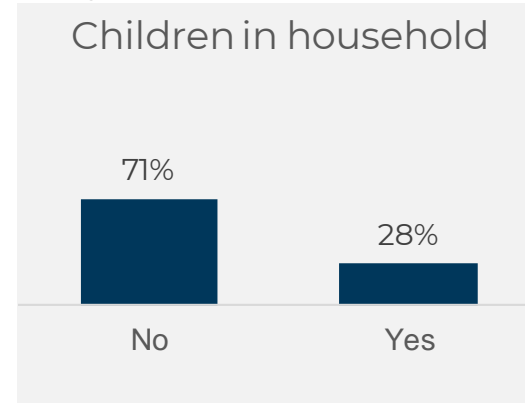
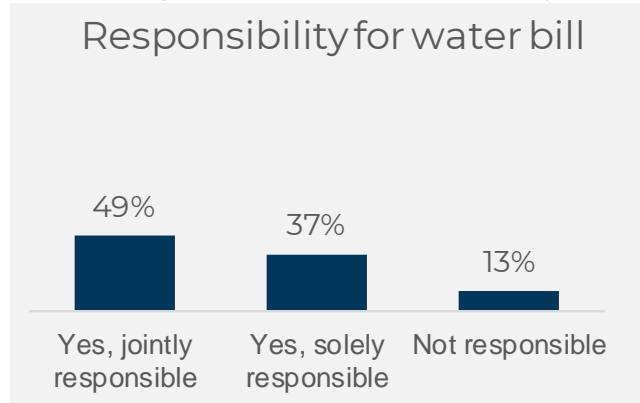
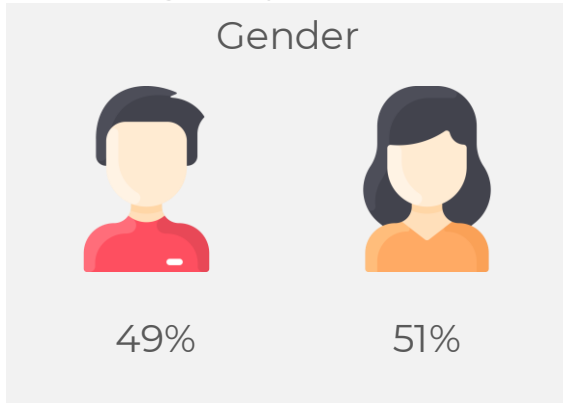
Respondent profile

Respondent profile



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Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding or due to the exclusion of prefer not to say/ don't know



Awareness and perceptions of river water quality *Social grade is a demographic classification based on the occupation of a household's chief income earner. AB is higher or intermediate, managerial, administrative or professional; C1 is supervisory or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional; C2 is skilled manual workers; DE is semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, state pensioners, casual workers and unemployed with state benefits only

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Findings

Awareness and perceptions
of river water quality

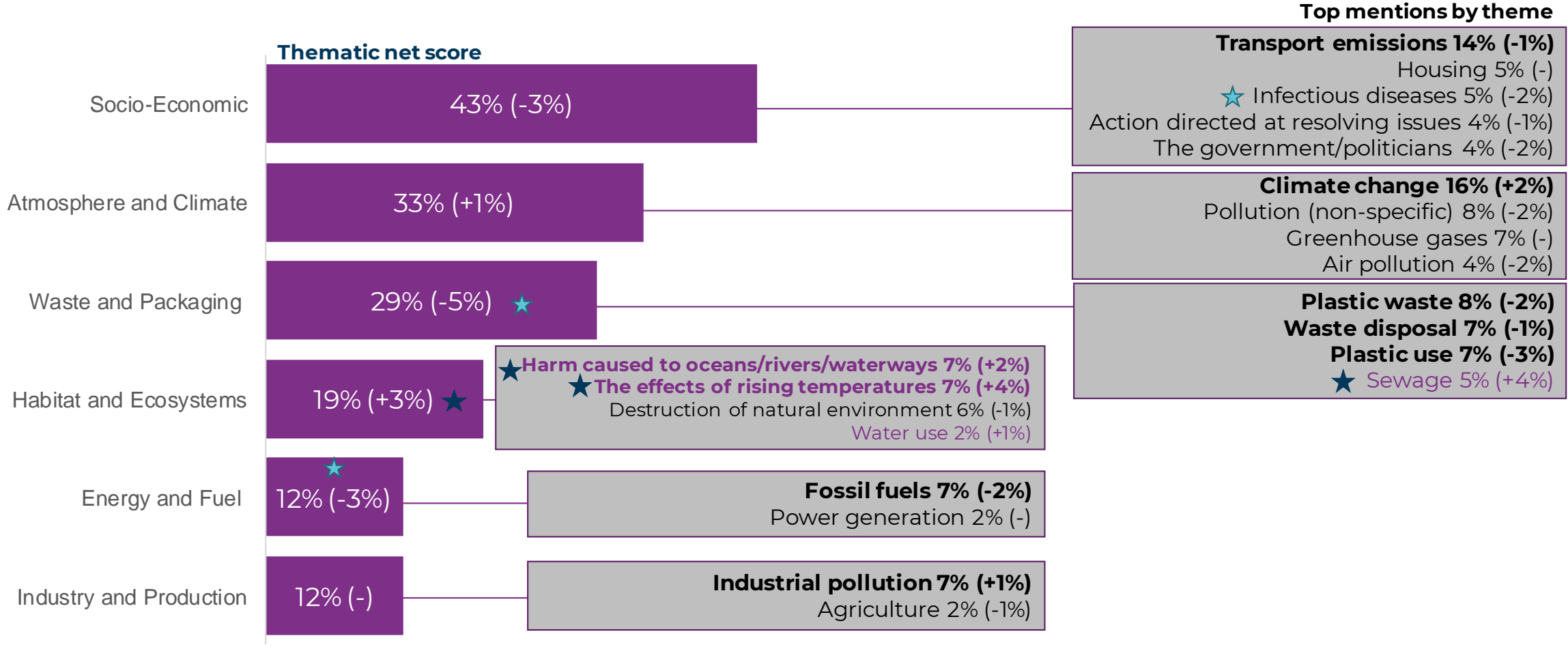
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Most people do not yet see sewage pollution as a threat to the environment – other environmental concerns were mentioned more often



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Biggest threats to the environment



Wave 2: Q2. What do you believe to be the biggest threats to the environment in the UK? i.e. thinking about issues that could/should be addressed on a national level OPEN ENDED. Base: All respondents (n=2,187)

Awareness and perceptions of river water quality ★ Statistically higher than the first wave
★ Statistically lower than the first wave

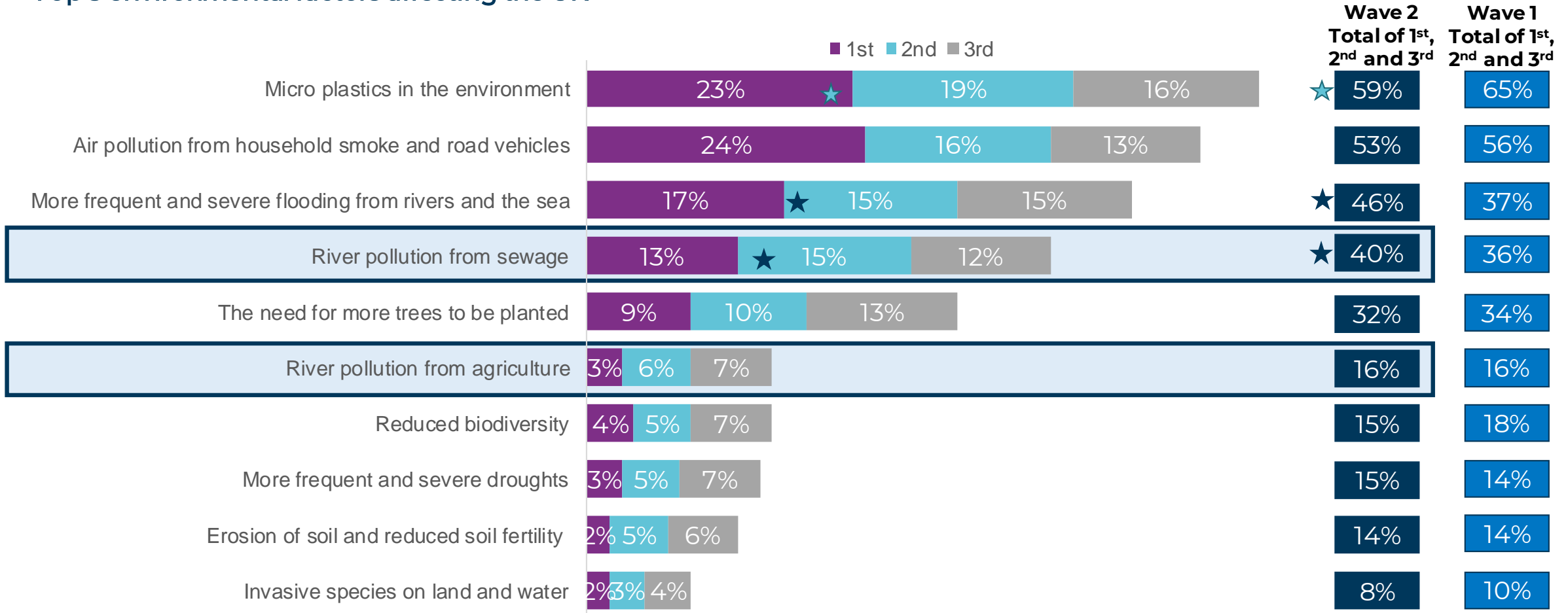
Wave 1: Base: All respondents (n=2,096) 17

When prompted, micro-plastics, air pollution and flooding were most likely to be identified as concerns, followed by river pollution from sewage



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Top 3 environmental factors affecting the UK

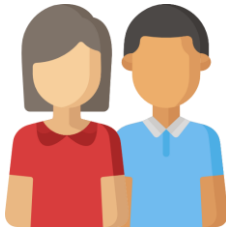


Wave 2: Q3 Below is a list of environmental issues affecting the UK: please pick the top three most concerning to you and rank them in order, with 1 being the most concerning etc. Base: All respondents (n=2,187)
Wave 1: Base: All respondents (n=2,096)

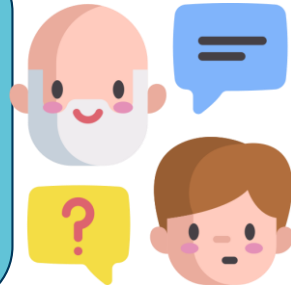
★ Statistically higher than the first wave
★ Statistically lower than the first wave

Demographic variations in environmental concerns

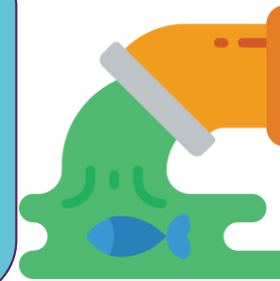
Top issues for various demographic groups



Women are most concerned about microplastics and flooding, whereas men are more concerned about river pollution from sewage and erosion of soil.

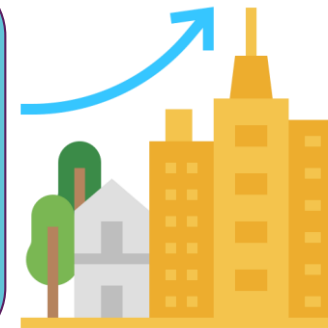


Those aged 55+ are the most concerned about microplastics in the environment and flooding, whereas those aged 18-34 are the most concerned about reduced biodiversity.



Those aware of storm overflows are more likely to be concerned about river pollution from sewage than those unaware.

Air pollution is more of a concern for those living in urban areas, whereas those living in rural areas are more concerned with the need for more trees and about the effect of invasive species on land and water. Those with children under 16 are also more concerned about air pollution (58%), than those with no children (52%).



There are no significant differences between the concerns of Welsh and English people or between the concerns of people belonging to different social grades.

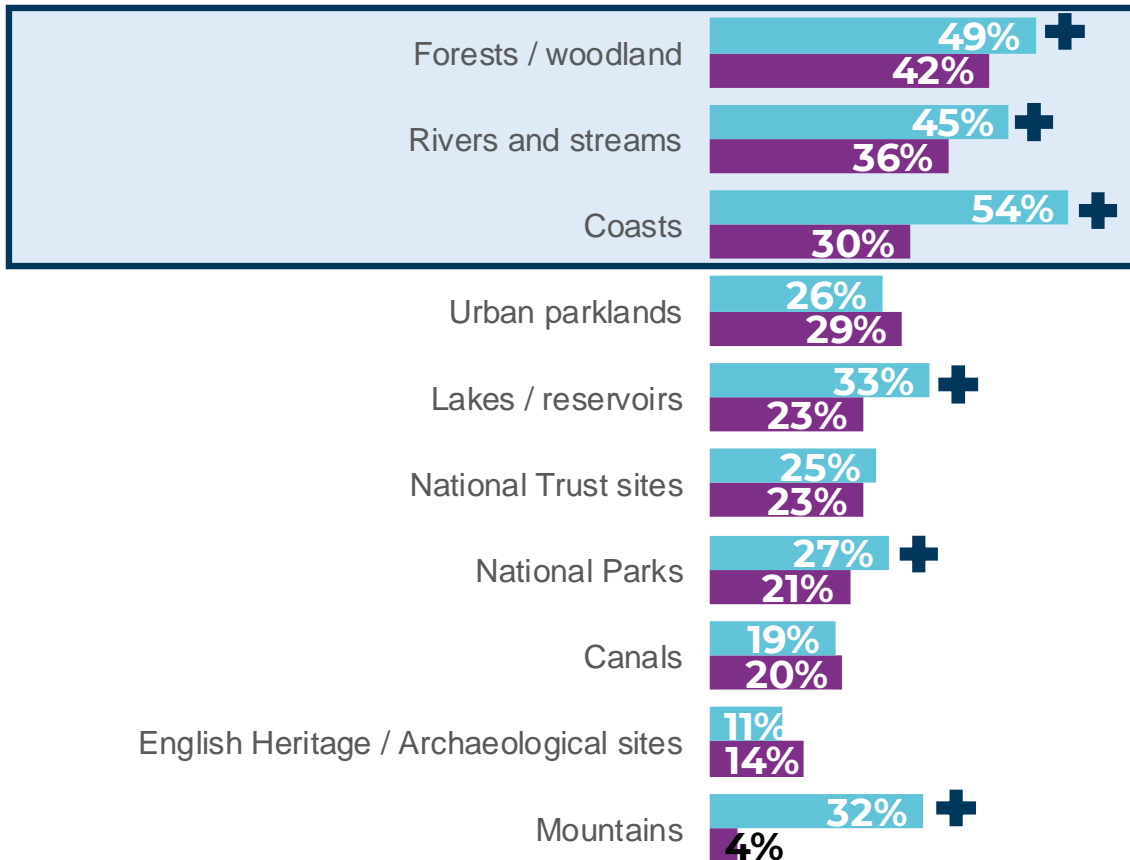
National environment areas visited in the last 2 years



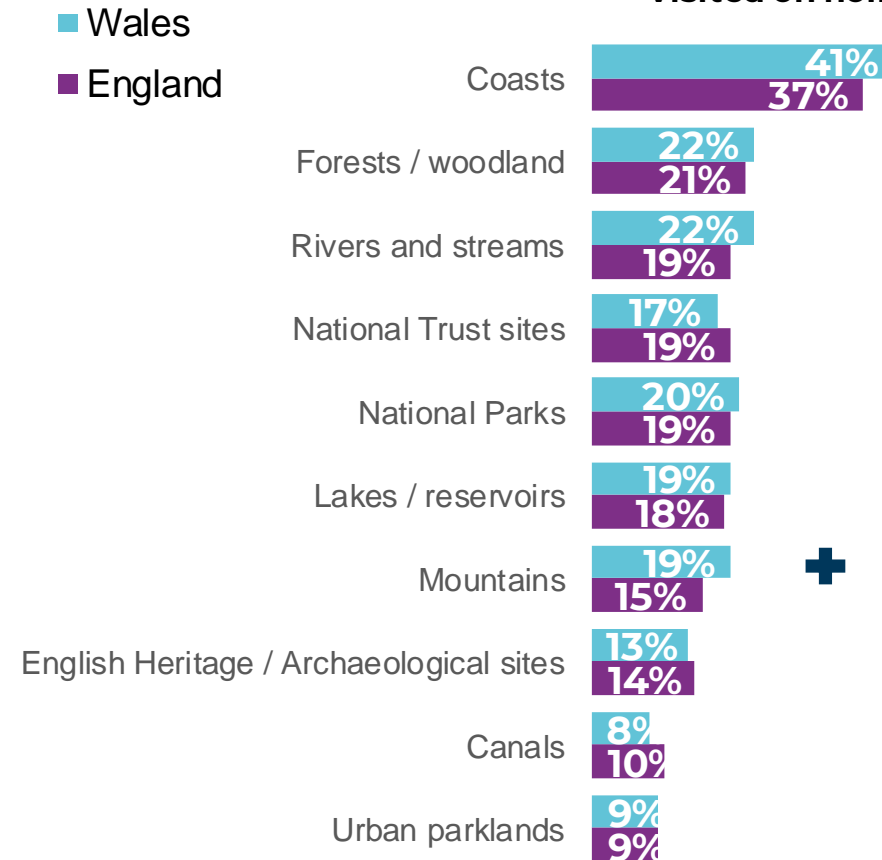
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+ Statistically **higher** than all other categories **within the subgroup**
- Statistically **lower** than all other categories **within the subgroup**

Visited locally



Visited on holiday



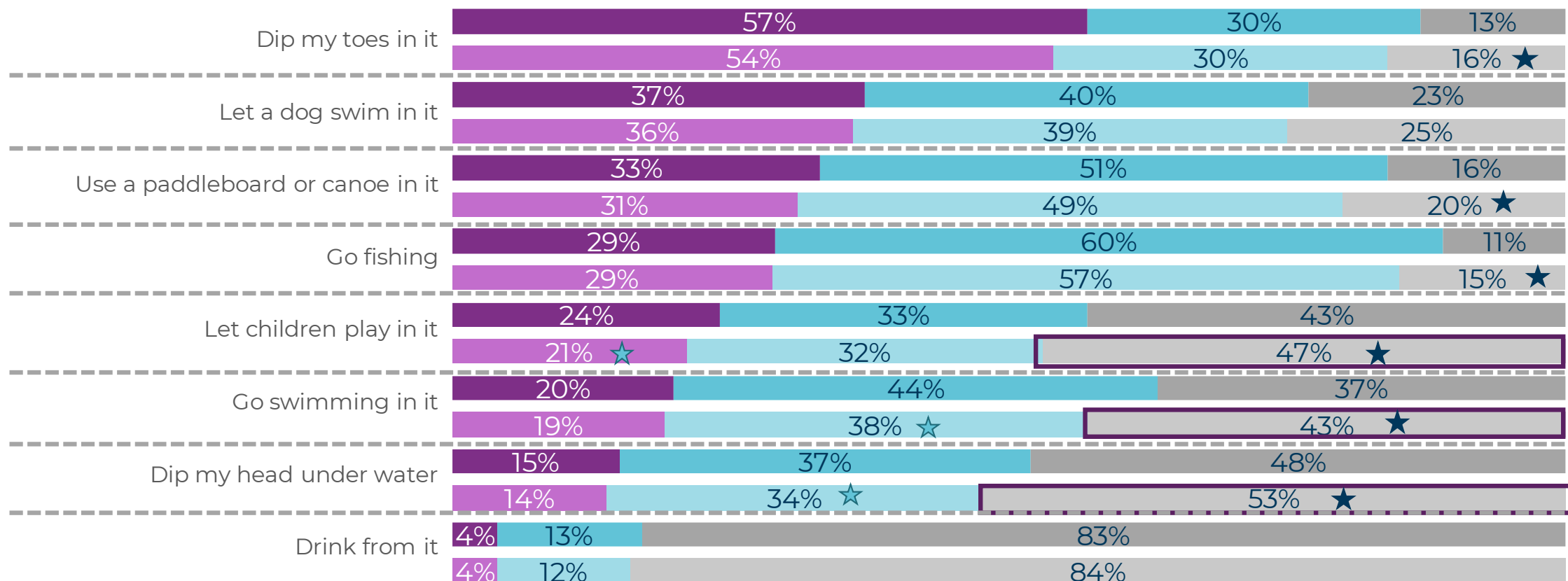
Generally, rivers and streams are thought to be safe for recreation nearby or on the water, though less so for activities which involve entering the water



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Perceptions of the rivers and streams being safe are falling compared to earlier this year

Wave 1 ■ Would be happy to do this ■ Wouldn't do this myself, but expect it would be safe to do so ■ Wouldn't expect to be able to do this safely
Wave 2 ■ Would be happy to do this ■ Wouldn't do this myself, but expect it would be safe to do so ■ Wouldn't expect to be able to do this safely



NB: There are no significant demographic differences

Wave 2: Q5 Which of the following would you be happy to do - or expect to be able to do safely in a river or stream in the UK?

★ Statistically higher than the first wave

★ Statistically lower than the first wave

Base: All respondents (n=2,187) 21

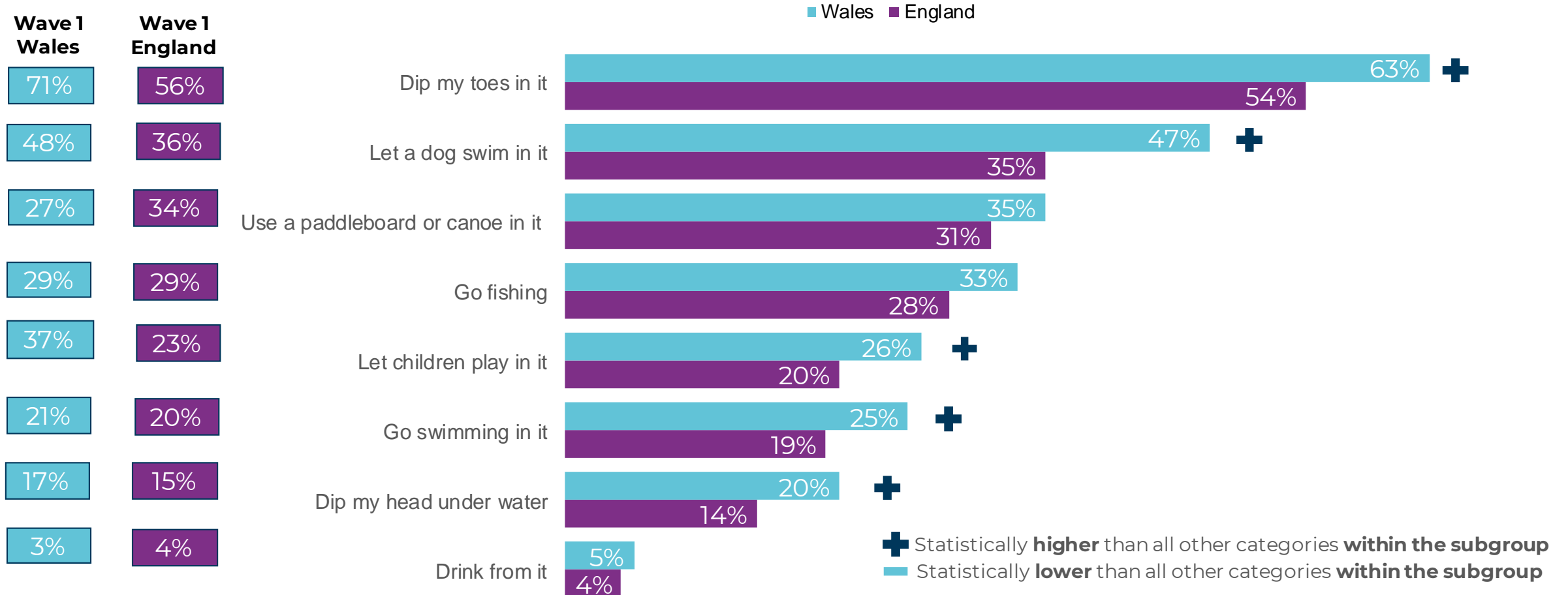
Wave 1: Base: All respondents (n=2,096)

People in Wales are happier with their safety within the UK's rivers and streams than those in England



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Those who would be happy to do the following or expect to be able to do so safely by nation



Wave 2: Q.5 Which of the following would you be happy to do - or expect to be able to do safely in a river or stream in the UK? – Would be happy to do this

Base: All respondents (n=2,187) ; England (n=1,755); Wales (n=432)

Wave 1: Base: All respondents (n=2,096) ; England (n=1,788); Wales (n=89)

Most people have positive associations with rivers and streams—seeing them as habitats for wildlife and as amenities for communities



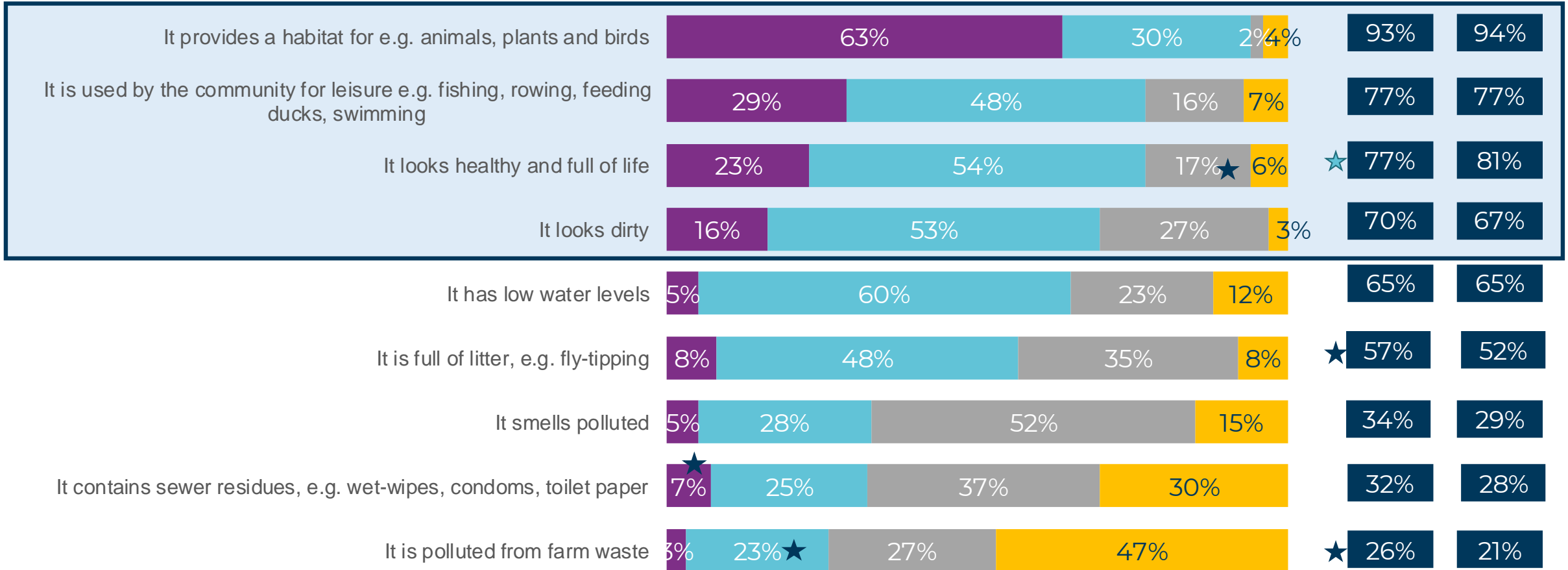
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Attributes that apply to rivers or streams that people are familiar with

★ Statistically **higher** than the first wave
★ Statistically **lower** than the first wave

Wave 2
Always/
Sometimes
NET:
Wave 1
Always/
Sometimes
NET:

Always Sometimes Never Don't know



Wave 2: Q.6 Now think about the particular river or stream you are most familiar with (the river you have visited recently or the river nearest you): which of the following, if any, applies to this river at least sometimes? Base: All respondents who visited a river in the last 2 years (n=983) 23
Wave 1: Base: All respondents who visited a river in the last 2 years (n=981)

Around half of people (48%) do not recall seeing media coverage about river water quality



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Seen any media coverage about river or stream quality in the UK

- I don't recall seeing media coverage about river or stream quality
- I've definitely seen media coverage about river or stream quality
- I may have seen media coverage about river or stream quality
- Don't know
- Not applicable

★ Statistically **higher** than **the first wave**

★ Statistically **lower** than **the first wave**



Men are twice as likely (31%) as women (16%) to have 'definitely seen' media coverage about river/stream quality in wave 2



The older subgroup, 65+, is twice as likely (38%) to have 'definitely seen' such media coverage than both 18–34-year old's (16%) and 35–54-year old's (21%) in wave 2



Those who have visited a river either locally or on holiday are more likely to notice media coverage about river/stream quality

In general, awareness of media coverage about river/stream quality has increased since the 1st wave of research



Bill payers are more likely to have seen either maybe (18%) or definitely (25%) than non-bill payers (11% and 13% respectively)



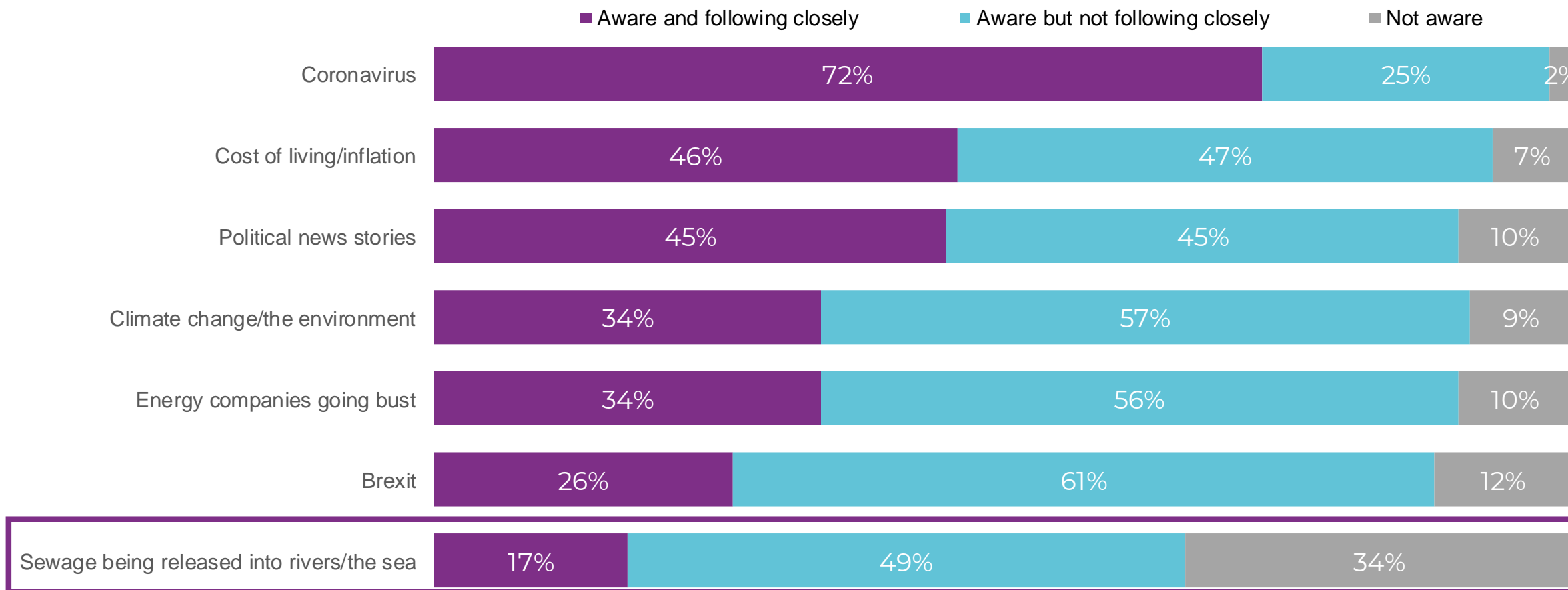
Wave 2: Q.7 Have you seen any media coverage about river or stream quality in the UK, e.g. in the news, on TV, online, social media?

Base: All respondents (n=2,187)

Wave 1: Base: All respondents (n=2,096) 24

People tend to pay less attention to news about sewage being released into rivers than to other high profile issues, though two thirds are still following 'sewage' news to some extent

Awareness of news stories and how closely they are being followed



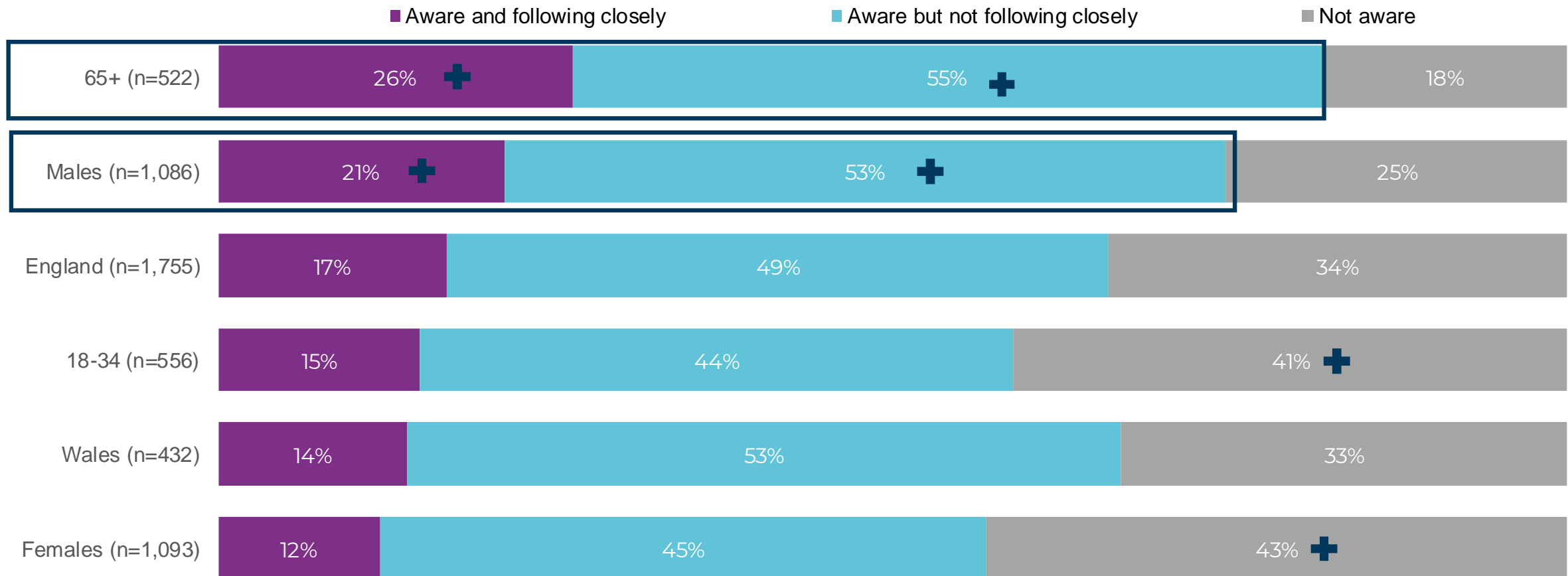
NB: There are no significant demographic differences

Awareness levels around sewage being released into rivers/the sea vary between demographics



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Awareness of news stories and how closely they are being followed by demographic subgroups



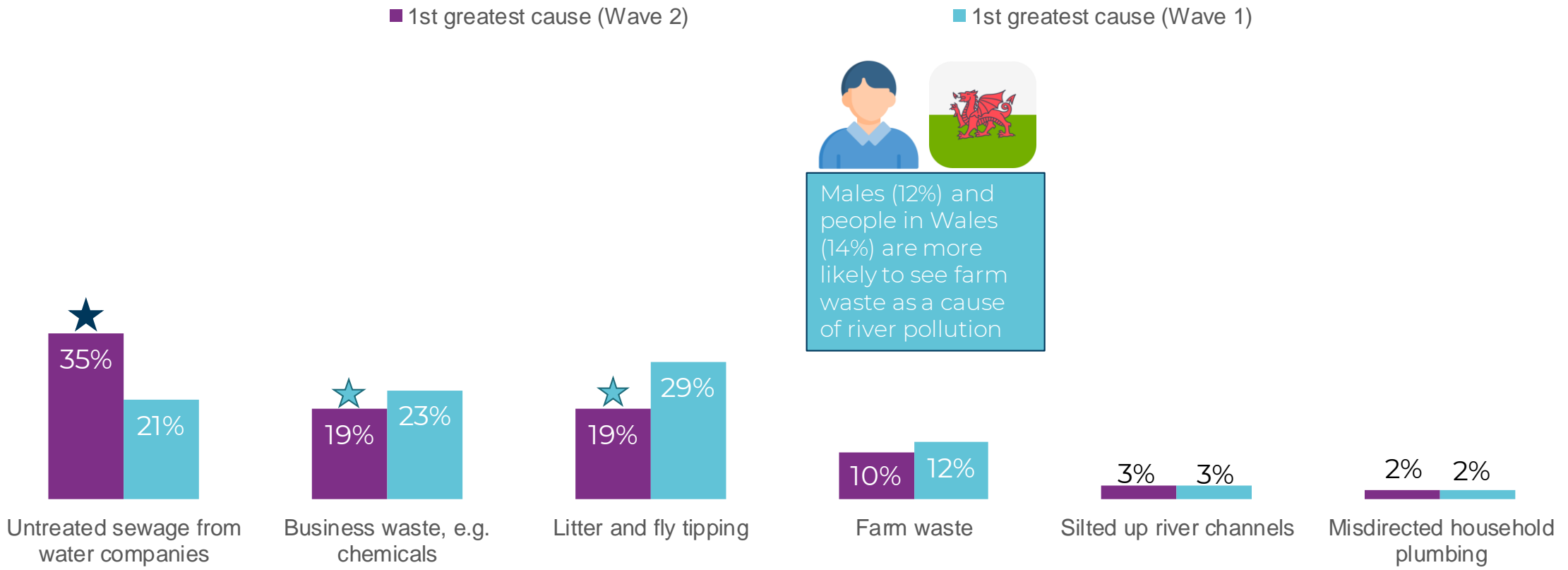
+ Statistically **higher** than all other categories **within the subgroup**
 - Statistically **lower** than all other categories **within the subgroup**

Untreated sewage is the most commonly cited cause of river pollution in the UK (35%)



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First greatest causes of river pollution in the UK compared by wave



Males (12%) and people in Wales (14%) are more likely to see farm waste as a cause of river pollution

Wave 2: Q.8a Which of these sources do you think is the greatest cause of river pollution in the United Kingdom?
Q.8b Which of these sources do you think is the second greatest cause of river pollution in the United Kingdom?

★ Statistically higher than the first wave
☆ Statistically lower than the first wave

Base: All respondents (n=2,187)
Wave 1: Base: All respondents (n=2,096)

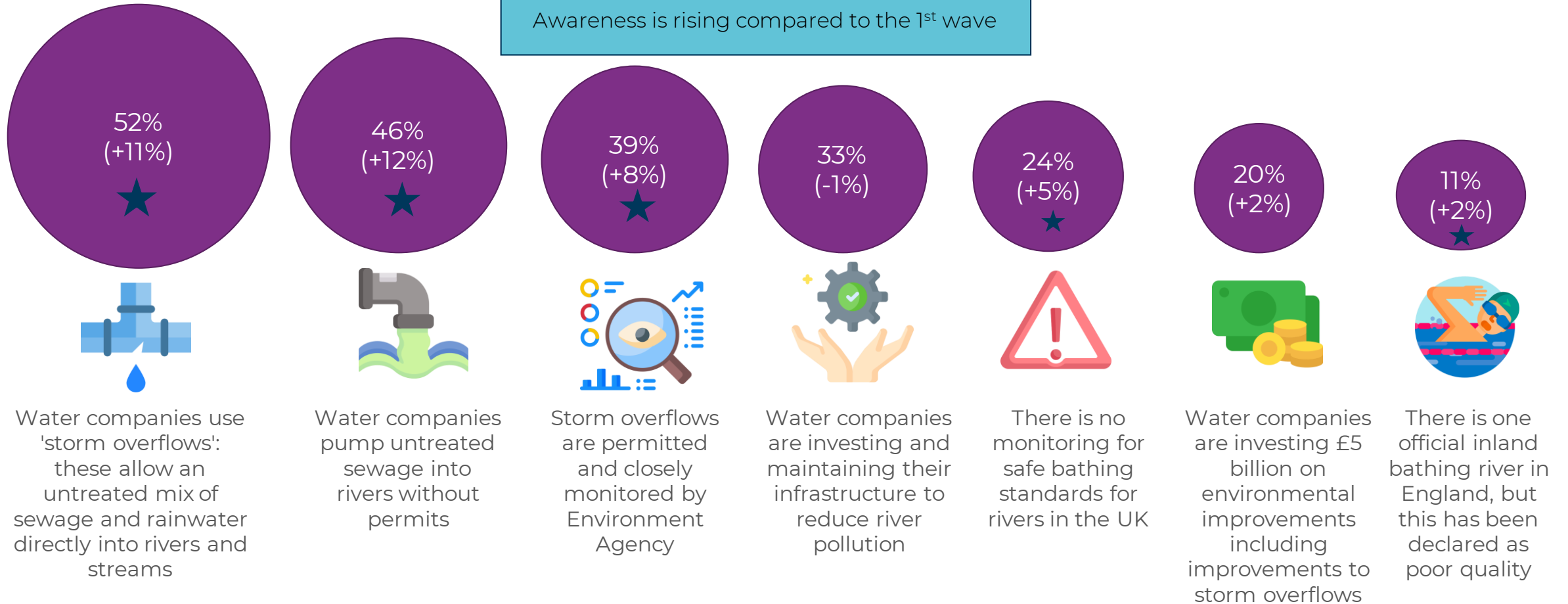
People were more likely to recall reports about the use of storm overflows than about investment to reduce river pollution



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Awareness of issues raised in recent media reports

Awareness is rising compared to the 1st wave



Wave 2: Q.9 Here are some issues raised in recent media reports. Were you aware of the issue before today? – Yes: already aware of this issue

★ Statistically higher than the first wave

★ Statistically lower than the first wave

Base: All respondents (n=2,187)

Wave 1: Base: All respondents (n=2,096)

Demographics of the people most aware of river water quality issues



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Demographics of the people most aware of these issues

- | | | | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men • Those over 55 • Those in the ABC1 social grade and with degrees • Those living in rural areas and Wales • Those have visited rivers recently | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men • Those over 55 • Those in the ABC1 social grade and with degrees • Those have visited rivers recently | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men • Those over 55 • Those in the ABC1 social grade and with degrees • Those living in rural areas • Those have visited rivers recently | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men • Those over 55 • Those in the ABC1 social grade • Those living in rural areas and Wales • Those have visited rivers recently | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men • Those in the ABC1 social grade and with degrees • Those have visited rivers recently locally | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men • Those over 55 • Those in the ABC1 social grade • Those have visited rivers recently | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men • Those aged 18-34 • Those in the ABC1 social grade |
|--|---|--|---|--|--|---|



Water companies use 'storm overflows': these allow an untreated mix of sewage and rainwater directly into rivers and streams



Water companies pump untreated sewage into rivers without permits



Storm overflows are permitted and closely monitored by Environment Agency



Water companies are investing and maintaining their infrastructure to reduce river pollution



There is no monitoring for safe bathing standards for rivers in the UK



Water companies are investing £5 billion on environmental improvements including improvements to storm overflows



There is one official inland bathing river in England, but this has been declared as poor quality

Wave 2: Q.9 Here are some issues raised in recent media reports. Were you aware of the issue before today? – Yes: already aware of this issue

Base: All respondents (n=2,187)

Wave 1: Base: All respondents (n=2,096)

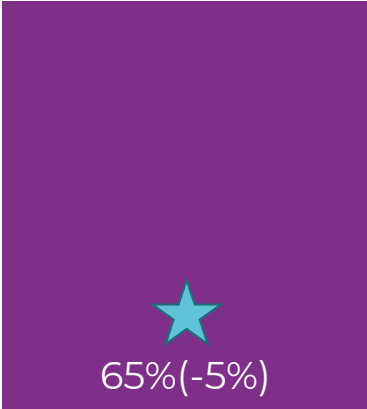
Most people want improvements to storm overflows to help ensure the river is a healthy habitat for wildlife



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Most important factors when planning improvement of storm overflows

- ★ Statistically **higher** than **the first wave**
- ★ Statistically **lower** than **the first wave**

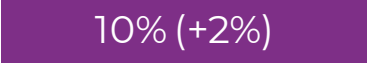


Ensure that the river provides healthy habitats for aquatic plants and animals

People in Wales (72%) and rural areas (70%), as well as people over 55 (71%), are more interested in prioritising rivers as healthy habitats for wildlife.



Ensure the river looks and smells clean with no litter or residues present



Ensure that the river is safe for people who wish to swim in it

Wave 2: Q.10 When planning the improvement of storm overflows where they have caused river pollution in the past, what is most important to you? Base: All respondents (n=2,187)

Wave 1: Base: All respondents (n=2,096) 30

In principle, most (58%) would pay more on their water bill to reduce the need to use storm overflows, subject to the detail and cost



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Willingness to pay more on your water bill to help reduce the need to use storm overflows



- Support for this proposition rises amongst those aware of storm overflows with nearly 2 in 3 (64%) being prepared to contribute money
- Similarly, those who have visited a river either locally (64%) or on holiday (66%) are more supportive of this premise in principle than those who haven't
- Amongst those unaware of storm overflows, half (50%) would still support this in principle

- In principle yes, but it depends on the cost/ detail
- In principle no, the cost/detail will make no difference to this
- Don't know



Q.11 In principle, would you be prepared to pay more on your water bill to help reduce the need to use storm overflows which put sewage into rivers, the sea etc.?

Base: All respondents with responsibility for water bills (n=1,925)

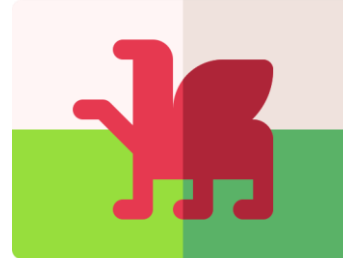
General demographic profile of those more aware of river water quality issues



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Men and older people (55+)



Those living in Wales



Those belonging to the ABC1 social grade



Those living in rural areas



Those who have visited a river either locally or on holiday in the last year



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