

Key findings from an Environment Committee survey about London's rivers and waterways

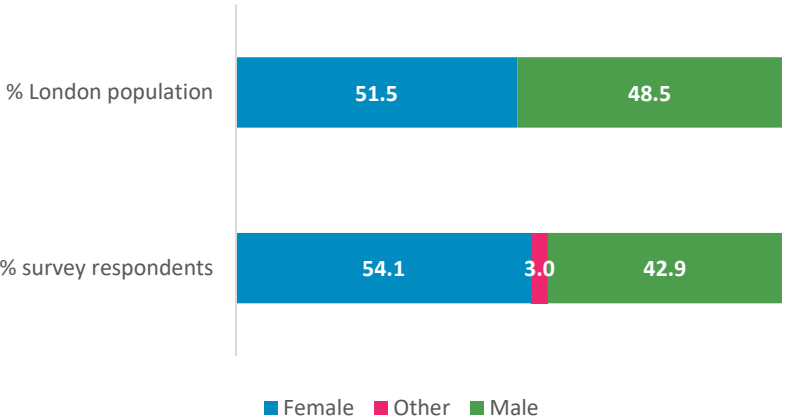
August 2025

Methodology and data limitations

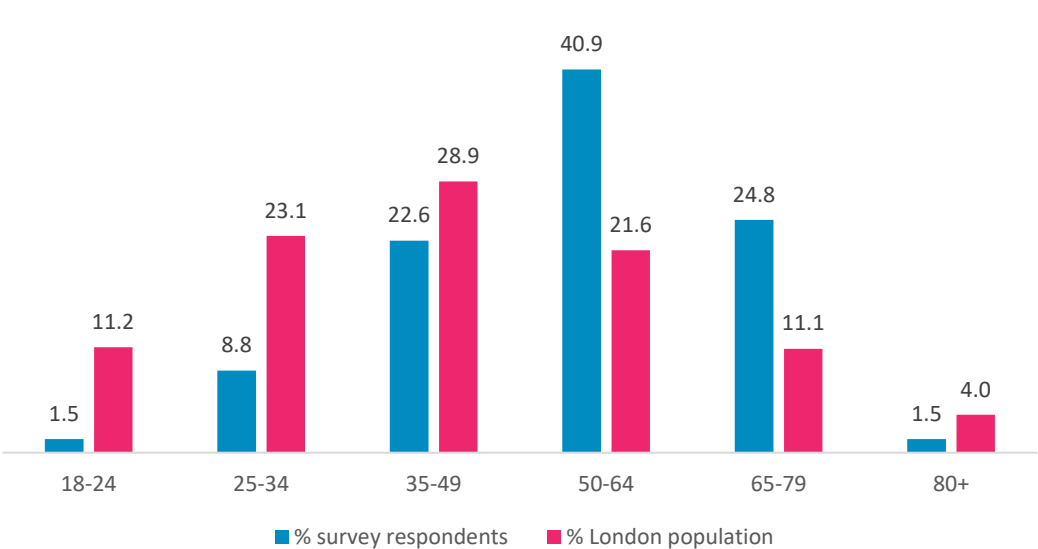
- This survey was conducted between 11 December 2024 and 24 February 2025. All responses were online, gathered via an online survey platform. The survey was designed by Research Unit staff in consultation with the Environment Committee project team.
- The survey was promoted by the Committee and project team sharing it with stakeholders, and online via social media.
- The primary purpose of the survey was to explore how Londoners use rivers and waterways in London and gather their thoughts on how rivers and waterways could be improved. This was done via qualitative questions.
- In total, there were 143 completed responses to the survey. Respondents to the survey were self-selected, and data has not been weighted to be representative. The respondents to the survey cannot be considered to be representative of the London population. The results should therefore be treated with caution. The findings can provide the Committee with an impression of the experience of some Londoners.
- Demographic data was collected to understand which groups of Londoners the survey reached. The next two slides provide an overview of the age, gender, ethnicity, age group and geographic spread of our respondents. It should be noted that our sample is more likely to be white, and more likely to be in older age groups, than the general London population.

Characteristics of respondents

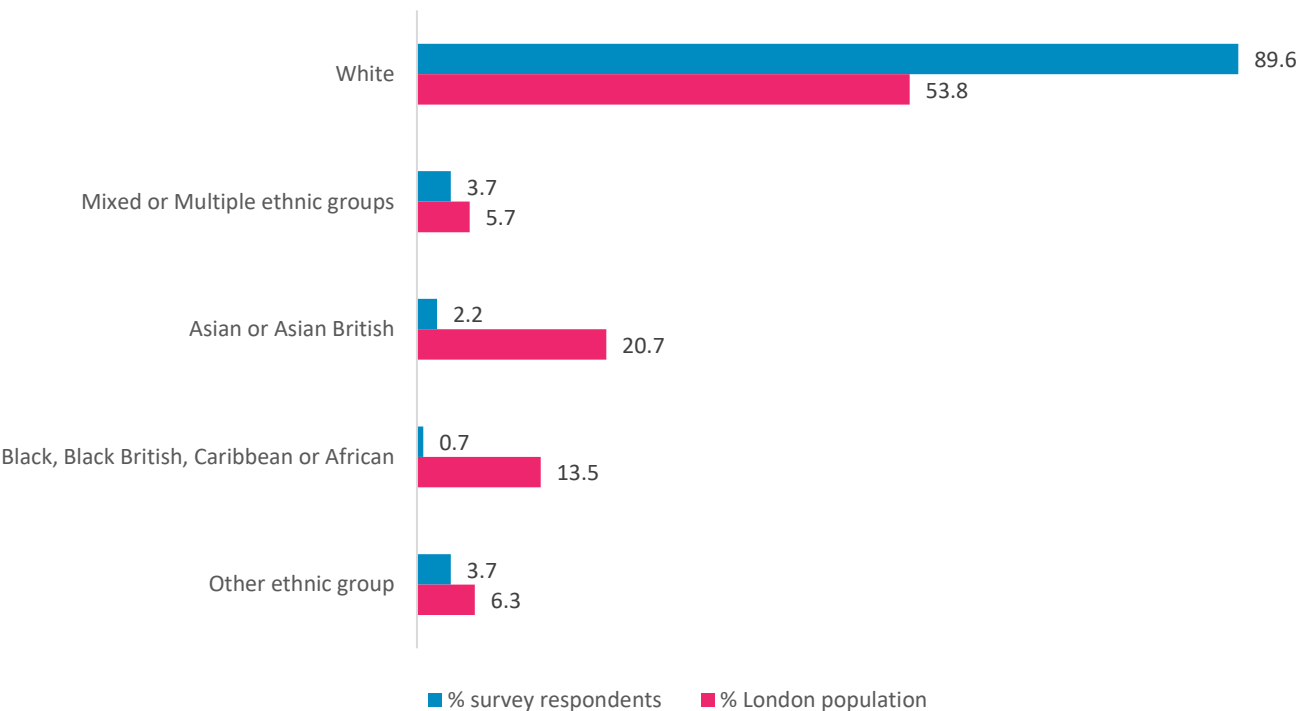
Gender of survey respondents



Age group of survey respondents



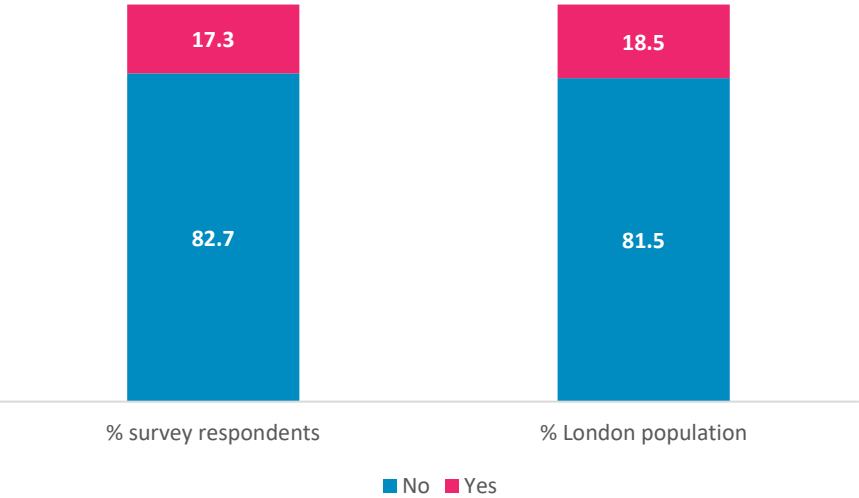
Ethnicity of survey respondents



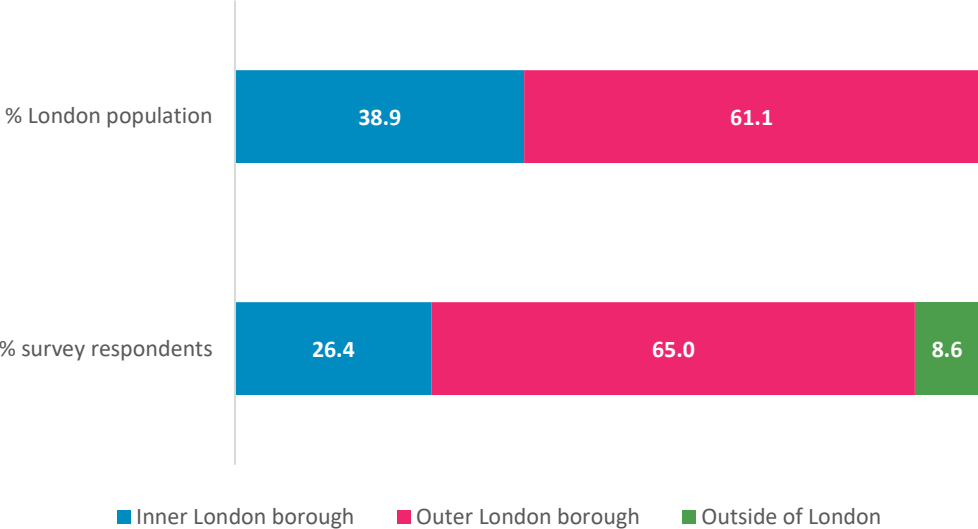
Based on responses from 143 London-based respondents. Where questions were skipped or respondents answered 'prefer not to say', these are not included in percentage calculations.

Characteristics of respondents

Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?



Where do you live?

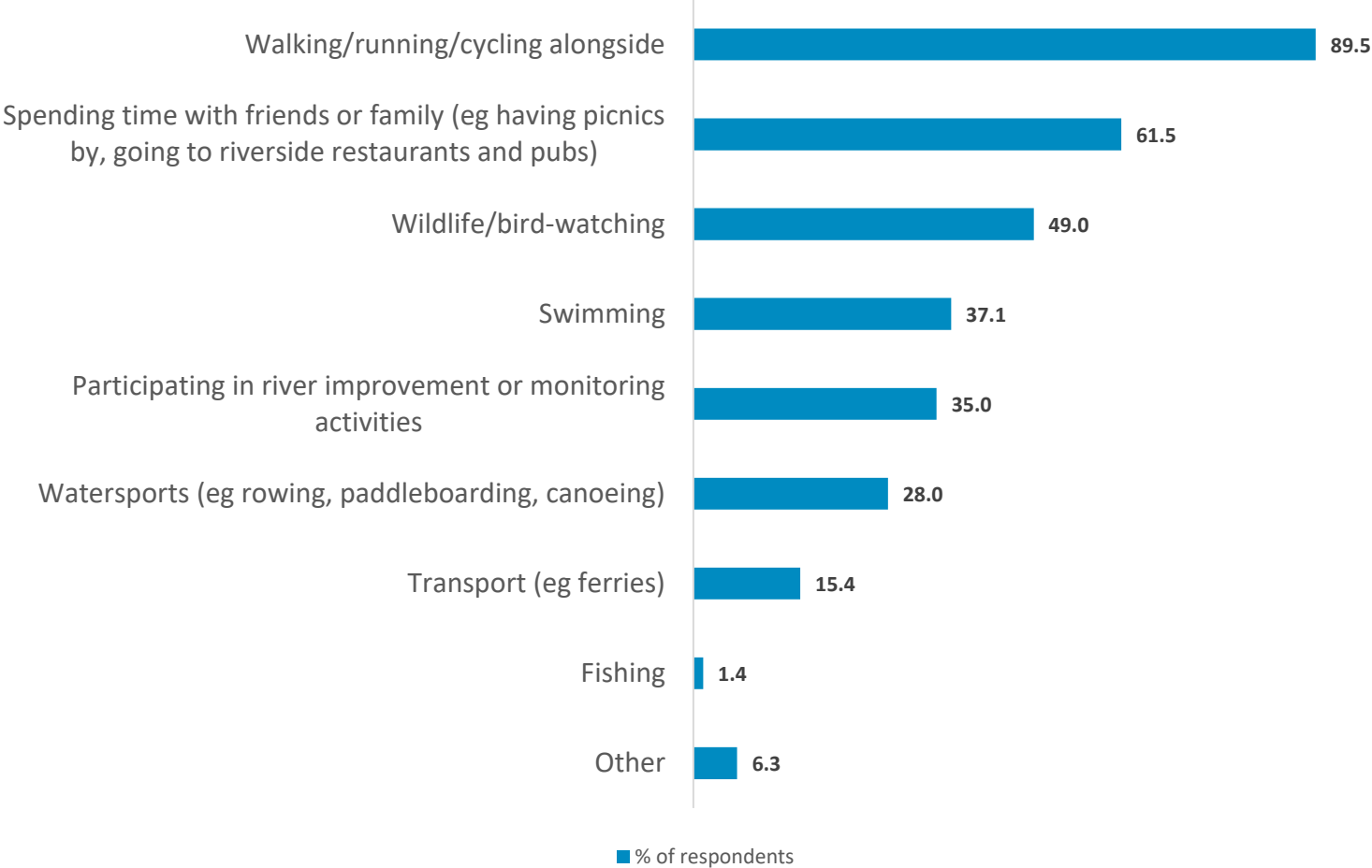


26 of the 32 London boroughs were represented in the survey, as well as the City of London.

Based on responses from 143 London-based respondents. Where questions were skipped or respondents answered 'prefer not to say', these are not included in percentage calculations.

Use of London's rivers and waterways

In what ways do you frequently use London's rivers and waterways?



The most popular way for survey respondents to frequently use London's rivers and waterways was walking, running or cycling alongside them. This was followed by spending time with friends or family, and wildlife/bird-watching. Only two respondents to the survey said that they frequently used London's waterways for fishing. This does not indicate that the general London population participates in these activities at these rates. It suggests that the people most likely to complete our survey were from groups who use rivers for these activities.

Number of responses = 143. Respondents could select multiple options, so percentage totals are greater than 100.

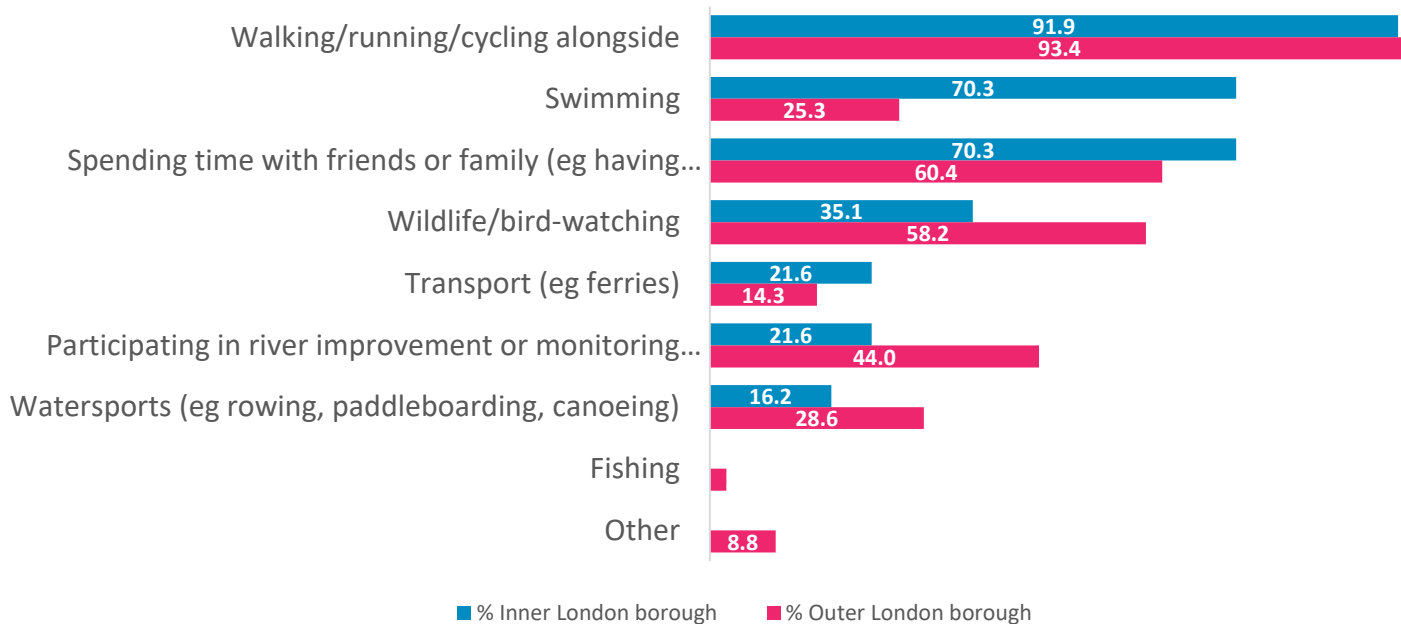
Use of London's rivers and waterways

Generally different groups of respondents reported that they frequently used the rivers and waterways in similar ways. For example, respondents aged over 50 years old had a similar usage pattern to the all-respondent average. This is the same for white respondents, although this is likely caused by the very high proportion of respondents who were white, making further demographic breakdowns impossible. In some areas there was greater variation between groups.

Inner / Outer London

Respondents who live in Inner London boroughs were more likely to frequently swim in London's rivers and waterways than those in Outer London boroughs. 70.3 per cent of respondents in Inner London said that they frequently swim compared to 25.3 per cent in Outer London. Outer London respondents were more likely to frequently take part in water sports and wildlife or bird-watching and participate in river improvement projects. These results relate to survey respondents and are not representative of the London population.

In what ways do you frequently use London's rivers and waterways?

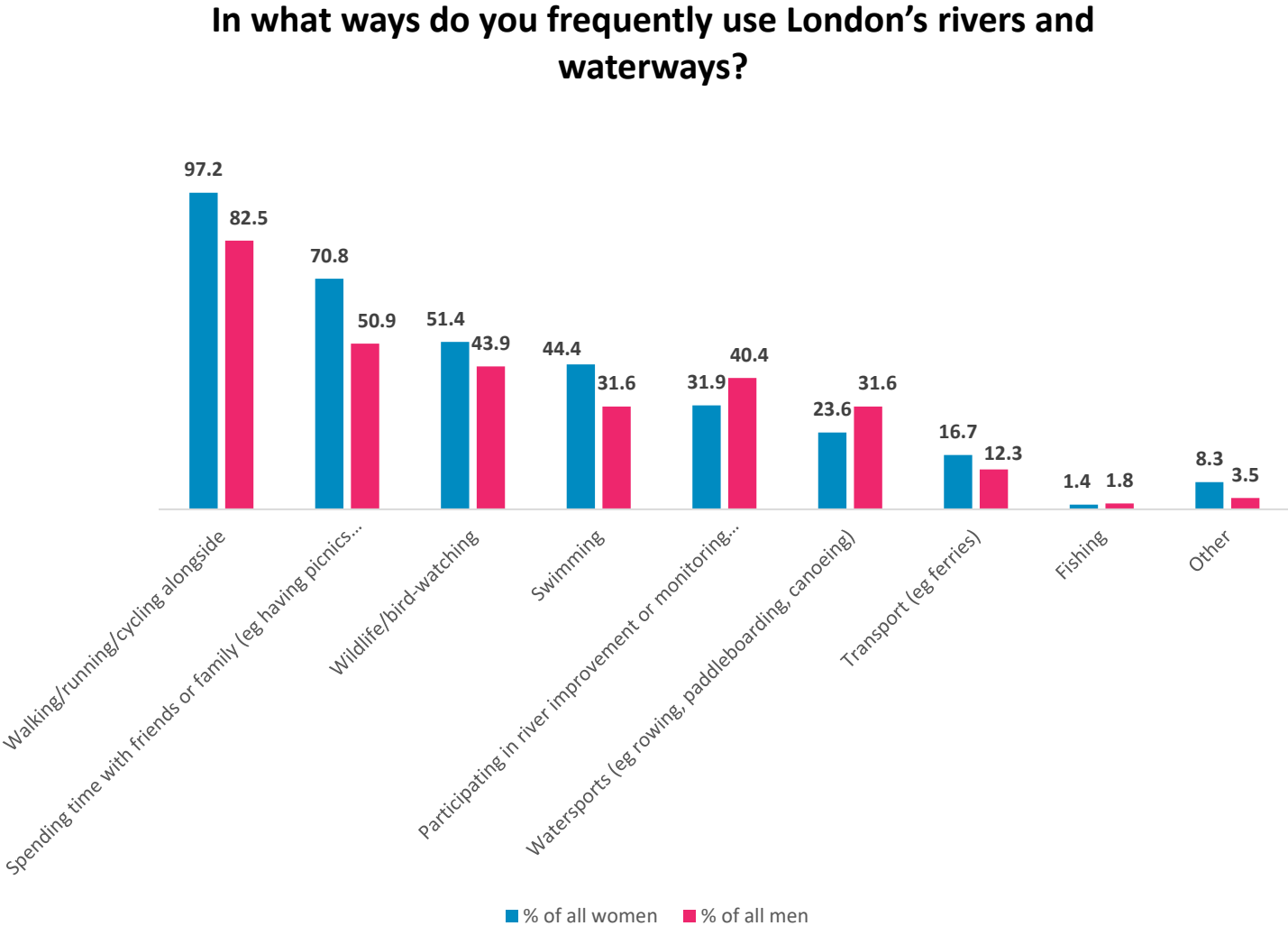


Number of responses = 128. Respondents could select multiple options, so percentage totals are greater than 100. Only respondents who said they live in inner or outer London boroughs are included in percentage calculations.

Use of London's rivers and waterways

Gender

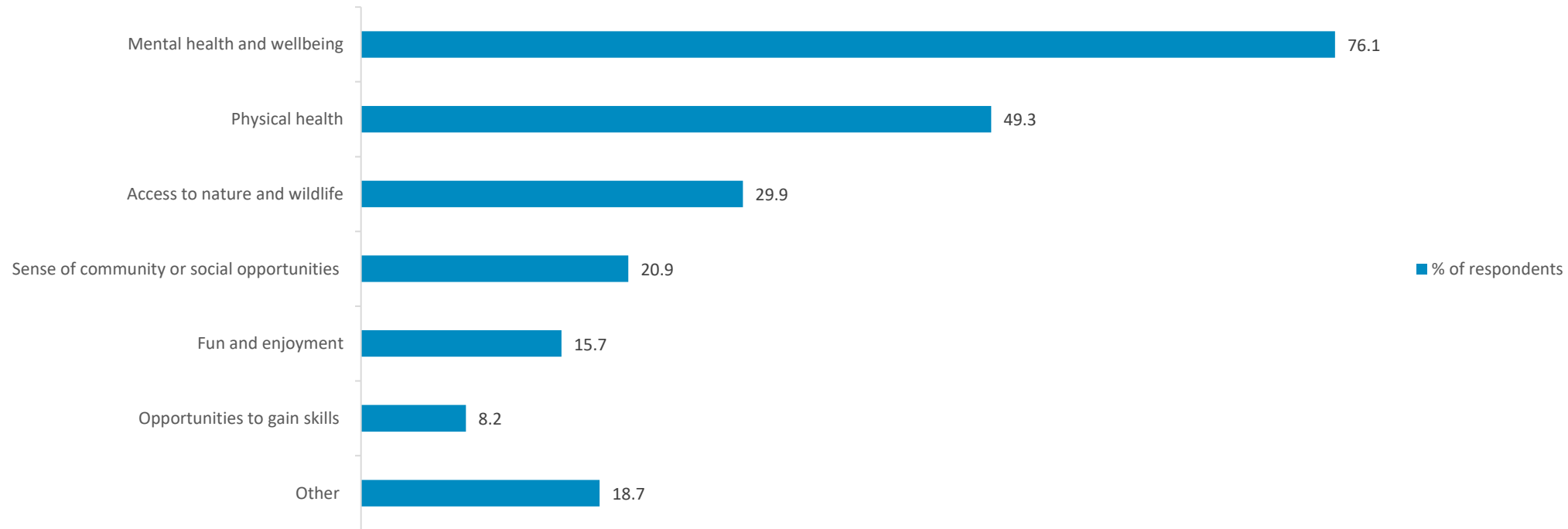
A greater proportion of female respondents frequently used waterways for walking, running and cycling; swimming; wildlife or bird-watching; and spending time with family or friends. 70.8 per cent of female respondents frequently spent time with family and friends at the riverside, compared to 50.9 per cent of male respondents. Male respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to take part in water sports and river improvement projects. These results relate to survey respondents and are not representative of the London population.



Benefits of London's rivers and waterways

There were a number of recurring themes in the benefits that survey respondents identified from spending time in, on or by London's rivers and waterways. These responses have been coded to quantify these themes.

What benefits, if any, do you get from spending time in, on or by London's rivers and waterways?



Number of respondents = 134. Where a response covered multiple themes, it was coded into all relevant themes.

Benefits of London's rivers and waterways

A significant majority of respondents (76.1 per cent) commented on the mental health, wellbeing or stress-relieving benefits that they got from spending time in, on or by London's rivers and waterways. Many of these highlighted the calming effect that waterways and their surrounding areas of nature have.

Often linked to mental wellbeing by respondents, the benefits to physical health were also highlighted. These ranged from providing access to fresh air, to opportunities for exercise including walking, swimming, running, and water sports.

Multiple respondents mentioned access to wildlife and birds, and an opportunity to connect with nature, as a benefit of London's rivers and waterways. For example, one respondent said it was "a lovely way to feel part of nature and to enjoy the local area from a different perspective".

The benefit that rivers and waterways have in building community and fostering relationships was also mentioned by survey respondents. It was highlighted how these areas provided a space to socialise with family and friends, as well as being a way to meet new people. In particular, respondents noted that spending time by rivers and waterways meant they had met people they otherwise wouldn't meet, as well as connecting with people who had similar interests.

In terms of gaining new skills, respondents highlighted a range of benefits. These ranged from an increase in knowledge about the natural world, to skills gained through volunteering and practical skills gained on the water.

Views on benefits of London's rivers and waterways

“ Discovering outdoor places to swim in London was life changing for me. I was diagnosed with depression, PTSD and anxiety and swimming provided an amazing solace that allowed me to reset every day. ”

“ Starting the day with a visit to the Serpentine provides a dose of 'green' and 'blue' amidst the 'grey' spaces of the city. It resets the mind, straightens out the worries, stresses and concerns that modern day imposes on us, particularly in cities. ”

“ My normal exercise routes are through the Brent River Park in Ealing. The views and the wildlife encourage me to take regular exercise away from traffic and noise. These walks are a source of solace when I am stressed. They were a life saver during Lockdown. ”

“ [Our local sea scout group provides] the opportunity for members of the group to participate in paddle sport activities, powerboating and rowing. This gives the members skills that they can not learn anywhere else. ”

“ Spending time with friends and family. My children join me on my kayak, and my eldest swims with me in the summer. ”

“ Cool, healthy space to cool down, see wildlife and immerse oneself in nature. Feeling closer to the local environment[,] and feeling less claustrophobic in a big urban city. ”

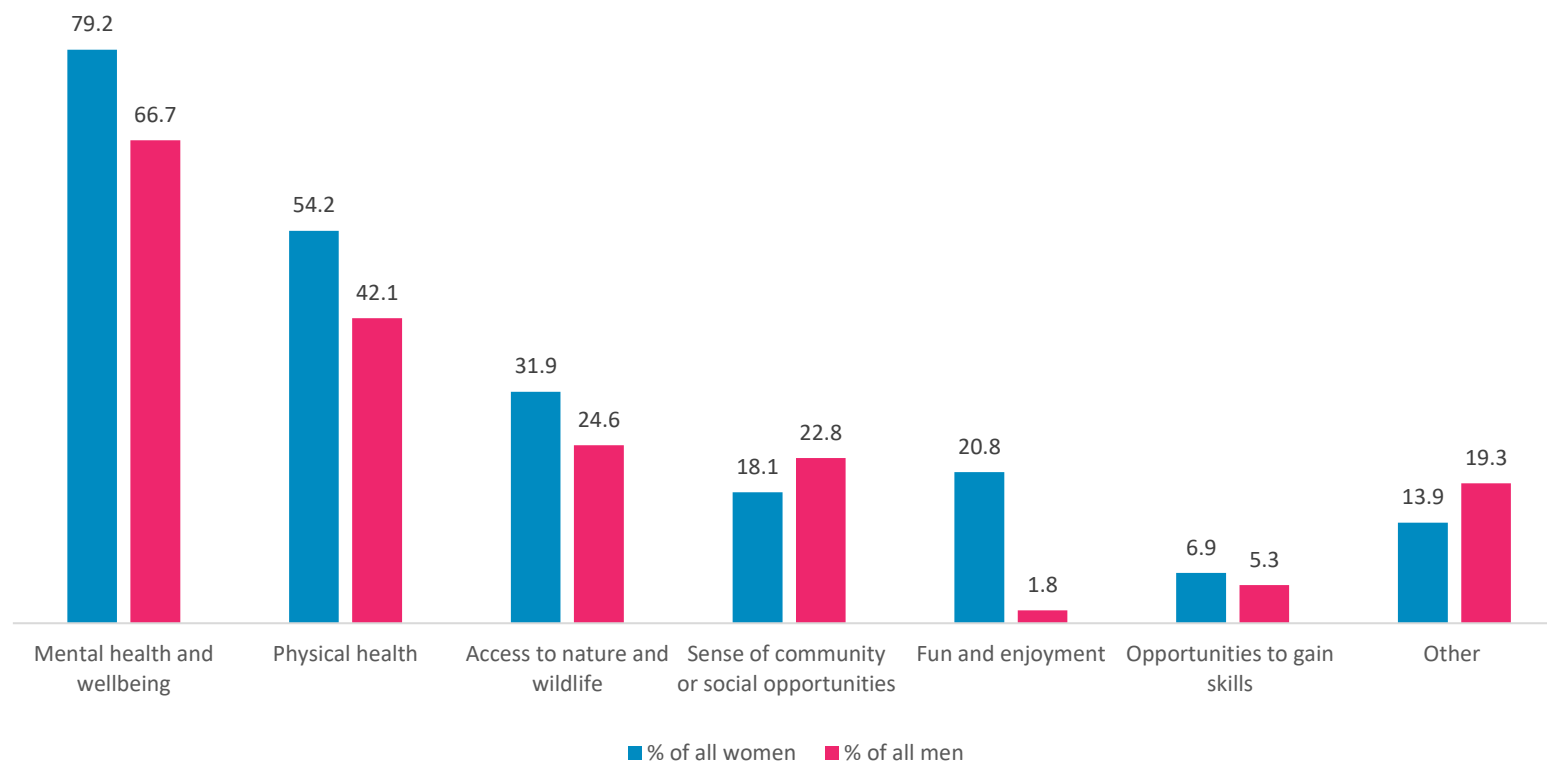
“ A sense of community - those who frequently use the river are known to each other as such[. It also provides] wider community benefit - I volunteer with an organisation that takes young people afloat. ”

Benefits of London's rivers and waterways

Female and male survey respondents highlighted many of the same benefits of London's rivers and waterways. However, women were more likely to comment on benefits including mental health and wellbeing, physical health, access to nature, and fun and enjoyment.

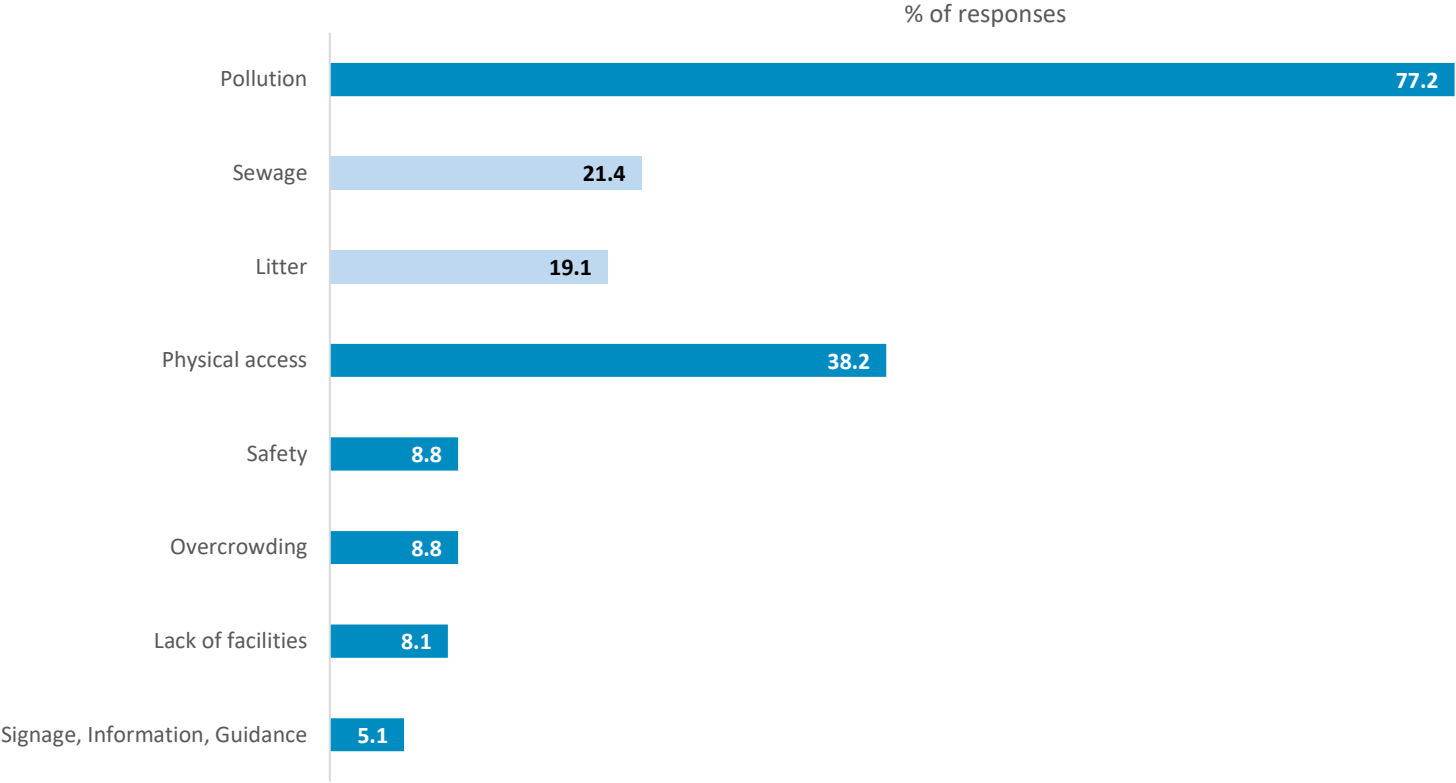
The difference between genders was most marked for fun and enjoyment, which was a benefit highlighted by 20.8 per cent of female respondents but only 1.8 per cent of male respondents. Male respondents were marginally more likely to identify the social or community benefits that rivers and waterways bring.

What benefits, if any, do you get from spending time in, on or by London's rivers and waterways?



Barriers to using London's rivers and waterways

Barriers to using London's rivers and waterways in more ways or more frequently



As with the benefits identified by survey respondents, there were a number of recurring themes in the barriers facing survey respondents. These responses have been coded to quantify these themes.

Number of respondents = 136. Litter and sewage are recorded as a subset of pollution and responses mentioning both are counted in the pollution bar. They have also been displayed in standalone bars to illustrate their prevalence. Comments were in response to the question “What barriers, if any, are there to you using London's rivers and waterways in more ways, or more frequently? Please consider barriers relating to rivers and waterways, rather than factors like the weather or amount of free time etc.”, which allowed free text entry.

Barriers to use of London's rivers and waterways

The most significant barrier that respondents identified to using London's rivers and waterways in more ways or more frequently was pollution and poor water quality. This was referenced by 105 out of 136 respondents (77.2 per cent). Within this, 26 respondents specifically identified litter or fly tipping as a problem, and 28 cited sewage being released into rivers, either by Thames Water or by discharge from boats. Some respondents also drew attention to the issue of misconnections, where incorrect plumbing results in wastewater being released directly into a waterway.

There were also a large number of respondents who highlighted the access barriers limiting their use of London's rivers and waterways. Many of these responses discussed restrictions on physically accessing land, for example where riverside land is privately owned. Eight people cited cost barriers to access, ranging from the cost of water taxi services, to the cost of swimming in designated areas.

Many survey responses also raised issues related to riverside paths or towpaths. These comments centred on paths being in a state of disrepair making them inaccessible especially for buggies or mobility aids. A variety of reasons were given for this including a lack of maintenance that meant paths were eroded, overgrown, or blocked.

Other barriers that were identified by respondents were: a lack of facilities, including parking, safe swimming areas, public toilets and public transport connections; overcrowding of both the river itself from boats, and the towpath and river banks; and safety, including respondents who cited a lack of lighting and instances of anti-social behaviour. Respondents also raised the issue of a lack of signage, information or guidance which often meant that people didn't know whether, where or how they could access the water.

Views on barriers to use of London's rivers and waterways

“ I would love to be able to go wild swimming in local rivers and lakes but knowing the levels of pollution due to misconnections, littering/flytipping, road run-off and sewage from storm overflows I am too worried about the health risks. ”

“ Pollution. Too many sewage flows. Shockingly poor monitoring and enforcement of misconnections of residential sewage pipes being connected directly to the waterways. ”

“ Mostly - and the closer you are to the centre the more problematic it gets - London's rivers are trapped in culverts and invisible. Or they are cut off by private gardens, industrial premises, contained in ugly concrete channels and [d]ifficult to approach safely. ”

“ With the emergence of organisations such as Nowca, bodies of water are excluding all but those that can afford to pay their annual fee and entrance fee. ”

“ Both the Grand Union Canal in Ealing and, particularly the River Brent are seriously polluted, the water quality of the Brent in many places is a danger to health. I would love to sit in the shade of the riverbank in the summer but it smells like a drain at times. People throw in Lime bikes and shopping trolleys. Trees are clogged with wet wipes despite best efforts of volunteers who attempt to clean all this. All this can make the area feel unsafe. ”

“ The condition of the towpath also limits access. My husband has Parkinson[']s and needs a flat, uncluttered surface to walk on. ”

The above quotes are from respondents' answers to the question, “What barriers, if any, are there to you using London's rivers and waterways in more ways, or more frequently? Please consider barriers relating to rivers and waterways, rather than factors like the weather or amount of free time etc.”, which allowed free text entry. Quotes are categorised by [pollution](#), including [littering and flytipping](#), [physical access](#), [cost](#) and [path maintenance](#).

Environmental improvements

Respondents to the survey suggested a range of environmental improvements that they would like to see to London's rivers and waterways. The most frequently mentioned improvement related to reducing pollution through stopping or reducing the discharge of sewage into rivers. As part of this, eight respondents specifically suggested that action to rectify and prevent misconnections should be prioritised. Respondents were largely in favour of much stricter enforcement against polluters; this included developers who built homes with misconnections, water companies such as Thames Water, and boats discharging sewage into the rivers. Enforcement options suggested by respondents ranged from hefty fines to imprisonment.

Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) were also referenced positively by a number of respondents as a way to reduce surface water run-off from roads and tackle pollution.

A number of respondents called for tougher enforcement and fines for littering and flytipping, the introduction of litter-picking initiatives and greater provision of bins along waterways. This was combined with calls for campaigns educating people on the correct way to dispose of certain rubbish, such as wet wipes.

Rewilding and improving biodiversity was also referenced by multiple respondents. Suggestions included re-meandering rivers; reintroducing wildlife such as beavers; creating more ponds and wetlands; introducing flood meadows and improving bankside vegetation. Some responses also called for the removal of dangerous invasive species such as giant hogweed.

Some respondents highlighted the importance of partnership working in tackling environmental concerns. For example, there were calls on the Mayor to work with boroughs, the Government and water companies, and for schemes to engage with local community voluntary projects and schools.

Views on environmental improvements

“ We need to stop sewage being pumped into our river and have those responsible for misconnections held to account with a clear line of accountability between Thames Water, EA [Environment Agency], all councils, developers / builders. There are no clean rivers if there are no legal obligations / consequences in place. ”

“ It would be great if the [M]ayor could encourage/support the boroughs to work with Thames Water to urgently enforce the correction of misconnected properties that have been identif[i]ed by Thames water. ”

“ Some mitigation of pollution can be provided by installing wetland with reed beds which provide much needed filtration and also slow the flow of the river to lessen damage from flash floods. ”

“ Measures to stop excess water run off from streets and houses should be encouraged eg porous driveways, SUDS, tree planting and flowerbeds. ”

“ Many of our rivers need Rubbish Traps, Eel Passes, Wetland Areas, Natural Meanders, proper Path Access, an end to Misconnections, Road Run-Off Traps, increased Sewerage Capacity to Minimise CSOs, proper SuDS, better Planning Policy. ”

“ I would like to see more Sustainable Drainage Systems soaking up surface water and relieving pressure on London[']s sewer system and waterways. I would like to see a significant reduction in the dumping of sewage in London[']s waterways, including dealing with misconnections and fining water companies for dumping sewage. ”

The above quotes are from respondents' answers to the question, "The Mayor has said he is committed to cleaning up London's rivers and waterways. Please use the box below to share any environmental improvements you'd like to see to London's rivers and waterways. If you have a specific river or waterway in mind, please include its name." This allowed free text entry. Quotes are categorised by [pollution](#), [rewilding and wetlands](#), and [measures for reducing water run-off](#).

Other improvements

In response to a question asking about other desired improvements, many responses reiterated the calls for reducing water pollution covered in the previous question.

Other improvements that were identified by survey respondents included:

- improved paths and path maintenance
- greater information and education about London's waterways
- greater regulation of small boats
- more swimming spots
- reduced costs.

A significant number of respondents called for better paths alongside waterways. This included creating more joined up riverside paths and working with landowners where appropriate to facilitate this. Multiple people also emphasised the need for improved maintenance of existing paths in order to make them more accessible and to reduce overcrowding.

Many respondents also expressed a desire for greater information and education about London's waterways. It was suggested that this would generate greater buy-in for river improvement. This also included suggestions for more substantial engagement with local schools and community groups.

Other improvements

As well as educating people about the benefits of waterways, some respondents also requested clearer information on the risks associated with rivers. In some instances, respondents implied that better safety knowledge could reduce the need for physical barriers and open up access.

Respondents held varying levels of concern about the dangers associated with rivers and waterways. Some emphasised that they felt that a lack of knowledge about rivers and their risks posed a danger to members of the public. However, other responses indicated a frustration with the current level of regulation and requested fewer restrictions on swimming, especially if this would mean a reduced cost. Of those responses which indicated restrictions on swimming should be relaxed, the majority were from people who indicated that they frequently swam in London's rivers and waterways. Those responses which displayed greater concern about the dangers of the water tended to come from those who do not frequently swim in London's waterways currently.

Some responses called for greater restrictions on small boat hire, increased awareness in the motorboat community of their impact on other river users, and investment for the policing of unlicensed craft. There were also requests for more designated safe swimming areas to be created, and more safe access points for swimming and water sports, including piers, boardwalks or pontoons.

Views on other improvements

“ I'd like better signing and access with paths improved. In summer overcrowding can feel dangerous. ”

“ The development of a 'Swim Zone' app that would allow people to check where and when they can swim, and buddy with other swimmers. As our summers get hotter, there is the risk more people will end up swimming at the wrong locations and times. The 'Swim Zone' app would encourage them never to swim alone or when it is most dangerous. ”

“ Wildlife improvements and clear educational signage, people can't care about what they don't know about. ”

“ There must be greater awareness amongst the public about the dangers of the River Thames. I am shocked at how ignorant people are & often don't realise it's tidal for example so I wouldn't want to encourage them to get down closer to the river. ”

“ Erecting physical barriers around these places will not increase awareness of the dangers. There needs to be an educational programme around urban water. In other European countries, years of using their rivers for recreation has meant the sharing of water knowledge from generation to generation. ”

“ Assumption of access, not restriction or over regulation. Should be possible to have a "casual" swim and not pay through the nose at a "facility" like Hampstead Heath or Western Reservoir. ”

Views on other improvements

- “ Having designated areas along the Thames that are suitable for children, young people and their families. Affordable and accessible opportunities for people to participate in swimming lessons. ”
- “ Improvement of footpaths to allow access near waterways for walking running and cycling and those with disabilities. ”
- “ Higher restrictions on small hire boats, lots of companies operate on the Thames. And due to the hire rules the people operating themselves do not understand the safety and dangers when operating hire (power) boats. ”

- “ Remove fences to improve access. Renaturalise canalised sections. Listen to local groups on the ground . Signpost them, celebrate them. All London rivers should be walkable. ”
- “ There's an opportunity to connect with local schools and community groups to educate people and give them access to nature. The Brent River flows into the Thames opposite Kew Gardens, there is an opportunity for scientific and educational collaboration. ”

Final views

Respondents shared a range of final thoughts in the survey. Many of these reiterated the themes and issues raised throughout the other survey questions. Additional comments referenced [de-culverting rivers](#), [flooding and housing development](#), and [crime](#).

“ Another thing is that maybe thought can be put into bringing back, making visible again some or parts of streams-rivers which have gone underground over time. ”

“ We have a great network of rivers in London but a major problem with water quality which cannot be allowed to continue. Rivers are an important part of London's green lungs. They play a vital role in cooling the capital and with proper management will help relieve future flooding as part of a sponge city programme. The health and wellbeing aspects of our green and blue spaces are well documented. ”

“ Please also think about the safety of the waterways in terms of crime. Having them be better lit for the winter months might be an improvement. I tend to not walk near them in winter due to safety fears. ”

“ Housing needs to be pushed back away from streams and rivers. Ideally, make the whole waterway system a green corridor. The present trajectory of an increased amount of building on plots adjacent to waterways should be abandoned. It's not just a pollution issue but also a flooding issue. ”

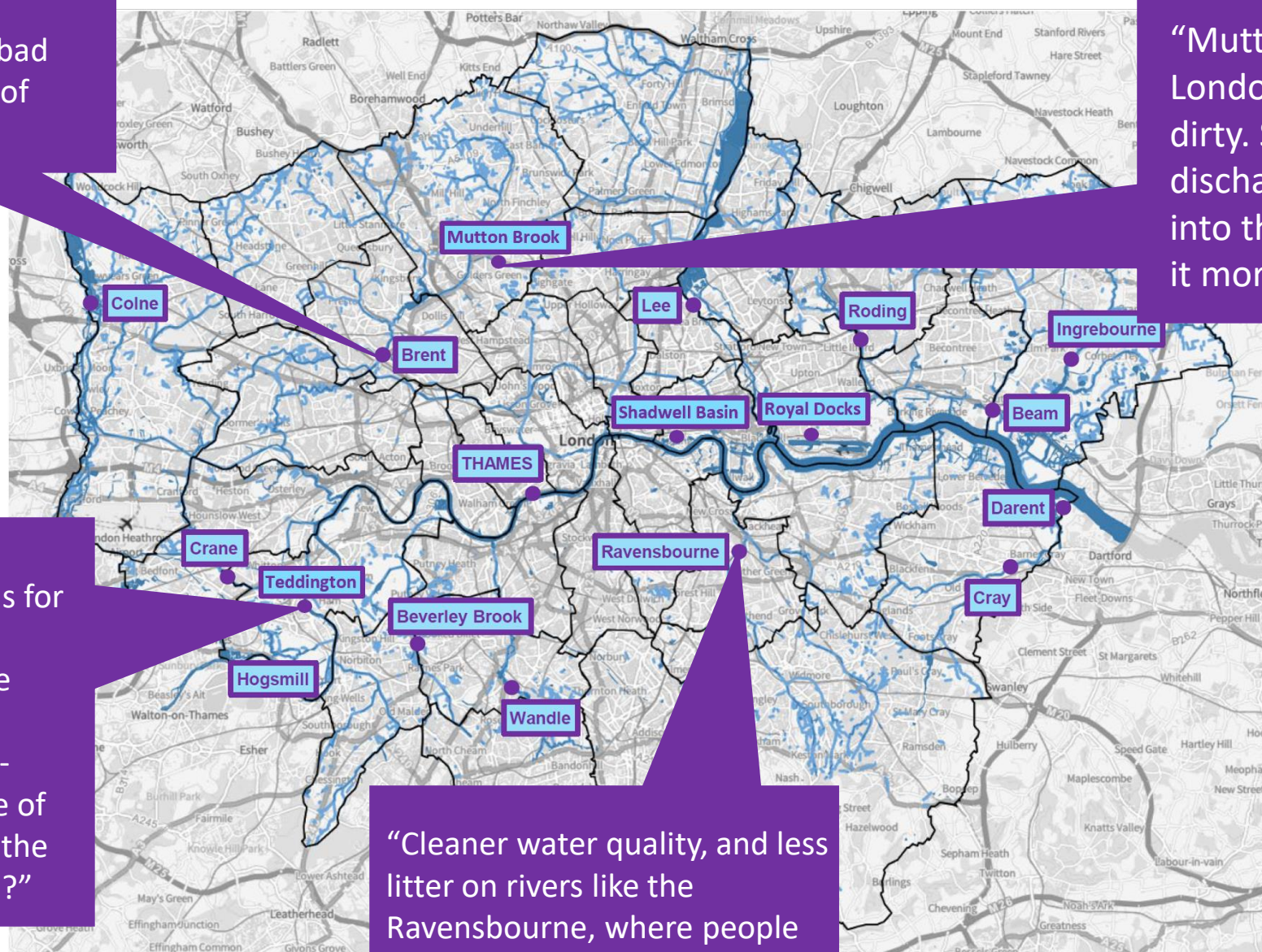
Named areas

Albert Island	Kingston upon Thames	River Peck
Barking	King George V Dock	River Pool
Barnes	Kingston upon Thames	River Roding
Barnet	Moselle Brook	River Thames
Beverley Brook	Mutton Brook	Roxburne in Harrow
Bonesgate	North Woolwich	Royal Docks
Burnt Oak Brook	Putney	Ruislip Lido
Chestnut Lake, Lee Valley Park	Pymmes	Serpentine Lakes
Dollis Brook	Quaggy River	Shadwell Basin, Thames
East London Waterworks Park	Radbourne Brook	Shepperton Lock
Edgware and Burnt Oak	Ravensbourne	Silk Stream
Excel Centre	Richmond	Southbank
Grand Union Canal	Rickmansworth Aquadrome	Sunbury Lock
Hackney and Brentford Canals	River Brent	Teddington Lock
Hampstead Ponds	River Colne	Teddington Reach
Hampton Court	River Crane	Twickenham
Haybourne Park Pond	River Cray	Wealdstone Brook
Hogsmill	River Lea	Willesden
Kew Gardens	River Lee	Yealding Brook
King George V Dock	River Mole	

These were areas of focus named by survey respondents. They do not provide a definitive or representative list.

"The river Brent often has sewage in it from bad plumbing. It has a lot of road run-off."

"Mutton brook in north London is polluted and dirty. Stopping the discharge of pollutants into the river would make it more attractive."



"I am concerned about Thames Water's proposals for a major extraction and replacement outfall in the Thames near Twickenham/Teddington - surely this flies in the face of any proposal to clean-up the river sufficient to swim in?"

"Cleaner water quality, and less litter on rivers like the Ravensbourne, where people could enter and swim if it were safe."