

SNOWDONIA NATIONAL PARK

EXPLORING VIEWS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES REGARDING THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF THE NATIONAL PARK, CHANGES DUE TO COVID-19 ON EVERYDAY LIFE AND POTENTIAL MANAGEMENT OPTIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Report prepared by

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INTRODUCTION

National Parks in the UK are important because of their high biodiversity and landscape value and also because of the socio-economic benefits they provide for people. Protected landscapes have a crucial role in improving physical and mental health, assisting in the improvement of people's wellbeing and protecting local social and cultural values. The COVID-19 pandemic during Spring 2020 has caused several countries across the world to impose restrictions on the movement and everyday activities of the public. Due to the seriousness of the situation in the UK several national parks have discouraged out of area users from accessing them, as the key message was to avoid all non-essential travel. The key priority of National Park Management Authorities was to protect the health and safety of local communities and also their members of staff. Although very limited evidence exists, these restrictions are expected to have changed the way local communities interact with the natural environment. As lockdown restrictions are currently being eased across the UK (June 2020) several National Park Authorities are taking the necessary steps in order for people to safely enjoy again these protected landscapes in the coming months.

In order to explore these changes a questionnaire was distributed during June 2020 to local communities living inside or near Snowdonia National Park. The survey was part of the FIDELIO project funded by a European Research Council grant. The aim of the questionnaire was to explore: a) People's views of Snowdonia National Park, b) The impact of COVID-19 on everyday life and c) People's opinion on potential options for managing the National Park during the pandemic.

Snowdonia (Eryri) was designated as a National Park in 1951 and covers 2,132 square km (823 square miles). It is comprised of a diverse mix of landscapes many of which are highly valued for their natural beauty and tranquillity. The National Park is probably most well-known for its mountain ranges of which the Snowdon massif rises to the highest peak in England and Wales, Yr Wyddfa, at 3560ft (1085m). Today, Snowdonia National Park is home to approximately 26,000 people, nearly 60% of whom use the Welsh language as their primary form of communication. The area has 24 small villages and 5 towns and has recently experienced its highest visitor figures of 4.48 million in 2018. Yr Wyddfa itself has experienced increasing popularity each year, where 2019 saw the numbers walking its paths reaching nearly 600,000. Consequently, a large proportion of the local economy relies on tourism.

In this brief report we present the first results from the survey. The report is also available via the website of the project: <https://www.fidelio.landecon.cam.ac.uk>. For further information please contact us at: fidelio@hermes.cam.ac.uk

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF METHODS

The research team sent 3000 postcards to a randomly selected sample of households in the area inviting them to participate in the survey. This was estimated to be just over 10% of the total population. The survey was also advertised online via social media and informal networks with the help of the Snowdonia National Park Authority.



**AROLWG PARC CENEDLAETHOL ERYRI
SNOWDONIA NATIONAL PARK SURVEY**

Rydym yn gofyn i bobl sy'n byw yn yr ardal hon lenwi arolwg byr ar-lein
We are asking people who live in this area to fill in this short online survey

**I rannu eich barn, ewch i:
To share your views go to:
www.fidelio.landecon.cam.ac.uk/snowdonia**

The poster features a scenic landscape of Snowdonia National Park with green hills and a lake. At the bottom, there are logos for FIDELIO, the European Union, ERC, Snowdonia National Park, and the University of Cambridge Conservation Research Institute.

The questionnaire comprised of four main parts. The first part explored issues around social impacts of Snowdonia National Park both before and during the pandemic. The second part explored options for managing the 're-opening' of the park and life after the peak of the pandemic for local communities. The third section focused on a variety of social aspects, including environmental values, social norms and trust in institutions. In the final section of the paper demographics data were collected.

In total 740 responses were included in the final analysis after excluding entries with missing values. 106 came from the link advertised in the postcards and the remaining answers were from the link advertised via social media. It is highly possible that people were informed of the survey via both methods. The demographic characteristics of the final sample are presented in the last section of the report along with possible limitations. SPSS 26.0 was used for data analysis. A detailed report regarding differences depending on the geographical location of the respondents will follow.

RESULTS

SOCIAL IMPACTS OF SNOWDONIA NATIONAL PARK IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS

Overall living inside or near Snowdonia National Park has had a positive impact for local communities. The most positive impacts reported were related to a 'sense of feeling connected to nature', being involved in recreational activities related to the National Park landscapes and also on quality of life. Impact on personal income is positive but to a lower extent compared to other impact categories (Figure 1).

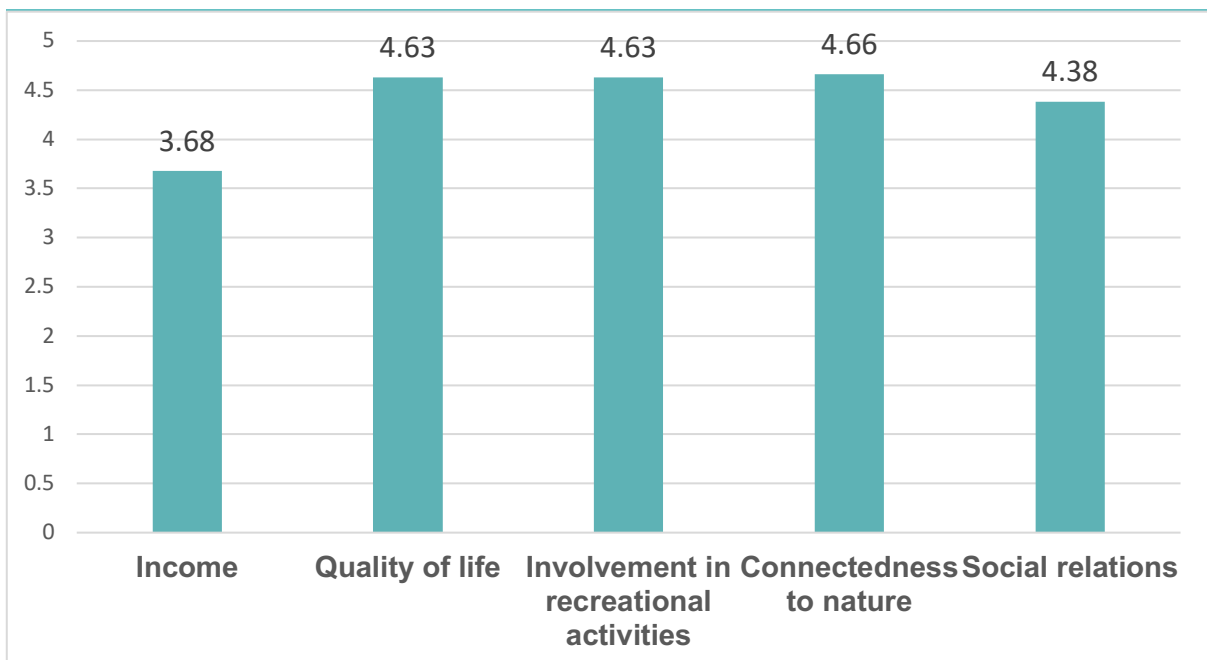


Figure 1. Perceived social impacts of Snowdonia National Park in the past five years
(Mean values, Range 1-5: 1 representing negative impact and 5 positive impact)

IMPACT OF COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

In March 2020 new regulations came into force in Wales limiting people's movement and everyday activities due to COVID-19. Participants were asked about the impact of the wider COVID-19 restrictions in their everyday lives. From our analysis it is evident that the new restrictions have influenced significantly local communities in Snowdonia National Park with a mixture of positive and negative impacts (Figure 2). Most positive impacts are that **walking and cycling paths are not as busy** as usual and that **the number of visitors has been reduced**. Most negative impacts are on **income** and **not being able to socialise with other people as before** (Figure 2). In the open-ended questions some additional examples given by respondents included:

- Lack of overcrowding in the towns, villages and in the countryside
- Being able to enjoy the local countryside without crowds
- Absence of poor behaviour by some visitors
- Greater opportunity for local people to interact including greater use of the Welsh language

More negatively, the 'Stay Local' and '5-mile rule' in Wales has for some sharpened a keen sense of who is local and who is not, which for some has increased social tension.

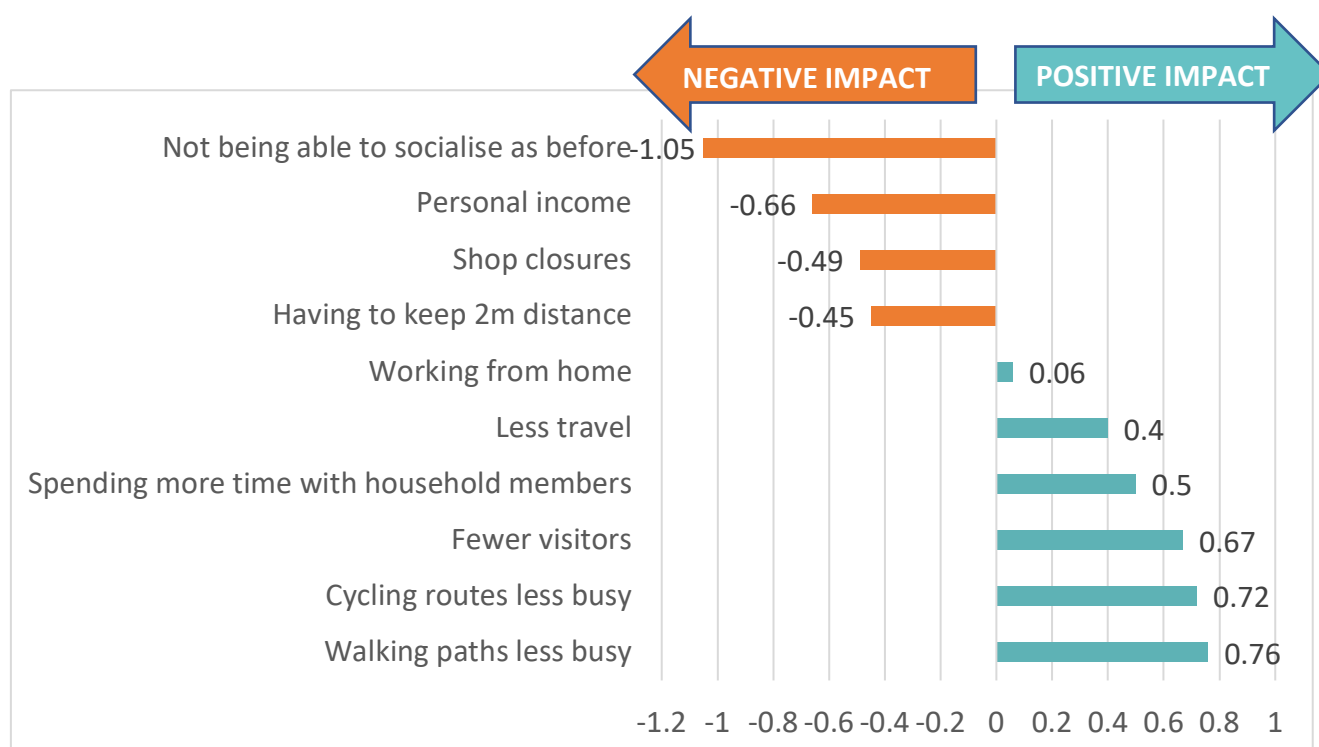


Figure 2. Life during lockdown: Positive and negative aspects
(Mean values, range -2,2: negative values representing negative impacts, positive values representing positive impacts)

Participants were also asked how the **restrictions in access to the National Park for visitors and locals** have affected their everyday lives. **Overall these restrictions had a negative impact across several issues, especially personal income and involvement in recreational activities** (Figure 3). Social relations however were improved and this is possibly due to the lack of visitors in the area allowing local people to enjoy nature and meet other local residents while being outdoors.

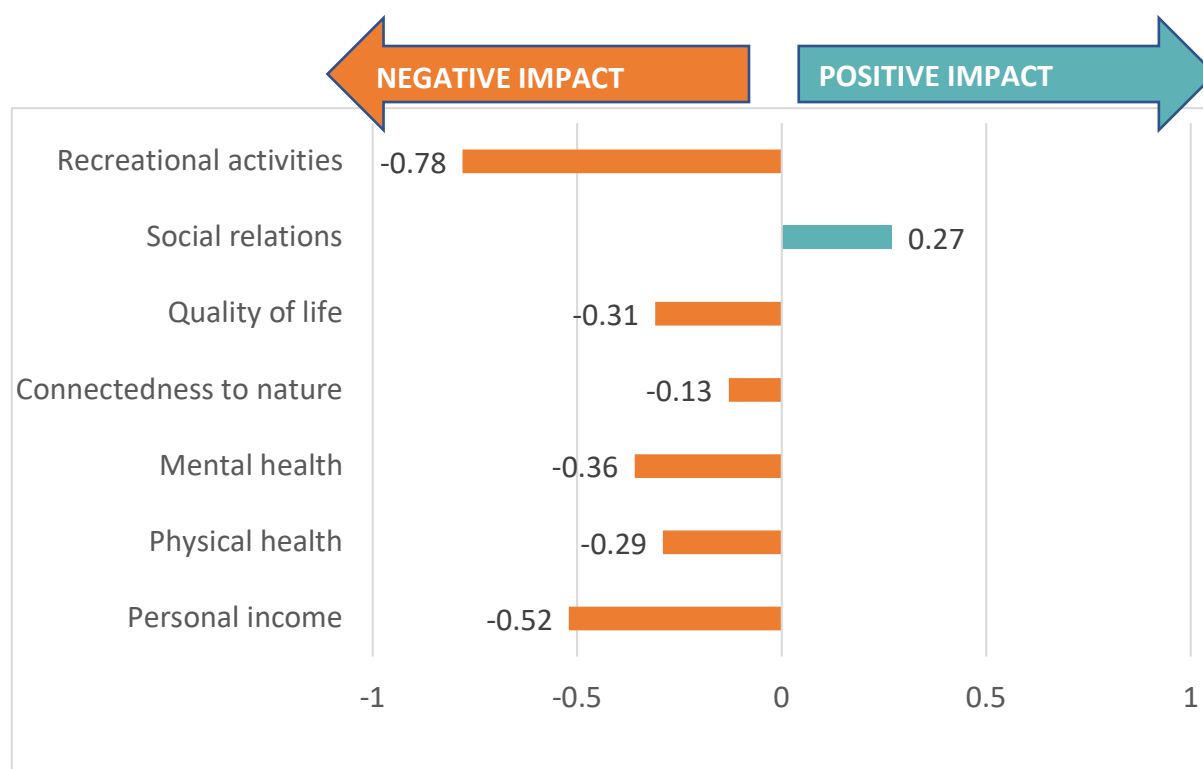


Figure 3. Impact of COVID-19 restrictions linked with the National Park (Mean values, range -2, 2: negative values representing negative impacts, positive values representing positive impacts, Question: *Could you please state below how the closure of the National Park has affected you regarding...*)

When people were asked how the fact that they live near the National Park has influenced them during the lockdown a very large percentage stated that living near the National Park is *important* or *very important* to them (54.8% and 23% respectively, Moderately important: 12.8%, Of little importance: 5.6%, Unimportant: 3.9%). Main reasons for the high level of importance is the opportunity to easily access outdoors for walking, climbing and cycling while the area is very quiet due to the low number of visitors. People are also strongly attached to the area. When participants were asked to state on a 1-7 scale how much they agree or disagree with the phrase 'Snowdonia National Park means a lot to me', the average score was 6.37 (out of 7). Also, 45.5% of respondents had contributed as a volunteer in an activity assisting in the protection of the National Park in the past 5 years.

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Respondents were asked to state their preferences regarding four different options in managing the park in the near future during the COVID-19 pandemic. We would like to note that this section was drafted in May 2020 and was therefore relevant at that moment in time.

- **OPTION A:** Phased re-opening of areas and facilities, from the least visited and where spread of the virus is low risk, to the most visited/popular areas and facilities where spread of the virus is higher risk
- **OPTION B:** Allow access to the National Park only for people living locally for now
- **OPTION C:** Allow access to local residents and only to a limited number of out of area users every day
- **OPTION D:** Allow unrestricted access to everyone

A gradual reopening could either take place in terms of geographical phases (specific zones and areas of the National Park reopen first – Option A), or in terms of travel areas from which visitors are allowed to come (Option B). The former does not discriminate against where visitors come from but Option B does. Options C and D are essentially related to rationing of access for non-local visitors, with Option C again raising issues of discrimination (local/non-local), which is avoided by Option D.

Preferences for these options were measured in a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*, Table 1). **The most preferred options is the (geographical) phased re-opening of the National Park** (Option A) followed by keeping restrictions for out of area users in the near future (Option B).

Table 1. Preferences for different management options during COVID-19

	Strongly disagree (%)	Somewhat disagree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Somewhat agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Phased reopening	11.8	13.8	7.5	40.2	26.7
Restrictions for out of area users	15.8	16.7	5.7	29.1	32.7
Access to locals & limited number of out of area users	29.9	28.6	11.5	21.3	8.6
Open to everyone	44.4	19.5	6.9	15.7	13.6

Phased re-opening

The most preferred option according to the study is a phased re-opening of Snowdonia National Park. In total 66.9% of respondents *somewhat agree* or *strongly agree* with option A. A large number of comments were received regarding this option. Here we have categorised the main concerns mentioned by participants:

- **Feasibility:** this option is spatially relatively challenging to manage and respondents noted that it would require significant monitoring. Participants questioned whether resources are available for this.
- **Risk of confusion:** The different guidelines between Wales and England regarding how far people are allowed to travel and for what purpose have already caused significant confusion in both Wales and England. As this option would be relatively complex (some areas and facilities open, others not) some people felt that trying to communicate which areas are open would be challenging and might cause greater confusion. Respondents noted that people would just hear that the Park was open and arrive without any idea of which areas were open or closed, causing congestion and confusion.
- **Overcrowding:** A large number of respondents felt that this option would not solve potential problems with overcrowding. Incidents of overcrowding would happen in areas which will gradually open. So if less popular areas were opened first, crowds would merely be shifted to those areas, which were well liked by locals because they were quiet.
- **Facilities:** Some respondents also questioned whether these 'least visited places' had the necessary facilities to potentially cope with a large number of visitors.
- **Risk of accidents:** Some respondents also mentioned whether opening the least popular paths would mean that visitors could access areas which are more difficult to walk/climb, thus increasing the risk of accidents.
- **Physical and mental health:** Overall there were several comments regarding locals being prioritised and given access to local paths which are not known to the wider public outside the area. This is also linked with concerns about the impact that current closures have had on physical and mental health on local communities.

Overall, Option A made intuitive sense to many respondents, and did not raise equity issues over who has the right to access the Park, but they commonly saw many location-related practical problems that might create a series of issues that would need to be managed.

Allow only locals to access the area for now

This option was the second preferred one. 61.8% of participants somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the National Park remaining open only for locals for now, though it was generally recognised that this could only be a temporary phase prior to full reopening (Option D). A key issue mentioned by a large number of participants is how one can define locals and also that since Snowdonia is a National Park it should be open for everyone. Restricting access to certain people might result in social divisions and conflicts between different groups of users. Despite these concerns, several respondents felt that this approach would be easier to manage under the current emergency regulations and circumstances and thus would cause less confusion. From the responses we received, it seems that most people feel this could only be a short-term option as the economy needs to restart with visitors coming back in the

area in the next months. Thus, respondents currently enjoy the 'quiet' park but they understand that in the long-term this would not be feasible to continue.

Option B is in effect the situation during April-June 2020 as a result of the Welsh government's 'Stay Local' message and associated '5-mile rule'. It did therefore discriminate between locals and non-locals, and many respondents of course immediately raised the issue of who would be 'in' and who is 'out', and noted that this was already causing conflict and problems in the local communities. A considerable number of comments referred to 'vigilante-ism', self-appointed policing of travel, and conflict and aggression between locals and (often perceived) non-locals, some of whom did in fact live in the area. Some related having seen or experienced very sharp and aggressive incidents that suggest that this option is not politically unproblematic as well as being practically challenging, given the limited State resources to formally police access.

On philosophical issues of rights, people fell on a spectrum from those who saw the Park and its associated benefits as a 'National' asset and resisted the idea of excluding and discriminating on principle, to locals who saw it as 'their landscape'. The former saw full reopening as soon as possible as a matter of principle,

Given that this option is a temporary measure, a key issue is the timetable for increasing the distance from which people are allowed to come. Whether people wanted the National Park opened as fast as possible or favoured delay was influenced by:

- Dependence on tourism for income (favouring rapid re-opening)
- Fear of the virus (favouring slower reopening)

with respondents commonly recognising that this was a balance that had to be struck. Some feared that restricted access to foreign holidays from the UK meant that the peak season would be busier than usual and so either they would want reopening to be delayed until the end of summer, or at least they would like a period to enjoy the National Park to themselves and the unique atmosphere that the closure has created before reopening.

As regards access for locals, many respondents were unhappy that some areas of the National Park have been closed, even to locals, despite the Wales 5-mile rule, which means that in theory only locals can visit currently in any case. So some locals currently have good access to their immediate local area but others don't. Indeed, some thought that for Option B, a distance related restriction like the 5-mile rule seemed the most sensible way to decide where people should be allowed to visit. However, this is a Welsh Government rule. If the Welsh Government relaxed the rule, something over which the National Park will have limited influence, instantly many people would be able come long distances and the National Park would be fully open by definition (Option D). Some respondents therefore liked Option B but felt it could only work in conjunction with broader regional or Wales-only travel restrictions.

Restrict the number of out of area users

This option was not favoured by a large number of respondents with only 29.9% of respondents stating that they somewhat agree or strongly agree with this option. Main concerns about this option is that it would be very difficult to enforce it and that it might also

lead to divisions between groups of users. If such an option was adopted then it would need careful design of new tools such as pre-booking for parking and recreation activities.

Many respondents thought the message would go out nationally that the Park is open and people would travel there without checking on any restrictions. The numbers arriving would exceed the rationed capacity and create chaotic situations. Some locals liked the idea of rationing as they felt over-tourism was a problem generally, others were opposed in principle to rationing. Overall however, the great majority thought it unworkable, as booking systems would need to be implemented and policed. For a temporary measure prior to full reopening this would therefore be a complex and expensive option for which infrastructure and funds might not exist.

Park open to everyone

This option was the least favoured with 29.3% of respondents stating that they somewhat agree or strongly agree with this option for now (June 2020). Option D is the least complex as it doesn't involve any special interim management, just a return to normal but here responses were polarised again between those emphasising the economy and dependence on tourism, pushing for immediate or rapid reopening, and fear of COVID health impacts, favouring delay. Many respondents recognised the balance between the two so the only decision left was that of when exactly would be the right time to release existing restrictions (approximately Option B) and move to Option D.

According to participants, whilst full reopening is inevitable, the full re-opening of the park would require careful consideration and there are concerns that it might be too soon to do this. From those who somewhat agreed/ strongly agreed with this option 26.3 % considered that this should happen in June and 39.4% in July. Respondents also emphasised that such a decision would require careful consideration regarding the balance between financial benefits, mental and physical health of locals and risk of COVID-19 infections. According to some respondents, this option would also require very careful management of the park to avoid overcrowding incidents putting also additional pressure on mountain rescue capacity.

We should note that since this questionnaire was issued, Welsh Government has announced that there will be a blanket lifting of travel restrictions once scientific and medical evidence allows, which is currently hoped to be 6th July. Therefore Option D is ultimately the most manageable and realistic option for the Park Authority.

PREFERENCES FOR POLICY TOOLS TO MANAGE OVERCROWDING IN SNOWDONIA NATIONAL PARK

Preferences for a number of policy tools managing overcrowding were also explored in the questionnaire. Most preferred tools were a mobile application alerting people of overcrowding incidents, restrict access to certain paths and develop a mobile app so that people can report irresponsible behaviour. Least favoured options were a reduction in car spaces and temperature screening (Figure 4).

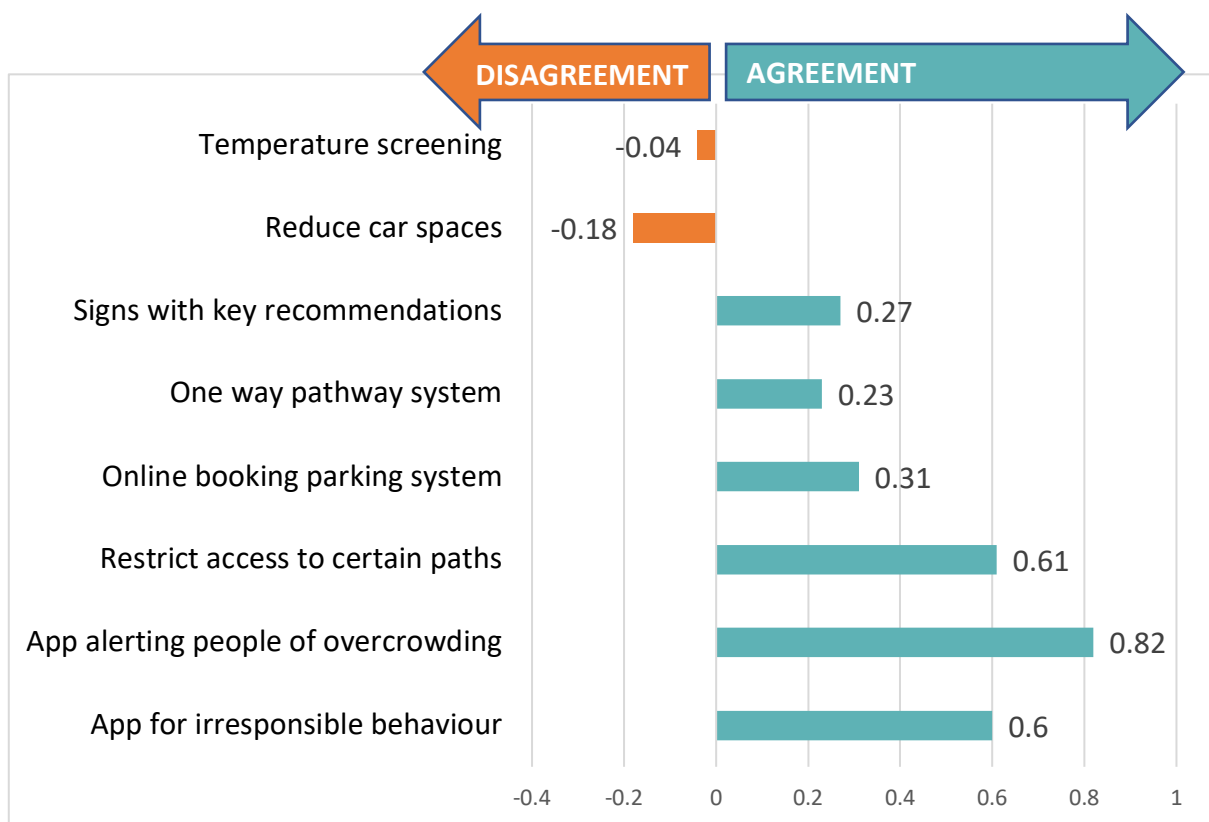
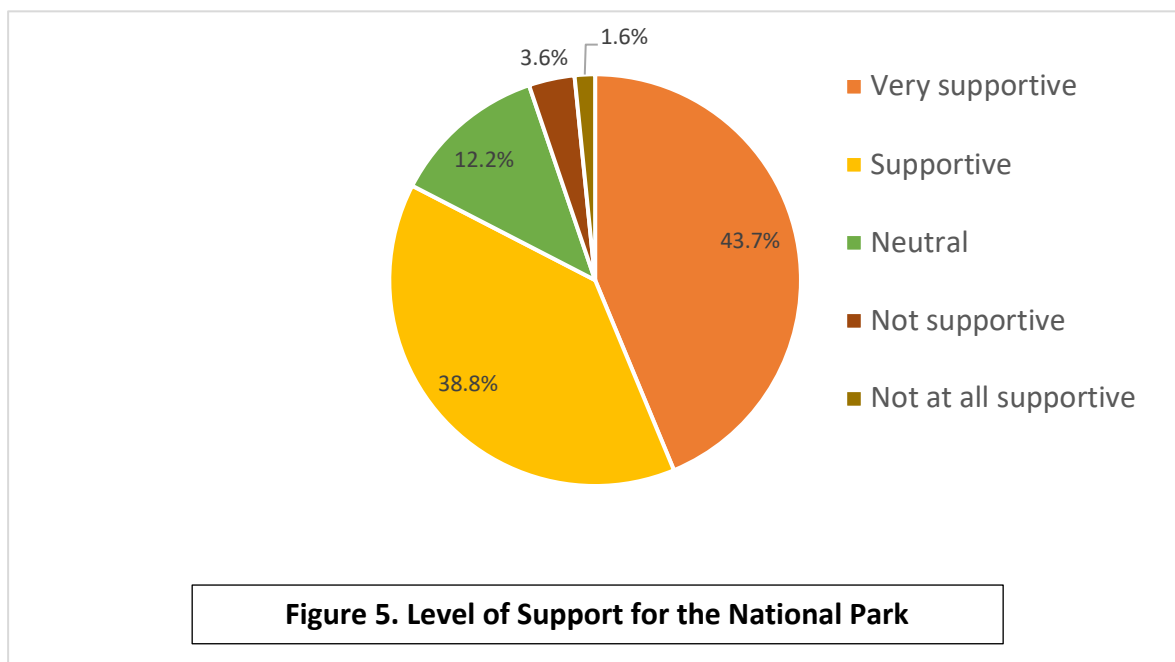


Figure 4. Preferences for policy tools managing overcrowding
(Mean values, Positive values represent tendency to agree, Negative values represent tendency to disagree)

SUPPORT FOR THE NATIONAL PARK AND TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

The level of support for the work of the National Park is very high with over 80% of respondents stating that they are *supportive* or *very supportive* (Figure 5). Similarly, the level of trust in Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA) is relatively high with a mean score of 3.42 measured in a 5-point scale (5 was the highest level of trust). SNPA is the most trusted institution compared to Local councils (2.80 out of 5), the Welsh Government (2.85 out of 5) and the UK Government (1.99 out of 5).



SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS AND LIMITATIONS

As with the majority of online surveys there are certain limitations that need to be taken into consideration when reading these results:

- People who were unable to access the internet have been excluded from the study as it was distributed online. This might also explain the low percentage in the over 75s age category.
- There is a relatively high percentage of people with higher education degrees in the sample and also of higher income categories (Table 2). This is possibly due to the method of distribution.
- The research team will proceed in further analysis in order to cross check differences between the different sample categories including geographical location.

Table 2. Sample characteristics

Age category	%
18-25	2.4
26-35	16.2
36-45	20.5
46-55	27.7
56-65	22.3
66-75	9.8
76-85	0.2
85+	0.2
Gender	%
Male	50%
Female	50%
Education	%
Primary school level education completed/No formal qualifications completed	1.1
Entry level qualifications	0.2
Secondary education level qualifications (e.g. GCE O Level, CSE, GCSE, NVQ/BTEC Levels 1-2)	6.3
Sixth form level (e.g. A/AS Levels, NVQ/BTEC Level 3)	10.9
Further/ Higher education	45.9
Postgraduate degree (e.g. Masters, PhD. NVQ Level 5)	35.6
Income	%
No income	2.6
up to £25,000	23.3
£25000- up to £50,000	35.9
£50,000-£70,000	17.2
over £70,000	9.6