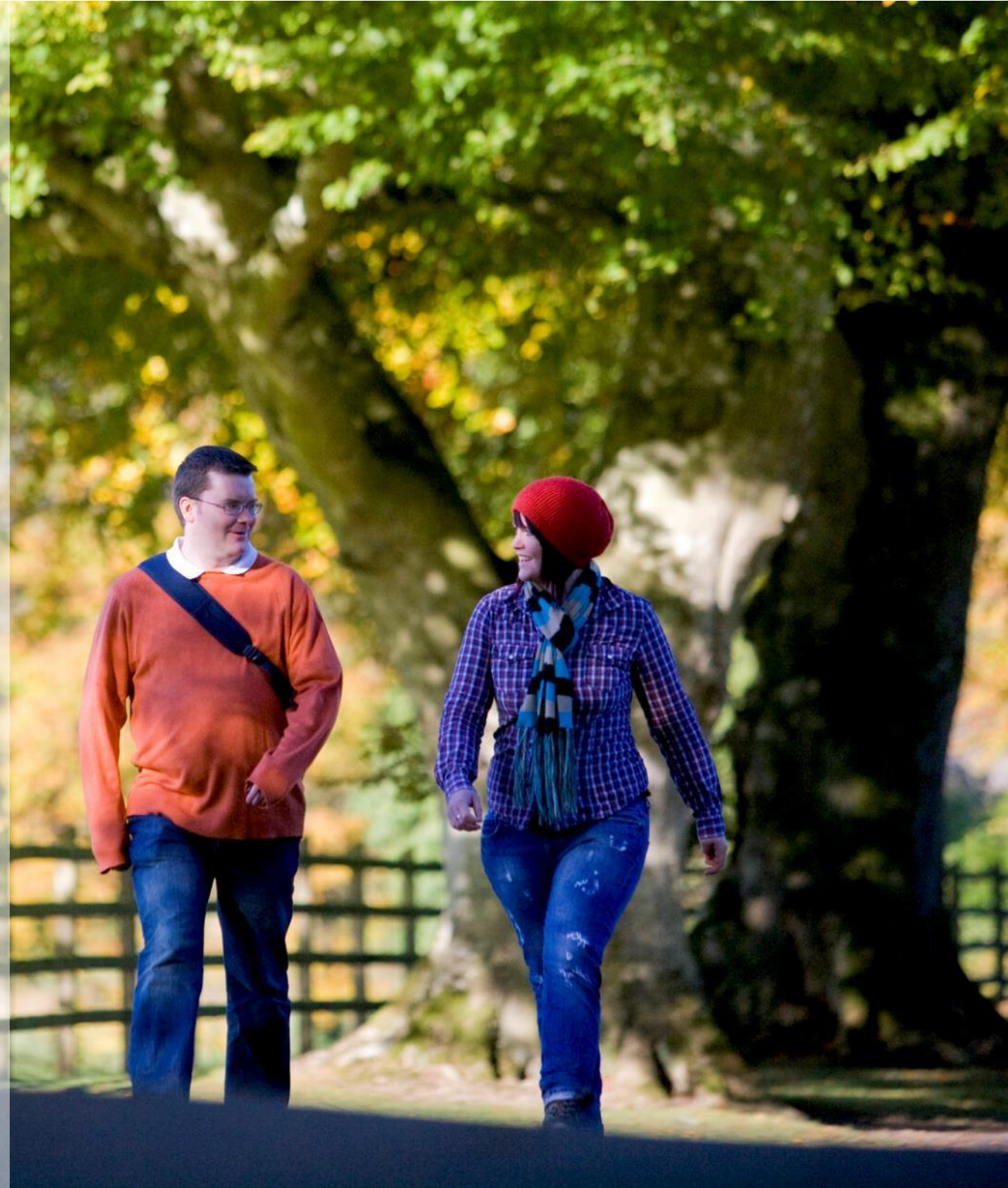


Engaging with the Outdoors during COVID-19 Lockdown in Northern Ireland

Survey of the Northern Ireland
population May 2020



Executive summary

A survey of the Northern Ireland population

- This survey used an online approach to interview residents of Northern Ireland from the 4th to 11th May 2020.
- The survey measured how the population was engaging with the outdoors during the COVID-19 lockdown period, the benefits obtained, issues encountered and expectations for the future.

Increase in outdoor visits

- Nearly half (47%) of respondents spent more free time outdoors during lockdown than they did at the same time of year in 2019.
- 63% reported going outdoors for exercise every day during lockdown, a much higher proportion than the 28% reported in the annual household survey (CHS 2017/18).

Attitude to local trails opportunities

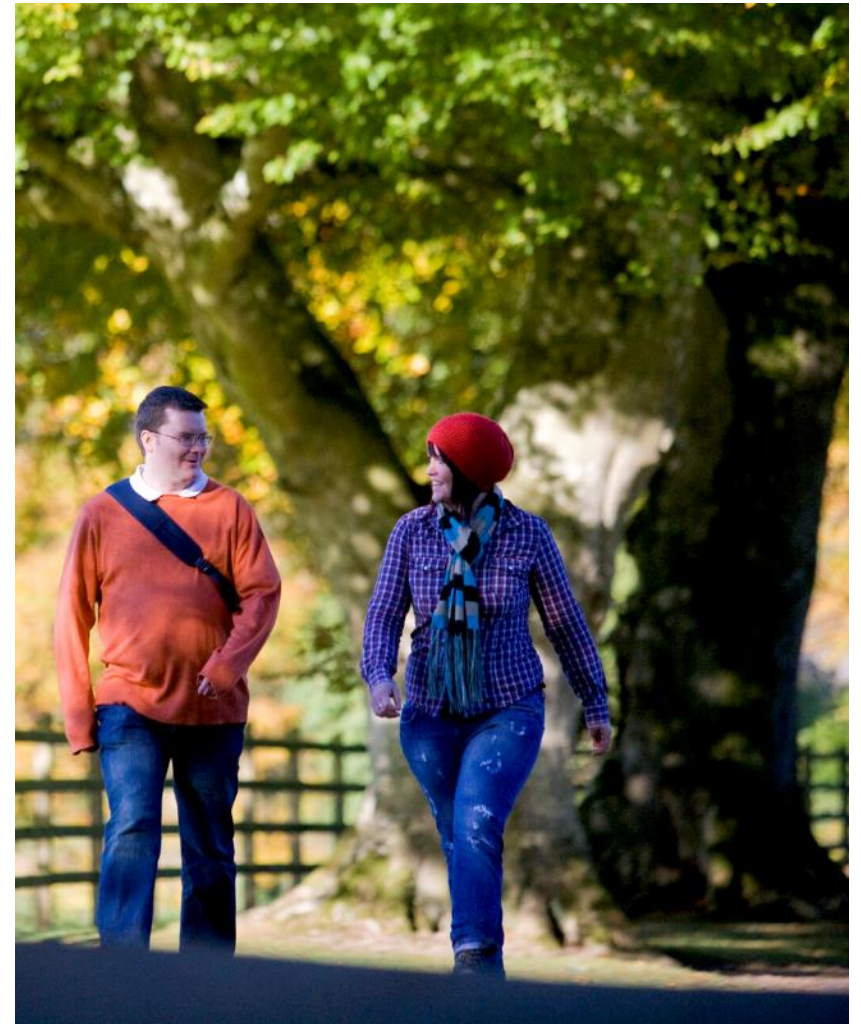
- During lockdown, participation in walks which start and finish at home, walking on roads/roadside pavements and watching and listening to wildlife increased the most. Conversely, the lockdown restrictions reduced participation in certain activities including visiting parks, countryside and coast.
- 52% of respondents went for a walk or run that was all on-road during the lockdown period.
- 44% reported having to walk on roads and roadside pavements due to a lack of off-road trails.
- 36% do not believe that there are off-road trails within easy walking distance from their house - these people visited the outdoors less frequently than those who believe there are off-road trails within easy walking distance from their house.

Mental and physical health benefits

- The benefits of spending time outdoors during lockdown are significant. 84% reported feeling physical health benefits and 90% reported benefits related to mental health and wellbeing. Also over three quarters agreed that time outdoors has made them feel closer to nature (79%).
- These benefits were strongest amongst people who visited the outdoors most often during lockdown and people with quality trails and greenspaces close to home.

Expected increase in outdoor visits after lockdown

- About half (51%) of respondents expect to spend more of their free time outdoors than they did pre-lockdown, once social distancing measures are softened.
- After lockdown people would most like to be able to visit local parks, the countryside and coast, to walk on off-road trails and to spend time with family and friends.
- There is significant support amongst respondents for the development and improvements of walking and cycling trails.



Introduction



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Background

Outdoor recreation plays a vital role in Northern Ireland, bringing benefits to society by contributing in a wide range of areas, including health and well-being, social inclusion, community cohesion, environmental protection, rural development and economic development.

These benefits support the work undertaken by a range of organisations from government departments and local authorities to organisations in the voluntary sector.

The survey was undertaken between 4th and 11th May 2020 to understand how the population of Northern Ireland was engaging with the outdoors during the COVID-19 lockdown period which was implemented on 23rd March.

Areas investigated included the following:

- Outdoor exercise during the period of lockdown including frequency of time outdoors and activities undertaken.
- Benefits obtained from time spent outdoors.
- Issues encountered while spending time outdoors.
- How levels of participation in outdoor activities compared with the same period in 2019, overall and by activity and place.
- Expectations for future behaviours once lockdown restrictions are eased.
- The impact of having trails and greenspaces close to home on these behaviours and attitudes.

Background

An online survey method was used with the invitation to participate shared by Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland and partner organisations from 4th to 11th May 2020.

A total of **1,487 responses** were obtained and data was then weighted by sex and age to make it more representative of the total population (using latest NISRA mid-year population estimates).

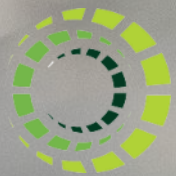
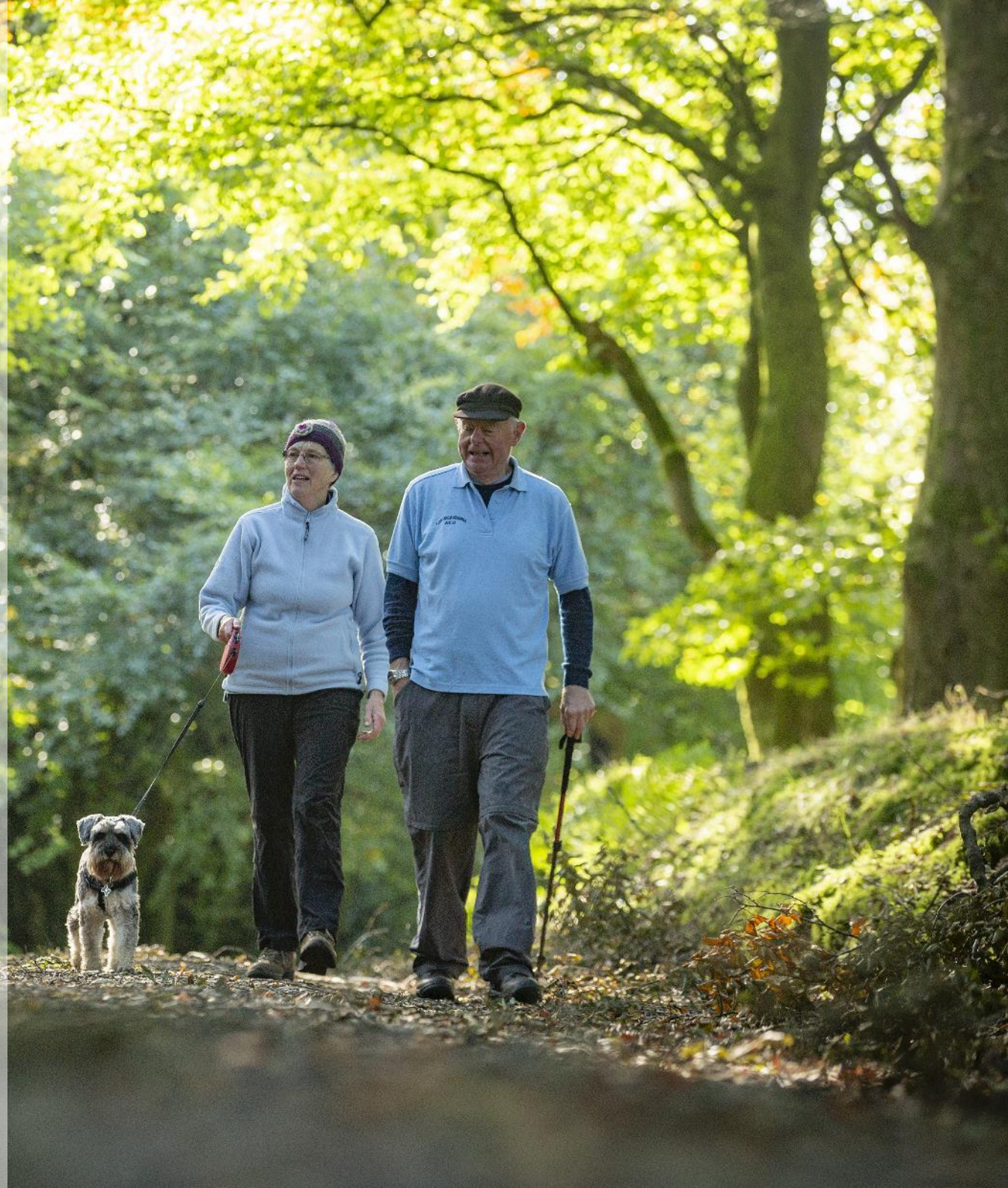
However, even with these weights applied it should be borne in mind that the self-selecting sampling approach may result in some biases such as an under-representation of residents of the most deprived areas.

Key details on the sample profile are show below.

Table 1 – Sample profile

Gender	N	Index of Multiple Deprivation	N
Male	493	Bottom 15%	38
Female	1,002	Mid 16% to 84%	626
Age		Top 15%	204
		Urban/ rural classification	
16-34	180	Rural	386
35-54	785	Mixed urban/rural	92
55-64	333	Urban	590
65+	193		

Results in detail



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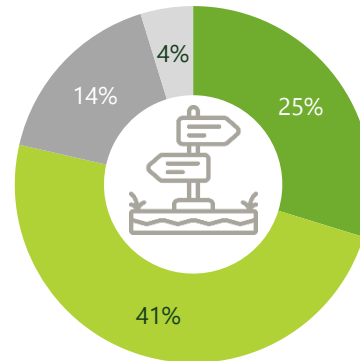
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Many respondents do not have easy access to off-road trails or greenspaces

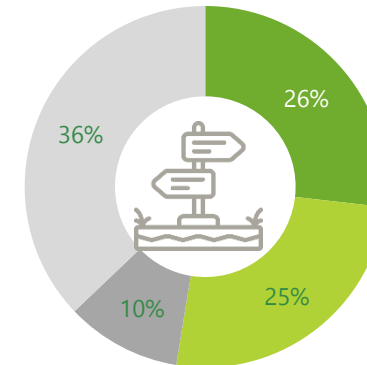
- To provide context to the questions regarding lockdown, respondents were asked to rate their local path/trails and greenspaces.
- 36% disagreed with the statement '*local off-road trails for walking and running are within easy walking distance from my house*'.
- Disagreement was highest amongst the following groups:
 - Residents of rural areas (51%)
 - Women – 40%
 - People with children under 16 (40%).

Figure 1 – Accessibility and quality of local off-road trails & local greenspaces

Trails of a high enough standard

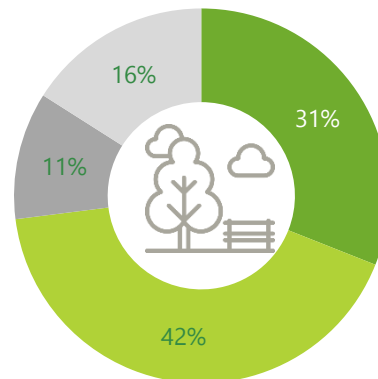


Trails within easy walking distance

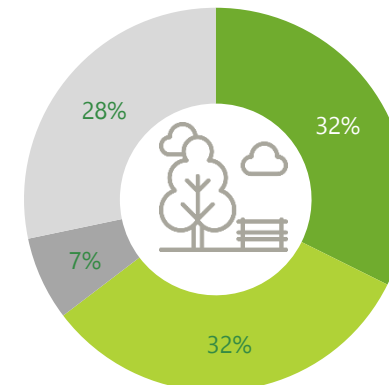


- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree

Greenspaces of a high enough standard



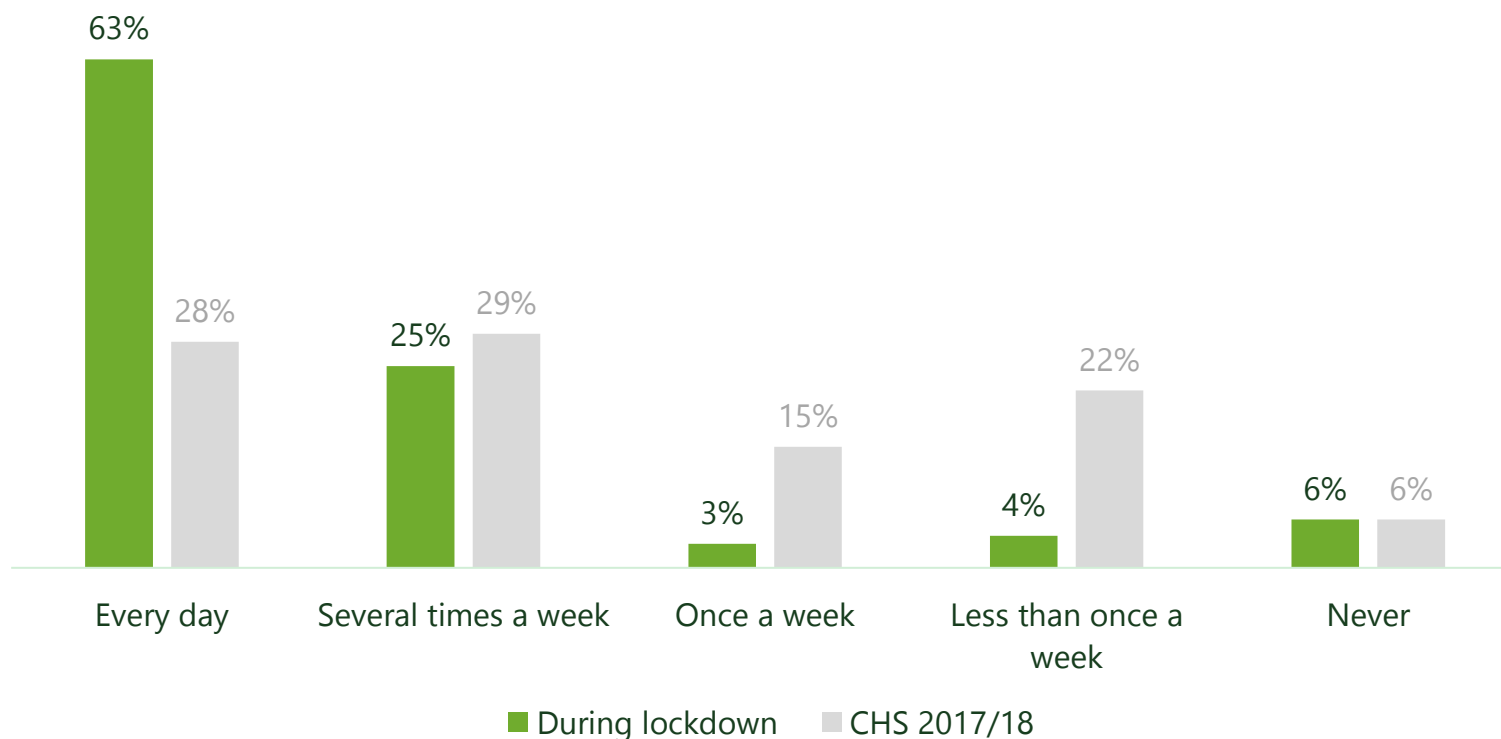
Greenspaces within easy walking distance



During lockdown over three in five respondents spent free time outdoors every day

- 63% reported spending their free time outdoors every day while a further 25% visited several times a week.
- Conversely just 6% of people stated that they had not spent any free time outdoors during the lockdown period.
- Comparing these results with a similar measure in the 2017/18 Continuous Household Survey suggests that frequency of visits to the outdoors was much higher than normal during lockdown.

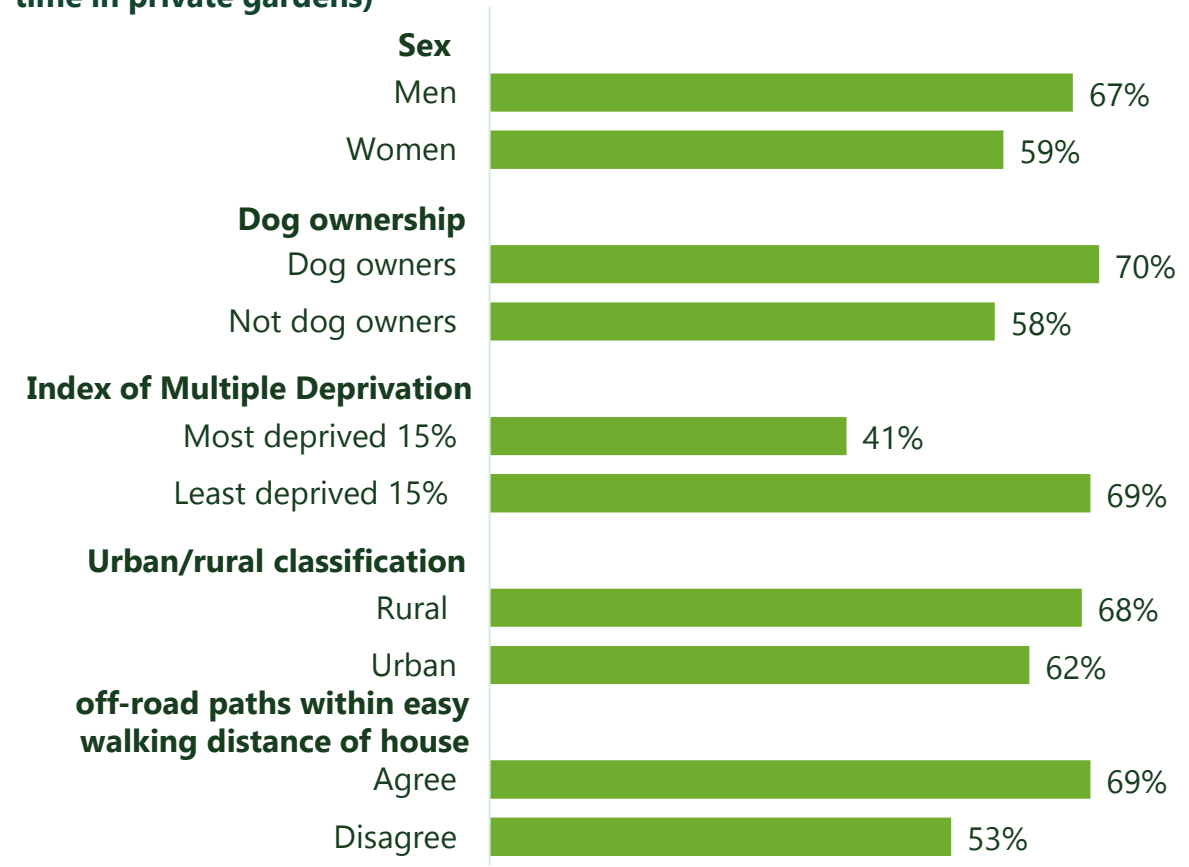
Figure 2 – Frequency of spending ‘free time’ outdoors during lockdown period (not including time in private gardens)



People with easy access to off-road trails were significantly more likely to spend time outdoors every day

- While an average of 63% of respondents had visited the outdoors every day, this proportion was higher amongst the following groups:
 - men
 - dog owners
 - residents of the least deprived areas
 - people with off-road trails within easy walking distance of their house.

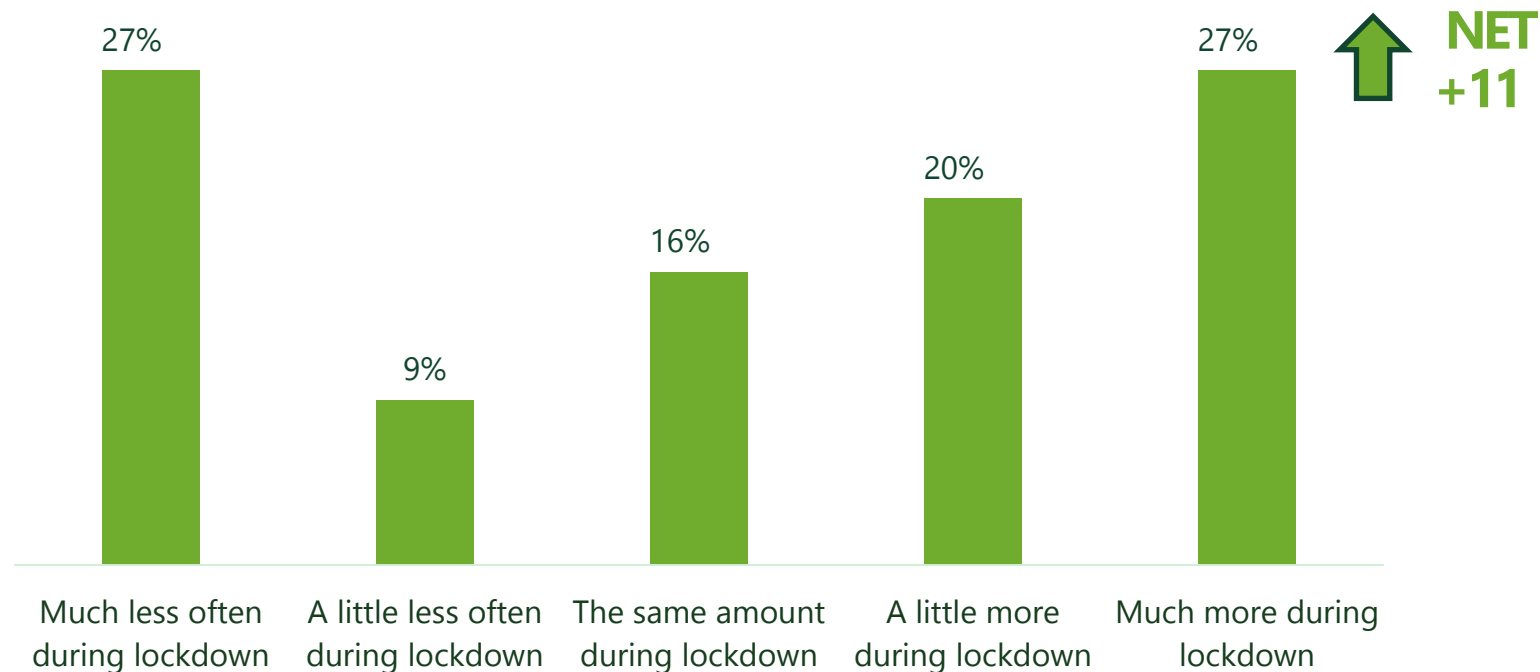
Figure 3 – Spending ‘free time’ outdoors every day by population group (not including time in private gardens)



Nearly half of respondents reported visiting the outdoors more often than normal during lockdown

- Lockdown had a varied impact on behaviours with 47% reporting spending more free time outdoors than the same time last year while 36% reduced the amount of time they spent outdoors (27% to a significant extent).
- The net change in visit taking can be estimated by subtracting the total proportion of people reporting taking fewer visits from the total taking more visits. This suggests an overall increase of +11 points.

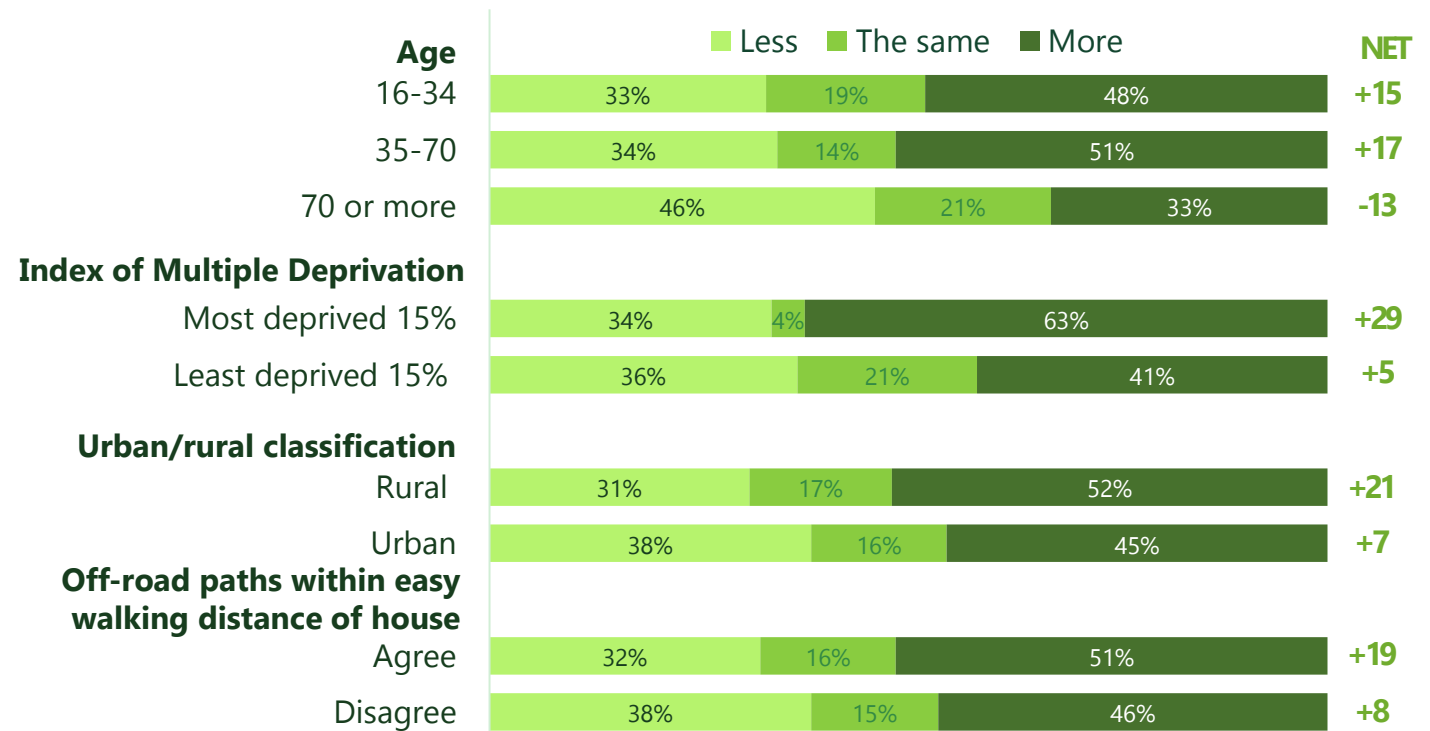
Figure 4 – Change in free time spent outdoors during lockdown compared to same time last year



Time outdoors increased most amongst residents of deprived areas, rural residents and those with accessible off-road trails

- Figure 5 illustrates how time outdoors changed during lockdown amongst different population groups, including the net change for each group.
- This analysis shows that the greatest increases were recorded amongst:
 - residents of rural areas
 - people with off-road trails within easy walking distance of their home.

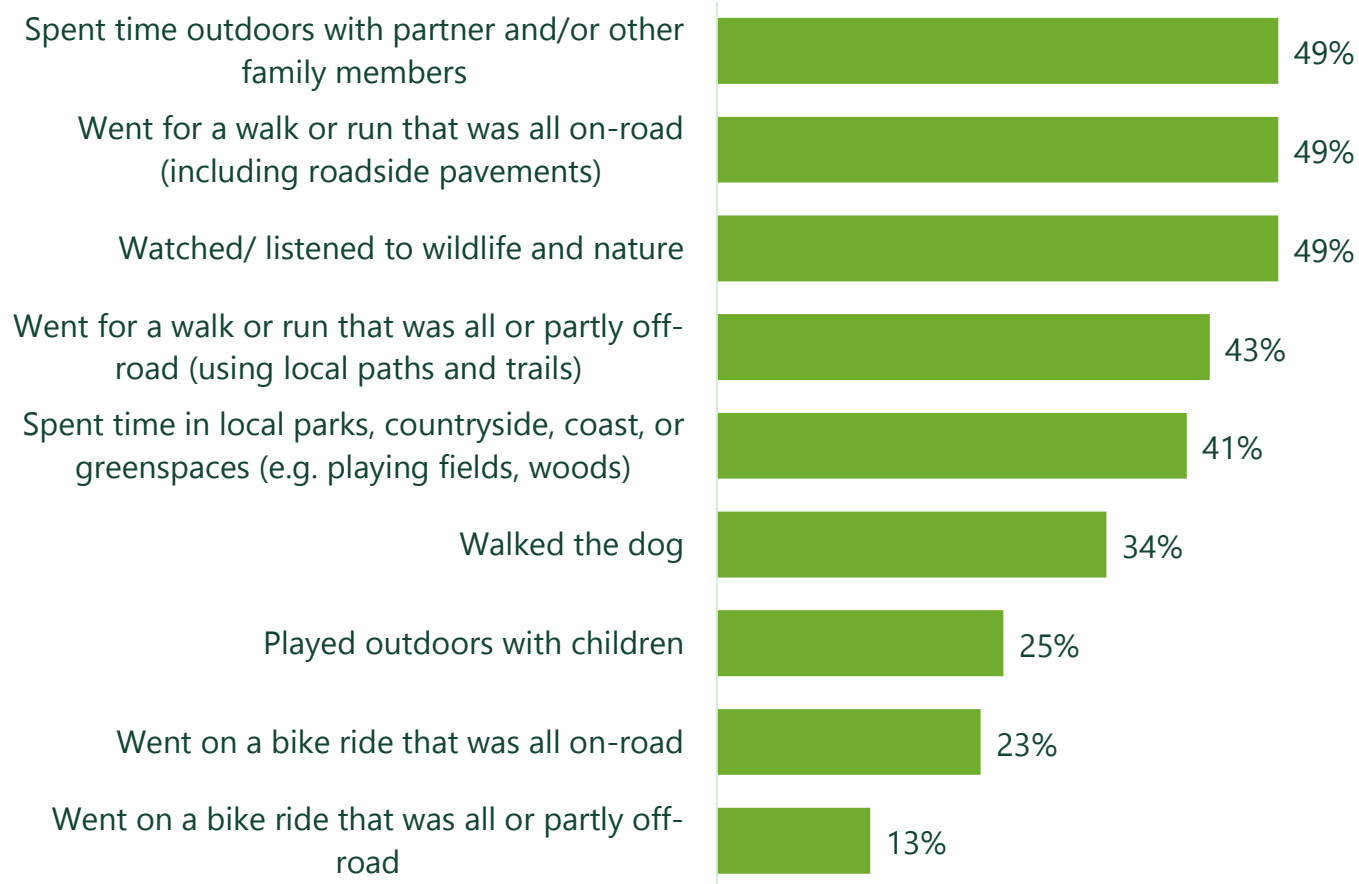
Figure 5 – Change in amount of free time spent outdoors during lockdown compared to same time last year by population group



The most commonly undertaken activities were spending time with family, walks on roads and enjoying wildlife

- Reflecting the high levels of participation in outdoor visits during lockdown, the majority of respondents participated in several of the activities listed.
- 49% walked on roads or roadside pavements while 43% went for a walk that was all or partly off-road.

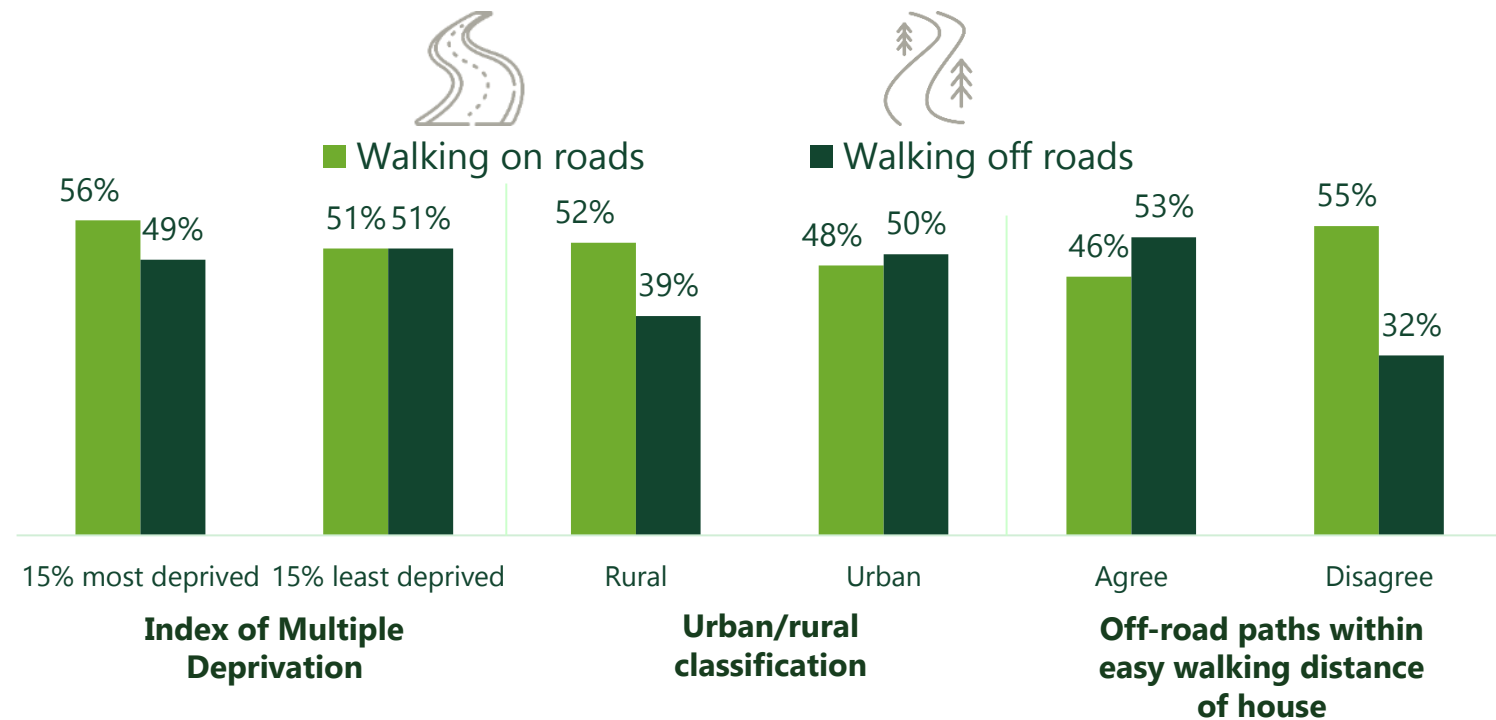
Figure 6 – Outdoor activities undertaken during lockdown



Whether people walked on or away from roads varied by place of residence

- Residents of the most deprived areas, rural areas and those with no access to off-road trails were more likely to walk on roads and roadside pavements.

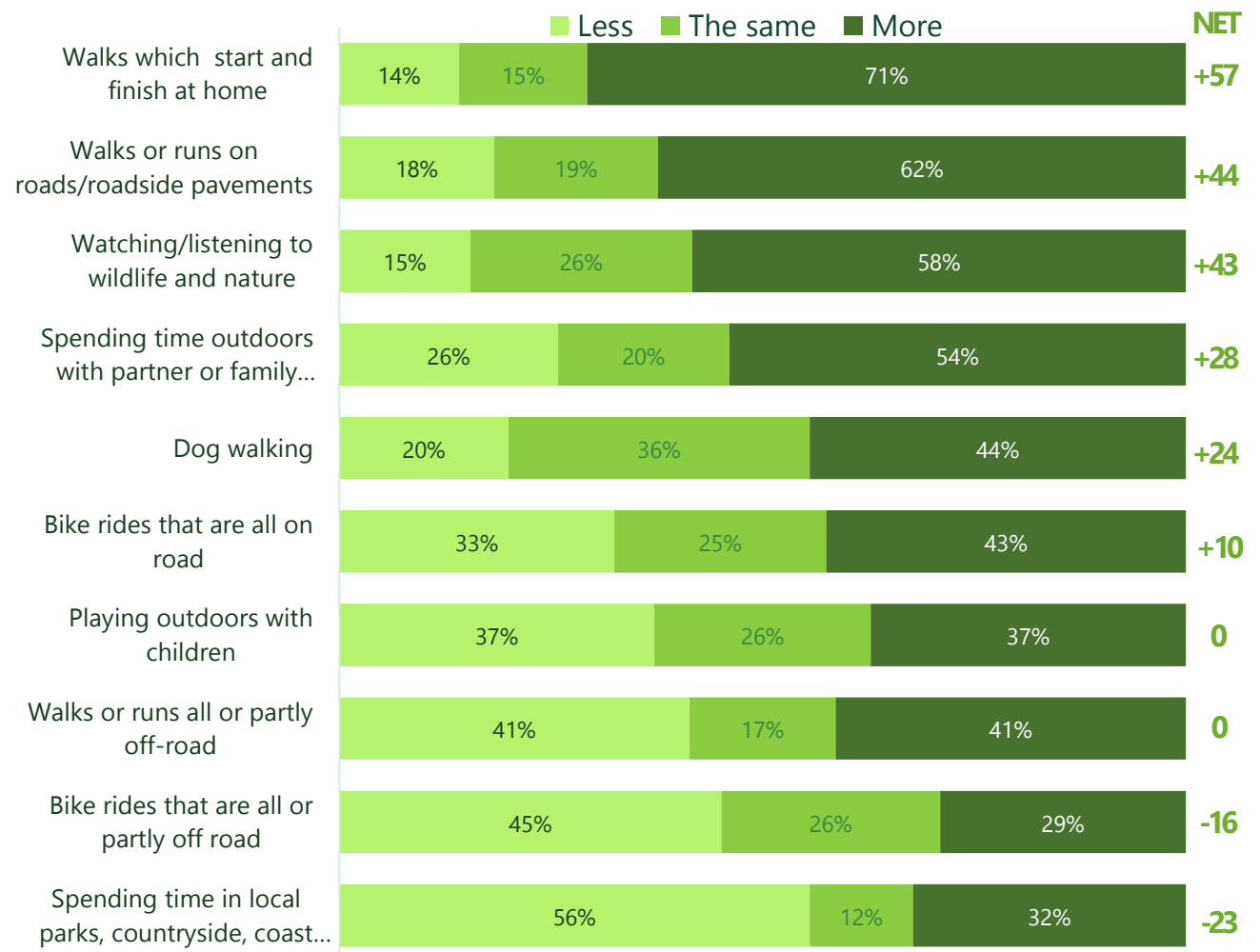
Figure 7 – Proportion walking on or off-roads during lockdown by place of residence



During lockdown local walks from home increased most but visits to parks, the countryside and coast decreased

- Figure 8 shows changes in frequency of undertaking activities compared to the same time last year, excluding people who stated that the activity was not applicable to them.
- Participation in the following activities **increased** most:
 - Walks starting at home
 - Walks/runs on roads & roadside pavements
 - Watching/listening to wildlife
 - Spending time with partner or family
 - Dog walking.
- Conversely, most people reported that they were visiting places like parks and the countryside and coast less often during lockdown.

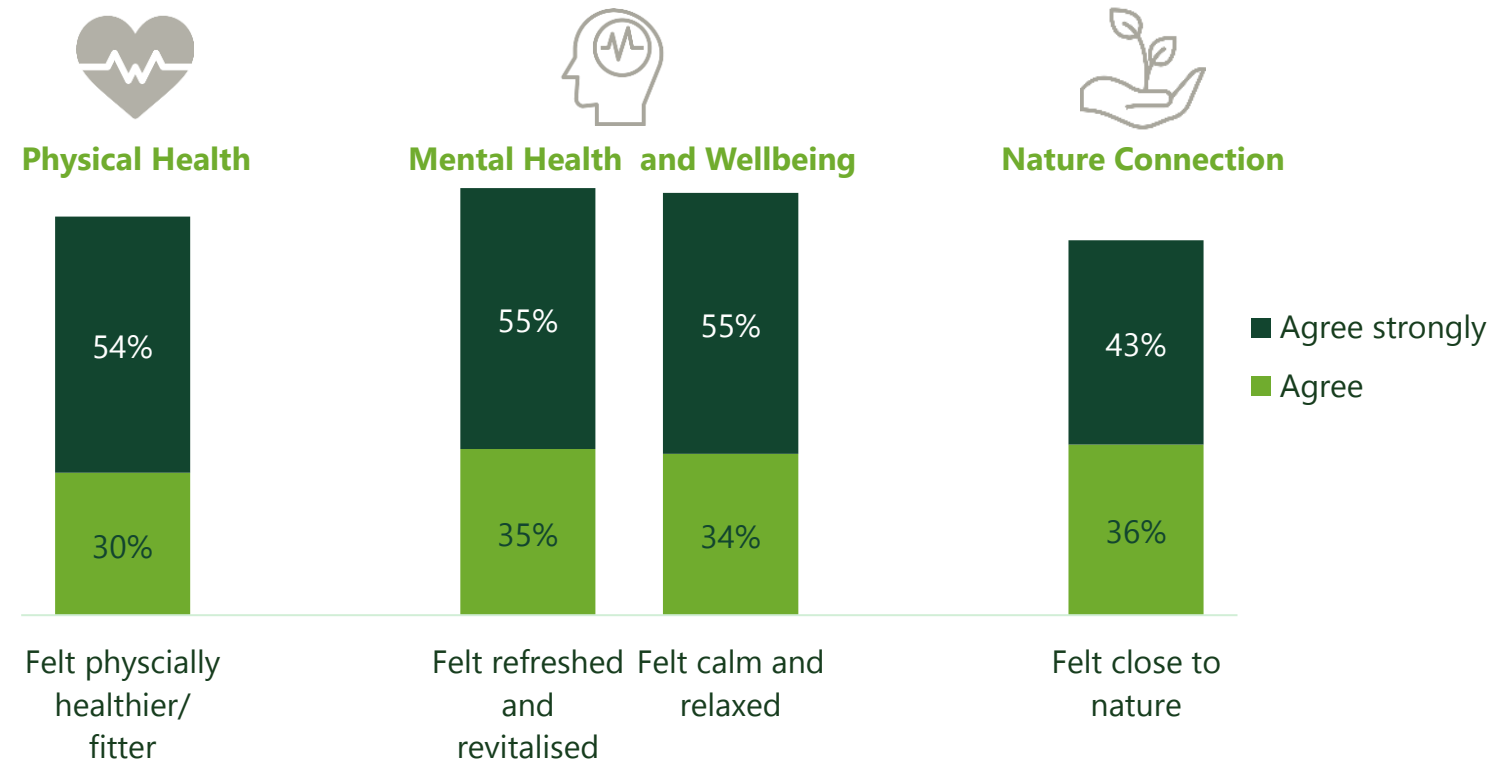
Figure 8 – Change in amount of free time spent outdoors during lockdown compared to same time last year by activity – excluding those stating any activity is ‘not applicable’ to them.



Time spent outdoors during lockdown provided important health and wellbeing benefits

- Participants indicated that the time they had spent outdoors had provided them with a number of health and wellbeing benefits.
- The vast majority of respondents agreed with the statements shown in Figure 9 regarding the benefits they obtained from the experience with many agreeing strongly.

Figure 9 – Benefits of outdoor activities undertaken during lockdown



Those who visited the outdoors most often during lockdown gained the greatest benefits

- Notably, those people who spent the most time outdoors during lockdown reported the greatest benefits.
- This relationship is seen with regards to both physical health and the measures of mental wellbeing included (combined responses for rest/revitalise and calm/relaxed).
- Frequent visits to the outdoors also appear to have a positive effect on levels of connection to nature.

Figure 10 – Benefits of outdoor activities undertaken during lockdown : % Agreeing Strongly with statements by frequency of time spent outdoors



People with accessible and good quality local trails and greenspaces gained the greatest benefits

- There is also a relationship between the benefits people reported from time outdoors and the ratings they gave to their local trails and greenspaces.
- A higher proportion of those people who stated that they had easily accessible and high standard trails and greenspaces also stated that they felt strong benefits from being outdoors.

Figure 11 – Benefits of outdoor activities undertaken during lockdown by access and quality of local places

		Felt physical health Benefits	Felt wellbeing benefits	Felt closer to nature
Paths & trails	Within easy walking distance	59%	58%	48%
	NOT within easy walking distance	52%	52%	38%
Paths & trails	Of a high enough standard	58%	60%	48%
	NOT of a high enough standard	52%	48%	39%
		Felt physical health Benefits	Felt wellbeing benefits	Felt closer to nature
Local greenspaces	Within easy walking distance	57%	57%	45%
	NOT within easy walking distance	47%	52%	37%
Local greenspaces	Of a high enough standard	55%	58%	46%
	NOT of a high enough standard	46%	47%	32%

Issues encountered during lockdown included a lack of off-road trails to walk on

- As might be expected during lockdown, the issues most reported were not being able to visit the same range of places or undertake the same range of activities as normal.
- However, over 2 in 5 (44%) also reported a problem of having to walk on roads and roadside pavements due to a lack of off-road trails.
- This issue was slightly more common amongst people aged under 70 and residents of rural areas.

Figure 12 – Problems encountered during lockdown

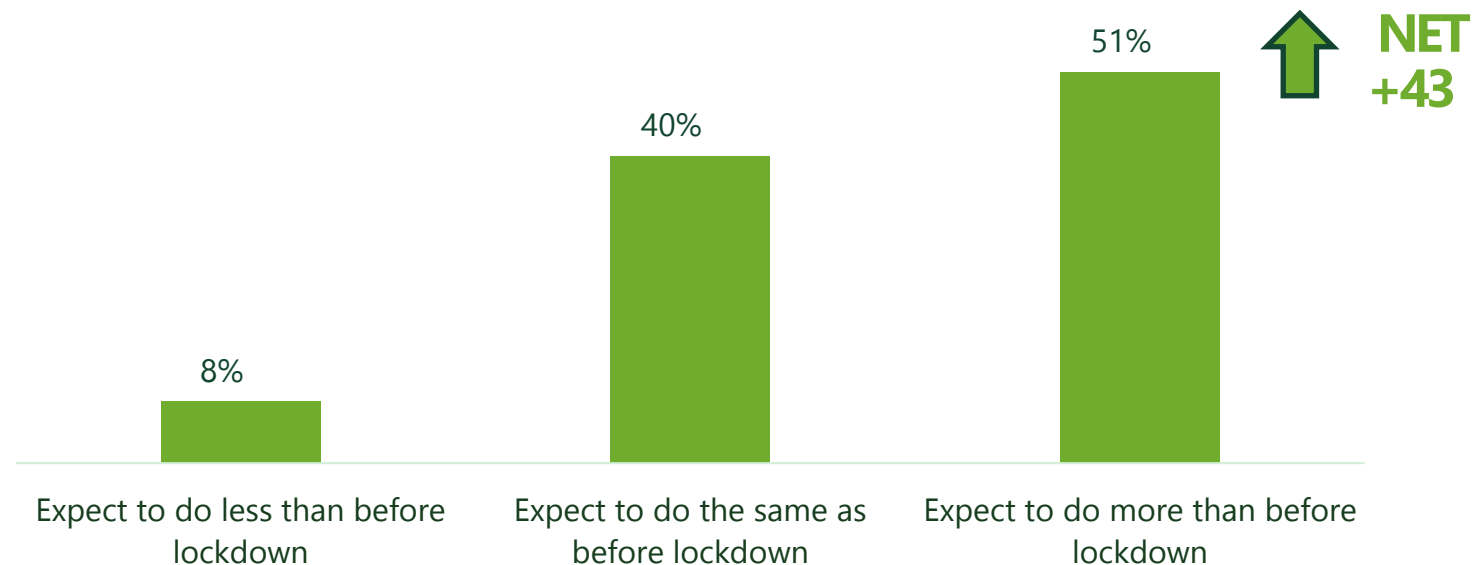


Half of respondents expect to undertake more outdoor activities when lockdown measures are eased

- When asked to think ahead to a time when outdoor activities can be undertaken again without restrictions, half of respondents stated that they expected to take part more often than before lockdown (51%). Just 8% expected to take part less often.
- This net increase of **+43** suggests that levels of demand to participate in future will be high, so visit taking could increase significantly as restrictions are softened.

Figure 13 – Amount of time expect to spend outdoors after lockdown compared to before

Looking to the future, to a time when social distancing measures are softened and we can undertake activities that are currently restricted, how often do you expect to do the following compared to before lockdown?

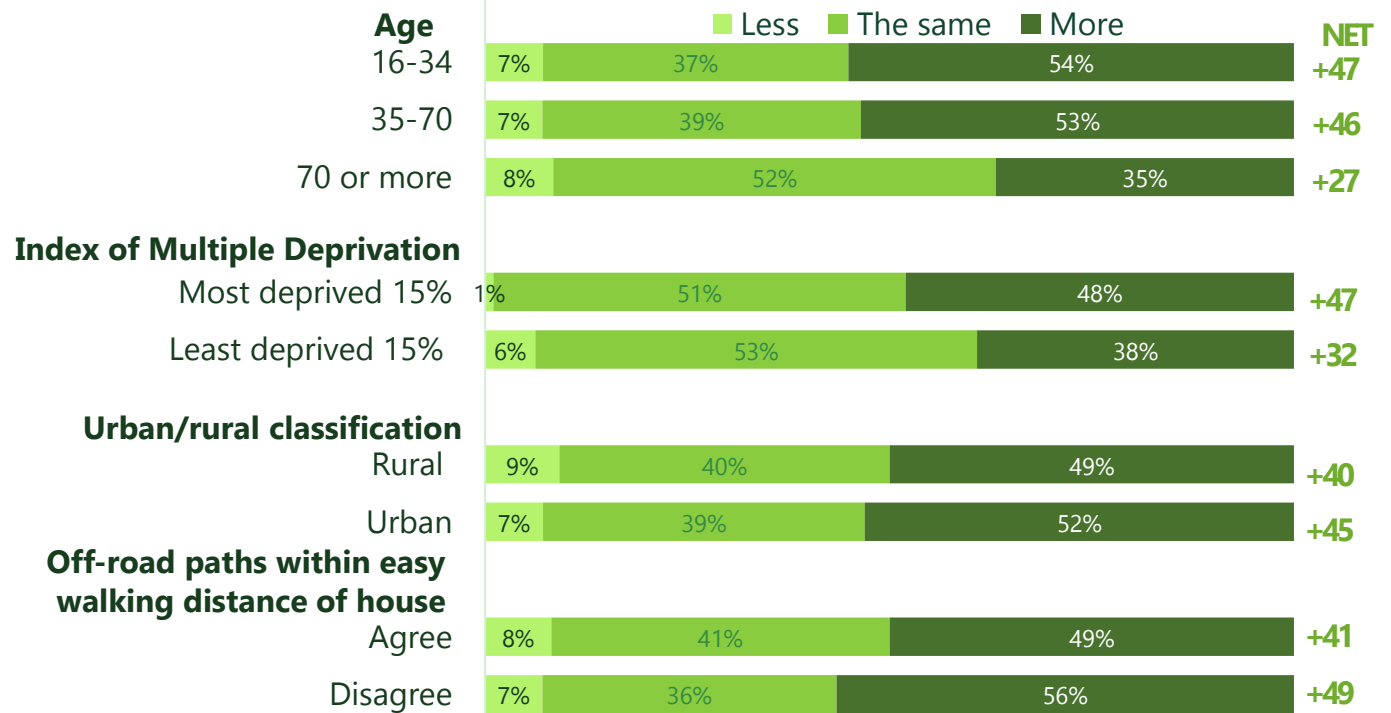


Activity by young people and residents of urban areas could increase most

➤ Comparing the responses across different population groups shows that whilst there is a demand to spend more time outside amongst all groups, this is particularly high for the following people:

- Aged under 70
- Residents of urban areas
- People who don't have good access to off-road trails.

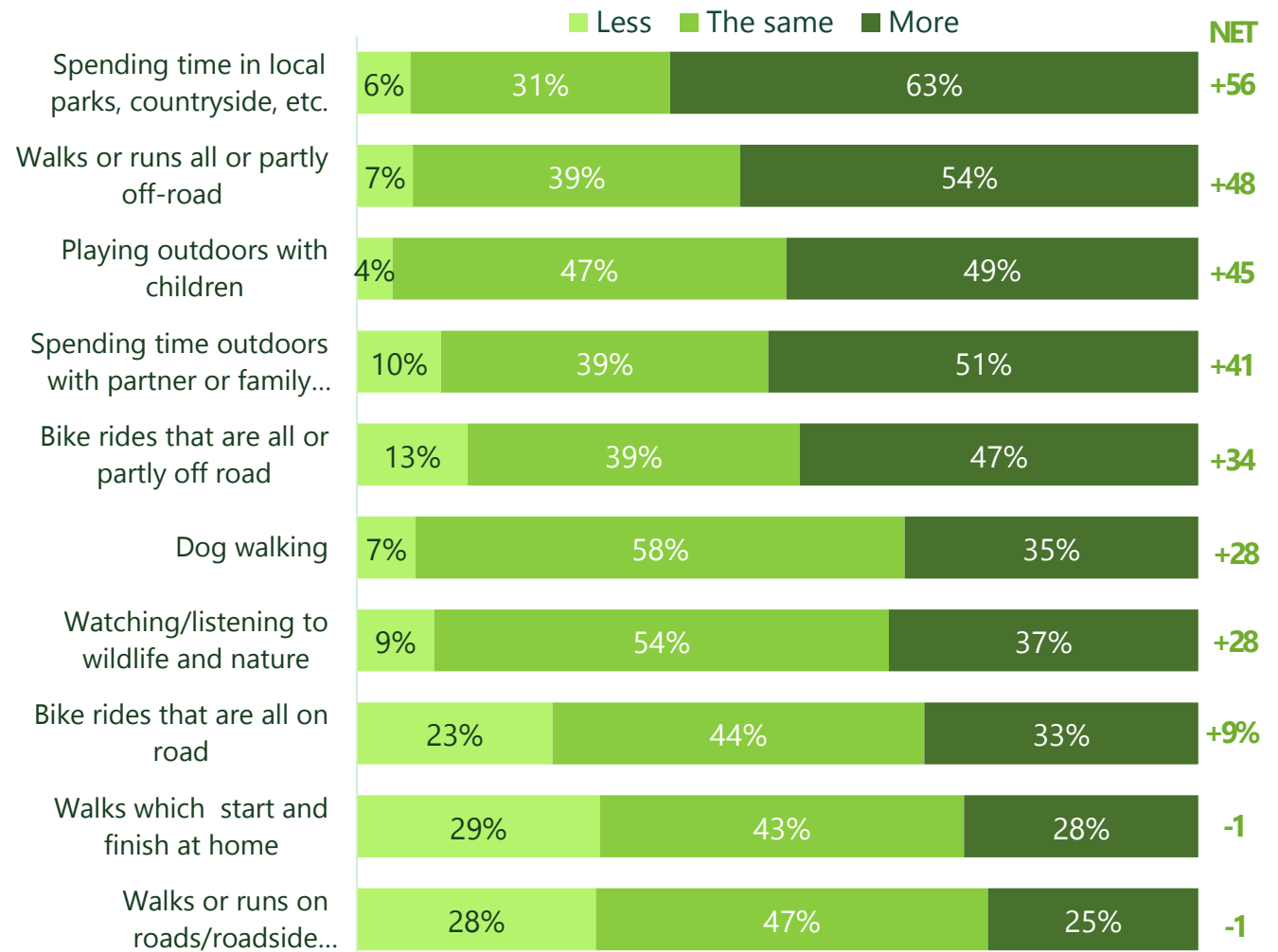
Figure 14 – Amount of time expect to spend outdoors after lockdown compared to before by population group



Most people would like to spend more time in local parks, the countryside and by the coast

- Spending time in local parks, the countryside and the coast is the activity which holds the most appeal when lockdown measures are eased. This high demand may reflect the fact that this is the activity which people have decreased participation in the most during lockdown.
- In contrast, the only activities with a net decrease in demand after lockdown are those which increased most during the period of restrictions i.e. walks which started from home and walks on roads/roadside pavements.

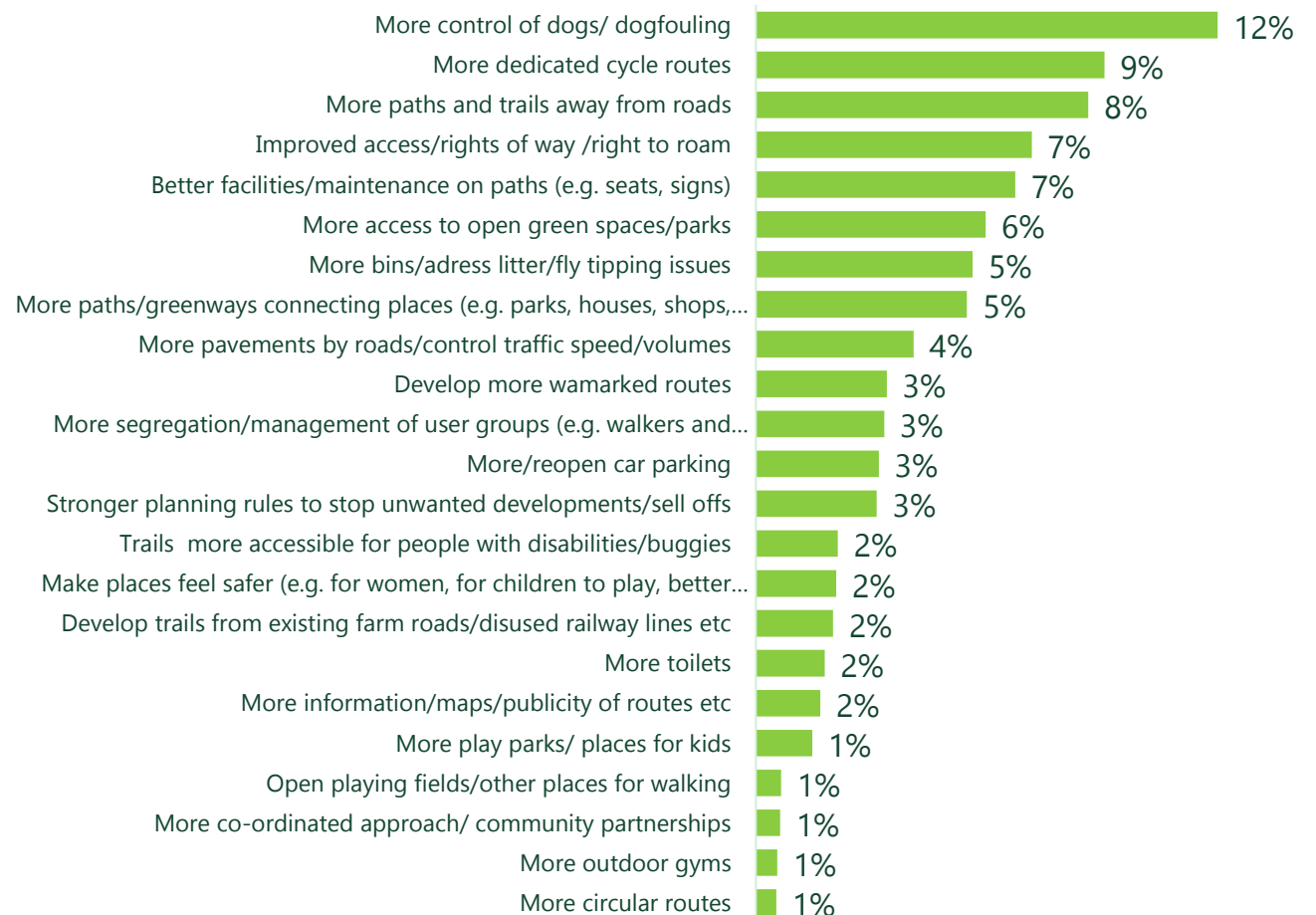
Figure 15 – Amount of time expect to spend outdoors after lockdown compared to before by activity – excluding those stating any activity is ‘not applicable’ to them.



There is significant interest in improving local areas for outdoor recreation

- An open-ended question was asked to obtain input from respondents on their priorities to improve the greenspaces and trails in their local area.
- These responses have been categorised into groupings shown in Figure 16.
- While 12% commented on issues relating to dogs and dog fouling, most of the other frequently provided answers related to the need for more dedicated walking and cycling routes, away from roads and traffic.
- A selection of the comments provided is included on the next page.

Figure 16 – What, if anything, could be done by organisations responsible for developing outdoor recreation to improve the opportunities for you to use greenspaces and trails in your local area? (1% or more shown)



There is significant interest in how local areas can be improved for outdoor recreation

More dedicated cycle routes

"Dedicated cycle and walking paths would transform our use of local beach and greenland area and make me feel more secure in allowing our children out on their own when a bit older."

"Reduce traffic and increase cycling/walking space on routes to local green space.."

"Continue to develop cycle paths . Great to see more people out on bikes since the lockdown . I cycle to work and would love to see more doing this."

Better facilities/ maintenance on paths

"Fix stiles and put in some new stiles, walkers have climbed over some gates and broken them."

"Keep right-of-ways cleared of encroaching vegetation which makes some of them difficult to access."

More trails away from roads

"More off-road trails in countryside areas - nothing fancy, just an alternative to walking on the road or driving for half an hour or more.."

"Off-road walking either foot paths or using old lanes to connect towns and villages."

"Need many more off-road trails and paths e.g. by fields and rivers so we don't have to drive to get to nice walking places. The country roads are not safe for walking when there will be more traffic."

"Traffic on the roads again will make the 60 mph country roads I'm enjoying inaccessible."

More paths/greenways connecting places

"Better links to paths and across different areas in North Belfast."

"Safer pedestrian links between parks with wider footpaths and stricter traffic calming."

"Better town planning. Make green space integral. Local councils could provide information on local walks."

Improved and clearer access rights

"There should be more footpaths / countryside rights of way. NI lags far behind the other UK countries in this respect.."

"Use trails local to my house which are rights of way, but if the landowner decided to deny access I'd guess there would be nothing I could do. Many farmers decided to deny access during to COVID-19 pandemic and none of the agencies challenge this. There needs to be more of a right to roam within the countryside."

"Clarity of rules for general use of outdoor spaces - a code of conduct which emphasises that with access comes responsibility."

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