“Access to water means different things to different people,” said Professor Church. “For anglers it’s about protecting their rights as understandably they want to fish the best stretches of water. For paddle sports – non-powered watersports such as canoeing – it’s about getting access to exciting places, usually white water, and it’s about encouraging local clubs and engaging local people. And there’s plenty of evidence telling us that from the health and wellbeing perspective, walking beside blue spaces is even more valuable than enjoying green spaces.”

A key outcome from the research has been a fundamental reshaping of voluntary access agreements, bringing together recreational users, landowners and others with an interest in inland water. Using collaborative environmental mapping, online communications, and a range of consultation and deliberation processes, the research moves beyond conflict resolution towards operationalising deeper understanding and appreciation of the co-use of natural resources.

“Voluntary agreements can be an effective solution, but they’re not cheap, they take time and they need maintenance,” said Professor Church. “They appeal to landowners and angers, people with existing rights, since those rights are not being permanently removed. And some paddlers accept them since they do provide new access, even if it’s not the access they thought they might achieve through legislation.”

The impact of the University of Brighton’s work has been felt across England and Wales. The Welsh Government has implemented a regional water recreation strategy, which has shaped spending and their approach to legislation, stimulated economic activity, and increased tourism. From 2008 to 2013, new policy initiatives in Wales linked to the University of Brighton research created over 100 jobs and the economy was boosted by over £1.3m.

The Brighton team have also designed and implemented voluntary access agreements for rivers in England that have required working closely with a wide range of partners, water users and landowners. Those devised on the Rivers Mersey and Waveney are seen as setting the benchmark for such agreements.

A 29km stretch of the River Mersey that has been opened up by the agreement passes through several deprived communities. A private-sector outdoor activities business, launched as a result of the new agreement, estimates that the number of new canoeists has increased four-fold between 2010 and 2013, to about 1,700 people per year, most of whom are novice water recreationalists.

The Brighton team is now extending its approach to Europe and has been funded by the European Union to work with the Canal & River Trust, and 17 local authorities in 11 countries to promote new social forms of ownership for enhancing the management of smaller waterways.

The University’s support has been valuable and lessons learnt through the project will feed into furthering European policy and input to future delivery of the European structural funds.

Chris Barnett, The Canal & River Trust

OVER 100 NEW JOBS CREATED THROUGH NEW POLICY INITIATIVES IN WALES AND OVER £1.3M TO THE ECONOMY IN WALES AS A RESULT OF THE RESEARCH