

Executive Summary

#OurSwimStory:

A CONVERSATION WITH BLACK AND
ASIAN COMMUNITIES ABOUT AQUATIC
ACTIVITY AND WATER SAFETY IN CITIES
ACROSS ENGLAND AND WALES



BSA Foreword



It is with great pleasure and a sense of purpose that I present to you this important report, which explores the aquatic behaviours, attitudes and experiences of ethnically diverse communities in the UK. As the Chair of the Black Swimming Association (BSA), I am committed to driving positive change and creating a more inclusive aquatics landscape for all, irrespective of background or ethnicity.

Water safety and aquatic activity are not merely recreational pursuits; they are essential life skills that everyone should have access to. Unfortunately, the underrepresentation of African, Caribbean, and Asian communities in aquatics is a pressing issue that demands our attention. This report aims to shed light on the complex social, cultural, and psychological barriers that hinder individuals from these communities from fully participating in and benefitting from water-based activities.

By uncovering the challenges faced by ethnically diverse communities, we can better understand the unique experiences, perceptions, and needs that must be addressed to not just inspire, but to empower and embolden all underrepresented communities to find their own place in the water. We firmly believe that by identifying these barriers, we can develop pragmatic and targeted strategies, and collaborative solutions, that promote water safety education, increase access to aquatic resources, and empower individuals to engage in aquatic activities with confidence.

This report is a testament to the dedication and hard work of the AKD research team, who have diligently explored the lived experiences and aspirations of communities whose voices have long been overlooked and unheard. It is my hope that the findings presented here will inspire individuals, organisations, and policymakers to come together and create meaningful change. By working collectively, we can remove barriers to engagement, promote inclusivity, and ensure that vital water safety education and aquatic activity become equitably accessible to all.

I extend my deepest gratitude to everyone involved in this research project, from the courageous participants who shared their stories to the dedicated researchers who tirelessly examined the data. Your contributions have been instrumental in shaping this report and propelling us towards a more equitable and safer future in aquatics.

Together, let us embark on this journey towards greater water safety education, and inclusivity and diversity in aquatic activity, knowing that our efforts today will have a profound and lasting impact on generations to come.

Warm regards,

Danielle Obe

Chair, Black Swimming Association (BSA)

Introduction to the BSA

Founded in 2020 with a clear mission to ensure African, Caribbean, and Asian communities have equitable access to vital water safety education, drowning prevention and the benefits of aquatics, the BSA is spearheading a transformative movement within the aquatic sector. Indeed, our organisation provides an invaluable bridge into communities that have been historically excluded, disenfranchised and invisible in the context of aquatics and water safety.

In the UK, swimming and water-based activities have long been cherished for their physical and mental health benefits. However, the unfortunate reality is that not everyone has equitable access to these opportunities. Historical, social and economic inequalities, coupled with institutional bias, have resulted in African, Caribbean, and Asian communities being significantly underrepresented across all aspects of aquatic engagement.

The BSA recognises the urgent need for change. By amplifying the voices and experiences of these communities, we aim to challenge the status quo and dismantle the barriers that prevent individuals from fully participating in and benefiting from aquatics. Importantly, the BSA's work extends beyond swimming pools, encompassing all water-based activities that rely on swimming skills and water safety knowledge, such as rowing, canoeing and sailing. By broadening our

scope, we seek to create a comprehensive and inclusive approach to aquatics that ensures everyone, regardless of their background, can safely and confidently enjoy the benefits of water-based activities.

The BSA commissioned AKD Solutions to conduct this landmark research project to support our mission to create a more equitable and inclusive aquatics landscape for ethnically diverse communities across the UK. By embedding community engagement throughout the research process, the project sought to gain a deep understanding of the attitudes towards, and perceptions and lived experiences of, aquatic activity and water safety within ethnically diverse communities. These insights will inform strategic decisions and collaborative efforts to increase awareness of water safety, promote the health benefits of aquatics, and dismantle barriers that hinder participation. In addition, the research findings will guide resource allocation and prioritisation, paving the way for lasting change and increased inclusivity in the sector.

Crucially, this research shines a long-overdue light on the lived experiences of ethnically diverse communities and showcases how we can collaborate to engage, support and nurture positive aquatic experiences, and ultimately help everyone 'find their own place in the water'.

Executive Summary

#OurSwimStory involved landmark interactions with Black, Asian, and other ethnically diverse populations regarding their engagement with aquatic activity and water safety.

The aim of this research was to explore the attitudes towards, and the experiences and perceptions of, aquatic activity within African, Caribbean, and Asian communities. We sought to understand the barriers to safe engagement experienced by Black and Asian communities and the ways in which these communities could be encouraged to engage in swimming and aquatic activity. In order to capture these insights, we undertook a mixed methods study, which consisted of a survey, forums and unstructured interviews. In total, we engaged over 1,400 participants from Black, Asian and other ethnically underrepresented communities. All of the respondents lived in or around one of seven cities: London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Cardiff, Swansea and Leicester.

The findings from this research provided novel and detailed insight into what is evidently a complex and multifactorial issue. Notably, the research revealed that ethnicity and culture shape individual's

attitudes towards, and experiences of, swimming and aquatic activities. However, it was also evident that many of the barriers to engagement are not unique to ethnically diverse communities, but rather are likely experienced more widely within the UK population.

Whilst multiple complex barriers to engagement were identified, the findings also indicated a willingness and interest from members of these communities to engage with aquatic activity and water safety.

What is "aquatic activity"?

For the purpose of this research, aquatic activity was defined as all activities that take place in, on or around water, such as swimming, canoeing, surfing, rowing, and fishing.



Headline Findings

This study identified 11 core themes that were present across forums, interviews and open-text box survey responses. These themes are outlined below, alongside the key statistics that emerged from an analysis of the closed survey responses.

1) Early Experiences

Early experiences in childhood often shaped attitudes toward swimming. Positive early experiences (such as, in the context of, primary school swimming lessons or engagement as a family) were associated with aquatic participation in adulthood and greater swimming confidence and competence. In contrast, negative early experiences and disruptions while learning to swim contributed to disengagement.

“ I’m not confident with water safety, because the last time I learnt how to swim was in primary school, and that knowledge hasn’t been used or developed to maintain my understanding of how to stay safe in the water.

(South East Asian, Male, North West England)

2) Parental Engagement

Parents commonly shared that there were three reasons that having children had resulted in their engagement with aquatic activities: 1) being concerned for their children’s safety in the water, 2) being fearful of missing great family moments, and 3) having time to themselves. For these reasons, parents of young children should be targeted for re-engagement with aquatic activity.

“ As mothers we’re always doing things for other people. I started swimming again to lose weight after my babies and I feel so refreshed afterwards.

(Black British, Female, London)

3) Water Safety Awareness

There was a feeling among many participants that they were ill-equipped to engage with aquatic activities, due to a lack of water safety knowledge. Indeed, many participants felt they did not have the water safety awareness necessary to safely engage with aquatic activity.

48% of survey respondents said they did not know how to stay safe in the water.



I know there are some signs at the beach, [but] I've never read them. I would be happy to read them... I think there are other things you should look out for in the sea like those buoys. But I don't really know much about staying safe. If I knew more, I might feel more comfortable to go in the water.

(Mixed Black Caribbean and White, Female, London)

4) A Lack of Aquatic Skill

Many participants felt their limited physical capability and aquatic skill restricted how they could engage with swimming pools and other aquatic environments. Whilst their limited skill prevented regular, local aquatic engagement, it did not always deter participants from engaging in aquatic activities during holidays abroad; this is concerning given that these participants may be placing themselves at a greater risk of drowning.

37% of survey respondents indicated that improving their aquatic skills would contribute to an increase in participation.

What is "aquatic skill"?

Respondents spoke about 'skills' when describing their aquatic ability. Therefore, this language has been used in the report to refer to the participants' aquatic capabilities, including their swimming proficiency, technique, and water confidence.



I stay close to the edge of the pool; I don't have the skills to swim away from the edge. I wouldn't feel safe.

(Mixed Black African and White, West Midlands)

5) Awareness of Aquatic Activities

Most participants were aware of the location of their local swimming pools; however, they were largely unaware of the aquatic timetable or sessions on offer. In addition, most participants were unaware of the local swimming clubs, open water spaces, and other aquatic activities available to them.

Survey respondents were most aware of local opportunities for swimming (**90%**), water aerobics (**32%**), canoeing (**17%**), kayaking (**17%**), fishing (**16%**) and rowing (**16%**).



I didn't know we have places to swim outside in Hackney. I know sometimes people row boats in the canals, which I just wouldn't, but not clean places to swim outside. It's interesting to know all those things are available near me and I only found out today because of this conversation.

(Black African, Female, London)

6) Fear of the Water

It was common for respondents to have a longstanding fear of water that had developed in childhood and continued into adulthood. Often respondents had disengaged with aquatic activity in their teenage years or earlier due to their fear. There were commonalities in the reasons for fears developing, with many participants who attended a UK primary school identifying the impact of negative experiences in school swimming lessons. Among respondents who spent their childhood in Africa, the Caribbean or Asia, some reported that their fear of water had been sparked by third party stories.

44% of survey respondents said they had a fear of water and **34%** said they (or someone in their family) had experienced a traumatic aquatic event.



In the past I feared swimming, because as a child I slipped in the swimming pool, and I slipped underwater for several seconds, and I choked on the water and panicked. It wasn't until I was 26 years old [that] I plucked up the courage to learn to swim.

(Black British, Female, South East England)

7) Aquatic Cultures

Differences between the UK and respondents' home countries, regarding the way in which swimming is taught and the aquatic activities offered, contributed to the disinterest of participants (especially those from Caribbean backgrounds). Additionally, swimming not being viewed as a priority contributed to low levels of engagement among families of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage.



I learnt how to swim in the Caribbean, [but] when I moved to Canada and the UK it became all about technique. I wasn't swimming properly, because I didn't have the technique they were teaching. I became uninterested in swimming. I did it because I enjoyed it, but they were really focused on swimming competitively or as a sport. It took a long time for me to come back to swimming.

(Black Other, Male)

“ My mum doesn't speak English. Maybe if she did, she would have heard or read about the importance of being able to swim. But because she didn't, I guess it was never going to be a focus... I don't think she saw it as something we had to learn to do.

(Asian, Female)

8) The Body, Hair and Skin

Concerns regarding privacy, modesty and body consciousness were most prominent among older and Muslim participants. Black and Asian participants were also concerned about the costs associated with having to purchase the swimwear, body and haircare products that suit their needs. Additionally, it was evident how wide-ranging the needs of various communities are, and the importance of diverse and tailored solutions to increasing participation.

33% of Black survey respondents indicated that hair was a barrier to engagement, with hair being the most commonly selected barrier within this group.

“ It's a hard activity to access as a Muslim woman due to a lack of female only classes, [and] appropriate swim costumes (not just for religion/culture but for my body type).

(Mixed Black Caribbean and White, Female, North West England)

9) Socio-economic, Structural and Practical Barriers

One of the most frequently mentioned reasons for not swimming regularly was a lack of time or having a work or life schedule that was incompatible with swimming. Some participants were concerned about the cost of an aquatically active lifestyle and recognised the impact this may have on water safety awareness and aquatic competence.

31% of survey respondents reported finance as a barrier to aquatic activity.

“ There are fewer opportunities in communities, fewer places to actually go swimming and the cost of swimming is too high for a lot of people from ethnic minority backgrounds, which tend to have much less disposable income compared to White households.

(Mixed Black Caribbean, Female, Yorkshire)

10) Stereotypes and Visibility

Some participants raised concerns about the impact of stereotypes on aquatic interest within Black and Asian communities. In addition, respondents highlighted that there was a lack of representation and cultural competence in their local aquatic spaces, which contributed to concerns regarding the visibility of Black and Asian communities. This included marketing materials lacking imagery reflective of the local area's diversity.

34% of survey respondents indicated that friendship-based swimming groups would encourage participation in aquatic activity and **32%** reported the positive impact of representation in marketing.

“ I think swimming is important. I swim, and people are always really shocked by how much of a swimmer I am. Me and my brothers can swim, and we go, but we do stand out - people are shocked.

(Black British, Male, West Midlands)



11) Aquatic Perceptions

Participants also frequently associated swimming with healthy living and other health benefits, including feeling stronger, more flexible, and less prone to joint and muscle pain. In addition, many participants associated aquatic activity with the opportunity to have fun with the whole family or to spend leisure and pampering time with friends. Despite these positive associations, many participants still felt regular engagement was not accessible and some of the participants perceived aquatic activities as being only for White people.

80% of survey respondents felt aquatic activities were a viable sports or fitness option for themselves or others from their ethnic or cultural community, yet **84%** felt aquatic activity was uncommon in their community.

“ It should be viable and accessible... However, the aquatics industry is very exclusive in the UK; in my opinion, it caters to White and middle-class populations.

(Black British, Female, London)

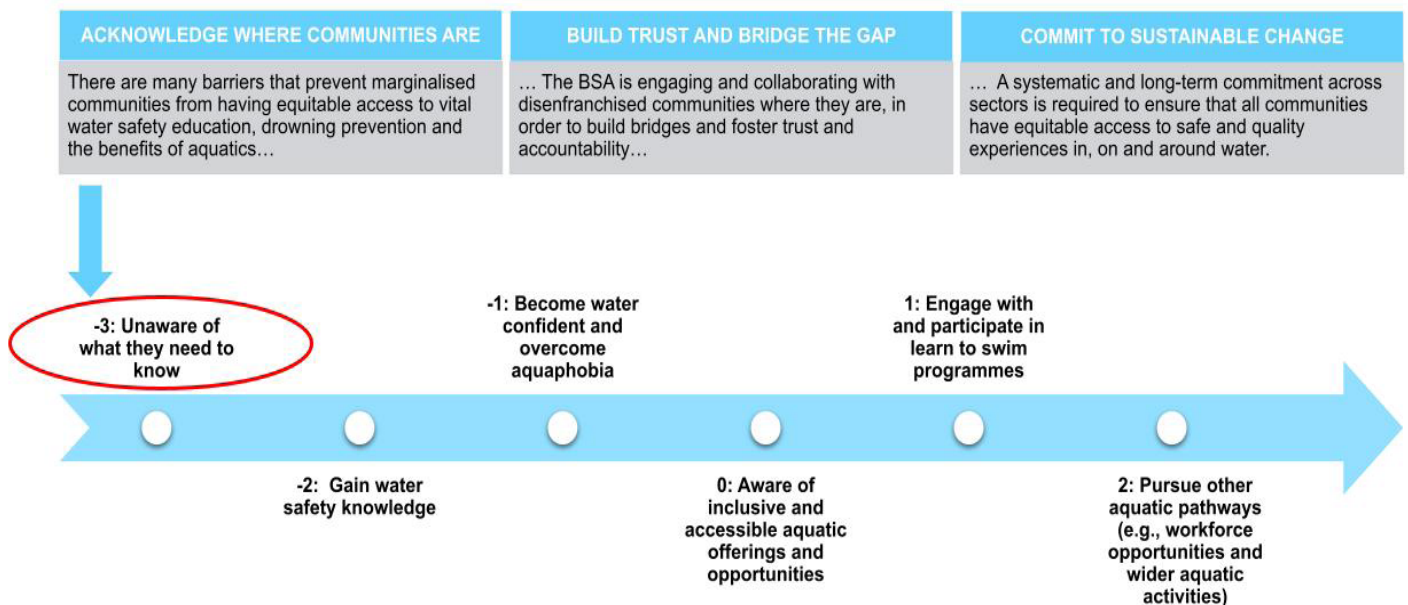
The BSA's Community Journey™

The BSA's Community Journey™ acknowledges the complex barriers faced by African, Caribbean, and Asian communities when it comes to engaging in aquatic activities. The diagram below visually depicts how traditional learn to swim programmes (1) are insufficient on their own, as individuals from disenfranchised communities often encounter social, cultural and psychological obstacles that prevent them from perceiving swimming and aquatic activities as accessible to them. The BSA aims to raise awareness among sector partners about the need for extensive efforts to foster lasting change, creating an environment where people from diverse backgrounds feel welcomed and empowered to participate in water-based activities.

The positions depicted in the Community Journey™ align with the experiences shared by participants in this study. Many respondents cited factors such as deficient aquatic awareness and skills, limited water safety knowledge, low water confidence, and a lack of ethnic diversity in the sector as barriers to engagement. Importantly, these factors often intersect and coexist, indicating that the path to aquatic engagement is not linear for many Black and Asian individuals. These findings underscore the importance of addressing multiple interconnected barriers and adopting a holistic approach to promote inclusivity and encourage meaningful participation in aquatic activities among ethnically diverse communities.



The BSA's Community Journey™



Recommendations

The findings evidence that there is a noticeable unmet demand from Black and Asian communities for support to engage in swimming and aquatic activities. This represents a huge opportunity for both the BSA and the aquatic sector to prepare and support ethnically diverse communities to access aquatic activities safely and confidently.

In particular, inadequate water safety knowledge and a lack of (or limited) aquatic skill were identified as central barriers; therefore, rapidly increasing swimming competency and water safety knowledge should be the core focus of initiatives aimed at growing participation among ethnically diverse communities. Furthermore, survey respondents identified the cost of aquatic activity, hair and aquaphobia as key barriers to participation, evidencing the need for a multifaceted approach to increasing safe

aquatic participation for Black and Asian communities.

Based on these findings, we have devised 11 recommendations for the aquatic sector targeted at various audiences, including operators, policy makers, governing bodies and the BSA. These recommendations address barriers to participation and suggest ways in which culturally relevant support could be provided to underrepresented ethnic communities.

What is the “aquatic sector”?

For the purpose of this research, the term 'aquatic sector' has been defined as encompassing the wide range of bodies and organisations that relate to aquatic activity and water safety; this includes (but is not limited to) governing bodies, leisure operators and providers, charities and policy makers.



- 1 Use a replicable inclusivity framework to understand local communities**
#OurSwimStory highlights the varying needs of ethnically diverse communities and the importance of swimming pool operators and aquatic centres in the UK assessing the diversity of needs within their local area. Multiple inclusivity principles have been outlined to support operators to collaborate with their local community, reach a wider local audience, and manage diversity effectively, with the ultimate aim of developing an inclusive, affordable, and community-led timetable.
- 2 Provide aquatic and swimming orientations**
To address aquatic non-engagement, participants suggested that orientations or introductory sessions (similar to gym inductions) should be adopted to provide support and reduce anxiety. These orientations should include water safety information, facility familiarisation, and culturally appropriate guidance on products and protective gear, as well as information on the available accommodations for specific cultural needs (such as closed viewing areas and same-sex staff).
- 3 Develop the BSA's Community Journey™ to make it an open, interactive and accessible resource**
To address barriers to aquatic participation among ethnically diverse communities, it is important to track their experiences. Converting the BSA's Community Journey™ into an interactive measurement and information tool would provide communities with bespoke guidance around engaging in aquatic activities and developing their aquatic skills and water safety knowledge. Regularly reviewing and making the data accessible to the aquatic workforce, sector professionals, and community groups would support safe and enjoyable participation in aquatic activities.
- 4 Recruit and train an ethnically diverse workforce**
To address the underrepresentation of ethnic diversity in the aquatic workforce, efforts should be made to recruit and train professionals from underrepresented backgrounds within the sector. The aquatic sector should target and invest in the development of ethnically diverse employees who can inspire greater engagement within their communities, utilising organisations like the BSA as a bridge to connect interested individuals with career and training opportunities in the aquatic sector.

Strive to achieve an aquatically active culture through an inclusive approach to policy planning

5 Ethnically diverse communities face multiple barriers to engaging in aquatic activities, including low skill levels, a lack of confidence, fears of the water, and underrepresentation within the sector. Policies and funding opportunities from various sources (including national governing bodies, charities, and government and non-government funders) should specifically address and overcome these barriers to participation, in order to promote the long-term adoption of safe aquatic lifestyles.

Prioritise addressing aquatic risk factors in all relevant policies and plans

6 All further aquatic policies and plans at local and national levels (including those relating to water safety education, aquatic skills development and leisure centre procurement guidance) should include actions to address the elevated risk of drowning experienced by ethnically diverse communities, posed by a lack of water safety knowledge, aquatic familiarity and negative aquatic experiences.

Ensure that the lived experiences of ethnically diverse communities are amplified and central to efforts to promote an inclusive and aquatically active culture

7 The BSA and its partners play a crucial role in promoting diversity and inclusivity within the aquatic sector by sharing the personal stories of ethnically diverse individuals and advocating for change. By collaborating with community leaders, they can normalise aquatic engagement among Black and Asian communities through practical initiatives, such as inclusive campaigns, experience-led discussions, and introductory sessions.

Clearly define the necessary aquatic capabilities and swimming competencies needed for safe aquatic engagement

8 #OurSwimStory revealed varying interpretations of what being able to swim means, influenced by multiple factors such as confidence, knowledge, skill, and practice; this deterred some individuals from participating and put others at risk. Further research is necessary to understand these perceptions and establish clear definitions of the swimming competencies and water safety knowledge needed for safe and enjoyable engagement in aquatic activities.

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- 9** **Increase access to water safety knowledge and skills sessions for ethnically diverse communities**

Ethnically diverse communities are under-equipped in aquatic skills and water safety knowledge and, as a result, face higher risks of drowning and traumatic experiences. This highlights the need for widely available water safety knowledge and aquatic skills sessions to increase awareness and address barriers to participation in swimming and other aquatic activities.
 - 10** **Widely disseminate digital and physical resources on water safety to ethnically diverse communities**

The findings indicate that a lack of aquatic skills and water safety knowledge prevents Black and Asian individuals from engaging in aquatic opportunities. To address this, a multifaceted approach is needed, including the creation of easily accessible and informative aquatic resources. The BSA and its partners (including schools, governing bodies and water safety organisations) can play a crucial role in disseminating ethnically and culturally engaging resources to promote water safety awareness and aquatically competent participation.
 - 11** **Collect drowning data by ethnicity**

It is crucial that information on ethnicity is collected and made available in drowning databases, in order to address disparities and better understand the specific risks and needs of different communities. By disaggregating the data, it becomes possible to identify and target interventions that can effectively reduce drowning rates among specific ethnic groups.

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