



# THE BLACK SWIMMING ASSOCIATION: RESPONSE TO #OURSWIMSTORY

The Black Swimming Association (BSA) is a non-profit organisation, set up to diversify the world of aquatics through **consultancy, advocacy, research, education and support** to ensure that people of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage have equitable, safe access to vital water safety education, drowning prevention and all the benefits of engaging in aquatics.

The BSA collaborates with a wide range of stakeholders, including government agencies, national governing bodies, lifesaving authorities, charities, sports councils, leisure operators, as well as research and educational institutions, in order to promote diversity and inclusion in aquatics for all communities.

The BSA is the commissioning body of the pioneering research project **#OurSwimStory**, which investigated the attitudes towards, and the experiences of, water safety and aquatic activity among ethnically diverse communities in the UK.

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# COMMISSIONING #OURSWIMSTORY

Since the inception of the BSA in 2020, we have been striving to ensure that ethnically diverse communities in the UK have equitable access to vital water safety education, drowning prevention, and the benefits of aquatics.

Adults and children of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage are currently underrepresented in swimming and aquatics, and are less likely to be equipped with potentially lifesaving skills.

Between November 2021 and November 2022, **only 3.5% of Black adults and 4.2% of Asian (excluding Chinese) adults participated in swimming activities regularly**, compared to 8.9% of White British adults [1,2]

In the 2021-2022 academic year, **only 14.2% of Black and 16.8% of Asian children and young people participated in swimming activities at least once a week**, compared to 26.1% of White British children [3,4]

The BSA's Water Safety Research (July 2022) provided evidence that children from ethnically diverse backgrounds are at higher risk in open water, due to **1) their lower level of water safety knowledge and 2) their lower level of claimed aquatic skills.**

**Only 28% of children from ethnically diverse communities correctly responded to four key water safety scenarios**, compared to 43% of White children

**Only 35% of children from ethnically diverse communities stated they could stop in deep water, shout for help and swim again**, compared to 57% of White children



**The BSA commissioned #OurSwimStory** in response to the underrepresentation of people of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage in swimming and aquatic activities, and their lack of vital water safety knowledge, which places these communities at high risk of drowning.

#OurSwimStory is a landmark research project, exploring the lived experiences with water safety and aquatic activity of over 1,400 adults from Black, Asian and other ethnically diverse backgrounds. The research identified significant barriers to safe aquatic engagement and presented recommendations aimed at increasing water safety awareness and aquatic participation.

[1] Sport England's Active Lives Survey; data available at <https://activelives.sportengland.org/Home/AdultData>

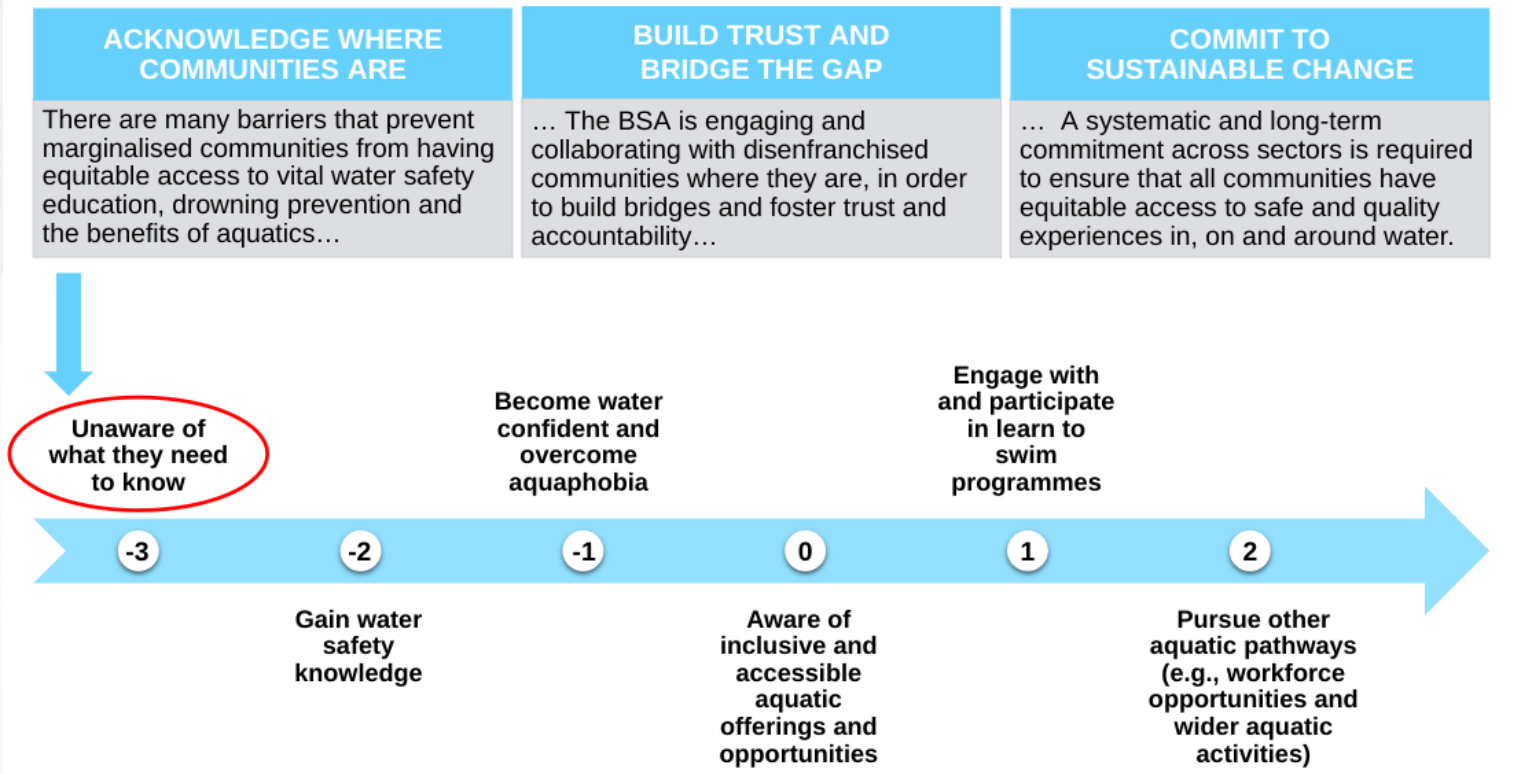
[2] This disparity was evident prior to the Covid-19 pandemic; 95% of Black adults and 93% of Asian (excluding Chinese) adults did not swim regularly, compared to 89% of White British adults, based on the 2016-2018 Active Lives survey data.

[3] Sport England's Active Lives Survey; data available at <https://activelives.sportengland.org/Home/ActivityData>

[4] Pre-Covid, 80% of Black children and 78% of Asian children did not swim regularly, compared to 71% of White British children, based on the 2017-2019 Active Lives survey data.

# THE BSA'S COMMUNITY JOURNEY™

The BSA developed the Community Journey™, following engagement with sector partners and communities, as a way of visually representing the possible positions of communities (on a number line from -3 to 2) with regards to their water safety awareness, knowledge and aquatic participation. The positions depicted in the Community Journey™ align with the experiences shared by many of the #OurSwimStory participants.



**Point 1** on the Community Journey™ represents the current efforts of the aquatic sector, which caters for and is equipped to support those who participate in 'traditional' Learn to Swim programmes.

When ethnically diverse communities are considered, many are at **point -3**. These communities are the most disenfranchised by the aquatic sector. Notably, communities at point -3 are completely unaware of what they need to know to keep themselves safe when in, on and around water. Multiple, complex barriers need to be overcome to enable disenfranchised communities to engage safely in aquatic activity.

“ I just stay and look after the bags at the beach. I'm not going in the water. I'm not confident to go in the water. There's not enough information about water safety really. I wouldn't know how to save myself.

*(Black British, North West England)*

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

**44%** of #OurSwimStory survey respondents said they had a fear of water.

**34%** of #OurSwimStory survey respondents said they (or someone in their family) had experienced a traumatic aquatic event.

**Point -2** represents gaining access to water safety knowledge, through targeted education and outreach, which is the first step on the journey to safe aquatic engagement. Once this essential foundation has been established, individuals need to be supported to develop confidence in the water (**point -1**) and made aware of inclusive and accessible opportunities within the aquatic sector (**point 0**).

It is only when they reach **point 1** that communities are equipped to engage in Learn to Swim programmes, which clearly demonstrates the need for the BSA to bridge the gap between the aquatic sector and African, Caribbean and Asian communities. Notably, being able to swim safely can enable individuals to pursue other aquatic pathways (**point 2**), which can generate significant benefits and social value (for example, improved health and employment opportunities).

“ I’ve always been told “Black people can’t swim” or “Black people don’t swim we run”. I think it’s something for all ethnic groups to experience. It’s an amazing life skill and being in the water... You feel free.

*(Black Caribbean, Female, Yorkshire)*

**80%** of #OurSwimStory survey respondents felt aquatic activities were a viable sports or fitness option for themselves or others from their ethnic or cultural community, yet...

**84%** of #OurSwimStory respondents felt aquatic activity was uncommon in their community.

By focusing on the most disenfranchised (i.e., those at point -3 on the Community Journey™), the BSA offers a unique perspective, and this has the potential to benefit other underrepresented groups. Indeed, the BSA is committed to ensuring that **all** children and adults (with a wide range of intersecting identities and experiences) have equitable access, feel included, and have a safe and quality experience in, on and around water.

Given the many intersecting and co-existing barriers identified in #OurSwimStory, **a holistic and multi-sectoral approach is required to equip communities with the knowledge and skills necessary to keep them safe and support them on their journey towards aquatic participation.**



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# WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN IN RESPONSE TO #OURSWIMSTORY?

The BSA will continue to act as a bridge between the aquatic sector and disenfranchised communities by:

- Advocating for the adoption of a comprehensive, nationwide water safety education programme, and utilising our proprietary **Water Safety Index™** as part of an evaluation framework
- Rolling out the award-winning BSA **Blue Hour / Together We Can™** programme, which provides access to vital water safety education, drowning prevention and the benefits of aquatics (e.g., by supporting participants to access employment opportunities, and in doing so diversifying the aquatic workforce and tackling employee shortages)
- Amplifying the experiences of disenfranchised communities and collaborating with partners, as we strive to achieve equitable access in the context of wider sector challenges

The BSA is developing the **Water Safety Index™** as a tool to measure a person's risk of getting into danger in open water, based on their **swimming competence, confidence and water safety knowledge**. These three aspects are essential to ensuring safety in, on and around water.

The **Blue Hour** provides an introduction to the vital water safety knowledge needed to prevent life threatening behaviours and increase the chance of survival from drowning.

The government and aquatic sector should start by recognising and acknowledging where communities are by:

- Ensuring all policies and initiatives aimed at promoting an aquatically active culture are informed by and respond to the barriers experienced by underrepresented groups (i.e., those at point -3 on the Community Journey™)
- Enacting and implementing the Water Safety (Curriculum) Bill to urgently improve access to vital water safety education for **all** children and young people, recognising that for many children of Black and Asian heritage the school curriculum could provide their only opportunity to acquire this crucial knowledge
- Firmly committing to ensuring disenfranchised communities achieve equitable access to lifesaving knowledge and skills by collaborating with the BSA and adopting a multi-sectoral approach

What will you / your organisation do in response to #OurSwimStory as part of a commitment to sustainable change?

Together, let us embark on this journey towards equitable access to water safety education and the benefits of engaging with aquatics for all, knowing that our efforts today will have a profound and lasting impact on generations to come.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the AKD Solutions team for conducting the #OurSwimStory research, including Reyss Wheeler (lead researcher), Darnelle Morgan, Nandi Kegode, Mercy Brown, and Samina Tarafder (researchers), as well as Jenny Gordon and Michelle Peter (advisors). We also thank our team, including Damian Stevenson and Georgie Milner Day (research team), as well as Rhiann O'Connor (marketing).

We also want to acknowledge the London Marathon Foundation, Sport Wales, the RNLI and PwC for supporting this research. We are particularly thankful to all the research participants without whom #OurSwimStory would not have been possible.


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