

Sheffield swimming accessibility for autistic people project

Survey results summary

Autistic Children and Carers Together have been working on a small project looking at swimming accessibility for autistic people in Sheffield. We are exploring the barriers that might prevent autistic people from being able to take part in swimming and to outline resources or other initiatives that might help to overcome those barriers.



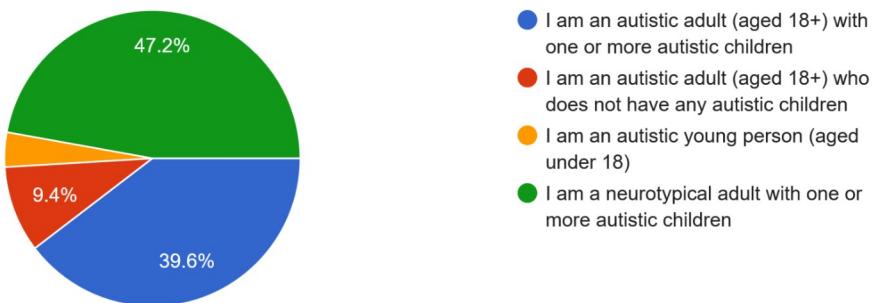
Our thanks for the Swimming Teachers Association CommUNITY STArters programme for providing a grant of £1,000 towards this work and to Mighty Splash Swim School and Dr. Susy Ridout for their support in developing and delivering this project.

Over the Summer of 2025 we sought responses to a survey from autistic adults and parent-carers of autistic young people to try to better understand the accessibility barriers to swimming faced by autistic adults and young people in Sheffield, as well as finding possible helpful strategies, resources or suggestions for improved practices. This is a summary of the responses received.

We received 54 responses, mainly from parents: 47% of respondents were neurotypical parents who have autistic children, and 40% autistic adults with autistic children. 9% were autistic adults who do not have any autistic children, and the remaining 4% were autistic young people completing the survey themselves. Many thanks to all the respondents who gave such thoughtful and detailed feedback.

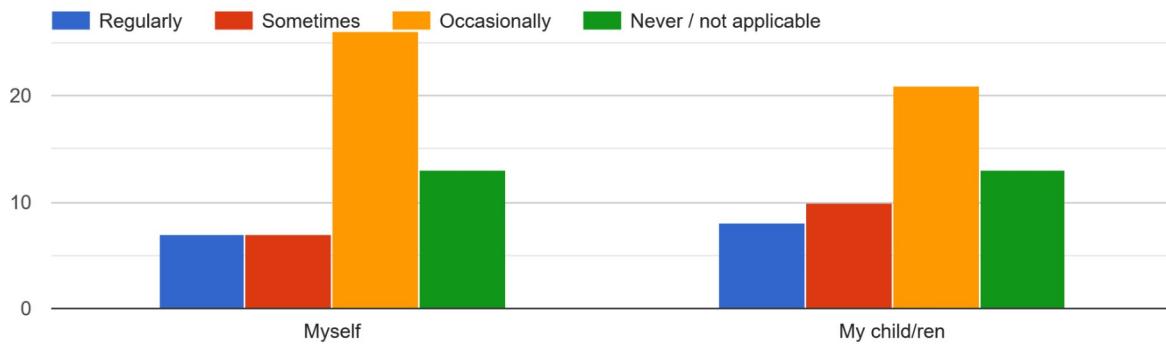
Which of these descriptions most closely applies to you?

53 responses



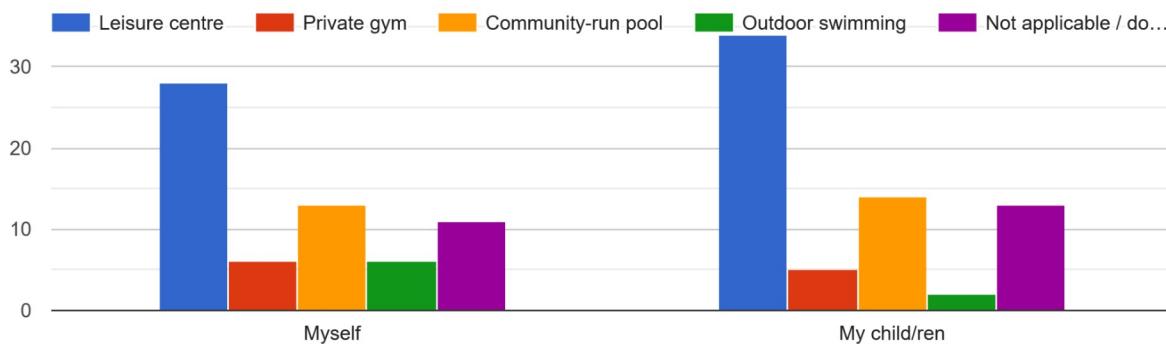
The majority of respondents were occasional swimmers, with some more regular participants and a significant number who do not swim because, as later comments demonstrate, there are a range of sensory and other barriers which have made swimming inaccessible to them as autistic people.

How often do you and/or your young people go swimming as a leisure activity



We asked where people swim, if they do. As we would expect, most respondents go swimming at leisure centres, with a significant number at community-run pools and smaller numbers at private gyms or outdoor swimming.

Where do you go swimming?

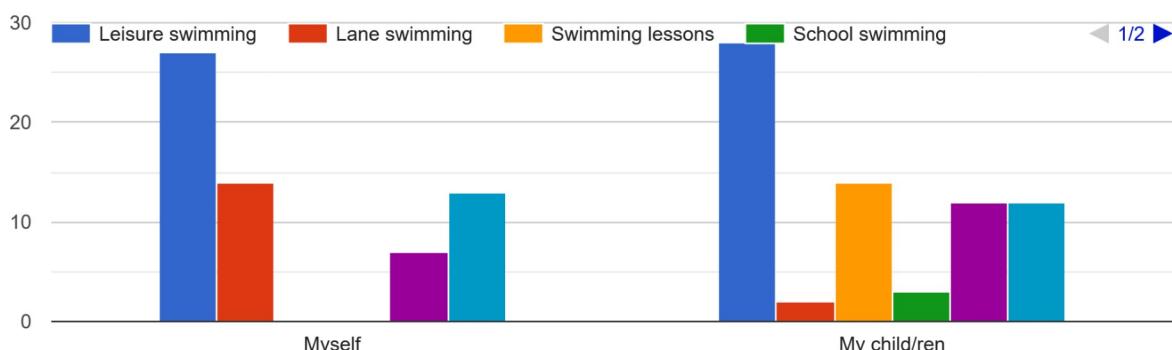


Venue	Number of respondents
Hillsborough	31
Ponds Forge	7
Heeley	6
Graves	6
Concord	5
Dronfield	4
Virgin Active	4
Hathersage	3
Thorncliffe	2

Zest	2
Westfield	2
Others - Aston-cum-Aughton, Hoyland, Doncaster Dome, Mapplewell, Stocksbridge, King Edwards, St James, Eckington, Nuffield, Archer Road	1 each

As most of the respondents were parent-carers, it is unsurprising that the most popular pool is Hillsborough as the only Sheffield leisure pool with slides and then Ponds Forge as a large leisure pool with wave machine and lazy river. Many of the respondents were ACCT members so we would expect to see a lot of Hillsborough responses as this is the venue we use for ACCT's autism-friendly family swimming session.

What type(s) of swimming session do you access?



For adults responding (i.e. almost all of the 'myself' chart responses), most are going leisure swimming, with some lane swimming, some to private hire sessions (the purple bar) and some not applicable (the light blue bar on the right of the chart) as they don't go swimming themselves, but are answering on behalf of a young person or have found swimming to be inaccessible.

For the young people, most are leisure swimmers, with some accessing swimming lessons or private hire sessions and a small number accessing school swimming.

We asked for the names of any private groups that respondents might have accessed. In addition to ACCT's fortnightly sessions, the following were mentioned:

- Nuffield
- Swim Now
- Sparkle
- Graves Health and Sports Centre special needs session

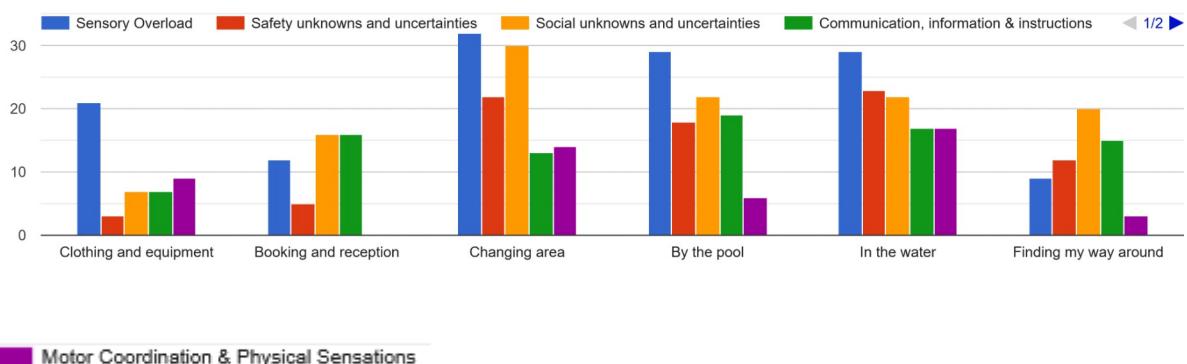
- SEN lessons at Dronfield (no longer running)
- SEN swimming lessons at Hillsborough
- SWIDS and autism swim at Westfield
- Swimming lessons at Mylnhurst - Water Merlins
- Virgin active
- Concord sensory sessions (limited to 20 attendees)

We asked about the sorts of access barriers that autistic adults and children have experienced that have made going swimming more difficult or impossible.

The barriers noted included sensory overload, safety concerns, social anxiety, lack of information/instructions and issues related to physical sensations and motor coordination. People noted particular issues around changing rooms and the process of getting changed before and after a swim, as well as while being in and around the pool. In addition, there were a number of issues related to first visits: knowing where to go and what to do. There were also a smaller number of barriers related to clothing and equipment .

“There are not enough larger/ accessible changing rooms and the noise in the changing area is very overwhelming for both of my children”.

What sort of access barriers have you or your child/ren experienced, or what barriers stop you or your child/ren from going swimming?



“The crowded pools create so much anxiety... My ASD child wants to swim and float and frolic independently in the pool, but due to others being in close proximity/mock and teasing from other young people, and limited disabled changing facilities, we don’t go as often as we’d like (and as often as needed for physical wellbeing)”.

We asked a series of questions about different products, resources or strategies that aid accessibility: things that people had used before, and things that they think would be helpful.

Far and away the most useful and most wished for accessibility aid is to have sensory-friendly sessions. In practice, these are very limited in availability in Sheffield, but where available, they can make a huge difference. These typically involve reducing the session capacity so the pool and changing rooms are less busy and noisy and may also involve simple adjustments made by the venue to reduce unnecessary noise or reduce the lighting levels.

Many respondents also talked about the physical environment, particularly finding changing room set-ups that are more accessible.

“It would really help to have more family changing rooms, and quiet areas in the changing rooms e.g. hairdryers not next to the disabled areas. Reduced noise and lighting.”

For children accessing swimming lessons, an inclusive approach with instructors who have training or experience in the needs of autistic young people was identified as very important.

More widely, many respondents talked about autism awareness of lifeguards, swimming instructors and other leisure centre staff. The feeling of being shamed or judged for neurodivergent behaviour is very real and does present a massive barrier to trying to go swimming. The knowledge that staff are aware of autistic behaviours and could offer support to autistic people would be a very big step forward in making swimming more accessible.

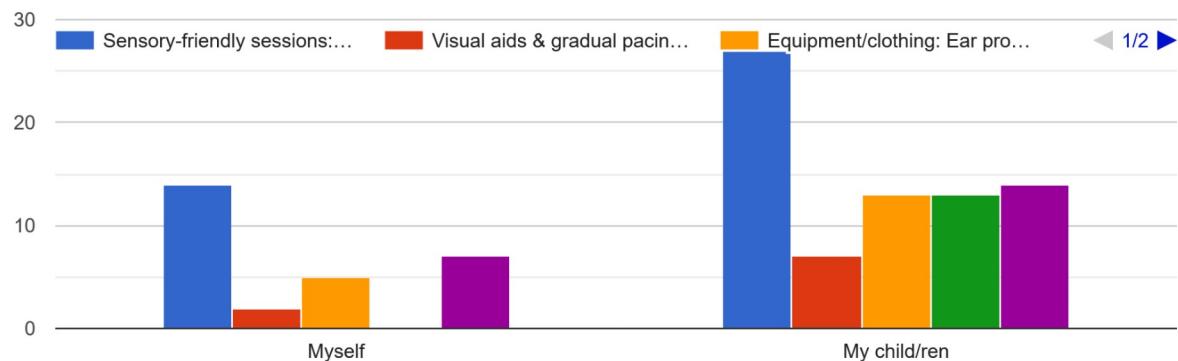
Many respondents also identified things to do with gradually building familiarity with the pool and the process, whether being able to make a preparatory visit to get to know the leisure centre facilities and prepare for any potential sensory triggers, or being able to have the time to take a step-by-step approach to getting to know the pool.

“Video tours are super important ..we end up searching youtube for families that have visited different pools”

Some young people and adults had noted issues with swimming clothing and equipment and suggested potentially helpful products including use of ear protection in the changing rooms, more comfortable goggles and different types of swimming costumes and flotation aids.

Some parents had made use of visual aids, pacing timetables and similar methods to support their children to access swimming.

Have you used any products or accessed any resources that have helped make swimming more accessible?



■ One-to-one, inclusive teaching: Adult in-water fo... ■ Private & staged exposure: Familiar pools,

"If leisure centres staff had some neurodivergence training for awareness it could be really good. To be able to recognise where families may struggle with moving quickly enough through transitions (e.g. from reception to pool) and avoid judgement when we struggle to immediately follow instructions".



With thanks to the Swimming Teachers Association CommUNITY STArters programme for funding this work.