

Swimming Accessibility for Autistic People - Current Provision in Sheffield (Nov 2025)

In 2025, Autistic Children and Carers Together worked on a small project looking at swimming accessibility for autistic people in Sheffield, exploring the barriers that might prevent autistic people from being able to take part in swimming and outlining 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.

We wanted to understand more about current provision in Sheffield. Were there any autism-friendly or inclusive sessions being offered? Are there quieter sessions? Are there swimming lessons aimed at SEND people? And are there any other initiatives or features available at particular leisure centres venues that could make swimming more accessible to autistic people?

It was quite disappointing how few leisure centres responded to our enquiries. We are unsure whether this is due to lack of time/capacity at the venues, or that autism accessibility is not something their venue has ever considered.

We did hear back from Everyone Active, who have the contract to run the Sheffield City Council-owned leisure centres across the city. This information is correct as of November 2025, but may of course have changed by the time you are reading this.

Everyone Active (Ponds Forge, Hillsborough, Concord, Heeley and Springs leisure centres, plus some others without swimming pools)

Inclusive swimming sessions for people with additional needs are available at Ponds Forge, Hillsborough leisure centre and Concord sports centre.

At the moment as Ponds Forge leisure pool is closed for maintenance; Everyone Active do not have a timetable for when the pool will reopen or when the inclusive session will be held once it does reopen.

Inclusive sessions at the other two venues are held at these times during term-times:

Hillsborough - Monday 11am , Wednesday 11am or 7.30pm , Friday 11am , Saturday 9am , Sunday 9am

Concord - Sunday 3.45pm

ACCT runs our fortnightly autism-friendly family swimming session at Hillsborough Leisure Centre on Sundays at 4.30pm. These sessions are open to families with autistic

children who are members of ACCT. There are currently no other external organisations who regularly hire Everyone Active facilities for inclusive leisure swims.

Other than specific inclusive sessions, one recommendation is to try to attend **public sessions at quieter times** to reduce the sensory impact and give you a bit more time and space in the pool and changing areas.

The Everyone Active pools are quite helpful for this: when you book online or via the app, you get to see how many spaces are still available at the session you are booking. So with a little bit of deduction, getting to know the venue, and timing your booking right, you can often find a quieter session.

Tips to find a quieter session when booking online or via the Everyone Active app:
You have to bear in mind that swimming sessions are one hour long but the booking times are at 15 minute intervals, so you should pay attention to the spaces available for the time slots before and after the one you are booking.

The number of bookings for your time slot (people getting changed to enter the pool) and the time slot one hour before yours (people leaving the pool) should indicate how busy the changing rooms are likely to be.

The numbers of bookings for your time slot, the three time slots immediately before and the three immediately after should indicate how busy the pool is likely to be for the hour you are in the pool.

This is not an exact science: for example, there may be a rush of people who book slots after you, but it's generally a good way of finding quieter sessions. For family swimming at the weekends at Ponds Forge and Hillsborough, sessions at the beginning of the day tend to be busier; those at the end of the day are often quieter.

Lessons

Everyone Active offers disability lessons for children under 16 at those same three venues (Ponds Forge, Hillsborough leisure centre and Concord sports centre). They also offer inclusive water confidence lessons for adults at Hillsborough leisure centre. However, these are in high demand (to put it another way: there aren't enough of them). They are currently fully booked at all venues; Everyone Active is advising customers to contact them again in around 6 months time to see if any spaces have become available.

Facilities

In terms of facilities, all the Everyone Active Sheffield venues apart from Heeley have accessible changing cubicles and all staff at each venue have received mandatory training on supporting disabled customers.

In our accessibility survey, many respondents noted that having photos/videos of the different areas/facilities of the leisure centre available online is very helpful for accessibility. Such information online can help people to reduce anxiety and overcome access barriers by

helping prepare for a visit: with photos or a virtual tour, you can understand possible barriers, sensory triggers and make a more informed decision about how to approach a visit.

Currently, [Concord](#), [Heeley](#) and [Springs](#) leisure centres have 360 degree panoramic photo tours available on the Everyone Active webpages for those respective venues. These are very helpful interactive tools, where you can move the 'camera' around the different areas and plan your route from outside to reception to the changing rooms to the pool.

Everyone Active told us that their team are in the process of completing similar tours for [Ponds Forge](#) and [Hillsborough](#) with the plan to have these live on the webpages for each venue by the end of November 2025 (though perhaps the unexpected closure of Ponds Forge may have an impact on this). We will update this document if and when those tours go online.

Other Sheffield leisure centres

Our information about other leisure centres in Sheffield has come from what we've been able to find out online. Hence we have not been able to verify it, and things may have changed.

Zest

The [Zest Centre](#) is a community-run leisure centre operated by Zest, which is the trading name for the Netherthorpe and Upperthorpe Community Alliance charity.

There are no specific autism-friendly, SEND-friendly, inclusive or quiet sessions on the timetable. Zest does hold a Disabled and Adult Only swim session on Mondays (9.15-10.30am), Thursdays (10.45am - 12 noon) and Sundays (9.00-10.00am). They say, *"These sessions are for those with a disability. Please be aware there will be people with seen and unseen disabilities. We ask everyone to be respectful of this. The session may on occasions be noisy. Disabled children are welcome to these sessions. Adults are welcome for a gentle swim".*

Amongst the facilities description for this session, they mention that they have "Four individual and private disabled cabinets, equipped with a shower, hand basin and toilet will provide you with plenty of room to get yourself changed" and "Increased water temperature to 31 degrees". Many respondents to our survey noted that the cold temperature of pools was a barrier for their autistic children or themselves.

For autistic and neurodivergent adults, Zest has an adult only session on weekdays at 3pm which is often a quieter session.

For swimming lessons, this is what the website says about lessons for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in their frequently asked questions section

"We will work with you to determine the most effective way we can accommodate children with SEND or disabilities. Initially, we may propose a trial session to assess their individual

suitability. Our teachers will make recommendations based on their professional judgment. If we don't feel our lessons are suitable for your child and we are unable to accommodate them in a mainstream class then we may signpost you to an alternative pathway for your child at another pool. At present, we do not provide customised lessons tailored for SEND or disabilities".

The website has a helpful short video walkthrough showing you the route through reception to the changing rooms and to the pool

<https://www.zestcommunity.co.uk/services/swimming/walk-through-to-the-pool/>

Regarding accessibility of their facilities, they say:

"There are a number of disability ramps which make access to any part of the Centre easy for wheelchair users.

Other facilities include disabled toilets, baby changing and a lift allowing access to facilities on the first floor of the building.

The swimming pool has a range of disabled changing facilities, with both ramp and hoist access into the pool".

Places for People - Graves and Thorncliffe

Places for People Leisure runs two Sheffield Leisure Centres with swimming pools: Graves Health and Sports Centre (Norton/Meadowhead) and Thorncliffe Health and Leisure Centre (High Green)

Looking through the swimming timetables for each centre, there do not appear to be any sessions specifically for autistic people or people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The Places booking system is similar to Everyone Active in that you can click on a session and see how many places are still available. This is a method you could use to gauge how busy a session is likely to be before you book.

Swimming lessons

SEND Swimming Lessons are available at both centres ([Graves](#), [Thorncliffe](#)) according to the website, though we have no further details.

Graves has a 360 degree interactive photo tour of their facilities on the website which is very helpful for preparing for a visit and identifying any things that could be an access barrier for you or your family members. There doesn't seem to be anything of that type for Thorncliffe.

Westfield Sports Centre

Offers a [Disability and Autistic swim session](#) on Sundays 2-3pm, which is "A calm, supportive swim session tailored for individuals with autism or additional needs, featuring reduced noise and fewer swimmers. Relaxed, sensory-friendly environment. Trained lifeguards & accessible facilities"

Also has some reduced capacity lane swimming sessions during the week.

No information online about accessibility of facilities.

Stocksbridge Community Leisure Centre

Has a *Family Swim for families of children with additional needs* session on Fridays from 3:30pm - 5:00pm.

Some information about facilities is published on the website:

"Changing rooms: We have a Group Changing Room which can be used as a Family Change. However, during Monday – Friday between 1 pm – 3 pm the group changing facilities are NOT available as this is for the exclusive use of school swimming. Please note:- only ONE family at a time can use the Family Changing Facilities

"Swimming Pools: Both of our swimming pools and changing areas have undergone an extensive refurbishment. We operate a full timetable in both pools including lane swimming, parent and child (up to 5 years), family swims, over 50's, ladies only swimming and Aquafit classes.

The Big Pool is 25m x 6 lane pool with 3m deep end and is complemented by a 12.5 m training pool which is 1m deep.

Pool Temperature

Main Pool 28.5 ° C

Small Pool 31.0 ° C"

The rest:

[Virgin Active Broadfield Park](#) - no specific inclusive or SEND-friendly swimming sessions or lessons publicised. No particular information about the accessibility of their facilities. Has a [photo gallery](#) on the website to give a rough idea of what to expect.

[King Edwards](#) - General public sessions offered; no specific SEND-friendly sessions or lessons. No information on accessibility of facilities.

[Swim! Archer Road](#) - specialist swimming lessons for children aged 0–11. No general public swimming sessions. No specific inclusive or SEND-friendly lessons publicised, though they do offer 1-1 private lessons.

Just Do More group (Eckington, Dronfield and Clay Cross) - no specific inclusive or SEND-friendly swimming sessions or lessons publicised. Regarding the accessibility of facilities, the website says, "We have a range of accessible facilities in place to help everyone to experience the benefits of swimming. Our new swimming pool at Clay Cross Active has been designed with accessibility in mind including a Changing Places facility. We also have a hoist available at Dronfield and Eckington Active".