

Swimming Accessibility - Advice and Resources for Autistic People



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 STArers 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.

The majority of swimming accessibility barriers for autistic people are at provider and venue level. System-wide change is clearly needed. Through this project we have produced an accompanying summary of feedback and suggestions for leisure centres and swimming providers.

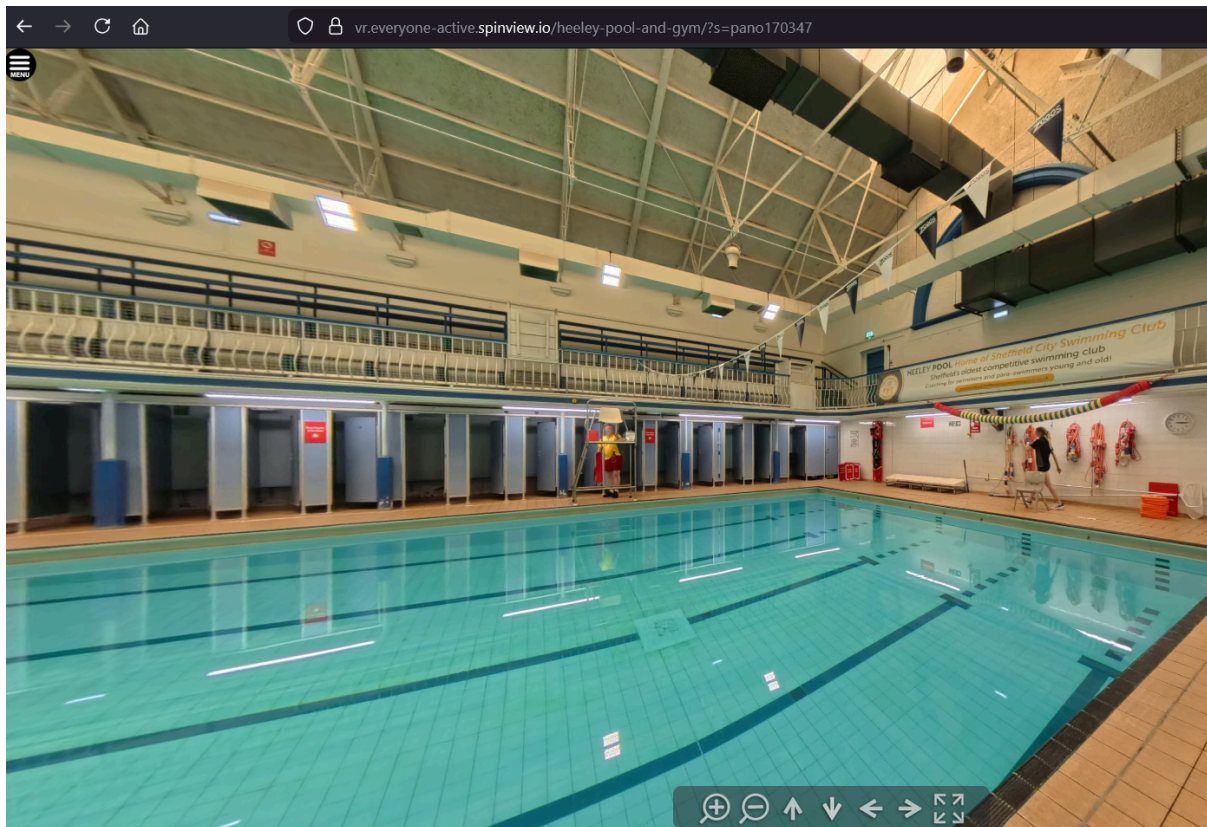
This summary looks at ways of making the best of what we've got at the moment. It is guidance based on advice, tips and strategies from the autism community in Sheffield that may be useful if you are going swimming yourself as an autistic adult, and for taking your autistic child(ren) swimming. Ways to help address the multiple accessibility barriers that exist, such as this expressed by one parent:

The crowded pools create so much anxiety. My autistic child wants to swim and float and frolic independently in the pool, but due to others being in close proximity, the mocking and teasing from other young people, and the limited disabled changing facilities, we don't go very often.

Before a visit

Going to a new place where you don't know the set-up and the sensory environment can cause a lot of anxiety. Having access to information about the pool and its facilities can help to make an informed decision about whether it is likely to be accessible for you as well as identifying possible sensory triggers or areas you need to be aware of when you go swimming.

As we note in the leisure centres summary, some pools have quite good information on their websites about their facilities including panoramic photo tours. A lot of feedback from autistic people and parents of autistic children mentioned this as a helpful thing.



Panoramic photo tour of Heeley pool screenshotted from the Everyone Active website

Our guide to Sheffield Leisure Centres mentions which have accessibility information on their websites with links to more information.

It may be possible to contact the leisure centre and have a trial visit to walk around the venue without swimming to help assess the likely issues.

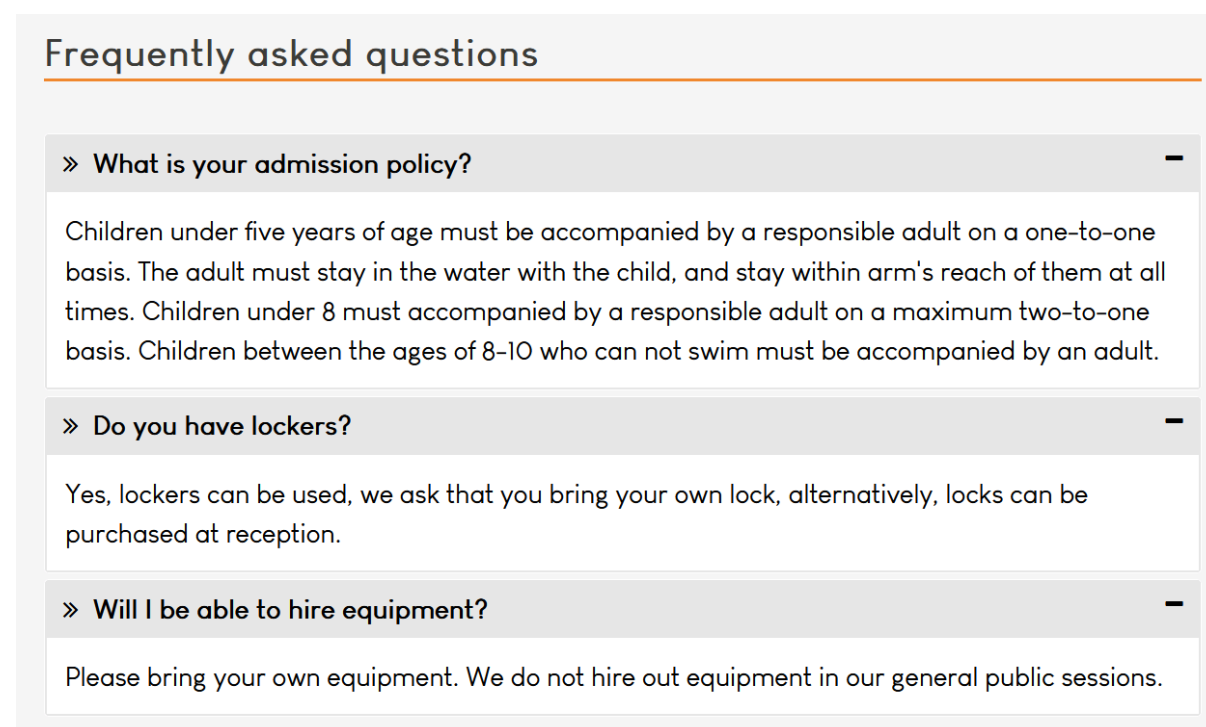
I find getting ready to go out is the worst bit. It seems to take a lot of organising. It helps when I have the swimming bags already packed. The thought of having to bag my children to get ready and also getting all the stuff together and get us out of the house for a certain time puts me off wanting to go. Once we are in the pool it's normally ok.

When it comes to swimming clothing and equipment, this is a very individual thing and depends on your own needs and sensitivities. For some people, the feeling of a wet swimming costume on your skin might just be too much whatever the fabric, style or cut. For others, this may be an annoying and costly process of trial and error to find what works for you. Some of our survey respondents mentioned 2 piece swimming costumes for women and girls feeling less uncomfortable; others prefer to have swimming clothing that covers the whole body. Others mentioned goggles from Decathlon. It's just going to be what, if anything, works for you.

Lockers: A quick word on lockers. Check the website to see what it says about lockers and what you need to operate them. For example, at Everyone Active you need pound coins to operate the lockers (that you get back when you've finished using the lockers). But at Zest,

you have to bring your own lock or buy a lock from reception - the website doesn't go into more detail about what sizes or types of lock would or would not fit.

As we say, the more prep you can do, the better to help make the experience as predictable as possible and to minimise the amount of unexpected things you may need to deal with while anxiety levels are already high.

A screenshot of a website's 'Frequently asked questions' section. The title is in a bold, dark font, underlined with a thin orange line. Below it are three questions, each in a grey header box with a minus sign on the right. The first question is 'What is your admission policy?' followed by a paragraph about age requirements. The second is 'Do you have lockers?' followed by a paragraph about bringing or purchasing locks. The third is 'Will I be able to hire equipment?' followed by a paragraph about bringing your own equipment.

Frequently asked questions

» What is your admission policy? -

Children under five years of age must be accompanied by a responsible adult on a one-to-one basis. The adult must stay in the water with the child, and stay within arm's reach of them at all times. Children under 8 must accompanied by a responsible adult on a maximum two-to-one basis. Children between the ages of 8-10 who can not swim must be accompanied by an adult.

» Do you have lockers? -

Yes, lockers can be used, we ask that you bring your own lock, alternatively, locks can be purchased at reception.

» Will I be able to hire equipment? -

Please bring your own equipment. We do not hire out equipment in our general public sessions.

Screenshot of the frequently asked questions section of the Zest website.

Booking a swim

As we discuss in the Sheffield leisure centres summary, there are only a few public swimming sessions designed as inclusive sessions for autistic people or people with special educational needs and disabilities.

This was the main suggestion/request from our research and consultation: to have more inclusive sessions like this: lower numbers of people in the pool, reducing unnecessary noise and lighting, a warmer pool temperature, and being around other people with similar needs to yours, all help make swimming more accessible and welcoming.

If you are unable to attend the inclusive sessions that are on offer, the next best option to improve accessibility is to try to find times at your leisure centre that are likely to be quieter, with fewer people in the changing rooms and in the pool. This reduces the sensory impact, can help you feel less judged, and gives you a better chance of accessing the limited private or accessible changing facilities that may be available.

As we note in the leisure centres summary, some providers including Everyone Active and Places do note how many spaces are available at the session when you are booking. This

means you can browse and figure out which sessions are likely (not guaranteed) to be less busy.

Here is our guidance on doing this with the Everyone Active website/app. The principles can be applied to any provider who indicates numbers of spaces available.

*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.

The screenshot shows the 'Select Slot' page for 'Fam Waterslides Sat 11:00'. The session is in the Beach Pool and lasts 60 minutes. The booking is for Saturday, 29 Nov, from 11:00 to 11:59. The page lists the following prices:

Category	Price	Include	Remove
Adult	£9.70	- 0 +	
Concession	£9.70	- 0 +	
Junior	£5.90	- 0 +	
Senior	£9.70	- 0 +	
Under 3s	£3.20	- 0 +	

On the right, there is a red 'Book' button and a green box indicating '27 spaces remaining'.

Screenshot from the Everyone Active booking page with info on the right of the page showing '27 spaces remaining'

Generally, pretty much all Sheffield swimming providers now offer online booking for swimming which, as long as it works properly, can reduce some of the anxiety of figuring out what you need and how to pay for it at reception or over the phone.

At reception

If you have booked online, you should have your booking on your phone/device, or you may be asked for your name to confirm your booking.

Generally, at somewhere like Ponds Forge which has booking times at 15 minute intervals, you will be allowed to go through to the changing rooms 5-10 minutes before your session time. You may be asked to wait if you are trying to go in sooner than that, but you can explain if you need more time e.g. because of the needs of autistic children, or because you really need an accessible changing cubicle.

You may get a wristband or something similar to indicate which session you are in. With a bit of practice, the plasticky paper ones can be put on in ways that aren't too annoying, without the sticky bits sticking to your skin.

In the changing rooms - going in

Where there are larger or accessible changing cubicles, this can be a big help. Often, parents may need a mixed gender family cubicle and these can be in high demand at busy times.

Again, checking the website or making an enquiry beforehand can give you information about what accessible changing facilities are available and maybe photos of the changing rooms so you can work out how you can best navigate this part.

There are a lot of things that, as autistic adults or parents of autistic children, you will naturally do anyway. If you have noise sensitivities, you will likely look for a place in the changing rooms far away from the noisy hard dryers, for example. You might use ear defenders in the changing rooms.

If you aren't too sensitive to your swimming costume, you can put this on under your clothes before you leave the house to reduce the time spent in the changing room.

I take extra coins and have one locker for clothes/shoes and a separate one where I can grab a towel and shampoo for the shower but also stick pool noodles, pool toys and goggles in without struggling.

In the pool

We're only aware of one leisure centre in Sheffield that publishes the expected pool temperatures on its website (well done Stocksbridge). The variability of the temperature can

be a problem, and many parents noted that the cold water at pools was a significant barrier for their children. We don't have any particularly helpful guidance to help with this.

The amount of people in the pool is a huge factor. Especially if there are lane swimmers where my children feel in the way, or other people splashing. They worry a lot about how they impact other swimmers and it makes them feel very anxious.

The other main accessibility barriers are to do with the busyness of the pool (noise, splashing, judgement of others) and general external noise (lifeguard whistles, alarm sounds to indicate water features such as wave machines). Going to quieter sessions can alleviate some of this; the rest is about how you can prepare yourself or your children for what it will be like so you're ready (easier said than done).

Many parents noted that getting autistic and demand avoidant children out of the pool at the end of the session could be hard; transitions are often a challenge.

Some parents suggested taking the kids out of the pool when there are still a few minutes left being helpful - not least because it can make the showers and changing rooms less crowded.

At the Jump Inc sensory sessions they count down from 10 at the end of the session which is really helpful.

Others mentioned attending the final session of the day being helpful, because everybody's leaving the pool at the same time and so your children aren't missing out on extra fun time.

In the changing rooms - coming out

In many ways, the hardest part of the swimming experience for everybody, but magnified a few times if you are autistic or are parenting autistic children. Managing showers if you can; getting stuff out of the locker; getting wet swimming costumes off; keeping your clothes dry while you get dressed; hand dryer and hair dryer noise. It's a lot.

We don't use the changing rooms because of the noise. We just come straight home in our hooded towels.

(We guess this one works better if you have a car; less straightforward on the bus!)

Again, if you can get a cubicle, this can help reduce the noise and give you a bit of breathing space to manage everything you need.

talc helps get kids dry quicker and reduces meltdowns

Guidance here is quite lacking. Again, it's quieter sessions if you can; get a cubicle if you can; stay away from the hair and hand dryers if this is a sensory trigger for you. And good luck.

Afterwards

Putting the swimming towels and suits straight back into the swimming bags after washing them is helpful.

After you've been swimming, it's worth spending a bit of time reflecting on what the barriers were, what was a struggle and whether there's anything you could do next time that would make it easier. If you can write this down in your notes app or wherever you'll find it again, that can really help. Life's going to happen in the meantime and you might not remember when swimming time comes around again.

Having a routine of going swimming at the same time every week is helpful.

Overall, for those things in your control, it's about doing what you do anyway as an autistic person or parent of an autistic child: thinking ahead about the things that are likely to be overwhelming or make the activity unbearable, and planning ways of minimising or avoiding those things.

If wet or dirty changing rooms are a big problem, then maybe the first swimming session of the day is better. If others still being in the pool when you need to get out is a problem, then the final session of the day might be the right one. Those issues might not be as important as finding a quiet session though, so you might choose a different time that'll be quieter and try to deal with the wet changing room or demand avoidance issues.

Not easy, we know. And of course what's really needed is more inclusive sessions, more quiet/private changing facilities and generally more understanding and action at provider level. But we hope the feedback from the Sheffield autism community can help a little.

Swimming Lessons

As we note in the leisure centre summaries, SEND and inclusive swimming lessons are very hard to access - there aren't enough of them for all the families who want them.

Other than specific SEND lessons, feedback suggests that it's 1-1 or very small group lessons that have been most successful, but of course, these are likely to be expensive.

Some parents fed back about the benefits of being able to speak to teachers and staff about their children's needs.

Speaking to the staff about my child's needs helped. They have been open to suggestions and ideas and it helped them to understand some of his behaviours.

Visiting beforehand to meet teachers and watching a lesson was helpful. Teachers accepting she may just want to watch and not join in.