

# #OurSwimStory:

A conversation with Black and Asian communities about aquatic activity and water safety in cities across England and Wales

---



# Contents

BSA Foreword	4
Introduction to the BSA	5
Executive Summary	6
Background and Introduction	17
Methodology	20
Research Design	20
Participants Recruitment	21
The Survey	21
Forums	21
Unstructured Interviews	22
Analysis	22
Research Audience	23
Survey Respondent Demographics	23
Survey Findings	25
Swimming Skills and Ability	25
Aquatic Participation	27
Push and Pull Factors	29
Forum, Interview, and Open Text Box Findings	31
Early Experiences	31
Parental Engagement	35
Water Safety Awareness	36

---

A Lack of Aquatic Skill	39
Awareness of Aquatic Activities	42
Fear of the Water	44
Aquatic Cultures	46
The Body, Hair and Skin	49
Socio-economic, Structural and Practical Barriers	52
Stereotypes and Visibility	54
Aquatic Perceptions	58
Analysis and Summary of Findings	60
Recommendations	66
Conclusion	73
Limitations	75
Acknowledgements	76
Glossary	77
References	78
Appendix	80

# 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. To read the statistical findings in full, please go to page 25; for the thematic findings, please go to page 31.

### 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.

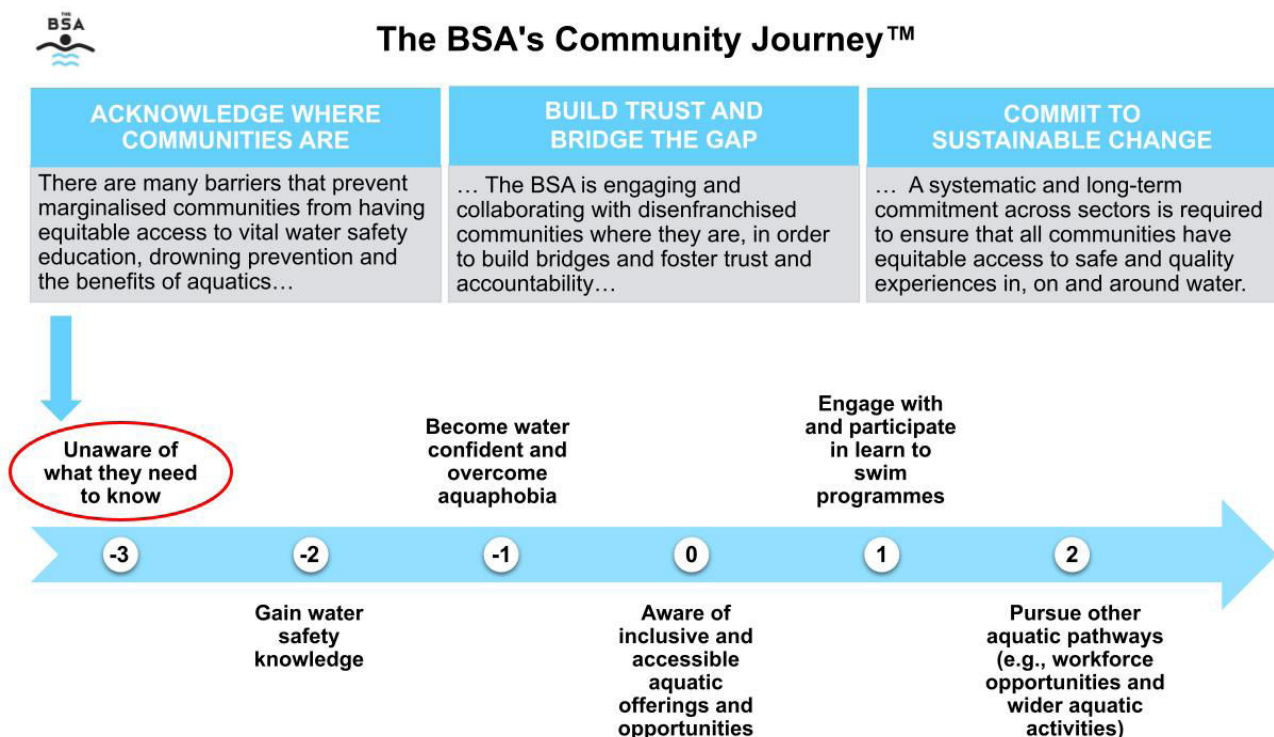
(Black British, Female, London)



## 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 BSA's 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.



## 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. To read the recommendations in full, please go to page 66.

### 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.

**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.



# Background and Introduction



In the UK, swimming and water safety are widely viewed as crucial life skills; so much so that swimming proficiency and water safety have been a mandatory element of the primary school curriculum in England since 1994<sup>1, 2</sup>.

However, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic over a quarter of children who completed primary school in England did not meet the curriculum standard for swimming and water safety; this has been exacerbated by disruptions to school swimming provision during the pandemic<sup>3</sup>. Notably, data from Sport England's Active Lives Children and Young People Survey indicate that Black and Asian children and young people are less likely to say they can swim 25 metres unaided, or that they can perform a safe self-rescue, compared to their White counterparts. In addition, Sport England has highlighted that Black and Asian children and adults are less likely to participate in swimming, compared to children and adults of White and mixed ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, 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. Similarly,

80% of Black children and 78% of Asian children did not swim regularly, compared to 71% of White British children<sup>4</sup>. Currently drowning statistics in the UK are not categorised by ethnicity and thus it is not possible to conclude whether drowning is disproportionately high among African, Caribbean and Asian communities within the UK. That said, disparities in aquatic skill and water safety knowledge suggest that these communities are at greater risk from drowning. Moreover, on a global scale, over 90% of drowning fatalities occur in low-income and middle-income countries, and Africa has the highest rate of drowning, whilst Asia has the greatest number of drowning deaths<sup>5</sup>.

Despite these findings, efforts to address the ethnic disparity in aquatic engagement and the high proportion of children who leave primary school without potentially lifesaving aquatic

<sup>1</sup> Department for Education. (2013). National curriculum in England: Physical Education programmes of study. GOV.UK. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-physical-education-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-physical-education-programmes-of-study#swimming-and-water-safety>

<sup>2</sup> Swim England. (2019). Swimming and the national curriculum. Swimming and Water Safety in Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.swimming.org/schools/swimming-national-curriculum/>

<sup>3</sup> Swim England. (2021). (rep.). Impact of Coronavirus on school swimming and water safety. Retrieved from <https://www.swimming.org/swimengland/impact-coronavirus-school-swimming-report/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sport England. (2020). (rep.). Sport for all? Why ethnicity and culture matters in sport and physical activity. Retrieved from <https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-02/Sportforallreport.pdf?VersionId=td0pMbTNOs7caOjvMZ0HCRPwsI3jGnFA>

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization. (2014). Global Report on Drowning: Preventing a Leading Killer. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/global-report-on-drowning-preventing-a-leading-killer>

skills have been minimal. In general, initiatives have focused on increasing uptake among those with limited financial means to pay for swimming and aquatic activities. For instance, policies in Wales have allocated funding to support free swimming for children and people aged over 60<sup>6</sup>, with some initiatives extending their target audience to include young people and adults. However, the success of these initiatives has been questioned. For example, an independent review into the effectiveness of the Welsh Free Swim initiative concluded that, whilst this initiative helped thousands of children and adults across Wales to participate in swimming, it failed to be cost-effective, did not make the biggest contribution to increasing activity levels, and saw notable declines in uptake after 2013<sup>7</sup>. Alongside this, several local, grassroots groups have specifically attempted to increase swimming uptake among Black and Asian people, by directly targeting these communities via social media and word of mouth.

The BSA has also played an important role in raising awareness and tackling the underrepresentation of Black and Asian communities in aquatics. For example, the issues of racism in swimming have been highlighted by two co-founders of

the BSA: Olympic swimmer Alice Dearing and film maker Ed Accura. The elite swimmer has vocalised the disadvantage and discrimination Black swimmers face stating that, “it’s decades of cultural and institutional racism which has sadly seeped into the swimming community and swimming in general for quite some time”<sup>8</sup>. One recent example of exclusionary practice at elite level includes the banning of swimming caps designed for afro hair styles by the international aquatic regulating body FINA; this decision was reversed in September 2022, following significant backlash from ethnically diverse communities<sup>9</sup>. Alice has also highlighted the challenges posed by a lack of accessible pathways into competitive swimming and the resources needed to support a competitive swimmer, such as regular access to local, high standard pools. Through visual media, Ed has highlighted the experiences of, and stereotypes faced by, Black people in the UK in his series of film documentaries, entitled ‘Blacks Can’t Swim’. The documentation of lived experiences evidences the issues of racism within the UK aquatic sector, whilst also revealing a significant latent demand for swimming among Black people.

Even with this increased focus, pervasive

<sup>6</sup> Sport Wales. (n.d.). Free swimming in Wales. Retrieved from <https://www.sport.wales/content-vault/free-swimming/>

<sup>7</sup> Grace, C., Martin, S., Harris, S., Bolton, N., Whittington, L., McInch, A., Mattingley, B., Eurig, A., & Church, S. (2018). Free Swimming in Wales: A Review. Swim Wales & UK Research and Consultancy Services Ltd. Retrieved from <https://democracy.npt.gov.uk/documents/s52972/Free%20Swimming%20Report%20Final.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Goodbody, J. (2021). Racism has held up ethnic minorities in swimming, says Alice Dearing. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/jun/25/racism-has-held-up-ethnic-minorities-in-swimming-says-alice-dearing>

<sup>9</sup> Guardian News and Media. (2022). Swimming caps designed for natural black hair finally permitted by Fina. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/sep/02/swimming-caps-designed-for-natural-black-hair-finally-permitted-by-fina>

racialised narratives (for instance, that Black people have heavier bones, which prevent them from being able to swim) continue to be passed down through families, perpetuating generational disengagement with swimming and water safety. In addition, historic trauma is also a potential contributing factor to current aquatic behaviour. Indeed, Black and Asian people are more likely to be aware of the role that water and drownings have played in the exploitation and liberation of their communities (for example, in the context of transatlantic slavery and civil war<sup>10, 11, 12</sup>).

Notably, there has been insufficient research into aquatic activity uptake and water safety awareness among Black and Asian communities, and until recently there has been no research that directly consults Black and Asian people to understand their aquatic experiences. In 2021 AKD Solutions (a research, learning and development agency) produced the pioneering #TellYourStory report on behalf of the UK Sports Councils<sup>13</sup>. This research found evidence of racism in sports (including swimming) at all levels, from amateur to professional, across the UK. In particular, the report highlighted that the impacts of racism often discourage people from participating in their sport, prompt them to change environment or

lead them to join or create an alternative structure (such as a club or group which operates outside of the existing sporting framework). That said, there remained a significant need to further understand the barriers to engagement with aquatic activity. These prominent gaps in the research prompted the BSA to commission this study, focusing specifically on people from Black, Asian, and other underrepresented ethnic groups within seven urban hubs in England and Wales.

Recognising the importance of culturally competent data collection and analysis processes, the BSA commissioned AKD Solutions to undertake this research and develop practical recommendations to improve ethnic representation in the aquatic sector. This research has been complemented by a survey conducted by Swim England<sup>14</sup>, which engaged 4,487 participants and explored the views and experiences of ethnically diverse communities. This research further demonstrates a growing awareness of the need to address the underrepresentation observed within swimming and aquatics.

<sup>10</sup> Dawson, K. (2006). Enslaved swimmers and divers in the Atlantic World. *Journal of American History*, 92(4), pp. 1327–1355. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.2307/4485894>

<sup>11</sup> Dawson, K. (2018). *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>12</sup> Hamlin, A. (2021). Swimming to Hong Kong: A bold Chinese refugee looks back. *Northwest Asian Weekly*. Retrieved from <https://nwasianweekly.com/2021/05/swimming-to-hong-kong-a-bold-chinese-refugee-looks-back/>

<sup>13</sup> David, H. (2021). (rep.). #TellYourStory. London: AKD Solutions. Retrieved from <https://www.akdsolutions.com/tellyourstory/>

<sup>14</sup> Swim England. (2022). England swims research and findings. Retrieved from <https://www.swimming.org/swimengland/england-swims-research-findings/>

# Methodology

## Research Design

This research was designed to a) explore the attitudes towards, and experiences and perceptions of, aquatic activity and water safety within ethnically diverse communities and b) support the production of practical outcomes. Regarding the latter, the research was intended to assist the BSA in achieving their mission to ensure all children and adults from ethnically diverse communities are water safety aware and have the opportunity to safely engage in aquatic activity.

The following research questions were formulated:

- 1 How do adults from Black and Asian communities perceive and experience aquatic activities and water safety?
- 2 What are the barriers to safe engagement in aquatic activity for Black and Asian adults?
- 3 How can Black and Asian communities be encouraged to engage in swimming and wider aquatic activity?

Within the research team, there were concerns about research fatigue and disillusion due to recent increases in equality, diversity and inclusion research. It was therefore deemed essential that the research team (and the methods they adopted) promoted trust and supported the participants on their journey through potentially difficult experiences. Notably, the research team comprised both trained researchers and peer researchers from the ethnic and geographical communities being researched; this was crucial for the process of data collection and analysis. The power of a shared group identity helped to reassure participants and facilitate conversations about racialised and cultural experiences<sup>15, 16</sup>. In addition, the commitment from the BSA and partner organisations to address the findings and implement the recommendations was important within the research process.

Given the scarcity of research exploring the aquatic experiences of Black and Asian people in the UK, this study aimed to engage a sample of 1,400 individuals from Black, Asian and other underrepresented ethnic groups across seven urban areas (with ethnically diverse populations) in England and Wales. A mixed methods approach was adopted, consisting of a survey, in-person and online forums, and unstructured face to face interviews.

<sup>15</sup> National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. (2017). (rep.). How to conduct peer-led qualitative research. Bristol. Retrieved from [https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/how\\_to\\_conduct\\_peer-led\\_qualitative\\_research.pdf](https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/how_to_conduct_peer-led_qualitative_research.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Austin, A & Jones, A. (2022) Peer Research: The Power of Shared Experience. Young Women's Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Peer-research-power-of-shared-experience-report.pdf>

## Participants Recruitment

Participants were recruited via various non-probability (i.e., non-random) methods, including snowballing (whereby new participants are recruited via word of mouth, referral and digital sharing) and purposive sampling (whereby participants are selected based on specific characteristics, such as ethnicity and gender). The community knowledge and contacts of peer researchers were used in data collection, and peer researchers spent time building awareness of the research issues within their physical and virtual communities. A significant amount of time was invested in outreach work to ensure the survey, forums, and unstructured interviews captured the voices and experiences of Black and Asian respondents who are typically unrepresented within research and considered 'hard to reach'. For example, where necessary, peer researchers conducted forums and interviews in the respondents' native languages to ensure participants were able to fully express their views and experiences. Community outreach also served as an opportunity to raise awareness of water safety among members of Black and Asian communities.

The survey and registration forms for forums were hosted on a purpose-built website and distributed via the following mediums: WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, family and friend networks, local and virtual community group forums, at events, and via sports

groups, community initiatives and local government organisations.

## The Survey

The research team developed a survey in February 2022 to capture attitudes towards aquatic activity. The survey development was informed by research into racialised experiences in sport, as well as other issues relevant to the UK aquatic sector (such as the threat of pool closures). In total, there were 43 questions on the survey, which were divided into three sections:

1	Swimming skills and ability
2	Participation in aquatic activities
3	Factors that encourage or prevent participation

The survey was piloted with 30 respondents from the target population, before being widely distributed across networks. Data collection took place from April to early August 2022.

## Forums

In-person and online forums were designed to facilitate discussions within Black and Asian communities about their personal experiences of engaging with aquatic activity (including the barriers faced).

Seven key questions were posed to forum attendees during the 90-minute forums, which were based around the following themes:

- 1 Engagement with aquatic activity
- 2 Aquatic knowledge, confidence and skill
- 3 Aquatic experiences

Most forums were open to all Black, Asian, and other ethnically diverse participants. However, some forums were targeted to gain feedback from specific groups (such as Muslim women, people of South Asian heritage, and Black and Asian men). The forums took place between the end of April and early July 2022.

## Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured, in-person interviews were conducted through purposive sampling and were employed as a tool in the second stage of the research, in order to target individuals who met a specific demographic or were underrepresented in the survey or forums. Fieldworkers were briefed on the project aim and given the task of engaging the public in conversations about swimming, water safety, and wider aquatic experiences. The fieldworkers all belonged to one of the targeted ethnic groups and lived within one of the seven cities.

Unstructured interviews were conducted between June and July 2022. The interview data was combined with the data from 79 additional interviews that were carried out during the making of the three 'Blacks Can't Swim' film documentaries.

## Analysis

The survey findings were analysed by ethnic group. To allow more meaningful comparison, individual ethnic groups (such as Black British or South East Asian) were collapsed to form three groups for analysis: Black, Asian and Other. Only data from respondents who disclosed their ethnicity were included within the analysis, and a multivariable analysis was beyond the scope of this study. An inductive approach was used to analyse the data from the forum, interview, and open text box questions; this involved the researchers examining the transcripts and text box responses for views and experiences that occurred repeatedly, which in turn enabled the themes to be established. The researchers outlined the recommendations and they were reviewed by an internal panel of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion professionals with over 50 years of combined experience.

# Research Audience

In total, the study received 1,410 responses from participants living in or around London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Cardiff, Swansea and Leicester. The survey had 952 responses and the forums and interviews engaged 458 people.

## Survey Respondent Demographics

Black respondents accounted for 74% of the survey sample (see figure 1). The three most prevalent ethnic groups within this category were as follows:

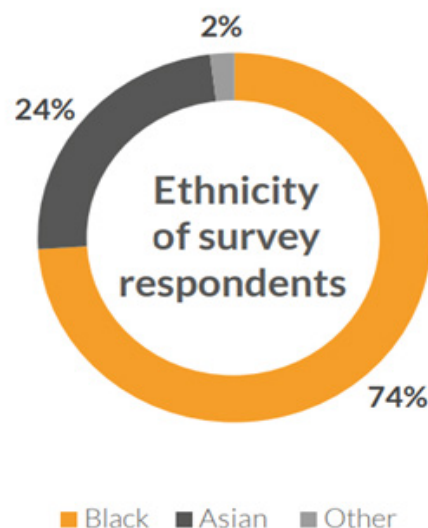
Black Caribbean	22%
Black African	22%
Black British	19%

Asian respondents made up 24% of the overall survey sample (see figure 1), and the two most common ethnic groups were as follows:

British Asian	12%
South Asian	6%

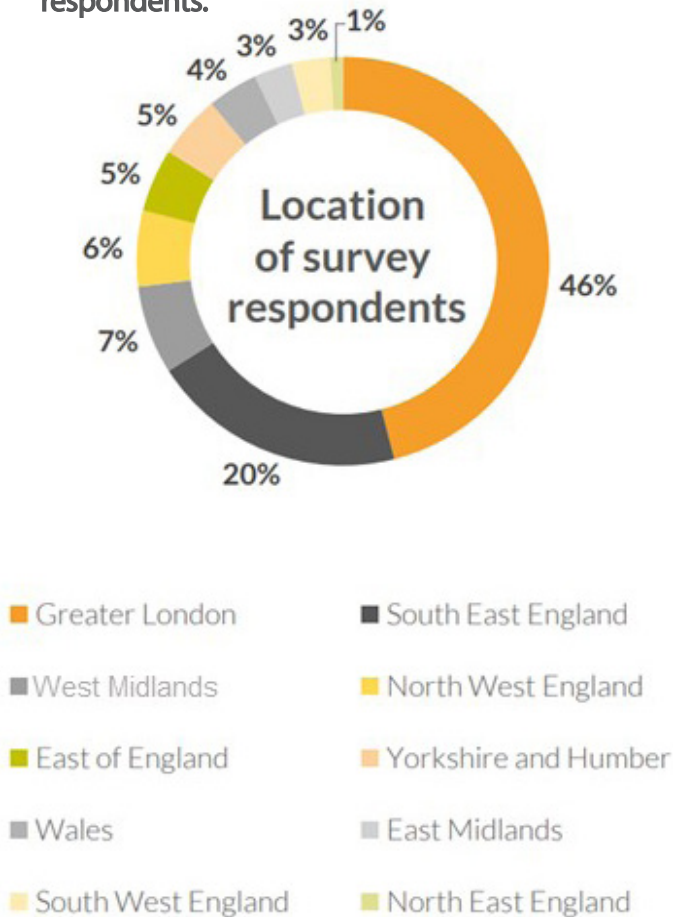
Respondents from other ethnic groups (such as Hispanic, Jewish and Iranian) accounted for 2% of the total sample. Further detail on the ethnic groups is outlined in Appendix, A1. Given the small sample size, and the diversity of experiences and perceptions, the 'Other' category was not analysed separately.

Figure 1: Ethnicity of survey respondents.



Respondents primarily lived in the following seven cities: London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Cardiff, Swansea and Leicester. However, the use of a snowball recruitment method resulted in some participants being based elsewhere. Survey respondents were most likely to be based in Greater London (46%) or in the South East of England (20%), followed by the West Midlands (7%) and the North West of England (6%); see figure 2 for further detail.

Figure 2: Geographical location of survey respondents.



ethnic groups (see Appendix, A4).

With regards to disability, 14% of Black and 10% of Asian respondents identified as having a physical, mental or intellectual disability (see Appendix, A5).

The majority of respondents (86%) stated that they were employed at the time of the survey (see Appendix, A6). The most common field of employment was education, training, and library occupations (15%), followed by management (10%), office and administrative support (9%), arts, media and sports (7%) and healthcare practitioners (7%). Notably, Asian respondents were almost twice as likely to be unemployed at the time of completing the survey (11% compared to 6% of Black respondents).

81% of Black and 95% of Asian respondents were between the ages of 18 and 54, and all the participants were under the age of 75 (see Appendix, A2).

Women were more likely to respond to the survey than men. This trend was apparent across ethnic groups with over 60% of respondents from Black and Asian backgrounds identifying as women (see Appendix, A3).

Approximately 6% of the surveyed population identified as being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and there were no significant differences between





# Survey Findings

The survey findings provide insights into the aquatic competence and engagement of ethnically diverse populations, as well as the barriers that Black and Asian communities face in accessing swimming and aquatic activities.

The following survey findings have been organised into three themes:

- 1 Swimming Skills and Ability
- 2 Aquatic Participation
- 3 Push and Pull Factors

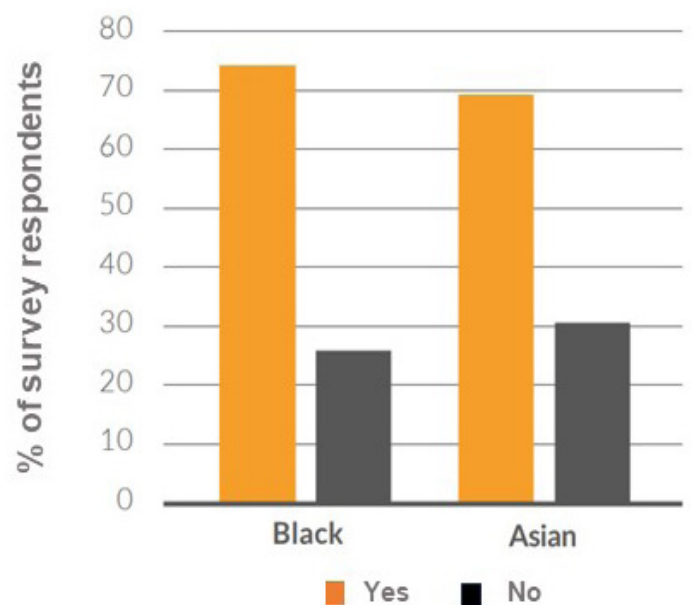
## Swimming Skills and Ability

Respondents were asked questions about their aquatic skills, ability and confidence. All the following statistics correspond to the respondents' self-reported skill, ability or confidence.

When asked if they could swim, only 27% of respondents stated 'no'. Black respondents were most likely to state they could swim, with 74% answering 'yes' compared to 69% of Asian respondents (see figure 3).

Of the respondents who said they could swim, 80% reported they could swim at least 25 metres (i.e., the length of a standard pool) and 45% stated they could swim two or more lengths of a pool (see figure 4).

Figure 3: Survey responses to the question 'can you swim?'



“ Whilst my swimming in a pool environment is somewhat okay, I wouldn't be confident enough to enter open water because of deficiencies in my swimming technique and floating ability. I also get tired quite easily when swimming compared with when I do other aerobic activities.

(Black African, Male, North West England)

Overall, 57% of survey respondents said they were not confident in the water and 48% said they did not know how to stay safe. Moreover, of those who identified as being able to swim, 44% of Black and 39% of Asian respondents stated they were not confident swimmers (see figure 5). Interestingly, 40% of the Black respondents who stated they could swim two or more lengths of a pool also described themselves as not confident. This was

considerably less prevalent among Asian respondents (16%).

When asked about their water safety confidence, respondents were more likely to answer positively if they also reported being confident swimmers. Notably, only 48% of Asian respondents reported feeling confident about their water safety knowledge and similarly this was the case for only 52% of Black respondents.

Figure 4: Survey responses to the question 'what is the furthest distance you can swim?'

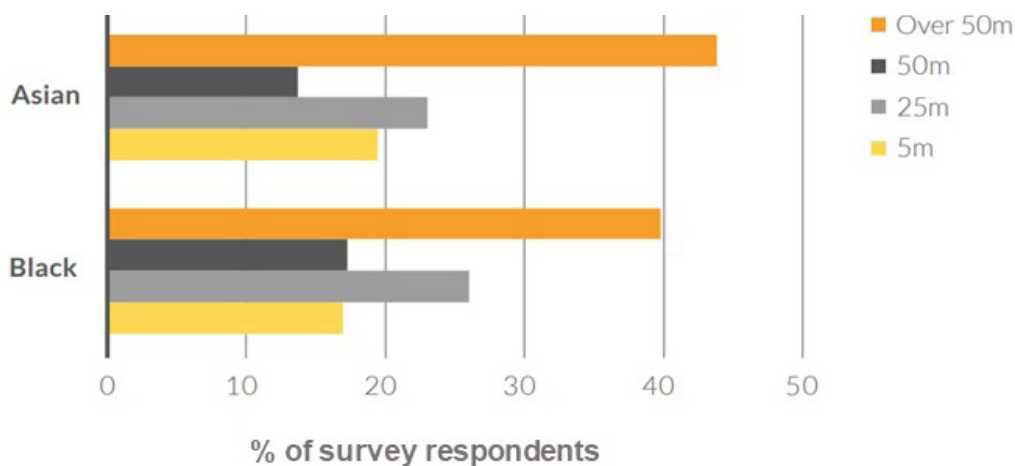
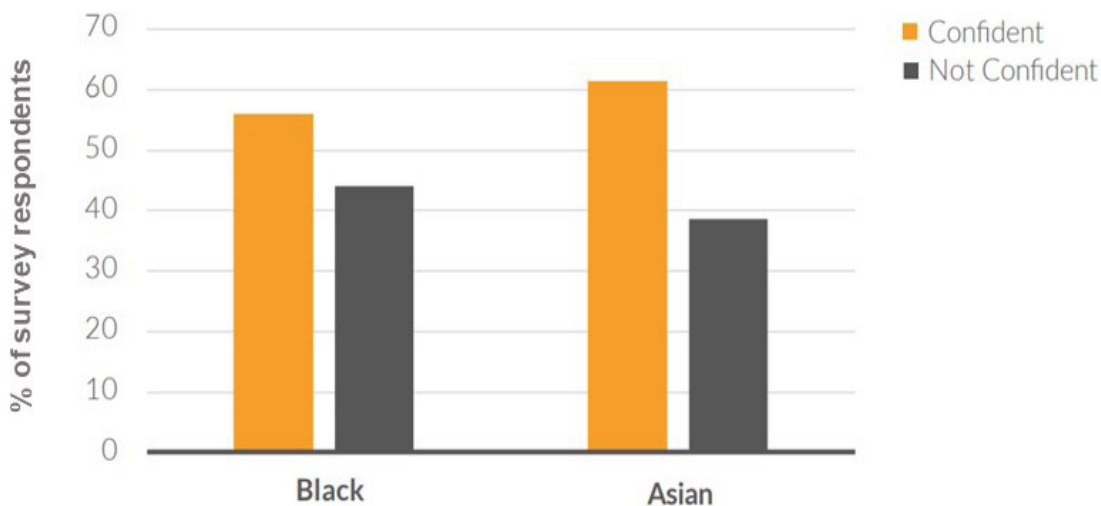


Figure 5: Survey responses to the question 'would you describe yourself as a confident swimmer?' (based on those who answered yes to the question 'can you swim?')



## Aquatic Participation

Respondents were asked questions about their predicted participation in aquatic activity over the next 12 months. Due to the potential for disruption caused by COVID-19, respondents were not asked about their participation in aquatic activity in the 12 months prior to completing the survey.

Overall, 80% of respondents felt aquatic activities were a viable sports option for themselves or others from their ethnic or cultural community; despite this, 84% of respondents perceived participation in aquatic activities as uncommon in their communities.

Half of respondents said they would participate in swimming or aquatic activity in the next 12 months. Asian respondents were less likely to say they would participate in aquatic activity in the next year either individually (40%; see figure 6) or as part of a group (19%; see figure 7), compared to Black respondents. Indeed, over half of Black respondents shared they would participate in aquatic activity in the next 12 months as an individual (see figure 6) and 45% said they would participate as a group (see figure 7). In contrast, respondents of Asian heritage were more likely to say they would participate in open water aquatic activities in the next 12 months (21%), compared to Black respondents (15%).

The difference between ethnic groups was smaller when they were asked about the likelihood of engaging in aquatic activity outside of the UK. Indeed, 40% of Asian and 43% of Black respondents said they would be likely or very likely to participate in aquatic activity outside of the UK.

Respondents were also asked about their awareness of the aquatic activities on offer in their local area. 92% of Black respondents were able to identify at least one aquatic activity that was available to them, compared to 87% of Asian respondents. The respondents were most aware of swimming (90%), water aerobics (32%), canoeing (17%), kayaking (17%), fishing (16%), rowing (16%) and diving (13%).

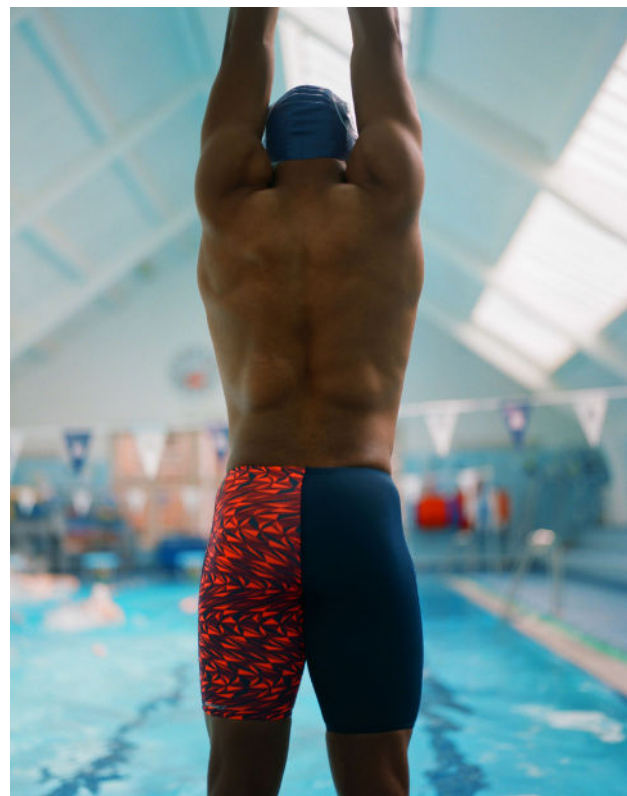


Figure 6: Survey responses to the question 'how likely are you to participate in swimming or aquatic activity over the next 12 months?'

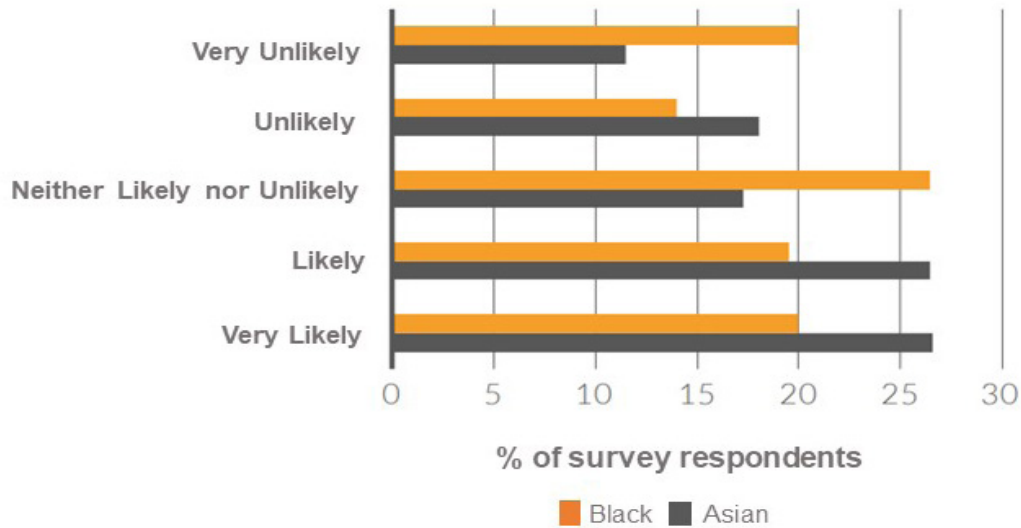
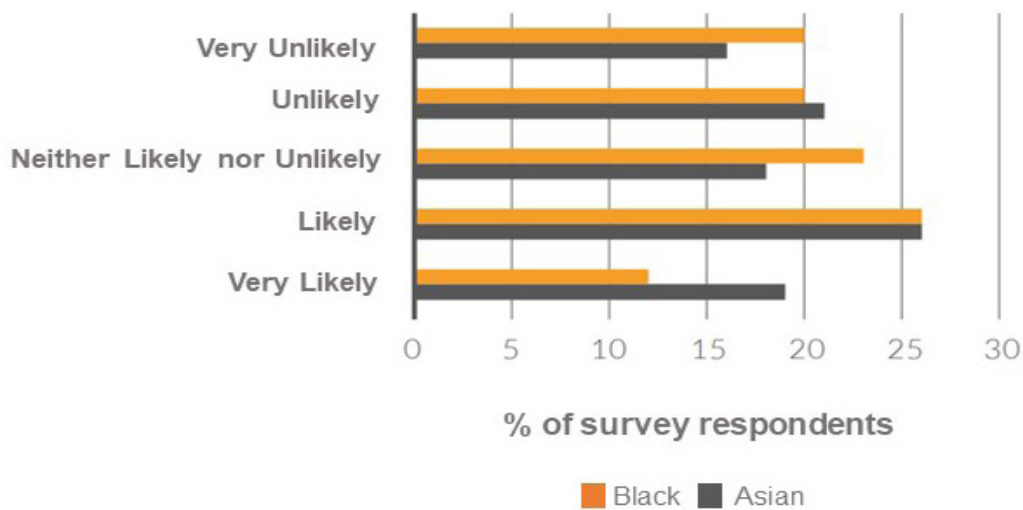


Figure 7: Survey responses to the question 'how likely are you to participate in swimming or aquatic activity as part of a group over the next 12 months?'



## Push and Pull Factors

Survey respondents were asked a series of questions about personal, cultural, socio-economic and structural factors that may impact their engagement with swimming and other aquatic activities.

“ The only real barrier for me is being unable to swim.

(Black British, Female, Yorkshire)

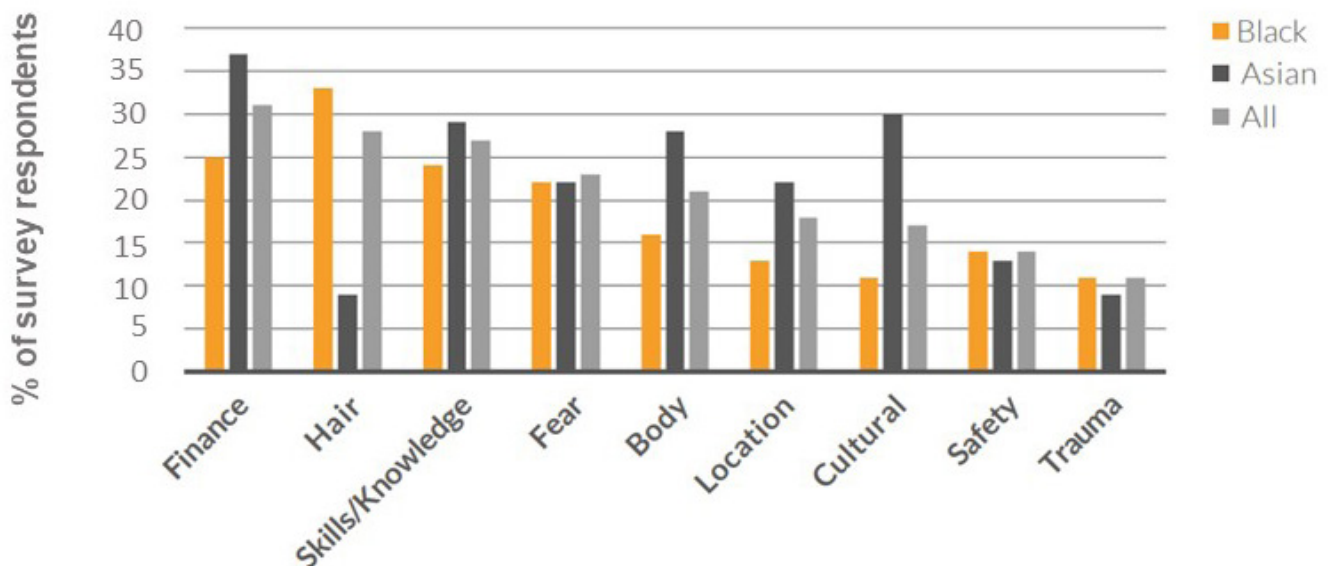
“ I nearly drowned in a local community swimming pool full of other school kids... the lifeguard was not paying attention. So, nah I'm not swimming!

(Black British, Female, London)

Overall, respondents reported finances, hair, and aquatic skill and knowledge as the most significant barriers to participation in aquatic activity (with 31%, 28% and 27% of participants selecting these factors, respectively; see figure 8). When asked about aquaphobia, 44% of respondents reported they had a fear of water and 34% said they (or someone in their family) had experienced a traumatic aquatic event.

Although four of the top five factors impacting aquatic participation were the same for both Black and Asian respondents (i.e., fear, the body, skill/knowledge and finances), variation existed in the degree to which these factors were deemed barriers (see figure 8). Indeed, Asian respondents most commonly identified finances as a barrier (37%), followed by cultural factors (30%); in contrast, Black respondents reported hair-related factors as the greatest barrier (33%) and were the least likely to identify cultural factors as a barrier to aquatic participation.

Figure 8: Survey responses by ethnicity to the question 'what factors impact your participation in aquatic activity?'



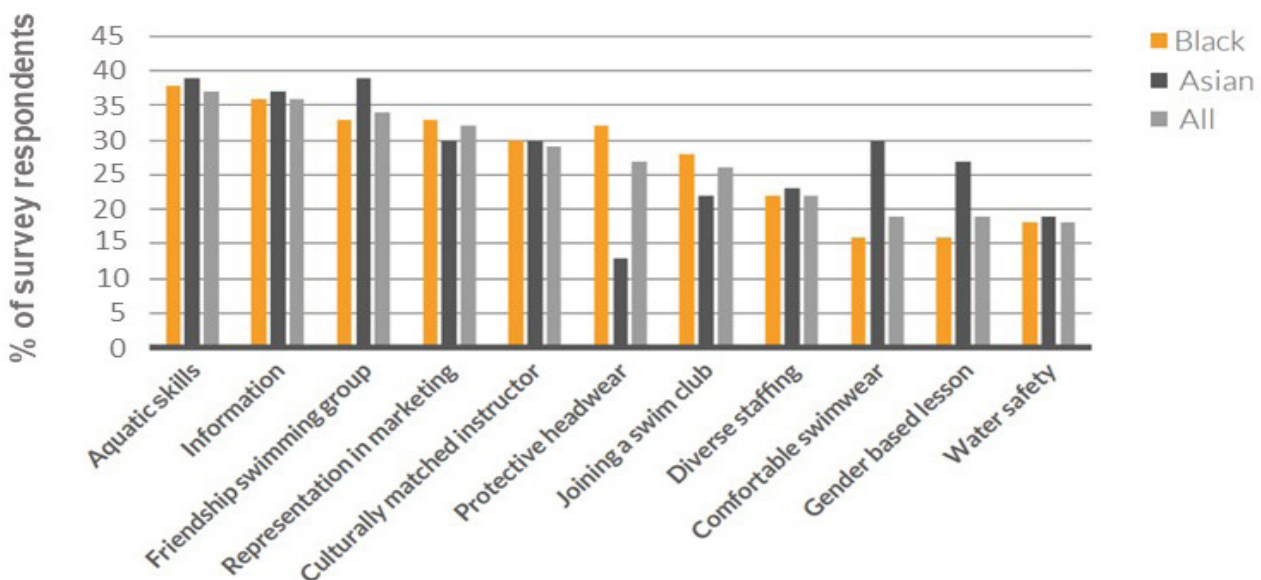
When asked about factors that would increase their participation in aquatic activity, around one third of respondents identified that they needed improved aquatic skills (37%), more information on aquatic activity (36%), and representation in marketing (32%; see figure 9). The participants also indicated that friendship-based swimming groups would encourage participation in aquatic activity (34%).

Asian respondents were almost twice as likely as Black respondents to say that a comfortable swimming costume and gendered swimming lessons were important factors that would increase their participation (see figure 9). Black respondents were almost three times as likely (32%) to identify protective headwear as an important factor in encouraging participation in aquatic activities; this aligns with the previous finding that Black respondents were more likely to identify hair as being a barrier to engagement.

“Representation is important and would encourage us to go. However, in general, the effort of swimming - from hair, showers afterwards, dry skin and fatigue - [mean] it’s not the most appealing exercise to take part in.

(Mixed Black African and White, Male, North West England)

Figure 9: Survey responses by ethnicity to the question ‘what factors would help you to increase your participation in aquatic activity?’



# Forum, Interview, and Open Text Box Findings



The forum, interview, and open text box responses revealed a diversity of aquatic experiences and identified numerous barriers to engagement with aquatic activity and water safety.

It is important to note that a number of the barriers to aquatic activity established in forums and interviews were not specific to ethnicity or culture and may well be experienced by the wider UK population. In addition, although the questions were about aquatic activity and a definition was provided to all respondents, they often thought about the questions in terms of swimming and pool environments.

The following 11 themes were identified:

1	Early Experiences
2	Parental Engagement
3	Water Safety Awareness
4	A Lack of Aquatic Skill
5	Awareness of Aquatic Activities
6	Fear of the Water
7	Aquatic Cultures
8	The Body, Hair and Skin
9	Socio-economic, Structural and Practical Barriers
10	Stereotypes and Visibility
11	Aquatic Perceptions

## 1) Early Experiences

In forums and interviews, respondents commonly drew upon experiences in childhood that shaped their attitudes toward swimming; in particular, experiences within their family and primary school swimming lessons were frequently mentioned (see quotes 1.1, 1.2).

A significant proportion of the participants who said they were able to swim spoke about early engagement and the role of their family (1.3). Indeed, participants highlighted that their swimming development and confidence around the water was shaped by their parents being invested in them learning to swim. In addition, participants who had parents or family members who encouraged them to swim spoke about being involved more widely in aquatic activity and felt that the skill had been passed down to them (1.4); however, participants who had this experience were in the minority. Interestingly, participants from mixed ethnic backgrounds were most likely to discuss positive early aquatic experiences being prioritised by their family.

““ Learnt to swim at a young age. I’m from a family of swimmers. I feel confident in my knowledge.

(East Asian, Female, London)

““ I’ve been an extremely keen swimmer from a young age. My mum is also from a fishermen’s village in her country of birth where everyone is adept at swimming underwater.

(Mixed Asian and White, Non-binary, London)

““ I learnt to swim when I was about 3 years old and have not stopped since. I feel I can keep myself safe and potentially look out for others.

(Mixed Black Caribbean and White, Female, West Midlands)

““ My mum made sure we learnt to swim as Black children. So, I’ve been in the water from the time I can remember... 3yrs up!

(Black Caribbean, Female, London)

““ I had swimming lessons when I was a child, and my Mum (Black Caribbean) also taught me how to swim from a young age. As part of these lessons, we would cover what to do if you are drowning, swimming in deep water, how to float, how to rise to the surface safely, and how to support someone in the water back to the shoreline.

(Mixed Black Caribbean and White, Female, Yorkshire)

Participants who spoke about positive early experiences were more likely to have a positive relationship with swimming as an adult. In addition, most participants who shared that they were regular or confident swimmers spoke about learning in early childhood and continuing to swim into adulthood (1.5). In several cases, the respondents had also achieved various swimming qualifications.





“ I’m confident with water safety, because I did up to lifesavers level when I was in school, and canoeing etc as a teen. I’ve also done a full scuba diving qualification course in the sea, with theory and practice, including water safety and I have a healthy fear of the power of the sea and water generally so I don’t take ill-advised risks in water.

(Mixed Black Caribbean and White, Non-binary)

“ The swimming lessons provided in school were not of much use... I wouldn’t know much unless I went out of my way to learn and become a lifeguard at 16. I could only do this because I could swim, and my parents paid for my lessons.

(Black African, Male, West Midlands)

In contrast, whilst participants who were not swim confident recalled learning to swim in childhood, they often shared that this was only within school and that they did not continue it as a regular activity during their childhood or adolescence (1.6, 1.7, 1.8). Interestingly, there was a greater diversity of ethnic backgrounds among respondents whose early experiences had negatively impacted their engagement. Despite these negative experiences, many still felt learning to swim in childhood was important (1.9).

“ 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)

## Theme 1: Table of Quotes

1.1

I’m confident in water because I had a lot of lessons and experience with swimming as a child. (Mixed Asian and White, West Midlands)

1.2

I was taught to swim from my Infants and Junior school and continued swimming right up to today. I had been taught lifesaving and how to tread water; it involved swimming in clothes and taking part in rescuing another person from the water. (Black British, Female, Yorkshire)

1.3

I did lots of swimming lessons as a child and my dad was a lifeguard when he was younger, so he taught us both how to be safe in the water. (Latin American, Male, London)

1.4

My mum, who is Chinese and does not consider herself a confident swimmer, enrolled me in swimming lessons from around 3 years old. We were in a financially privileged position at the time and could afford to do so, and I also lived in an area where water activity was accessible. I loved swimming and diving as a child, and I participated in swimming competitions until I was about 11. (Mixed Asian and Black, Female, London)

1.5

I had lessons when I was a kid. I'm comfortable with swimming and the typical actions to take if I've fallen in water. Never felt unsafe swimming. (Black Caribbean, Male, North West England)

1.6

I don't feel confident with water safety because It's been a while since I took lessons (primary school!). (Black British, Female, London)

1.7

I have not been able to keep up with swimming lessons past an elementary school age and therefore, do not feel comfortable or aware enough about water safety rules. (Black British, Female, London)

1.8

From my personal experience I went to a primary school that was predominantly Black and we were given water safety education. I think the break down for me was after primary school when swimming was not compulsory. (Black Caribbean, Female, West Midlands)

1.9

We need to make sure people can swim as children because adults often don't leap out and do new things. (South East Asian, Female, East England)



## 2) Parental Engagement

Parents repeatedly discussed that having small children had led them to re-engage with swimming and sparked a renewed interest in learning to swim or improving their swimming ability. Parents commonly shared that there were three reasons for their engagement with aquatic activities since having children: 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.



I am aware of some aquatic activities in my area as I have encouraged and supported my 9-year-old daughter to attend swimming lessons. I do not want her to pick up on my fear. I feel safer if I am in the shallow end and can touch the ground; I have never been confident in deep water.

(Mixed Black Caribbean and White, Female, London)



I know more about what's available now because I take my children swimming. It's important to me they learn.

(British Asian, Female, London)

Participants' concerns for their children's safety appeared to be the main catalyst for engagement and resulted in parents

heightening their awareness of water safety and becoming more interested in engaging with swimming facilities as a family (2.1). Whilst many participants were invested in their children becoming confident swimmers, this was especially the case among parents who were concerned about their children's safety (2.2, 2.3, 2.4).

Other participants shared that swimming represented important time away from the children, in which they could relax and focus on themselves (2.5). For example, Muslim mothers of Asian and Black heritage often referred to learning to swim as empowering and as time for themselves. These mothers all had two or more children and they discussed using swimming as a social, fitness, and wellness activity. Although these women were all accessing pool space, they had varying levels of confidence and skill; some shared that they were confident swimmers and practised in the pool, whilst others spoke of using the pool to relax, float, gain water confidence and spend time with a social group away from their daily responsibilities.



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... I don't always get to go (as a Muslim woman there's a lot of things to think about before going swimming), but when I do go I really enjoy it.

(Black British, Female, London)

## Theme 2: Table of Quotes

2.1	I like to read up because my kids love swimming and I want to be prepared when we swim on holiday. (Black African, Female, East Midlands)
2.2	We were taught basic things as kids, and I teach my kids those things because I want them to be safe. Now they do swimming lessons, so they get the information they need. (Mixed Asian and Black, Male, London)
2.3	I have learnt to swim and also took both children to swimming lessons where they covered water safety, learning how to float, etc. (Black British, Female, East Midlands)
2.4	My mum made sure that we took lessons when we were children. My mum is a good swimmer and she wanted to ensure that we were also. I will do the same with my children. Break the stereotype. (Black British, Female, London)
2.5	Because of timetabling I have to choose between taking the kids swimming or going myself. Sometimes I just go because I need the time alone. It's time for me. I really enjoy being in the water. (Black African, Female, South East England)

### 3) Water Safety Awareness

Participants often shared that they felt ill-equipped to engage with aquatic activities, due to concerns about their water safety knowledge (3.1, 3.2, 3.3).

During forums, participants were presented with water safety signs. Many participants said they had not seen the signs before and tried to work out what they meant. This often led to conversations about how frequently participants looked for water safety information when in aquatic environments. Several participants discussed water safety signage at

swimming pools; most people were comfortable finding this signage and felt it was “easy to read and in plain sight”. However, some respondents felt there could be more signage in general. When probed to consider other sources of water safety information and other aquatic environments, participants often shared they had not thought about trying to obtain water safety information, but said that, if they needed to, they would look online. Other participants spoke about engaging with staff for information (3.4).

“ For me, I think [finding water safety information] completely depends on the venue. Some places do provide good safety info. But I think most assume you will already have that knowledge.

(Mixed Asian and White, Non-binary, London)

“ 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.

(Asian British, Male)

Participants also raised the need for information on how to respond to situations in different aquatic environments (for example, open water, tidal waters and different depths of water; 3.5), as well as for improved access to water safety education (3.6) and information for parents and children.

However, they felt this needed to be separate from accessing pools or water spaces for fun.

“ We need more info/posters etc on how to keep safe in water, whether in a swimming pool (shallow and deep ends) or open water... (e.g., what to when you panic, when waters get rough, when you are further out from land than expected).

(Black British, Female, London)

“ I don’t know how to stay safe in the water because I haven’t had much experience with swimming. The only swimming I do is for leisure, so I haven’t had insight into water safety.

(South Asian, Female, Yorkshire)

Overall, participants were concerned about an absence of water safety awareness (3.7) and often had not recognised water safety as a distinct knowledge base that could be developed separate from learning to swim.

### Theme 3: Table of Quotes

3.1

I have never had to consider being safe in the water so therefore do not know what I would have to do. (Black African, Female, South West England)

3.2

I am not confident about what to do if I ‘get into problems’ in the water. (Black African, Female, South East England)

3.3

I wouldn't know how to stay safe in the water or swim. I've all but forgotten any lessons due to avoiding swimming for so long. (Mixed Black and Asian, Male, West Midlands)

3.4

If I needed water safety information, I would ask the staff. I think it's available at swimming pools, but I think the staff would tell me if something wasn't safe. (Black Other, Male, West Midlands)

3.5

I know how to keep myself safe in a pool, not so sure about open water swimming. (Black Caribbean, Female, London)

3.6

I have not found any water safety training locally despite routinely looking for adult swimming lessons in my area that do not have a long waiting list. (Black Caribbean, Female, London)

3.7

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)



## 4) A Lack of Aquatic Skill

Despite saying they could swim, many participants felt their physical capability and aquatic skill was limited and restricted how they could engage with swimming pools and other aquatic environments (4.1). Others felt that not being able to swim prevented or hindered their aquatic engagement (4.2, 4.3).

When describing how they coped with their limited aquatic skill, participants frequently referred to staying by the 'edge of the pool' or in the 'shallow end', which reveals a focus on swimming pools (4.4, 4.5). Additionally, for some participants their lack of aquatic skill led them to avoid deep water altogether (4.6, 4.7). When probed to think more widely about open water spaces, some participants shared concerns about their skills and felt they were inadequate for engaging in aquatic activities (such as swimming, canoeing, surfing and rafting) in open water environments (4.8).

“ 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)

Despite being concerned about their aquatic skill, many participants were willing to participate in aquatic activities abroad. In some forums, some participants were able to identify the risk this posed to their safety,

but many were unaware of the potential dangers.

“ I go in the water when I go on holiday, but not really in the UK. I don't know how to swim so I wouldn't just go to the pool.

(Asian Other, Male)

Participants regularly highlighted the need for continued aquatic activity in childhood and beyond. This was due to their non-engagement in adulthood being underpinned by their limited skills level, which often resulted from an interruption to their aquatic learning experience. Often, they had started to learn how to swim in primary school, but they did not develop competency before lessons finished or were unable to continue lessons or aquatic engagement for a range of reasons, resulting in a skill deficit (4.9, 4.10, 4.11).

Furthermore, participants often conflated knowing how to swim theoretically, or having had a previous aquatic learning experience, with being able to swim proficiently. For example, many participants described themselves as swimmers because they had attended lessons at some point in their childhood; however, they either shared that they were not able to swim when they had tried or did not feel sufficiently confident or competent to try to swim. This reveals the challenge of defining what it means to be able to swim competently, as the wider work of the BSA has highlighted.

Participants were keen to access support to improve their aquatic skills. For example, participants commonly highlighted the need for age and stage appropriate adult swimming lessons, swimming inductions, and aquatic activity taster sessions.

“ I think we should have something like a gym induction for swimming. You go [to the gym] and they teach you how to use all of the equipment and help you set targets... it’s about being familiar with everything and making sure you know what you’re doing so you’re safe... a session or something that helps me to answer my questions before I get into the water.

(Black, South London)

#### Theme 4: Table of Quotes

4.1	I’m worried when I go to the beach or a deep end pool. I don’t know how to tread water or how to stay safe in open water. (Black African, Female, London)
4.2	I cannot swim and have not done many water-based activities in my life; therefore, I do not feel safe in the water. (Mixed Black Caribbean and White, Female, South West England)
4.3	I don’t go to pools because I can’t swim. If I could swim, I would go. (South Asian, Male, Yorkshire)
4.4	My swimming is self-taught and weak. Being self-taught means that although I have a technique, I don’t have the knowledge. I only feel comfortable swimming in the shallow end because of this. My swimming style is unorthodox, so I don’t have the confidence to swim in deeper water. So, I trust myself to be safe in the shallow end just in case. (Black Caribbean, Female, East of England)
4.5	I stay in the shallow end or where I can stand up because I can’t swim confidently. (South Asian, Male)



4.6 All I know is to stay away from deep water because I can't swim. (Black African, Female, North West England)

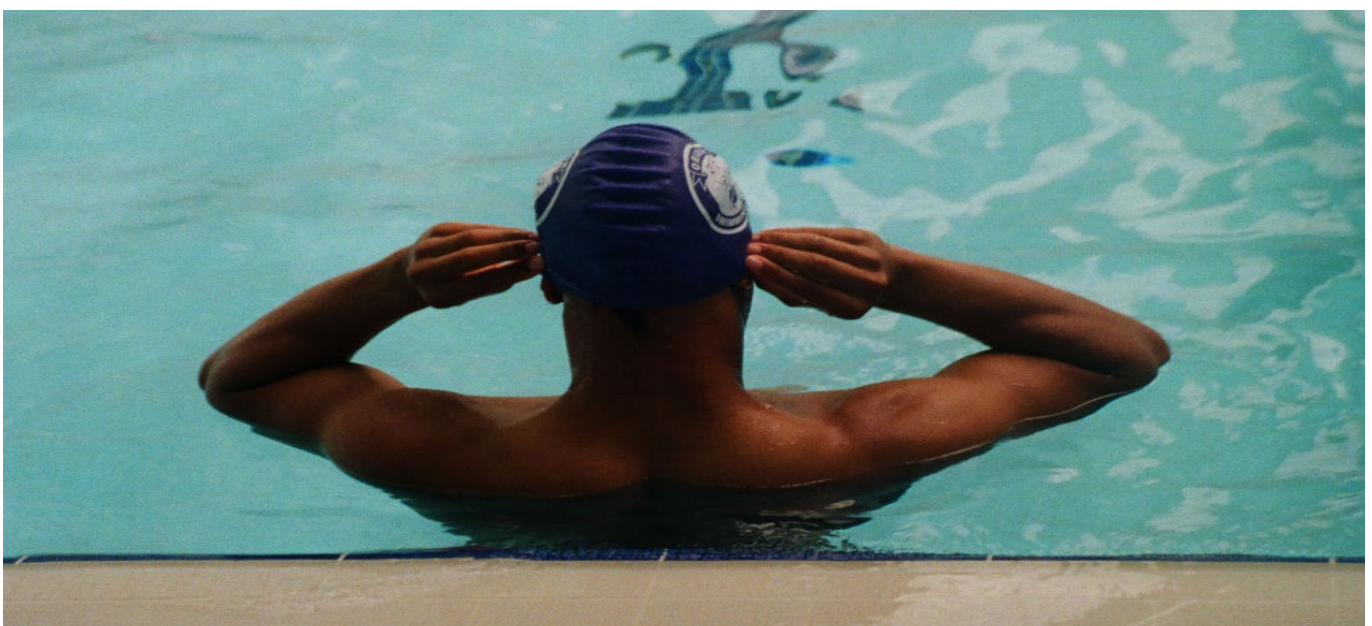
4.7 I'm not confident in my ability to tread water which means that if I was in deep waters, I would not be confident that I'd be able to keep myself afloat in the water and free from panicking. (Black British, Female, Wales)

4.8 I've tried to find swimming lessons but there aren't any for my age. I would like to try other activities, but I feel like I need to know how to swim to be confident to do aquatic activities. (Black, West Midlands)

4.9 As a child I took swimming lessons and whenever I have the opportunity on holiday I go into the pool or the sea. I feel safe when I'm in the water and remember what I've been taught from being young, but I no longer have the technical skills to swim any distance. (Black African, Female, London)

4.10 In primary school I learnt to swim down the road from here, but I haven't been swimming since... No, I wouldn't say I can swim now. (Black, Male, London)

4.11 We did swimming lessons, in like year 3 or 4... I learnt some things but not enough to go swimming alone. (Mixed Black, Female, London)



## 5) Awareness of Aquatic Activities

Respondents were asked about their awareness of the aquatic activities on offer and the facilities in their local area. As was reflected in the survey data, most participants were aware of swimming pools in their local area (5.1). However, they were often unaware of the timetable or aquatic offering provided by their local pool (5.2).

“ I know where my local pool is and some of what they offer, like they do have a female only session. I don't really know what else they do.

(Black African, Female)

Most participants were unaware of the local swimming clubs, open water spaces, and diverse offering of aquatic activities available to them locally and regionally (5.3, 5.4, 5.5). Despite most participants being aware of different types of aquatic activities, they did not tend to associate these activities with their local area or

even with the UK (5.6, 5.7). For example, in a forum that took place in the London Borough of Hackney, the participants were only aware of the new swimming pool in the area; they were shocked to hear about the range of aquatic activities (including, open water swimming and rowing) that are available to them.

“ 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)

“ Lots of aquatic activities come to my mind but I don't think of them when I think about swimming. I wouldn't know where to go if I wanted to do something like rafting in London.

(Black African, Male, London)

### Theme 5: Table of Quotes

5.1

I can think of 3/4 swimming centres near my house that are easily accessible and reasonably priced if one were to engage with water-based activities. (Black African, Male, London)

5.2

I'm interested in learning to swim, well improving my ability mostly, but there isn't really anything out there for me. I would need the lessons to be just women and for it to be a female lifeguard but I'm not really aware of any swimming activities or learn to swim like this. (Black African, Female, London)

5.3

I only know there are swimming pools, but I don't know of any other water-based activities in my area. (Black British, Female, West Midlands)

5.4

We need more information on how to access classes and activities or events in local areas. (British Asian, Female, London)

5.5

If someone asked me about getting involved in aquatic activities, I would only think about the swimming pool. (Black British, Male)

5.6

When I think of aquatic activities, I think of holidays and outside of the UK. In my head I imagine snorkelling or water surfing. (Black Caribbean, Female, London)

5.7

We need to improve on accessibility and awareness. For example, no one in my community would know or be aware of canoeing near us. (Black African, Male, Wales)



## 6) Fear of the Water

Corresponding to the survey findings, a fear of water was a common discussion point in forums and interviews (6.1); respondents often cited a fear of the unknown, putting their face in the water or being in deep water as reasons for non-engagement (6.2, 6.3, 6.4). Respondents frequently spoke about a fear developing in childhood and continuing into their adulthood (6.5). These respondents had usually disengaged from aquatic activity in their teenage years or earlier (6.6).

“ I guess because my life is fine without swimming or water-based activities, it just keeps the fear of the unknown in place so there is no need for me to correct it.

(South East Asian, Male, North West England)

Among respondents who attended a UK primary school, many attributed their fear to having had a traumatic experience that occurred either in a swimming pool setting or during primary school lessons. Such adverse experiences whilst learning to swim were associated with a longstanding fear of water in adulthood (6.7, 6.8).

“ 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)

“ I got into a little bit of trouble in a school swimming lesson and one of my school friends helped me to the side. From that day I have at every opportunity tried to develop my swimming techniques and water confidence.

(Black British, Male, East Midlands)

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; in particular, stories of slave rebellion, childhood drownings and culturally held beliefs relating to the danger of water were referenced (6.9). Some respondents explained that these ideas were held by their parents and that they were motivated to “break the cycle” (for example, by taking steps to overcome their personal fears; 6.10), whilst others were happy with how things stand.

## Theme 6: Table of Quotes

6.1	My fear has stopped me from consistently attending swimming lessons. (Black British, Male, London)
6.2	I just don't swim. I don't like to put my face in or under water. I stay away from it. (Mixed Black Caribbean and White, Female, South East England)
6.3	The fear of the unknown and lack of knowledge keeps me away from water-based activities. (South East Asian, Male, North West England)
6.4	I fear swimming in water that gets deeper. (British Asian, Female, South East England)
6.5	I am afraid of deep water as I nearly drowned when I was younger. (British Asian, Female, London)
6.6	Since stopping swimming at 18, I have had high anxiety of getting back into the water. Even when I'm on holiday I am basically pushed into the water. I have not tried anything to get over this anxiety. But I will avoid getting into a pool at all costs. This has stopped me from doing a sport which I much loved. (Black Caribbean, Female, Yorkshire)
6.7	When I was 11 my P-E teacher pushed me in the big pool during a lesson. I thought I was going to drown! Since then, I have had that fear of the water. I have taken swimming lessons, but they were never dedicated to that fear of deep water. I can swim but would need some lessons to tackle the fear I have. (Black African, Female, London)
6.8	There was a swim coach at my high school who was very mean and unapproachable, and I already had a fear, so she compounded this. (Black Caribbean, Female, London)
6.9	My mum has always said stay away from the water. She had quite a negative view of it based on what she had seen growing up... She would say "people go to the water and don't come back"... so I have not thought much about water activities. (Black African, Female, London)
6.10	The fear used to be crippling. Over the years I had hypnotherapy which has helped - I can actually get in a pool without having a panic attack. (Black British, Female, South East England)

## 7) Aquatic Cultures

Respondents who learnt about swimming and water safety abroad remarked how different the aquatic experience and styles of teaching were to their experiences in the UK (7.1, 7.2, 7.3). Many participants spoke positively about their experience of aquatic activities in their home countries (7.4, 7.5, 7.6); indeed, some of the participants reported enjoying the experiences in their home countries or places they lived as children because it was “less competitive”, and the focus was not on “precision, technique or sport”. Other participants emphasised that the culture of swimming in the UK favoured lane swimming and other structured pool activities. Many participants felt that lane swimming and swimming in pools was “boring” and didn’t “have the appeal” of aquatic activities abroad.

“ 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)

“ It doesn’t appeal to me to just go swimming, like swimming in lanes isn’t really something I want to do. I always do water activities when I’m on holiday though. It’s fun as a group and when I go back home to the Caribbean.

(Black Caribbean, Male, London)

A few of the participants (who were primarily from Caribbean backgrounds) shared that they did not swim in the UK because of the water in pools and open water environments being “too cold” (7.7). Respondents from professional swimming backgrounds also highlighted the temperature of water in pools as a significant problem across the sector. One respondent shared that she had been a swimming instructor for over a decade and had repeatedly asked the pools she worked at to increase the temperature of the water.

“ I have told different pools I have worked at many times they need to increase the temperature of the water. You know... people stop coming when they’re not comfortable. I couldn’t have stressed this more.

(Black, Female)

Additionally, many participants who were the first generation to be born in the UK shared that their aquatic competency and fear of water were not addressed by their

parents who, because of their culture, busy work lives and limited finances, did not view swimming or water safety and aquatic skill development as a priority.

“ Swimming wasn’t a priority for my parents. We would do other things on the weekend. The focus was on education, it wasn’t on learning to swim or making sure that we could swim.

(Black, Female)

“ 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)

### Theme 7: Table of Quotes

7.1	My country is very hot... and water is widely accessible, making it very common for people to know how to swim... In the UK it’s not done at all compared to my home country, especially [among] those living in London, due to the different environment and lifestyle. (Mixed Asian and White, Female, London)
7.2	When at home (West Africa and Jamaica) I swim a lot but living in the UK I don’t engage until I go home. Weather and water hygiene are factors. (Black African, Female, South East England)
7.3	Growing up, my swimming education ended in elementary school where I was in an African country within a paid school where the knowledge around swimming was promoted. However, on being in the UK and going to a comprehensive school, there were no swimming activities or Physical Education activities which were not floor based due to the cost and therefore, I was unable to keep up with swimming lessons and became fearful of being in water. (Black British, Female, London)
7.4	I’m only confident due to being brought up in Jamaica and going to the beach every Sunday. I was taught by my father who was self-taught. And then I had lessons in a pool at school in Jamaica. (Black Caribbean, Female, East of England)

7.5

Been swimming for a very long time. I grew up in the Land of Many Waters, Guyana and was taught well. (Mixed Asian and Black, Male, London)

7.6

Water sports is for everyone. Plus, in the Caribbean (my heritage) many use and engage with water as a way of life, e.g., fishing. (Black Caribbean, Female, London)

7.7

I'll tell you why people don't go swimming, it's because of the temperature of the water. I went swimming almost every day in Jamaica, but I never go swimming here. (Black Caribbean, Male, West Midlands)





## 8) The Body, Hair and Skin

Concerns regarding privacy, modesty and body consciousness were most prominent among older participants and those whose views toward modesty were rooted in their religious practice (8.1, 8.2, 8.3). Some of these participants reported a lack of imagery of people in swimwear covering more of the body than standard swimming costumes; this potentially contributed to staff in aquatic settings remaining unaware of the diversity of swimwear options available (such as the burkini).

“ Yeah, the staff have asked me before and other women I’m with if my burkini is the right material, you know, or said things like “you can’t wear that in the pool”. Some still don’t know you can get swimsuits covered like that in the right material.

(Black Other, Female)

Many of the groups that participated in the forums felt that they were currently unrepresented in aquatic spaces and that there was a need for pool sessions to be targeted at their specific ethnic, religious or gender group (8.4). Indeed, it was commonly felt that meeting the specific needs of under-represented groups would encourage engagement and reduce concerns for groups requiring specific measures (8.5, 8.6). For example, several participants across forums agreed that

when participating in aquatic activities or learning to swim, they would prefer to be around other people from their ethnic or cultural background.

“ 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)

“ Because Black people don’t really swim, it would be nice to do it with a group of black or other ethnic minorities because we would all have the same fears you know, we would be on the same level.

(Black Caribbean, Female, South East England)

However, one of the core themes evident from this feedback was how wide ranging the needs of various communities were. For example, some Black women were highly concerned about their haircare, and others (predominantly older Black women) were concerned about their weight and body shape; in addition, Muslim women emphasised the need for cultural considerations (8.7), including modest swimwear and privacy. Although both groups of women felt it was important to look and feel good in their swimwear,

in practice this looked different for each group. Nevertheless, across all groups, it was apparent that feelings towards the body and swimwear impacted whether participants felt confident to access public aquatic spaces, and that privacy was valued.

“ I’m conscious of my body sometimes. If I’m going swimming, I want to be able to wear that bikini or swimsuit that makes me feel good about my body.

(Black African, Female, London)

“ I want to feel good [in swimwear] too... I’m covering up, but I don’t want to look frumpy and big... For me to feel good and confident, I need to know the environment caters to people like me and it will be women only.

(Black African, Muslim, Female, London)

In addition, Black participants raised concerns in both forums and interviews about the impact of aquatic activity on hair and skin (8.8, 8.9, 8.10). These concerns mostly pertained to swimming pools and the use of chlorine. Among Black

participants, there was a lack of awareness on how to manage the impacts of chlorine on skin and hair. Where participants were aware of appropriate products for their skin and hair, they noted that these products tended to be more expensive, and some felt as though there were additional burdens to being ‘ethnically diverse’.

“ There are swimming caps and creams and shampoos and conditioners, but they cost more or they're not easily available. I can’t just walk in and buy the right size cap.

Black, Muslim Female)

Some female participants from Asian backgrounds also commented on the management of their hair. In contrast to Black participants, their concerns mostly related to keeping it covered in the pool because of its length.

“ My hair is really long. I don’t think it will get into a swimming cap and then I would have to spend all that time drying it. It’s inconvenient.

(British Asian, Female)

## Theme 8: Table of Quotes

8.1

A lot of people from my culture dislike swimming with the opposite gender or showing their body... in the UK it is hard to participate in water activities because of these obstacles so we don’t look at safety because we won’t need it if we are not swimming. (Middle Eastern, Female, Wales)

8.2	Dress code needs to be more adaptable and easier to buy - i.e., burqini, shorts, leggings in swimwear material at low-cost; swimming caps that are larger for women with hair extensions etc. (British Asian, Female, South East England)
8.3	Most centres have only 1 or 2 closed cubicles. Mainly they have open shared shower units which is culturally inappropriate. So, you end up waiting ages for the 1 or 2 private cubicles. (British Asian, Female, East England)
8.4	Swimming pools and leisure centres do not facilitate for my community - like women only or men only sessions. (British Asian, Male, South East England)
8.5	We live in a diverse country yet there are limited options to partake in swimming due to religious barriers and access so therefore many miss out on learning about water safety. (South East Asian, Female, Wales)
8.6	There just isn't much around that meets our needs. We would have to lessen our criteria if we wanted to participate, and that's not an option for most of us. (British Asian, Female, South East England)
8.7	I think in recent years there has been lots of movement to be more inclusive in offering and culture considerations are being taken into account - i.e., new swim hats and swimsuits that support your religion or hair etc. Just needs to be promoted better and information should be more readily accessible. (Mixed Asian and White, Female, East England)
8.8	I've gone swimming before with my hair in braids, but you always have to think about 'what am I going to do with my hair'. It's easier not to go or to do something else instead. (Black British, Female)
8.9	The information on caring for your hair, especially if it's natural afro hair, just isn't out there. (Black Caribbean, Female)
8.10	I loved swimming and diving as a child, and I participated in swimming competitions until I was about 11 when cost and a lack of swimming caps fitting my hair influenced my decision to stop. I'm in a position now where I could afford to start swimming again, but swimming caps are still very uncomfortable due to my hair. (Mixed Asian and Black, Female, London)

## 9) Socio-economic, Structural and Practical Barriers

During forums and interviews, participants were asked about social and structural factors that impacted their participation in swimming and aquatic activities. The list of barriers described was vast, but commonly included the cost of lessons and swimming sessions (9.1, 9.2, 9.3, 9.4), work commitments (9.5), and the accessibility of aquatic activities (9.6). These barriers were often not associated with ethnicity or culture, but some appeared to be associated with the difficulties of living in a city (9.7).

“ 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)

“ We were taught to swim in school but that was it. The swimming pool was too far to continue after.

(South Asian, Female, London)

Many respondents felt that appropriate swimming sessions occurred during the daytime when they were at work. Other participants felt that the location of

pools made it difficult to access them or inconvenient after a workday.

“ I would go swimming, but I can never find a session that actually works with my workday.

(South Asian, Female, North England)

“ If I want to go swimming with the children it needs to be at the time that is suitable for all of us, one of the family sessions, but then I have to think about watching all of the kids.

(Black African, Female, London)

Some participants were particularly concerned about how the cost barrier prevented water safety awareness (9.8). Whilst many respondents in the forums indicated that the costs of membership and family swimming represented a barrier to engagement (9.9), it was apparent that finances were not the primary reason for non-participation. Despite this, some Black respondents noted that initiatives aimed at increasing their participation were commonly linked with making swimming free or significantly discounted. However, another participant explained that free sessions were usually “at unsuitable times, like during the middle of the working day”. They felt that there was an underlying sentiment that the people who may benefit from free swimming sessions were unemployed.

“ We couldn’t afford it when I was growing up, so I didn’t learn how to swim properly. I learnt in school but that wasn’t properly. I wasn’t confident, and I certainly don’t know how to stay safe in the water.

(Black Other, London)

“ They try to encourage us to do new sports like swimming by making it free. It doesn’t mean we will go.

(Black, Female)

### Theme 9: Table of Quotes

9.1	It’s very expensive booking swimming lessons in my area. (Black African, Female, South West England)
9.2	Leisure centres with pools are usually more expensive. (Black African, Female)
9.3	I can’t afford swimming lessons for myself. (Black Caribbean, Female, London)
9.4	It’s the cost, lack of availability in areas highly populated by diverse communities, and a lack of visibility and diversity of these sports in the media. (Mixed Black Caribbean and White, Female, Yorkshire)
9.5	It’s the hassle of getting ready for work after swimming in the morning or going home after swimming late in the evening, especially when it gets cold. (British Asian, Female, North West England)
9.6	I grew up quite close to an aquatics centre in a culturally diverse area and we’d often use the swimming facilities for leisure in our own time as children. I’d say it’s less viable for my parents/their generation since they did not grow up with such facilities on their doorstep. (Black African, Male, North West England)
9.7	Pools are shutting down where I live...where is there to swim or sail or paddle that’s clean in the city? I wouldn’t travel far for regular sessions. (Black British, Male, London)

9.8

I feel the majority do not have access to water-based education, and with the income squeeze are unlikely to be able to pay to swim or learn how to engage with water in a safe way. Parents working flat out to put food on the table are unable to afford the finance, time and space to support their children through swimming. (Black British, Male, South West England)

9.9

The cost really starts to build up when you're thinking about taking the family swimming. (Black African, Male)

## 10) Stereotypes and Visibility

There were a number of stereotypes raised during the research. Commonly Black and Asian participants felt they were known for not being able to swim (10.1) and this was underpinned by various factors, including ideas relating to bone density (10.2, 10.3). Some of the participants were concerned that this would make them stand out in aquatic environments (10.4).

“

Within the black community, swimming isn't very common. I hardly remember having a discussion about swimming from my peers. Apart from my uncle and father, both who taught me how to swim, I haven't really got people to discuss swimming techniques with.

(Black African, Male, South West England)

“

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)

“

When I go to the pool I swim, I'll do a few lengths and all of the women of colour will look at me shocked I can swim. Some even ask me to teach them.

(Black Muslim, Female)

Across ethnic groups, respondents highlighted that there was a lack of representation in their local aquatic spaces (10.5). This included marketing materials lacking imagery reflective of their local area's diversity. For example, it was clear that participants felt that if marketing materials included images reflective of the ethnic diversity of the local population, they would contribute

to ethnically diverse communities feeling welcomed and included in the space (10.6, 10.7, 10.8). In addition, female participants generally felt men were more represented within swimming. Female participants shared that having “more images of women swimming”, and more “female coaches, and lifeguards” would encourage them to participate in swimming.

“ I don’t think swimming is an activity that’s marketed to black communities. You don’t see yourself on a gym poster, goggles on and doing front crawl. But you do see yourself on a poster, running.

(Black British, Female, East England)

Muslim women were concerned about being hyper-visible in aquatic environments. They specifically felt they stood out if they wore swimming attire that covered their arms and legs more than a standard swimming costume. They generally expressed that the fear of standing out impacted their confidence to attend aquatic activities and increased their self-doubt and made them uncomfortable when in the pool. In addition, some Muslim participants recounted experiences of microaggressions<sup>17</sup>; for example, they reported being questioned by staff about

the appropriateness of their swimming costumes (such as whether they were the right fabric) and some had even been told that they were not allowed to wear their costumes in the pool. One group of Muslim women in their 20s had completely disregarded swimming in a pool or open water as they assumed the activity just would not be available to them. Other participants shared that they were good swimmers, but that they did not regularly attend because they could not find a local swimming pool at which they felt comfortable; this was due to experiences of culturally discriminatory behaviour and their cultural and religious needs not being met.

### What is "hyper-visibility"?

The feeling of being overly visible or scrutinised on the basis of one's ethnicity.

### What are "microaggressions"?

"Everyday verbal, non-verbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership".<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, white allies, and bystanders. *American Psychologist*, 74(1), pp. 128–142. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000296>

Some participants also shared concerns about hyper-visibility based on the limited skill and technique they possessed (10.9). This feeling was heightened by the thought of attending a swimming session alone and participants felt they would be more likely to engage in aquatic activities if they attended sessions for a specific ability level (10.10) or as part of a friendship group. For example, one respondent explained how her mother, a West African born woman, had been trying to learn to swim in the UK, but found it difficult in a room full of native English speakers who did not always understand what she was saying; others echoed this experience (10.11).

“ I learnt to swim but it isn't something I will go out and do. The real yard man in Jamaica swim every day, like fish, but not me - who would I go swimming with?

(Black Caribbean, Male)

There was a common sentiment that there was a disconnect between local aquatic facilities and the ethnically diverse communities in the area, and many participants felt that easily achievable cultural accommodations were not catered to or reflected in the timetabling. Some participants who had tried to access swimming pools and asked for adjustments to be made shared that they felt they were “begging for something they were paying for” and were “inconveniencing the staff”.

One participant shared that community leaders and groups had experienced hostility from the leisure centre or swimming pool hosting them when they had organised religious and culturally targeted sessions. For example, with requests for the viewing area to be closed being denied by staff or a male lifeguard being on duty during their women's only session. For participants, these incidents were experienced as being culturally hostile and discriminatory.

“ Our group were going swimming regularly, but one day we turned up and they wouldn't close the viewing area. We had paid for the private session... it was organised by a mum in the community, but they wouldn't close the viewing area, or it was hit and miss so I stopped going... we asked for female lifeguards too. Some women in our group gave up asking, but you know, it's a sin for us, it's serious.

(Black Muslim, Female, London)





## Theme 10: Table of Quotes

10.1	I think the stereotype that Black and brown people don't do water-based things overrides any efforts to place safety information where those communities can find it. (Black Caribbean, Non-binary, South East England)
10.2	There's something about our bone density that makes it harder for us to swim. (Black, Male)
10.3	We are often stereotyped as having dense bones and unable to float. People forget that our parents swam prolifically back home in the Caribbean. (Black Caribbean, Female, London)
10.4	I want to learn but I don't want to stand out. I feel like I would be so obvious. (Black British, Female, London)
10.5	It can be accessible, but since it's not targeted towards our community, it's not. (Mixed Black African and White, Male, North East England)
10.6	I've never received that information in a way that feels relevant or irrelevant to my cultural background. (Black African, Female, South East England)
10.7	Having operated in this area previously, there has been in my opinion, little or no direct promotion to ethnically diverse communities and if there has been it has been insignificant at best. (Black British, Male, East Midlands)
10.8	I do not see Black women or people represented in imagery for water sports and the staff at swimming pools from my last visit were also not diverse. (Black Caribbean, Female, London)
10.9	If I go to the pool and I'm one of those people just holding on to the side doing a bit of kicking, I will fit the stereotype of Black people that can't swim. (Black British, Female, London)
10.10	I've been to sessions targeted at women like me and it is sometimes a lot of women in the pool just playing or holding on to the side, so the sessions aren't really suitable for me because I can swim, so there's no space to go and actually swim for people of colour. (Black, Female, South East England)

## 10.11

Services were never there. I am not so worried for myself as English is my first language, but my mum (for whom English is a second language) never had access to services, especially not in her mother tongue. (South Asian, Female, London)

### 11) Aquatic Perceptions

Participants were invited to share their perceptions of swimming and aquatic activity. Swimming was frequently associated with healthy living and other health benefits (11.1, 11.2, 11.3), including feeling stronger, more flexible, and less prone to joint and muscle pain. Regarding the latter, some older participants spoke of having used, or having considered using, water aerobics for joint and muscle issues. Participants of all ages, genders, and ethnicities noted the effectiveness of swimming for weight management and fitness training. 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 (11.4, 11.5).

“ I can do exercises in the water I could never do in the gym; it really helps me.

(Black Caribbean, Female, London)

Despite these many positive associations, participants still felt regular swimming or engagement with aquatic activities was not within their reach. In several forums and interviews, participants indicated that they perceived aquatic activities as being for White people (11.6, 11.7). Often

participants stated that they “hadn’t been aware” that they held this view; it was a perception brought to the forefront of consciousness through the research process. Associations of swimming and aquatic activity with White people seemed to increase when participants were asked to think about swimming as a sport (11.8). However, some participants were undeterred by the narratives and perceptions that swimming wasn’t for them (11.9).

“ 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)

“ I hadn’t really thought about it before but when you said aquatic activities I saw White people in my mind, in like one of those little boats doing white river rafting or whatever it’s called.

(Black Other, Female, Wales)

## Theme 11: Table of Quotes

11.1	I know swimming is really good for you. It helps with all of your body, with weight loss with pain. That's what I think about when I think of swimming. (South Asian, Female)
11.2	Swimming and water-based activities are another way to keep fit and healthy; I started swimming regularly to help with my asthma and to complement my running. (Black Caribbean, Female, London)
11.3	[Swimming] helps improve fitness and uses muscle groups in a completely different way to running or cycling. (British Asian, Male, London)
11.4	We have enjoyed a few water parks and other things like toddler pool sessions when they were small... The kids really enjoy it, they have no fear of the water, they don't hold back, they just jump in, so it is a lot of work for us, but it tires them out and they've had a good day. (Black African, Female, West Midlands)
11.5	When I think of swimming, I think that's boring but aquatic activities make me think of more fun things. (South Asian, Male, North England)
11.6	Even when I think about the advertising for swimming in my area it's just White people; that's not to say there aren't Black people and other people taking their children swimming in the leisure centre, it's just on the flyers or the pictures at the swimming pool, I think it's just White people. (Black African, Female)
11.7	When I think of aquatic activities I think of White people, I don't think of Black people or Asian people. I just think that's for White people. (Black British, Male)
11.8	The big Olympians are all White people. I don't think we're really represented in swimming. (Black British, Male, London)
11.9	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)

# Analysis and Summary of Findings

The findings revealed that Black and Asian communities experience multiple, complex barriers to safe aquatic engagement. Despite these barriers, the findings also identified a latent interest from these communities to engage with aquatic activity and water safety.

Despite many respondents from Black and Asian communities stating that they could swim, a lack of (or limited) water safety awareness and aquatic skill were identified as significant barriers to engagement in aquatic activity. Notably, survey respondents most commonly indicated that improving their aquatic skill would increase their participation. Moreover, according to the forums and interviews, non-swimmers and participants who had disengaged from swimming commonly felt ill-equipped to engage with swimming or aquatic activities. This was usually attributed to them being unaware of how to stay safe in the water and not feeling confident in their ability to navigate water-based activities independently. A lack of water safety knowledge was also reported among participants who stated that they were confident and/or regular swimmers; this illustrates the importance of increasing awareness that water safety knowledge is distinct from aquatic skill, and that both are essential to being safe in and around water. Improving access to water safety education for Black and Asian communities will be especially important, given that the participants were unlikely to have been able to access this information within their family networks.



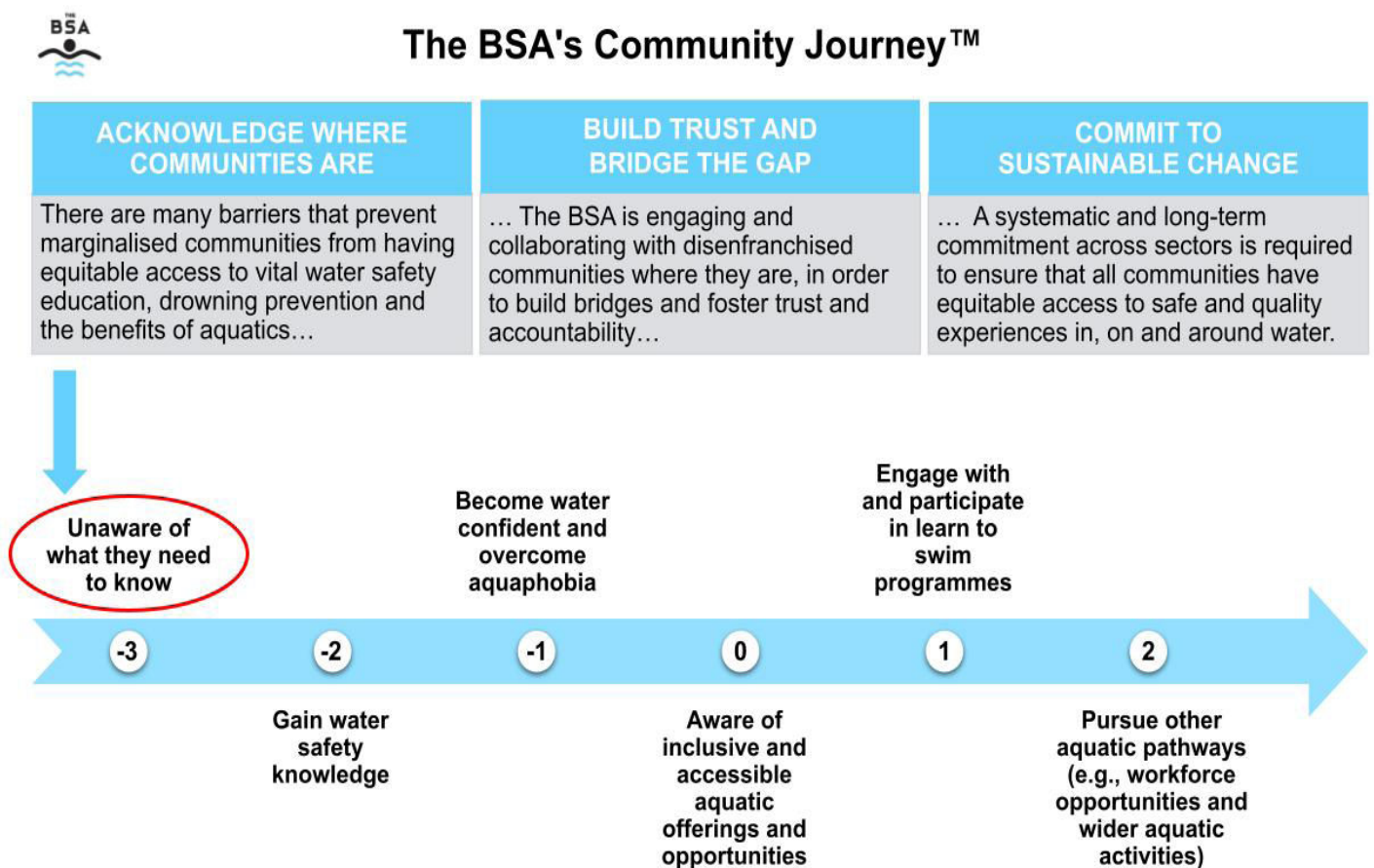
The BSA's Community Journey™ (see Figure 10) captures the various starting positions where communities of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage often find themselves. Based on the lived experiences within ethnically diverse communities, the BSA's Community Journey™ aims to highlight that, whilst the aquatic sector tends to wait for people to enter 'traditional' learn to swim programmes, many non-swimmers within the BSA's target communities experience a wide-range of complex social, cultural and psychological barriers that prevent them from viewing swimming and wider aquatic activity as being 'for them'. By highlighting this to partners within the sector, the BSA aims to demonstrate the extensive effort that is required to bring about real and lasting change, which

would ultimately lead to people from diverse backgrounds being welcomed and helped to find their place in the water.

The positions depicted within the BSA's Community Journey™ correlate with the experiences shared by many of the participants in this study. For example, many respondents reported non-engagement because of low water confidence (-1) and a lack of ethnic

diversity within aquatic spaces (0). In addition, participants most prominently reported a deficit in aquatic awareness and skill (-3), as well as water safety knowledge (-2). However, the findings highlight that these factors often do not exist independently of one another, and many Black and Asian participants were affected by several barriers; this suggests the journey and points of entry to aquatic engagement are not linear.

Figure 10: The BSA's Community Journey™



Moreover, the data revealed a significant challenge in defining what it means to be able to swim. Indeed, many survey participants who stated they could swim reported that they were not confident in water or that they could not swim relatively short distances (such as the length of a pool). Based on the forums and interviews, this inconsistency in the respondents' self-reported swimming ability appeared to stem from disruptions to their aquatic engagement; for example, participants had often undertaken childhood swimming lessons as part of the school curriculum, but they had not continued to engage thereafter. In turn, whilst these individuals said they were able to swim, the disruption resulted in concerns about swimming competency and prevented re-engagement.

Whilst aquatic activities were often deemed to be more appealing than swimming, being able to swim 'confidently' appeared to be a deciding factor in whether participants considered taking part in these activities regularly. Nevertheless, some individuals were more willing to participate in aquatic activities when abroad, for the purpose of fun or adventure, regardless of their confidence or self-assessed ability. Many participants were unaware of the danger this would pose, revealing that numerous people from Black and Asian communities may be placing themselves at an increased risk of

drowning when participating in aquatic activities abroad. Therefore, the evidence points to the importance of promoting aquatically active lifestyles, involving regular aquatic engagement and the development of potentially lifesaving aquatic skills and water safety knowledge.

There were several additional factors that were found to promote or prevent participation in aquatic activities. Whilst it is not possible to establish which of these factors are the most important in determining aquatic engagement, the evidence suggests that positive early experiences both normalise aquatic activity and help build the relevant skills and knowledge needed for long-term participation. Indeed, the participants who engaged regularly in aquatic activity and/or were self-reported confident swimmers had often participated in aquatic activity regularly since childhood. Interestingly, Sport England's Active Lives Survey data indicate that children from mixed ethnic backgrounds are more likely to claim swimming skills, compared to Black and Asian children<sup>18</sup>; similarly, this study found that respondents from mixed ethnic backgrounds were more likely to describe positive early experiences with aquatic activities, often attributing this to their family culture or parental enthusiasm. In contrast, negative early experiences deterred engagement. For many participants, a fear of the water

<sup>18</sup> Sport England. (2022). Swimming Capability by Ethnicity. Children And Young People Activity Data (Ages 5-16). Retrieved from <https://activelives.sportengland.org/Result?queryId=91823>

emerged during childhood and prevented them from remaining aquatically active in adolescence and adulthood; this, in turn, contributed to a cycle of disengagement.

Notably, when survey respondents were asked to indicate which factors impacted their participation, finances was the most commonly selected barrier. Interestingly, finances were more frequently identified as a barrier by Asian respondents. This may partly reflect the higher rate of unemployment reported by Asian respondents, compared to Black respondents; however, this requires further exploration. That said, based on the forums and interviews, finances were not deemed to have the greatest impact on participation. Despite this, regular participation in swimming and aquatic activities was considered expensive and time consuming, and this was especially prominent for family groups. With the current cost of living crisis and the associated reduction in disposable income, the financial barrier is expected to have an increasing impact on access to participation. Nonetheless, parents of young children were keen for their families to participate in aquatic activities; however, they needed sessions to be at convenient times, which varied depending on work and childcare schedules.

Parents of young children appeared primed to engage with aquatic activity; indeed, having small children was found to spark a renewed interest in participation. In addition, parents were keen for their

children to be aquatically competent and confident, regardless of whether they themselves could swim. This reveals that the intergenerational transmission of aquatic skills and interest can occur in both directions. As such, parents should be targeted, in order to increase engagement in aquatic activity among Black and Asian children and adults.



A lack of visible diversity (such as ethnically diverse marketing materials) within the sector impacted respondents' perceptions of their place in aquatic activity. Swimming pools and aquatic spaces were viewed by some as unwelcoming and lacking diversity. As a result, many Black and Asian participants did not engage with local aquatic opportunities and were unaware of the range of offerings at their local pool or open water space.

Furthermore, participants felt that low levels of diversity in aquatic spaces contributed to an absence of information; for example, it was highlighted that there was insufficient information on products

for afro hair and appropriate swimwear for Muslim individuals. This perception prevailed, despite many products (such as burkinis and larger swim caps for afro hair) being more widely available than in previous years. Notably, respondents felt the novelty of Black and Asian participants in aquatic activity resulted in them paying financial premiums for swimwear, and hair and body care products, further contributing to the expense of aquatic activity. Additionally, it is evident that more attention should be given to markers of identity, such as hair, among women from Black and Asian backgrounds. Indeed, the survey findings highlighted the significance of hair for Black respondents, who identified hair-related factors as the greatest barrier to participation. Thus, further investigation into the impact of hair on aquatic participation for Black people is warranted.

For participants who occasionally took part in individual or group aquatic activity, having a diverse staff team was an important aspect of their experience. Many felt that a diverse staff team would be able to fill gaps in culturally appropriate knowledge and improve the customer experience; for example, by providing advice on where to purchase haircare products or how to access culturally appropriate swimming sessions. For some participants, the limited knowledge and understanding among staff, regarding their cultural or religious needs, contributed to the feeling that

they were unwelcome or a burden; this in turn made accessing aquatic spaces more difficult and resulted in latent or eroding demand among these communities. In addition, some participants shared experiences of microaggressions, and culturally discriminatory behaviour in aquatic spaces. This did not impact whether participants were interested in swimming and aquatic activity overall and was not the primary reason for low participation rates; however, these experiences were reported to impact how frequently some participants engaged with swimming.

Furthermore, the findings of this research indicate that learning to swim can be a very personal journey, requiring a level of privacy. When attempting to increase participation, it is important to recognise that the needs of specific groups may pose challenges or conflicts; for example, individuals following religious practices may need to attend gender-specific sessions that are overseen by staff of the appropriate gender, which may introduce operational challenges. Consequently, initiatives focused on increasing aquatic participation for Black and Asian communities will need to consider how ethnicity intersects with other characteristics, such as gender, religion and culture.

The barriers outlined above are likely to contribute to the significantly lower levels of engagement among ethnically diverse communities and to the additional safety



risks they face in aquatic settings. Despite these barriers, many individuals within Black and Asian communities are aware of the importance of aquatic competence. Indeed, many Black and Asian adults are supporting their children to engage in aquatic activity and often consider taking part themselves.

Tailored support for ethnically diverse communities, focused on developing skill, knowledge and confidence (for

instance, via water safety education, adult swimming lessons, aquatic inductions and a diverse aquatic offering), will be essential to reducing the barriers to aquatic engagement. In addition, the provision of high quality and accessible swimming lessons and water safety education for Black and Asian children will be crucial in reducing the likelihood of negative early experiences, the development of fear and a lack of water safety awareness.



# Recommendations

The following 11 recommendations have been reviewed by a panel of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion professionals. These recommendations aim to increase the number of ethnically diverse community members engaging with aquatic activity and address the disproportionate risk of drowning and negative aquatic experiences within these communities.

1

## Use a replicable inclusivity framework to understand local communities.

A commitment to water safety and aquatic life skills for all should be the core driver in diversifying the aquatic sector. #OurSwimStory illustrates that the needs of ethnically diverse groups are not homogenous. Therefore, swimming pool operators, open water facilities, other aquatic centres and clubs across the UK should work to assess local demography and accommodate the diversity of needs within their geographical reach. The outlined inclusivity principles have been developed to assist this process, by supporting operators to reach a wider local audience and effectively manage diversity. In addition, the framework encourages collaboration between providers and community members and is based upon the principal ‘nothing about me, without me’.

Ultimately, the aim of the principles is to help operators develop an inclusive, affordable and community led timetable. It is recommended that the BSA and its partner organisations develop these principles into a full inclusivity framework.

- **Assess** the diversity of your local community
- **Identify** opportunities to improve diversity
- **Learn** more about the needs of your specific community (i.e., build cultural competence)
- **Consult** your local community and collaborate with diverse groups
- **Engage** your local community with an offering based on the information from previous steps
- **Target** advertising and build community partnerships to engage new communities in aquatic activity
- **Review** the uptake, engagement and feedback from new communities; note and consider any issues raised by other community groups; and adapt the offering where necessary

## 2

### Provide aquatic and swimming orientations.

When consulting participants about the solutions to aquatic non-engagement, they regularly referred to the possibility of support from staff and the delivery of inductions or introductory sessions (similar to the function of gym inductions). The adoption of orientations in aquatic spaces would have the potential to reduce the anxiety, fear and information deficit experienced by individuals considering engaging in aquatics.

Participants were keen for inductions to inform them of key water safety information and familiarise them with the facilities, timetable, offering and the development support available to them.

Finally, orientations must provide an opportunity for culturally appropriate information and advice to be provided to new participants and individuals who are interested in engaging with aquatic activity. This should include guidance on what suitable hair, body and skin products and protective gear are available and where they can be purchased. Individual operators should also include information on how they accommodate specific cultural needs, such as closed viewing areas, private changing spaces, same-sex staff and any culturally tailored activities.



### 3

Develop the BSA's Community Journey™ to make it an open, interactive and accessible resource.

The findings indicate that there are many barriers to aquatic participation and as such, generic initiatives may lack effectiveness. Keeping track of the aquatic experiences and progression of ethnically diverse communities will help to understand their needs.

To do this, the BSA's Community Journey™ could be converted into an interactive measurement and information tool for use by communities and individuals. The tool should provide communities with culturally tailored information and provide bespoke guidance on where they can engage in aquatic activity and develop their aquatic ability and water safety awareness.

It is recommended that the BSA regularly reviews the data and makes it accessible to the aquatic workforce, other aquatic sector professionals, community groups and individual community members who are interested in promoting safe participation in aquatic activity.

Thus, the BSA's Community Journey™ tool will co-produce vital information for the BSA and the aquatic sector, whilst providing an important exchange of information that immediately supports communities to participate in aquatic activity safely and enjoyably.



## 4 Recruit and train an ethnically diverse workforce.

Participants felt there was a visible underrepresentation of ethnic diversity within the aquatic workforce, which contributed to feelings of both hyper-visibility and invisibility within the sector. To address this, there needs to be a focus on recruiting and training professionals from underrepresented backgrounds within the aquatic sector (for example, at pools, other aquatic activity venues, and within club settings). As well as providing visible diversity within the aquatic sector, a diverse workforce could contribute to the inclusion of difference of thought and perspective, if provided the opportunity.

The evidence suggests there is a limited pool of ready and appropriately trained ethnically diverse aquatic workers in comparison to the White workforce. Consequently, the aquatic sector needs to target and invest in the development of ethnically diverse employees who are equipped with the knowledge and tools to inspire wider aquatic engagement from their respective communities.

Within this process, the BSA should be utilised by the UK aquatic sector in its role as a bridge, connecting interested community members with aquatic career and training opportunities.

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

Various barriers exist that prevent ethnically diverse communities from engaging in aquatic activity: low levels of aquatic skill and knowledge, a lack of confidence, deep-seated fears of the water, and invisibility within the sector.

Policies and funding opportunities from various sources (including national governing bodies, charities, and government and non-government funders) should seek to address these specific barriers to participation, in order to promote the long-term adoption of safe aquatically active lifestyles.

6

Prioritise addressing aquatic risk factors in all relevant policies and plans.

All further aquatic policy 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.

7

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

As the BSA and its partners continue to contribute to a more diverse and inclusive aquatic sector, the intrinsic storytelling nature of the BSA should be utilised to continue raising awareness of the experiences of Black and Asian people. To date the work of the BSA has brought personal stories of ethnically diverse people to the forefront of conversations, not only providing a reflective space, but also timestamping these lived experiences which in turn has helped to influence change.

By working in collaboration with community leaders, the BSA and wider aquatic sector can help to shift perspectives by visibly representing and normalising aquatic engagement among Black and Asian communities. This could involve practical initiatives, including producing imagery, facilitating experience-led discussions, providing opportunities for members of under-engaged communities to attend introductory sessions for swimming and aquatic activity, and creating inclusive campaigns that promote safe pathways to aquatic engagement.

8

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

The #OurSwimStory findings highlight that variation exists in the interpretation of what being able to swim means; this was impacted by multiple factors, including confidence, knowledge, skill and practice. Concerningly, for some participants this deterred engagement in aquatic activity, whilst for others it placed them at risk.

As a result, there is a need to conduct further research to better understand these varied perceptions and to clearly define the swimming competencies and water safety knowledge needed for safe and enjoyable participation in aquatic activity.

9

Increase access to water safety knowledge and skills sessions for ethnically diverse communities.

Ethnically diverse populations remain unaware of where or how to access lifesaving aquatic information and are unlikely to have access to this information within their family units. Notably, it is understood that aquatically under-equipped populations are at increased risk of drowning and having traumatic aquatic experiences.

Water safety knowledge and skills sessions should be made widely available for all ethnically diverse communities, with the aim of increasing the number of aquatically informed ethnically diverse community members and tackling one of the most significant barriers to participation in swimming and aquatic activities.



10

Widely disseminate digital and physical resources on water safety to ethnically diverse communities.

As outlined in the findings, potential Black and Asian participants are prevented from engaging with aquatic opportunities, due to a lack of water safety skills and knowledge. Increasing the number of aquatically competent and water safety aware participants will require a multifaceted approach.

One dimension should be the creation of easy-to-access, readily available aquatic resources that are informative and practical. The BSA and its partners (such as schools and water safety organisations) are in a prime position to disseminate resources that are ethnically and culturally engaging, with the aim of promoting water safety awareness and aquatically competent participation.

11

Collect drowning data by ethnicity.

Collecting and making information on ethnicity available in drowning databases is a necessary step towards addressing disparities in water-related fatalities and improving overall water safety. Examining drowning rates across different ethnic groups (for example, within the WAID 2 database), will provide a clearer understanding of the specific risks and challenges faced by each community. This data will enable the identification of patterns and trends that may be influenced by cultural, socio-economic, or environmental factors, enabling targeted interventions and prevention strategies.

Disaggregating drowning statistics by ethnicity would also help to highlight and address inequities in access to water safety education, swimming lessons, and aquatic facilities. In addition, it would provide insights into the barriers that different ethnic groups may face in acquiring water safety skills and knowledge, such as language barriers, limited awareness of available resources, or cultural factors affecting participation. With this information, organisations and policymakers should develop culturally sensitive and tailored approaches to promote water safety within each community, ensuring that interventions are effective, relevant, and inclusive.



# Conclusion

---

#OurSwimStory involved landmark interactions with Black and Asian communities regarding their engagement with aquatic activity and water safety. In order to capture detailed insights into the complex push and pull factors, we undertook a mixed methods study, which incorporated a survey, forums and unstructured interviews.

---

The research findings demonstrate the wide ranging personal, cultural, socio-economic and structural barriers to aquatic engagement experienced by Black and Asian communities in England and Wales. Whilst multiple complex barriers to engagement have been identified, the study indicates a willingness and interest from members of these communities to engage with aquatic environments and develop aquatic skills and water safety knowledge. It is evident that there is a huge opportunity for both the BSA and the aquatic sector to prepare and support ethnically diverse communities to access aquatic activities safely.

Two central barriers identified in conversation with Black and Asian participants were inadequate water safety knowledge and a lack of (or limited) aquatic skill. These barriers appeared not only to act as the primary deterrent to regular engagement with aquatic spaces, but also contribute to a worrying safety risk for Black and Asian communities. Indeed, low levels of water safety awareness were common and the huge risk this poses to the safety of these communities (and especially to those

who engage in aquatic activities abroad, despite a lack of skill) is of the utmost concern.

There was evidence in survey responses and forums that water safety and aquatic skill were valued by Black and Asian respondents. Survey responses relating to anticipated aquatic engagement and perception of aquatic activity indicate there is substantial unmet demand from Black and Asian communities for support to engage in swimming and aquatic activities both safely and confidently. As such, rapidly increasing swimming competency and water safety knowledge should be the core focus of initiatives aimed at growing participation among ethnically diverse communities.

The findings also set the stage for the development of a comprehensive definition of what it means to be able to swim. #OurSwimStory shines a light on widespread uncertainty about swimming competency among Black and Asian communities. Many participants had developed some basic theoretical and practical knowledge from childhood onwards, but ultimately felt ill-equipped

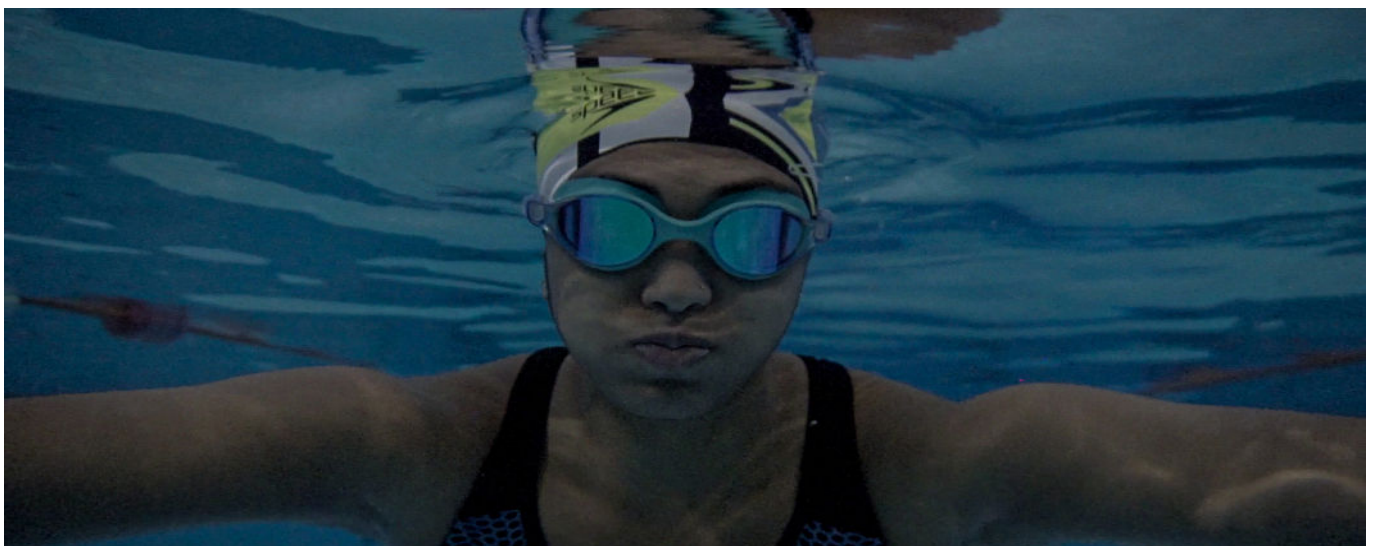
to apply this knowledge in the water for leisure activities and, most importantly, in emergency situations.

There were a number of key factors that encouraged participants to engage in aquatic activity or primed them to be aquatically active. The most prominent of these was positive early experiences with aquatic environments. High quality, regular participation in aquatic activity during childhood and adolescence was linked to an aquatically active adulthood. Therefore, parents, schools and aquatic activity providers have a significant role to play in creating aquatically competent, confident and active people. That said, there is also a considerable opportunity to promote engagement among Black and Asian adults, evidenced by the high latent demand.

Some communities will require additional support in accessing regular aquatic activity. Alongside opportunities to develop aquatic skill and water safety knowledge, there is a need to improve

representation in marketing, provide information on appropriate swimwear options and hair and skincare products, and ensure facilities are culturally accommodating and have an accessible and appealing offering. It is also clear that an ongoing review of aquatic engagement among Black and Asian communities is necessary to measure progress and assess new obstacles to these communities achieving safe and aquatically active lifestyles.

Overall, #OurSwimStory has gathered a significant breadth of information about the attitudes towards, and experiences and perceptions of, aquatic activity held by members of Black and Asian communities. It is hoped that the aquatic sector will value the personal experiences and views shared by over 1,400 ethnically diverse respondents and utilise these insights in order to collaborate with communities to improve their engagement and increase the overall diversity of the sector.



# Limitations

---

One limitation of the research is that due to the impact of COVID-19 on leisure centres in the preceding 24 months, it was not possible to gather insights into aquatic participation in the recent past. However, the research was able to explore the respondents' predicted participation in aquatic activity, as well as their willingness and desire to engage.

The absence of a comparative group of White heritage means we are unable to understand how the views of Black and Asian people are similar to or different from the majority population within the aquatic sector. However, within the report it has been made clear where the themes and barriers are not specific to an ethnic or cultural experience and may apply to the wider population.

As a result of non-purposive sampling in the survey and forum recruitment, the male population and members of other diverse ethnic groups were underrepresented in the research sample. Thus, the views of Black and Asian women are most strongly represented by this report and may not apply to other populations. Further research should seek to explore the barriers faced by specific ethnic, religious or cultural groups. In addition, the majority of respondents were from London and the South East of England. Whilst these geographical locations are two of the most ethnically diverse in the UK, the barriers faced by respondents from other regions of the UK (for

instance, those residing in rural or coastal areas) may vary.

This research benefited from having a broad scope, both in terms of the sample population and the topics explored. That said, the wide scope of the research limited the possibility for in-depth analysis; therefore, further research should build on the findings from this study.

Lastly, all research is impacted by the time and space in which it is conducted. This is especially pertinent in this research, given that it was conducted shortly after restrictions in the UK eased following the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, relevant research suggests that the impacts of COVID-19 on the sports and leisure sector persist and should continue to be considered.

# Acknowledgements

---

The #OurSwimStory research was conducted by the AKD Solutions team of dedicated fieldworkers and project managers. In particular, we thank Reyss Wheeler (lead researcher), Darnelle Morgan, Nandi Kegode, Mercy Brown, and Samina Tarafder (researchers), as well as Jenny Gordon and Michelle Peter (advisors).

The BSA commissioned this landmark study for underrepresented communities within aquatics. The BSA's passion and determination to improve access to water safety for individuals of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage has amplified the voices of these communities. Special thanks go to Damian Stevenson and Georgie Milner Day (research team) and Rhiann O'Connor (marketing).

We gratefully acknowledge the London Marathon Foundation, Sport Wales, the RNLI and PwC for supporting this research.

Lastly, but most importantly, we thank the 1,410 people who participated in our research, recommended it to family, friends and colleagues and made this study possible. We thank our community of participants and advocates for trusting us to represent their views and contribute to long term change in the aquatic industry and improved water safety and aquatic experiences for ethnically diverse communities.



# Glossary

<b>Aquatic activity</b>	<p>All activities that take place in, on or around water, such as swimming, canoeing, surfing, rowing, and fishing.</p>
<b>Aquatic sector</b>	<p>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.</p>
<b>Aquatic skill</b>	<p>Aquatic capabilities, including swimming proficiency, technique, and water confidence.</p>
<b>Hyper-visibility</b>	<p>The feeling of being overly visible or scrutinised on the basis of one's ethnicity.</p>
<b>Microaggressions</b>	<p>"Everyday verbal, non-verbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership"<sup>19</sup></p>

<sup>19</sup> Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, white allies, and bystanders. *American Psychologist*, 74(1), pp. 128–142. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000296>

# References

---

Austin, A & Jones, A. (2022) Peer Research: The Power of Shared Experience. Young Women's Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Peer-research-power-of-shared-experience-report.pdf>

David, H. (2021). (rep.). #TellYourStory. London: AKD Solutions. Retrieved from <https://www.akdsolutions.com/tellyourstory/>

Dawson, K. (2006). Enslaved swimmers and divers in the Atlantic World. *Journal of American History*, 92(4), pp. 1327–1355. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.2307/4485894>

Dawson, K. (2018). *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Department for Education. (2013). National curriculum in England: Physical Education programmes of study. GOV.UK. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-physical-education-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-physical-education-programmes-of-study#swimming-and-water-safety>

Goodbody, J. (2021). Racism has held up ethnic minorities in swimming, says Alice Dearing. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/jun/25/racism-has-held-up-ethnic-minorities-in-swimming-says-alice-dearing>

Grace, C., Martin, S., Harris, S., Bolton, N., Whittington, L., McInch, A., Mattingley, B., Eurig, A., & Church, S. (2018). *Free Swimming in Wales: A Review*. Swim Wales & UK Research and Consultancy Services Ltd. Retrieved from <https://democracy.npt.gov.uk/documents/s52972/Free%20Swimming%20Report%20Final.pdf>

Guardian News and Media. (2022). Swimming caps designed for natural black hair finally permitted by Fina. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/sep/02/swimming-caps-designed-for-natural-black-hair-finally-permitted-by-fina>

Hamlin, A. (2021). Swimming to Hong Kong: A bold Chinese refugee looks back. *Northwest Asian Weekly*. Retrieved from <https://nwasianweekly.com/2021/05/swimming-to-hong-kong-a-bold-chinese-refugee-looks-back/>

---

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. (2017). (rep.). How to conduct peer-led qualitative research. Bristol. Retrieved from [https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/how to conduct peer-led qualitative research.pdf](https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/how_to_conduct_peer-led_qualitative_research.pdf)

Sport England. (2020). (rep.). Sport for all? Why ethnicity and culture matters in sport and physical activity. Retrieved from <https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-02/Sportforallreport.pdf?VersionId=td0pMbTNOs7caOjvMZ0HCRPwsl3jGnFA>

Sport England. (2022). Swimming Capability by Ethnicity. Children And Young People Activity Data (Ages 5-16). Retrieved from <https://activelives.sportengland.org/Result?queryId=91823>

Sport Wales. (n.d.). Free swimming in Wales. Retrieved from <https://www.sport.wales/content-vault/free-swimming/>

Sue, D. W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M. N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C. Z., & Mendez, N. (2019). Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, white allies, and bystanders. *American Psychologist*, 74(1), pp. 128–142. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000296>

Swim England. (2019). Swimming and the national curriculum. Swimming and Water Safety in Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.swimming.org/schools/swimming-national-curriculum/>

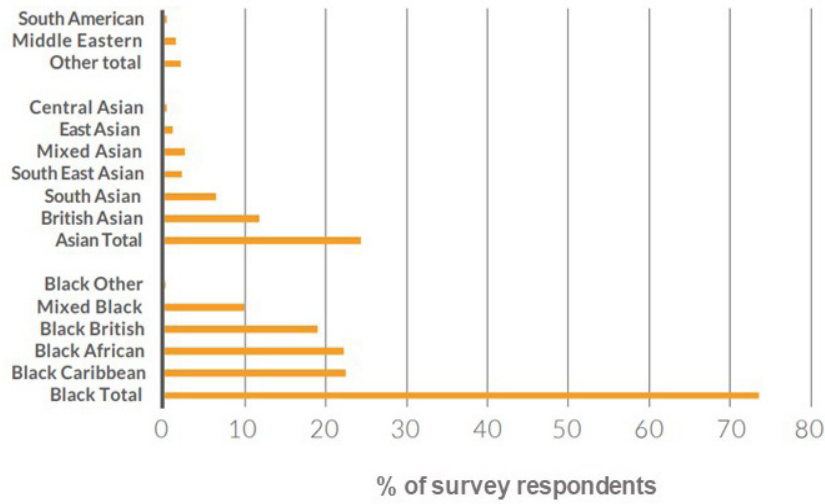
Swim England. (2021). (rep.). Impact of Coronavirus on school swimming and water safety. Retrieved from <https://www.swimming.org/swimengland/impact-coronavirus-school-swimming-report/>.

Swim England. (2022). England swims research and findings. Retrieved from <https://www.swimming.org/swimengland/england-swims-research-findings/>

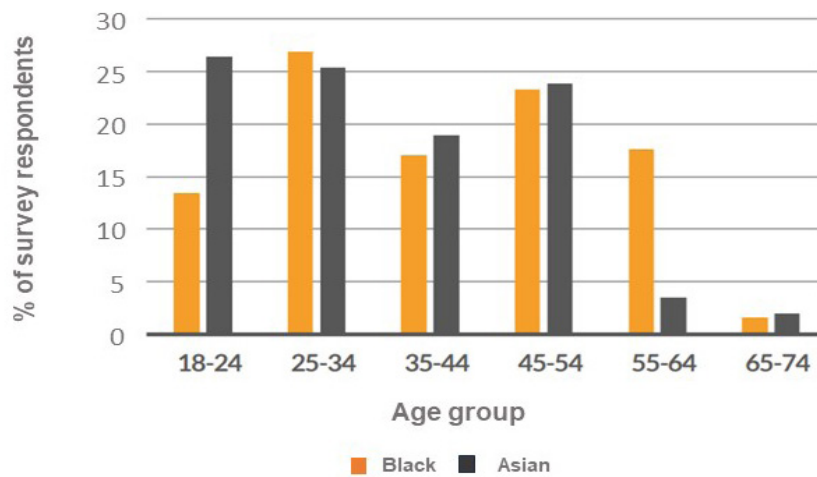
World Health Organization. (2014). Global Report on Drowning: Preventing a Leading Killer. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/global-report-on-drowning-preventing-a-leading-killer>

# Appendix

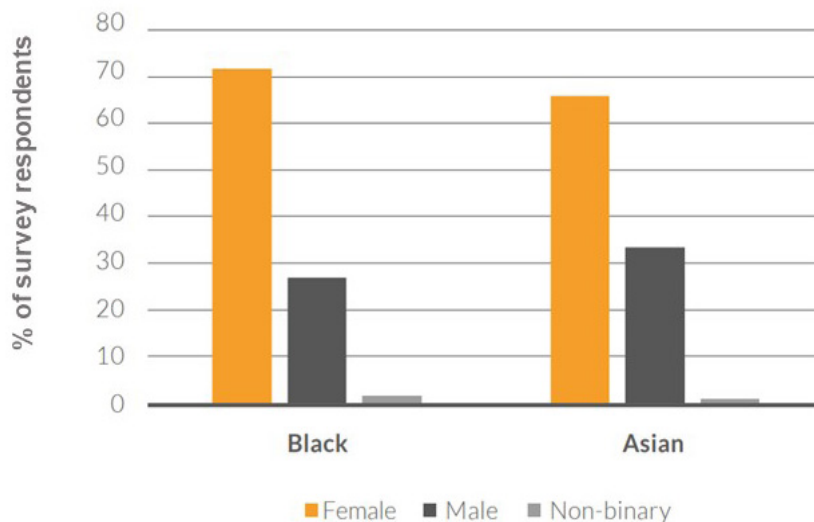
A1: Ethnicity of survey respondents.



A2: Age group of survey respondents by ethnicity.

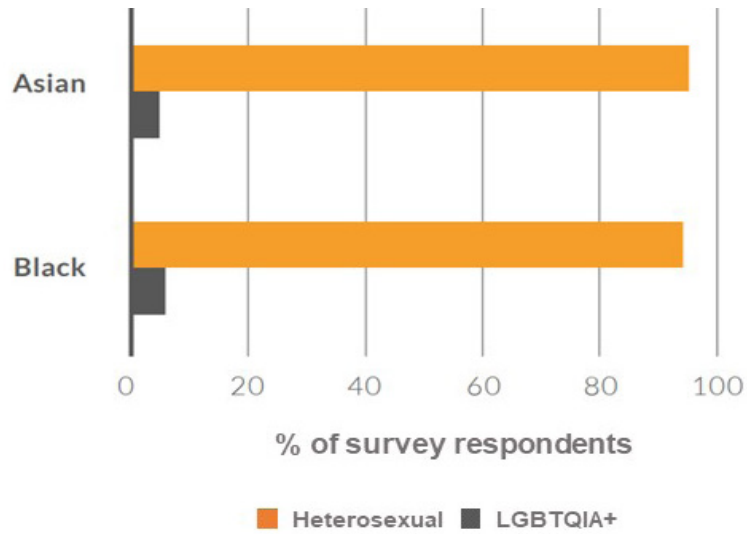


A3: Gender split of survey respondents by ethnicity.

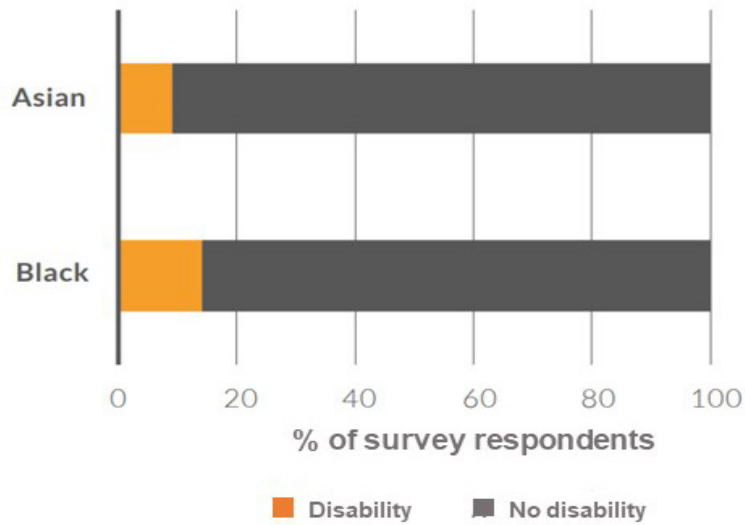




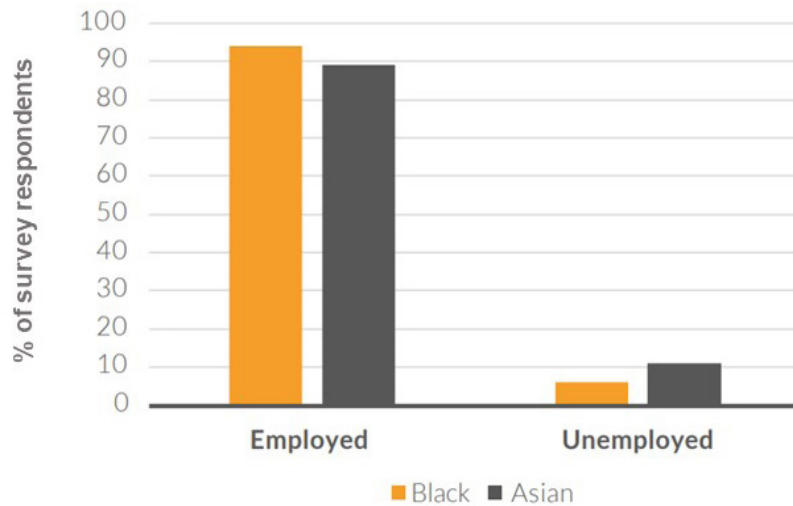
A4: Sexual orientation of survey respondents by ethnicity.



A5: Disclosure of disability among survey respondents by ethnicity



A6: Employment status of survey respondents by ethnicity



Contact No

+44(0)345 034 1105

Email

[contact@akdsolutions.com](mailto:contact@akdsolutions.com)

Web

[www.akdsolutions.com](http://www.akdsolutions.com)

Stay in contact with us via social media

 [akdsolutions](#)

 [AKD\\_Solutions](#)

 [akdsolutions](#)

Email

[contactus@thebsa.co.uk](mailto:contactus@thebsa.co.uk)

Web

[www.thebsa.co.uk](http://www.thebsa.co.uk)

Stay in contact with us via social media

 [BlackSwimAssoc](#)

 [blackswimmingassociation](#)

 [The Black Swimming Association](#)

