



SWIMMING WITHOUT BARRIERS

New Research – Understanding the Experiences
of Families and Swimming Teachers in
Inclusive Swimming Across the UK

A Report by



**SEN
UK
SWIMMING**

Supported by



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Contents

Foreword	3
Executive Summary	4
Headline Findings	6
Why This Research Matters	8
About the Research	10
THE PARENT PERSPECTIVE	13
Understanding the Barriers	16
The Right Teacher Changes Everything	20
THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE	24
Closing the Skills Gap	28
BUILDING INCLUSIVE SWIMMING OPPORTUNITIES	30
Turning Insight Into Action	30
Training Can Make a Difference	32
Case Study: A Teacher's Perspective	35
Recommendations	36
Next Steps	39
FINAL THOUGHT	42
About SEN UK Swimming	43
About STA	44

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Foreword

Every child deserves the opportunity to learn to swim, enjoy the water safely and experience the many physical, social and emotional benefits that swimming can provide.

For children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), those opportunities can be life-changing. Swimming can build confidence, independence and water safety skills, while also supporting physical development, wellbeing and social inclusion. Yet for many families, accessing suitable swimming lessons remains a challenge.

At the same time, swimming teachers across the UK are working hard to create inclusive environments and support an increasingly diverse range of participants. Many are doing so with passion, commitment and creativity, often seeking additional training and resources to better meet the needs of the children and families they support.

This report was developed to better understand those experiences and, importantly, identify where the greatest opportunities exist to strengthen inclusive swimming across the UK.

It gives a voice to hundreds of families and swimming teachers from across the UK, providing one of the first opportunities to examine both perspectives together.

What emerges is a clearer understanding of both the challenges that remain and the progress already being made.

This research does not identify a sector lacking commitment to inclusion. Instead, it highlights a growing demand from families for inclusive swimming opportunities alongside a workforce that is already supporting children with a wide range of additional needs and is keen to continue developing its knowledge, confidence and skills.

Taken together, these findings highlight both the scale of the challenge and a practical way forward. While many families continue to face barriers accessing suitable swimming opportunities, the research also demonstrates that strengthening the existing swimming workforce has the potential to increase access to high-quality, inclusive swimming experiences.

One of the most encouraging finding is that the research does not simply identify barriers. It highlights examples of inclusive swimming already working exceptionally well. Throughout the research, parents shared examples of swimming teachers who have transformed their child's experience in the water through patience, understanding, adaptability and specialist knowledge. These stories demonstrate the profound difference that inclusive practice can make.

The findings also reinforce the importance of investing in the swimming workforce. When teachers are supported through specialist training and professional development opportunities, they are better equipped to support children and young people with additional needs, creating more inclusive opportunities for families and stronger pathways into swimming.

We hope this report will serve as a valuable evidence base for the sector, helping to inform future training initiatives, funding programmes, partnership activity and policy discussions. Most importantly, we hope it helps drive positive change so that more children and young people can access the opportunities, confidence and lifelong benefits that swimming provides.

Together, we can help ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn, participate and thrive in the water.

Troy Parsonage | Founder & CEO, SEN UK Swimming

Dave Candler | Chief Executive Officer, STA

Executive Summary

Every child deserves the opportunity to learn to swim safely and confidently. Yet this research suggests that too many children and young people with additional needs continue to face barriers accessing suitable swimming opportunities.

This report presents the findings of what is believed to be the first UK study to bring together the experiences of both parents of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and the swimming teachers who support them. The research highlights a clear gap between the growing demand for inclusive swimming opportunities and the availability of suitably trained teachers and provision.

To better understand these challenges, SEN UK Swimming and STA examined the experiences of both families and swimming teachers. By exploring the perspectives of parents alongside those delivering swimming provision, the research provides a unique insight into where barriers exist, what is already working well and where the greatest priorities for improvement lie.

Perhaps the most significant finding is the disconnect between the experiences of parents and swimming teachers. Teachers are committed to supporting children and young people with SEND and overwhelmingly want to develop their skills, yet many families continue to struggle to find suitable swimming opportunities. The findings suggest that willingness alone is not enough; teachers also need access to specialist training and support that builds confidence, capability and consistency.



While the research highlights significant challenges, it also identifies compelling reasons for optimism. Parents repeatedly shared examples of swimming teachers who have transformed their child's experience through patience, understanding, adaptability and specialist knowledge. Teachers, meanwhile, demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusion and a clear desire to continue developing their skills.

Investment in workforce development has the potential to transform access to inclusive swimming. Evidence from STA's STARLIGHT campaign in 2023 supports this, with 500 swimming teachers funded to achieve the STA Award in Aquatic Teaching – Disability Swimming qualification. The programme demonstrated that specialist training can significantly increase teacher confidence and encourage more inclusive teaching practices. Combined with the evidence presented in this report, it provides a compelling case for expanding access to specialist training, enabling more teachers to confidently support children and young people with additional needs.

The SEN UK Swimming Bursary Programme has been developed in response to the same evidence - supporting existing swimming teachers to access specialist training and increasing local inclusive swimming opportunities.

The findings demonstrate that children with additional needs are not the barrier to participation.

When teachers have the confidence, knowledge and support to adapt their approach, children can and do thrive in the water.

The opportunity now is to ensure that more families, teachers and communities have access to support, supplemented by the enhanced training and opportunities needed to make inclusive swimming the norm rather than the exception.



Headline Findings

The headline findings reveal both a significant challenge and an equally significant opportunity for the swimming sector.

While many children and young people with additional needs continue to face barriers accessing suitable swimming opportunities, swimming teachers across the UK are already supporting children with a wide range of additional needs and developing valuable experience through everyday practice.

However, experience alone is not always enough. While almost all teachers surveyed have taught children with additional needs, many have not undertaken specialist disability swimming training and 42% have, at some point, turned away a child because they did not feel equipped to provide the support required.

Parent Survey



72%

of children represented in the survey are not currently attending swimming lessons.

74%

cannot currently swim 25 metres unaided.

64%

of parents described local swimming provision as not very inclusive or not inclusive at all.

96%

said they would be more likely to choose a swimming teacher with specialist disability swimming training.

Key Insight

By combining specialist training with the valuable experience already within the profession, and sharing effective inclusive practice more widely, the sector has an opportunity to build a more confident, consistent and replicable approach to inclusive swimming.

As teacher confidence grows too, so does parental confidence, helping bridge the gap and enable more children and young people to access swimming lessons, develop essential water safety skills and enjoy the lifelong benefits that swimming provides.

The positive impact of specialist training has already been demonstrated through initiatives such as STA's STARLIGHT campaign.

The findings suggest that strengthening the swimming workforce may be one of the most effective ways to improve access to swimming for children and young people with additional needs.

Teacher Survey

96%

of swimming teachers have taught a child with SEND or a disability.

42%

have turned away a child because they did not feel equipped to support them.

79%

do not currently hold a specialist disability swimming qualification.

98%

believe more specialist training opportunities are needed within the sector.

STARLIGHT Impact

500

swimming teachers gained the STA Award in Aquatic Teaching - Disability Swimming qualification.



86%

said they have adapted all of their swimming lessons to be more inclusive.

75%+

said they now feel confident teaching participants with a wide range of disabilities and integrating disability swimmers into mainstream lessons.



Why This Research Matters

Swimming is much more than a recreational activity. For children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), it is an essential life skill that supports physical health, emotional wellbeing, confidence, independence and social development.

The unique properties of water create opportunities that are often difficult to replicate elsewhere. For children with physical disabilities, buoyancy reduces the impact on joints and muscles, while the natural resistance of water helps develop strength, balance, mobility and coordination.

For many children with neurodevelopmental conditions, including autism and ADHD, the sensory qualities of water can provide a calming and predictable environment that helps reduce anxiety, improve emotional regulation and build confidence. As children develop their skills in the water, they often gain greater self-belief, resilience and independence that extends into education, family life and participation within their communities.

Perhaps most importantly, swimming is an essential life skill. Every child should have the opportunity to learn how to enjoy water safely and develop the confidence and knowledge to stay safe in and around water throughout their lives. Ensuring children and young people with SEND can access welcoming, inclusive swimming opportunities is therefore about far more than participation in sport; it is about enabling them to develop a skill that could one day save their life while experiencing the same health, wellbeing and social benefits as their peers.



This research has three important recommendations for the swimming sector.

Filling an Important Evidence Gap

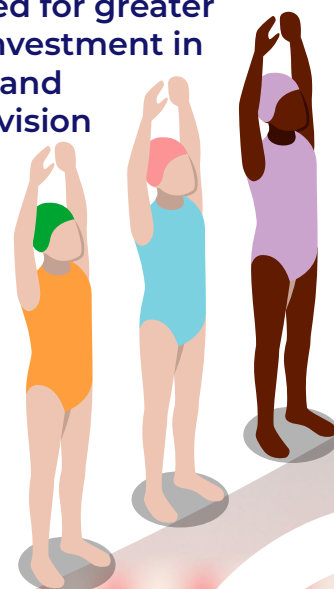
While research has explored inclusion and participation in swimming, little has brought together the perspectives of both families and the swimming workforce. By examining these experiences together, this report provides a more complete understanding of the barriers to inclusive swimming and, importantly, the practical opportunities to overcome them.

Providing an Evidence Base for Action

The findings move the conversation beyond recognising the need for greater inclusion. They provide compelling evidence to support future investment in specialist disability swimming training, workforce development and collaborative initiatives that strengthen inclusive swimming provision across the UK.

Strengthening the Existing Workforce

Swimming teachers are already supporting children with additional needs every day. Specialist disability swimming training builds on that experience, helping to crystallise effective inclusive practice through greater knowledge, confidence and practical strategies. By strengthening the existing workforce, the sector can create more consistent inclusive swimming opportunities, increase parental confidence and ultimately enable more children and young people to learn this essential life skill.



***"Swimming is much more than
a recreational activity.
It is an essential life skill."***

About the Research

Capturing the Voices of Families and Swimming Teachers

This report is based on research conducted by SEN UK Swimming and STA to better understand the experiences of children and young people with SEND within swimming, alongside the experiences of the swimming teachers who support them.

The research was designed to explore:

- Access to swimming lessons and aquatic opportunities
- Barriers experienced by children and families
- Perceptions of inclusion within swimming provision
- The experiences and confidence of swimming teachers
- Access to specialist training and professional development
- Opportunities to strengthen inclusive swimming provision across the UK.

Parent Survey

The parent survey gathered responses from **351 parents and carers** of children and young people with SEND from across the United Kingdom.

The survey explored:

- Current participation in swimming lessons
- Swimming ability and water confidence
- Experiences of swimming provision
- Barriers to participation
- Perceptions of inclusion
- The importance of specialist teacher training.



Respondents represented children with a wide range of needs, including autism and neurodiversity, learning disabilities and learning difficulties, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, medical conditions and social, emotional and mental health needs.



Teacher Survey

The teacher survey gathered responses from **331 swimming teachers and aquatic professionals** working across the United Kingdom.

Respondents included swimming teachers, lead teachers, swim school owners, coordinators, managers and aquatic professionals working across a variety of swimming environments - including leisure centres, swim schools, schools and independent providers.

The survey explored:

- Experience teaching children with SEND
- Confidence levels
- Access to specialist training
- Professional development needs
- Perceived barriers to inclusion
- Demand for disability swimming provision.

Research Reach

Although the research directly captured the views of 682 participants from a wide range of communities and swimming environments, its potential impact extends much further.

Collectively, the **331 swimming teachers** represented within the survey teach thousands of swimmers every week across the UK. Based on a conservative estimate, the workforce represented within this research has the potential to influence the swimming experiences of more than **16,500 swimmers every week.**

This highlights the significant reach of the swimming workforce and reinforces the importance of investing in specialist disability swimming training and workforce development to strengthen inclusive swimming opportunities.



Understanding the Findings

The findings presented within this report combine both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

The statistical data provides insight into participation levels, attitudes, confidence and trends, while the experiences shared by parents help explain the real-life impact behind those figures.

Together, these provide a richer and more balanced understanding of inclusive swimming than either perspective could provide alone.

A Note on Interpretation

The purpose of this research is not to provide a definitive national benchmark for inclusive swimming provision. Rather, it seeks to identify common experiences, highlight challenges and opportunities, and inform future workforce development, funding and inclusion initiatives.

While the findings reflect the views of survey respondents rather than the entire UK population, the consistency of the themes emerging from both parents and teachers provides confidence that the report captures genuine issues and opportunities facing the sector.

Survey Snapshot

351

Parent and Carer Responses

331

Swimming Teacher and Aquatic Professional Responses

682

Direct Survey Participants

16,500+

Swimmers Represented Through the Teaching Workforce*

4 Nations

Represented



*Based on a conservative estimate of 50 swimmers taught per teacher each week.

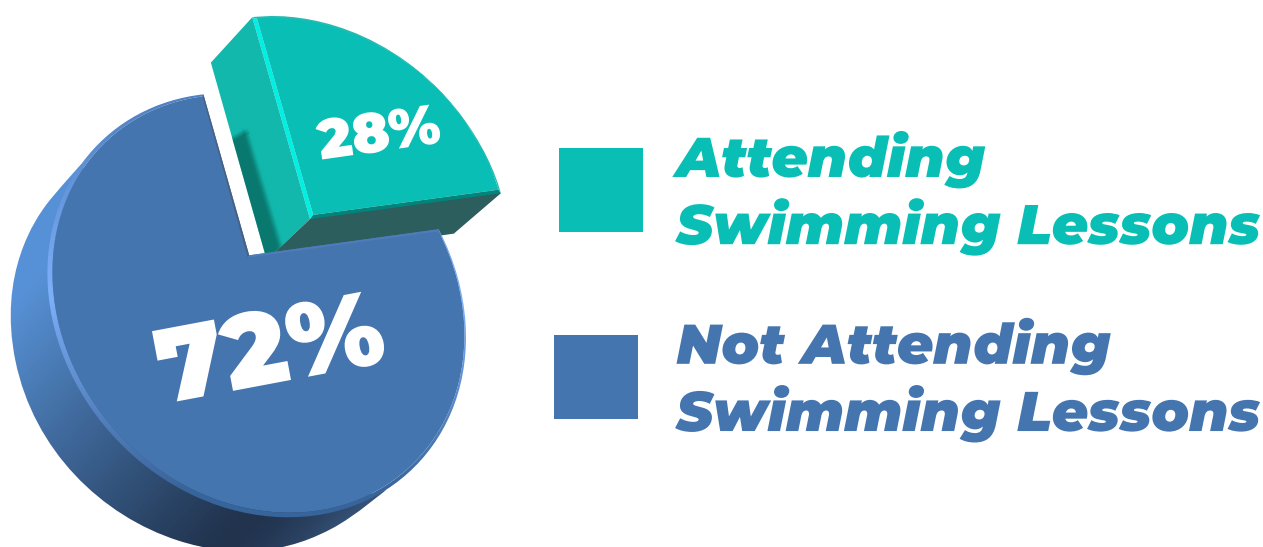


THE PARENT PERSPECTIVE

Access to Swimming Remains a Significant Challenge

While every family's circumstances are different, parents consistently described a combination of barriers that prevented their child from accessing swimming lessons. These included limited availability of suitable provision, concerns about whether lessons could meet their child's individual needs, affordability and uncertainty about the level of support available.

Less Than Three in Ten Children Represented in This Research Are Currently Accessing Structured Swimming Lessons



The findings indicate that access to swimming is often determined not by a family's willingness to participate, but by whether suitable opportunities exist that meet their child's individual needs. Many parents described spending considerable time searching for lessons where they felt confident their child would be understood, supported and able to thrive.

The pages that follow explore these barriers in greater detail, highlighting the experiences of families across the UK and identifying practical opportunities to improve access to inclusive swimming. Ultimately, ensuring more children and young people with SEND can participate in swimming lessons means enabling more of them to develop essential water safety skills while experiencing the lifelong physical, social and emotional benefits that swimming provides.

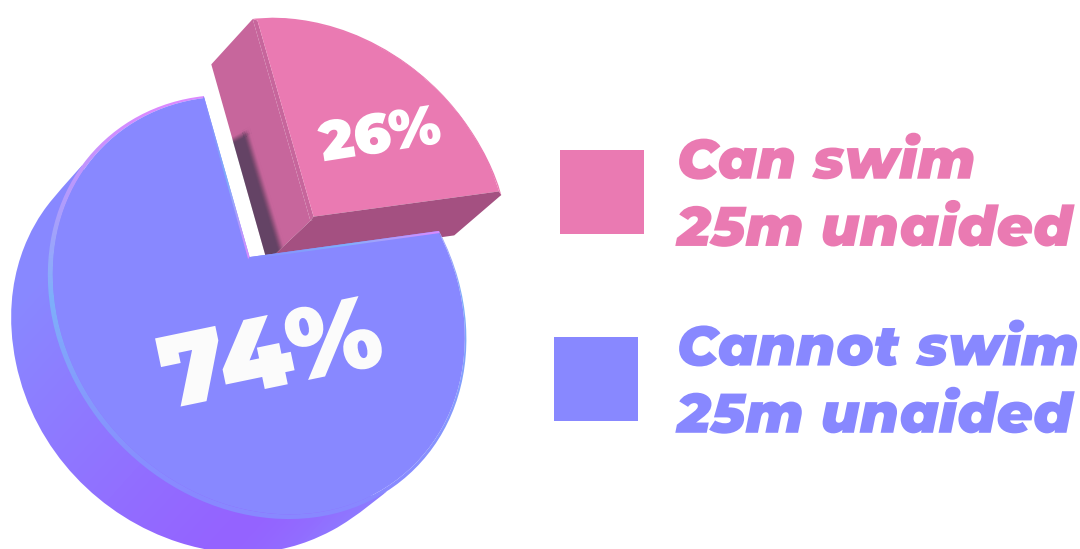
Water Safety Concerns

The findings also highlight concerns regarding swimming ability.

KEY FINDING

74% of children represented in the survey cannot currently swim 25 metres unaided.

Swimming Ability



The survey highlights the extent to which many children represented within this research have yet to develop independent swimming ability. A key finding of the survey is that nearly three-quarters of children are currently unable to swim 25 metres unaided, reinforcing the importance of ensuring they can access suitable swimming opportunities at an early stage.

Parent Voice



There are no suitable lessons close to where we live.

Understanding the Barriers

Why Are So Many Children Missing Out on Swimming Lessons?

The parent survey explored the reasons families were unable to access suitable swimming lessons.

Rather than identifying a single issue, parents consistently described a combination of barriers relating to accessibility, the suitability of lessons, affordability and confidence that their child's individual needs would be understood and supported.

While every family's circumstances were unique, several common themes emerged consistently throughout the responses.

Swimming Environments Can Be Overwhelming

For many children with additional needs, the swimming pool environment itself can present challenges.

Parents frequently highlighted concerns relating to:

- Noise levels
- Crowded pool environments
- Busy changing rooms
- Multiple lessons taking place simultaneously
- Sensory overload
- Long waiting times.

For some children, these factors created significant anxiety and made participation difficult, regardless of their ability in the water.

Parent Voices



Too noisy and overcrowded pool.



The pool was split into four lanes. It was too noisy and busy for my son who is autistic.

Families Struggle to Find Suitable Provision

Many parents described spending considerable time searching for swimming lessons that could meet their child's needs.

Some reported being placed on waiting lists for extended periods, while others travelled significant distances to access suitable lessons.

Several parents highlighted a lack of specialist provision within their local area, leaving families with limited options.

Parent Voices

There are no trained disability swimming teachers at my local pool.

We travel over an hour each way to attend lessons.

The waiting list for suitable provision is extremely long.

Cost Remains a Significant Barrier

The survey also highlighted the financial challenges faced by many families.

Where specialist or one-to-one lessons were available, they were often significantly more expensive than mainstream provision.

Several parents reported that the cost of lessons limited the frequency with which their child could attend, while others stated that suitable provision was simply unaffordable.

Parent Voices

One 30-minute lesson costs £60 a week.

My child needs one-to-one lessons, but we simply cannot afford them.

The specialist lessons have been amazing, but the cost is very difficult.



Exclusion Before Opportunity

Perhaps one of the most concerning findings to emerge from the parent survey was that some families felt their child was excluded before they had been given the opportunity to participate.

Rather than beginning with an understanding of the child's individual strengths, needs and potential, parents described occasions where assumptions were made based on a diagnosis or perceived ability. Many felt decisions about participation were made before reasonable adaptations or alternative approaches had been explored.

The experiences shared below illustrate the impact these assumptions can have on families seeking suitable swimming opportunities.

Parent Voices



One swim school told us they couldn't meet his needs as soon as they heard his diagnosis.



Teachers and clubs didn't want to take my son because of his disability.



After one lesson we were told he was not suitable for the group and could no longer attend.

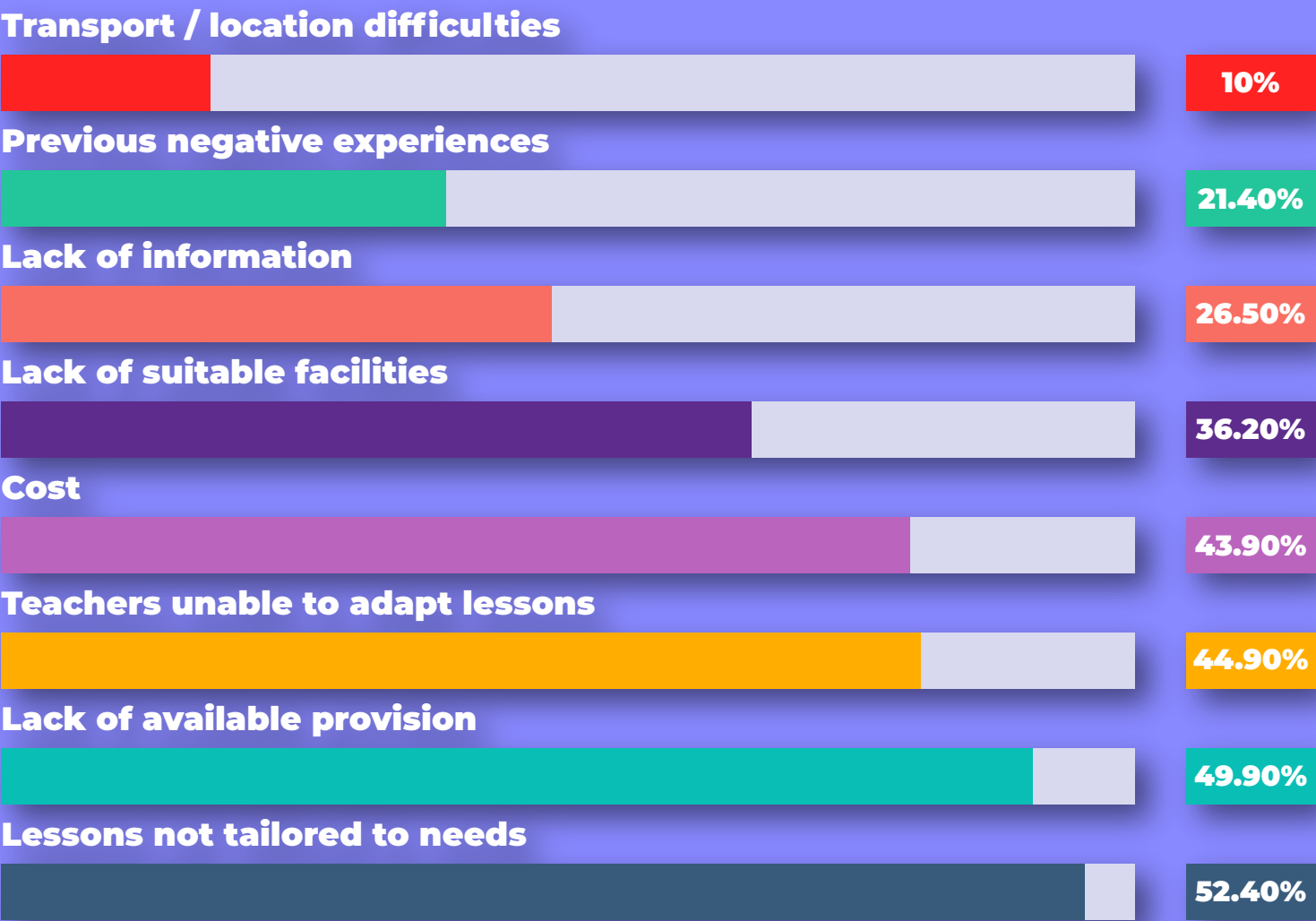
What This Tells Us

The experiences shared by parents point towards a clear opportunity. Families consistently value teachers who understand their child's individual needs and can adapt lessons with confidence. Expanding access to specialist disability swimming training can build on the valuable experience already developed by swimming teachers, strengthening knowledge, practical strategies and professional confidence. Equally important, a recognised specialist qualification provides parents with visible reassurance that their child's teacher has undertaken dedicated training, giving families greater confidence that their child will be understood, supported and able to thrive.

Strengthening confidence on both sides of the pool has the potential to increase participation and enable more children and young people with SEND to access the essential life skill of swimming.



Top Barriers To Participation



The findings show that the barriers facing families are rarely linked to a child's willingness or ability to learn to swim. Instead, parents consistently identified challenges relating to the availability and suitability of provision, alongside concerns about whether teachers had the knowledge and confidence to meet their child's individual needs.

Together, these findings reinforce the importance of expanding access to specialist disability swimming training, while continuing to increase inclusive provision and improve information for families seeking suitable swimming opportunities.

The Right Teacher Changes Everything

While parents shared many examples of the barriers they had encountered, they also described something equally important: the transformational impact that the right teacher can have on a child's swimming journey.

Across hundreds of responses, parents consistently described swimming teachers who had transformed their child's confidence, enjoyment and progress in the water. These positive experiences occurred in a variety of settings, from mainstream swimming lessons to specialist disability swimming programmes. Regardless of the environment, the qualities families valued most remained remarkably consistent.

Understanding the Individual

Parents repeatedly highlighted the importance of swimming teachers taking time to understand the child rather than focusing solely on their diagnosis.

Successful teachers adapted their communication, recognised individual learning styles and took time to build trust.

Parent Voices

My son is now having one-to-one lessons with an instructor who has taken time to build a rapport with him and understand his learning style.

They don't make assumptions about children with SEND. They get to know the child first.

The teacher understands his needs and adapts the lesson accordingly.



Patience and Flexibility

Parents consistently explained that progress was greatest when teachers were prepared to adapt lessons to meet each child's individual needs and allow them to learn at their own pace. Success was not always measured by distance swum or badges achieved. For many families, simply entering the water with confidence, participating in activities or attempting something new represented significant progress and important milestones in their child's swimming journey.

Parent Voices



The teachers have adapted the lessons to meet his needs.



Patience and understanding made all the difference.



The teacher celebrates every small achievement.

Building Confidence

For many families, the benefits of swimming extended well beyond learning a life skill. Parents described increased confidence, improved self-esteem, greater independence and a sense of achievement that often carried into other aspects of their child's life. These wider outcomes reinforce the value of creating positive, inclusive swimming experiences that recognise and celebrate every child's individual progress.

THE EXPERIENCES SHARED BY PARENTS DEMONSTRATE THAT INCLUSIVE SWIMMING IS SHAPED NOT SIMPLY BY THE ENVIRONMENT, BUT BY THE KNOWLEDGE, ADAPTABILITY AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE TEACHER DELIVERING THE LESSON.



The Right Environment Matters

Parents consistently identified smaller group sizes, one-to-one support and structured learning environments as important factors in creating positive swimming experiences. These settings gave teachers greater flexibility to adapt lessons, respond to individual needs and build children's confidence at their own pace.

Several parents also highlighted specialist disability swimming lessons and inclusive programmes as examples of good practice, demonstrating how the right environment, combined with knowledgeable teaching, can help children and young people thrive.

What This Tells Us

The experiences shared by families demonstrate that inclusive swimming is achievable. Parents consistently described the positive difference made by teachers who understood their child's individual needs, adapted their approach and created supportive learning environments.

These experiences reinforce the importance of expanding access to specialist disability swimming training. By building on the valuable experience already developed by swimming teachers, specialist qualifications strengthen knowledge, practical strategies and professional confidence. At the same time, they provide parents with reassurance that their child's teacher has undertaken dedicated training, giving families greater confidence to access and remain engaged with swimming lessons.

Key Insight

Children are not the barrier.

When swimming opportunities are designed around individual needs and delivered by knowledgeable, confident teachers, children and young people with SEND can thrive in the water.

**Understanding → Confidence →
Opportunity → Progress**



Parent Voices



"I explained to the leisure centre that my daughter is autistic and was assured they had experience supporting autistic children. Unfortunately, the reality was very different.

The instructors changed regularly, there was pressure for her to put her head underwater despite her sensory needs, and she became increasingly anxious about attending. We were advised that one-to-one lessons might be better, but as a single parent I simply couldn't afford them. Eventually I had to cancel her lessons altogether."

- Annmarie



"I love swimming, so I enrolled my little boy in lessons when he was just a few months old. Although he loved being in the water, the noise, splashing and having water on his face became overwhelming, so after just four sessions we had to stop.

Now aged seven and diagnosed with autism, he still loves being in the sea and swimming with me, but we've struggled to find lessons that meet his needs. I contacted the only provider in our area advertising SEND experience, but never received a response. I just want my son to have the opportunity to learn to swim safely and confidently."

- Andi





THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

Inclusive Swimming Is Already Part of Everyday Teaching

One of the clearest messages emerging from the teacher survey is that the vast majority of swimming teachers have experience of supporting children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

KEY FINDING

96% of swimming teachers surveyed have taught a child with SEND.

This finding demonstrates the valuable experience that already exists within the profession. Expanding access to specialist disability swimming qualifications provides an opportunity to build on that experience through dedicated learning, practical strategies and greater professional confidence, helping teachers feel better equipped to support an increasingly diverse range of learners.

Supporting a Diverse Range of Needs

Respondents reported experience supporting children and young people with a broad range of needs, including:

- Autism and neurodiversity
- Learning disabilities and learning difficulties
- Physical disabilities
- Sensory impairments
- Medical conditions
- Social, emotional and mental health needs.

The breadth of needs represented within the survey reinforces the importance of specialist disability swimming qualifications, ensuring teachers have access to the knowledge, practical strategies and confidence needed to support an increasingly diverse range of learners.

Respondents from across the UK also reported significant levels of SEND swimming activity, with teachers delivering dedicated disability swimming lessons, inclusive programmes and one-to-one support on a weekly basis.



Building on Existing Experience

The survey findings demonstrate that the need for specialist disability swimming qualifications is being identified by the swimming workforce itself. While most teachers already have experience supporting children and young people with SEND, many reported situations where they wanted to provide appropriate support but did not always feel equipped to do so confidently.

The findings also reveal a strong appetite for professional development, with almost all respondents believing more specialist training opportunities are needed. This presents a significant opportunity to strengthen the workforce by expanding access to recognised specialist disability swimming qualifications.

Teacher Workforce Snapshot



96%

have taught a child with SEND or a disability.

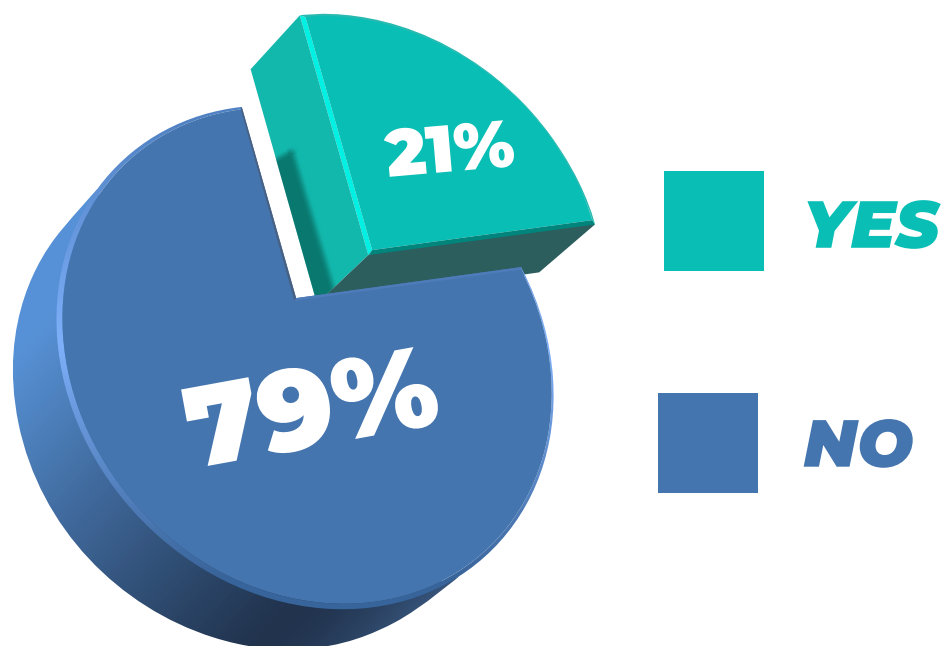
42%

have turned away a child because they did not feel equipped to support them.

98%

believe more specialist training opportunities are needed.

Teachers who hold a specialist disability swimming teaching qualification



What This Tells Us

The findings present a clear opportunity for workforce development. While swimming teachers are already supporting children and young people with SEND, only one in five currently holds a specialist disability swimming qualification.

Expanding access to recognised specialist qualifications will help build confidence, strengthen inclusive practice and ensure more teachers feel equipped to support an increasingly diverse range of learners. It will also provide parents with greater reassurance that their child's teacher has undertaken dedicated specialist training.

Closing the Skills Gap

The previous findings show that relatively few swimming teachers currently hold a specialist disability swimming qualification. Against that backdrop, the next finding provides an important insight into the practical impact this can have on swimming opportunities for children and young people with SEND.

When Teachers Do Not Feel Equipped

KEY FINDING

42% of swimming teachers reported that they have turned away a child because they did not feel equipped to support them.

With only 21% of respondents holding a recognised specialist disability swimming qualification, it is perhaps unsurprising that many teachers have encountered situations where they did not feel confident providing the support a child required.

Nearly half of respondents said they had turned away a child because they did not feel equipped to meet a child's individual needs. While these decisions were made with the child's best interests in mind, they reflect a desire to ensure every child receives appropriate support, rather than asking teachers to work beyond their knowledge or experience.

The findings reinforce the importance of making specialist disability swimming qualifications and continuing professional development more widely available, enabling teachers to build on their existing experience and develop the confidence, practical strategies and knowledge needed to support a wider range of learners.

Demand for Training Is Clear

KEY FINDING
98% of swimming teachers believe more specialist training opportunities are needed.

This finding demonstrates near-universal recognition within the workforce that further professional development would be beneficial.

Teachers consistently expressed a desire to:

- Increase their confidence
- Improve their understanding of different needs
- Learn practical strategies and adaptations
- Better support children within mainstream lessons
- Deliver dedicated disability swimming provision.

The survey demonstrates that the appetite for professional development already exists. The opportunity now is to ensure specialist disability swimming qualifications are accessible to every teacher who wishes to develop their knowledge and confidence.

Bridging the Gap

The parent and teacher surveys tell a consistent story. Families want teachers who understand and can confidently support their child's individual needs, while teachers themselves are asking for greater access to specialist disability swimming qualifications. Together, these findings present a compelling case for investing in workforce development that strengthens confidence, supports inclusive practice and expands access to high-quality swimming opportunities.

Key Insight

The challenge is not a shortage of committed teachers, but ensuring more have access to recognised specialist disability swimming qualifications that build the knowledge, confidence and practical skills needed to support an increasingly diverse range of learners.

BUILDING INCLUSIVE SWIMMING OPPORTUNITIES

Turning Insight into Action

The parent and teacher surveys point towards a clear direction for the swimming sector. Families are seeking more inclusive swimming opportunities, while teachers are calling for greater access to specialist disability swimming qualifications.

Inclusive swimming is already being delivered in a range of settings, including:

- Mainstream swimming lessons
- Small group lessons
- One-to-one sessions
- Dedicated disability swimming programmes
- Inclusive community initiatives.

The priority now is to build on this existing provision by expanding access to specialist qualifications, enabling more teachers to strengthen their knowledge, confidence and practical skills and increasing the availability of inclusive swimming opportunities.

**Parents Need Support →
Teachers Want Training →
Workforce Development →
More Inclusive Swimming
Opportunities**

Regional Insights Highlight Opportunities

While the need for more inclusive swimming opportunities was evident across all four nations, the research also identified regional differences in participation, perceptions of inclusion and workforce capacity.

Families in regions including Northern Ireland, the North West, Yorkshire & Humber and the South East highlighted challenges relating to access, lesson suitability and the availability of inclusive provision. In some areas, lower participation rates were evident, while in others parents reported greater concerns regarding how inclusive local swimming opportunities were for children with additional needs.

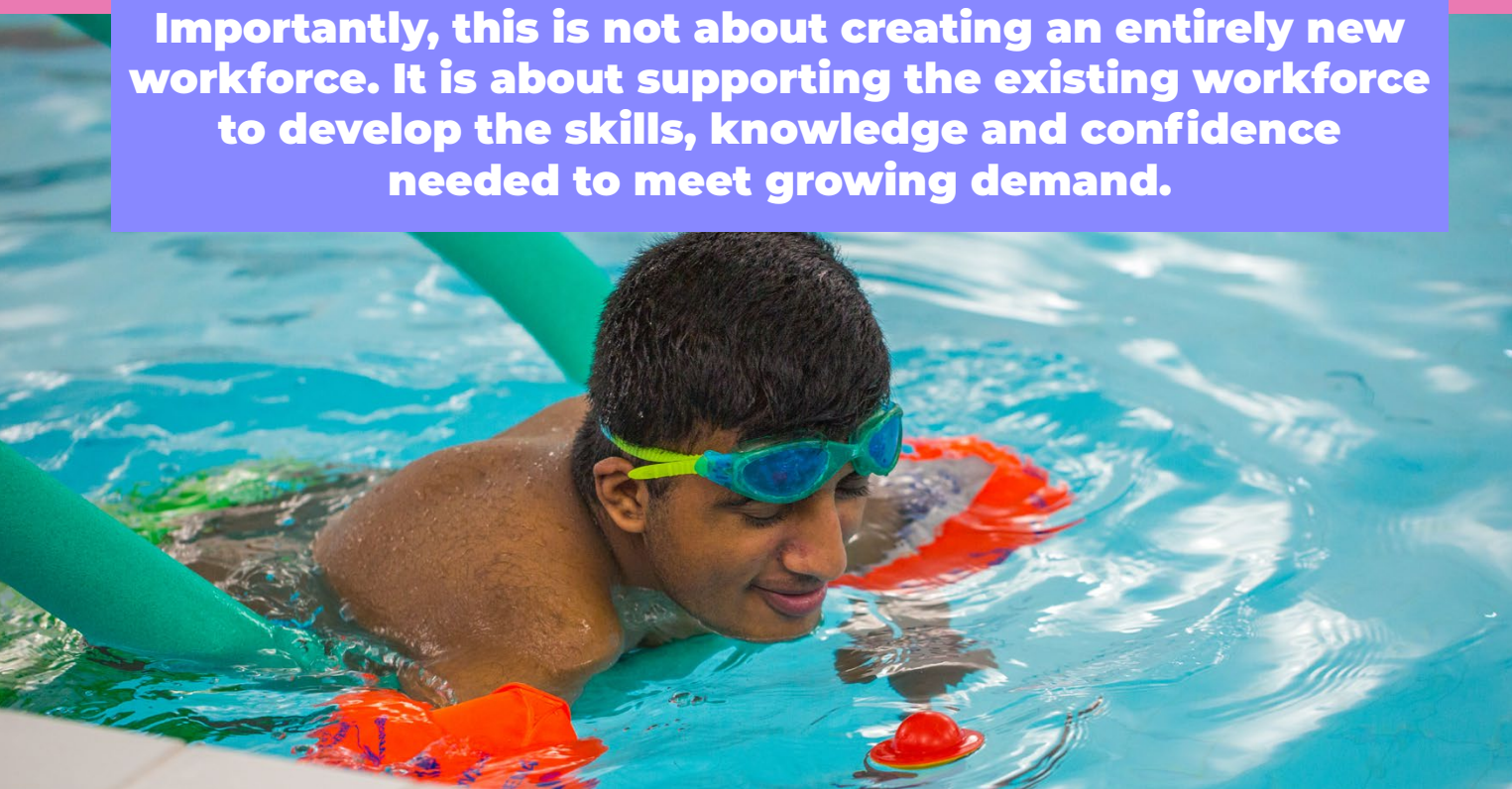
Several regions also highlighted:

- Lower participation rates
- Higher levels of parental concern regarding inclusivity
- Limited access to specialist provision
- Greater reliance on one-to-one or specialist support
- Longer waiting times for suitable lessons
- Strong demand for additional training opportunities for swimming teachers.

These findings suggest that while the challenges facing families are national in nature, their impact can vary between communities. In some areas, families reported difficulties finding any suitable provision, while in others the primary concerns related to lesson suitability, teacher confidence or the availability of specialist support.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that while the need for more inclusive swimming is shared across the UK, the priorities for improving provision may differ between communities. This highlights the importance of local partnerships, targeted workforce development and improved access to specialist disability swimming qualifications.

Importantly, this is not about creating an entirely new workforce. It is about supporting the existing workforce to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to meet growing demand.



Training Can Make a Difference

Evidence From the STA STARLIGHT Campaign

Throughout this report, parents have highlighted the importance of knowledgeable, adaptable and confident swimming teachers.

At the same time, swimming teachers have identified a need for greater access to specialist training and professional development opportunities.

The question therefore becomes:

Can specialist training make a meaningful difference?

Evidence from STA's STARLIGHT campaign in 2023 suggests the answer is **YES!**

The STARLIGHT Campaign

Launched in 2023, STARLIGHT was a charity campaign designed to increase the number of swimming teachers qualified to support swimmers with disabilities and additional needs.



Through the campaign, funding was secured to provide swimming teachers with access to the STA Award in Aquatic Teaching - Disability Swimming qualification.

Within six months:

500 swimming teachers gained the qualification.

This represented one of the largest disability swimming workforce development initiatives undertaken within the sector.

Increased Confidence

Following completion of the qualification, teachers reported significant improvements in their confidence and ability to support swimmers with additional needs.



KEY FINDINGS



86%

said they would adapt all of their swimming lessons to be more inclusive.

75%

reported increased confidence teaching participants with a range of disabilities.

75%

said they now felt confident integrating disability swimmers into mainstream lessons.

75%

reported increased confidence delivering one-to-one and small-group provision.

Responding to Existing Demand

Importantly, the STARLIGHT campaign also demonstrated that demand for inclusive swimming already exists within local communities.

KEY FINDING

81% of teachers reported demand for disability swimming lessons within their local area.

This mirrors the findings of this 2026 parent survey, where families consistently reported difficulties finding suitable provision and expressed a strong preference for teachers with specialist knowledge and training.

Turning the Framework into Action

The findings from STARLIGHT help provide a practical response to many of the challenges identified throughout this report.

Parents told us they are looking for teachers who:

- Understand additional needs
- Adapt lessons effectively
- Build confidence and trust
- Create inclusive learning environments.

Teachers told us they want:

- Greater confidence
- More specialist knowledge
- Practical strategies and guidance
- Increased access to professional development.

STARLIGHT demonstrated that specialist training can help bridge that gap.

Building on Proven Success

The findings from this report suggest that the sector can build on the success of initiatives such as STARLIGHT and further strengthen the swimming workforce.

Rather than creating entirely new provision, investment can focus on supporting existing swimming teachers to develop the specialist skills, confidence and knowledge needed to support children and young people with additional needs.

This approach has the potential to increase capacity within local communities, improve access to inclusive swimming opportunities and help more families find suitable provision closer to home.

The Role of the SEN UK Swimming Bursary Programme

The SEN UK Swimming Bursary Programme is built upon the same principle.

By helping swimming teachers access specialist disability swimming training, the programme aims to:

- Improve accessibility
- Support inclusive practice
- Create more opportunities for children and young people with additional needs to participate in swimming
- Increase teacher confidence
- Strengthen local provision.

The findings from both this report and the STARLIGHT campaign suggest that investment in workforce development can deliver benefits for teachers, providers, families and, most importantly, children.

Key Insight

The evidence suggests that improving access to inclusive swimming may not require more swimming teachers. It may require more swimming teachers with the specialist skills, confidence and support needed to help every child succeed in the water.

Case Study: A Teacher's Perspective

"Specialist Training Helps You Support More Children"

As swimming teachers, we are seeing increasing numbers of children with a wide range of additional needs participating in lessons. Inclusive swimming is becoming an important part of everyday teaching, and many of us are continually looking for ways to develop our skills and better support the children and families we work with.

Undertaking specialist disability swimming training provided valuable insight into different learning styles, communication approaches and practical adaptations that can be used within lessons. It reinforced many of the techniques I was already using, while also introducing new ideas and strategies that have helped me support a wider range of learners more effectively.

One of the biggest benefits has been the increased confidence to adapt lessons to meet individual needs. Often, relatively small changes can make a significant difference to a child's - and their parents' or carers' - experience, helping them feel more comfortable, engaged and able to progress at their own pace.

For us, some of the biggest improvements haven't necessarily come from changing what happens during the lesson itself, but from understanding and supporting everything around it. The transition into the pool, waiting poolside, changing afterwards or managing anxiety before a lesson can often be just as important as the swimming activity itself. By helping children feel calm, settled and ready to participate, lessons become more enjoyable, productive and successful.

The training also reinforced the importance of building strong relationships with parents and carers. They know their child better than anyone, and working together helps create the best possible experience. At the same time, specialist training gives teachers the confidence to offer guidance, share ideas and suggest approaches that families may not have considered. That partnership can be incredibly powerful.

I've seen first-hand through my own teaching the difference that swimming can make to a child's confidence, independence, happiness and overall wellbeing. For some children, learning to swim is about much more than developing a life-saving skill; it is about building self-belief, achieving goals, no matter how small, and experiencing success in an environment where they feel supported and understood.

By continuing to invest in specialist training and professional development, we can help ensure that more children and young people have the opportunity to experience those benefits and succeed in the water.

Mark McNichol
Director
In at the Deep End



Recommendations

Creating More Inclusive Swimming Opportunities

The findings from this research highlight both the challenges facing families and swimming teachers, alongside the practical actions that can help improve access to inclusive swimming across the UK.

Based on the evidence gathered through both the parent and swimming teacher surveys, SEN UK Swimming and STA have identified five key recommendations to help strengthen inclusive swimming opportunities across the UK.

Recommendation 1

Strengthen the Workforce Through Training and Development

Swimming teachers are already supporting children and young people with SEND across a wide range of swimming environments. However, the research shows there is strong demand for greater access to specialist disability swimming training, with almost all teachers expressing an interest in developing their knowledge and confidence further.

Expanding access to recognised specialist qualifications, continuing professional development (CPD) and funded bursary programmes will help teachers build the practical skills and confidence needed to support an increasingly diverse range of learners.

By investing in the existing workforce, the sector can increase inclusive swimming opportunities without creating an entirely new workforce.

Recommendation 2

Embed Inclusive Practice

The research shows that successful inclusion is not determined solely by the type of lesson being delivered, but by the confidence and ability of teachers to adapt their teaching to meet individual needs.

Swimming providers should support teachers to embed inclusive practices across all swimming environments by encouraging flexible teaching approaches, person-centred planning and reasonable adjustments that enable more children and young people with SEND to participate successfully alongside their peers wherever appropriate.



Recommendation 3

Share Good Practice

The research identified many examples of excellent inclusive swimming provision already taking place across the UK.

Swimming providers, governing bodies, training organisations, charities and community partners should work together to share successful approaches, practical resources and case studies that help strengthen inclusive practice across the sector.

By learning from existing examples of success, organisations can accelerate progress and support more children and young people with SEND to access high-quality swimming opportunities.

Recommendation 4

Use Evidence to Drive Long-Term Improvement

This report provides an important evidence base for understanding the experiences of both families and swimming teachers. Future workforce development, funding programmes, partnership initiatives and policy decisions should continue to be informed by robust evidence, ensuring support is targeted where it can have the greatest impact.

As the first UK report to bring together the perspectives of both parents of children and young people with SEND and swimming teachers, it also establishes an important benchmark against which future progress can be measured.

Continued research should build on this foundation, helping to monitor progress, identify emerging trends and evaluate the long-term impact of specialist training, workforce development and inclusive swimming initiatives. By combining lived experience with ongoing evidence, future decisions can continue to strengthen opportunities for children and young people with SEND to access swimming.

Recommendation 5

Help Families Make Informed Choices

Parents consistently described the difficulty of identifying swimming providers that could meet their child's individual needs. Clear, accessible information enables families to make informed decisions before enrolling in swimming lessons and helps reduce uncertainty about whether provision will be suitable.

Swimming providers should be encouraged to make information about their facilities, programmes and accessibility easy to find, including, where appropriate:

- Quiet swimming sessions or quieter swimming periods.
- Pool hoists and other accessible equipment.
- Water temperature.
- Changing room accessibility and available facilities.
- Lesson formats, including one-to-one and small group provision.
- Teacher qualifications and specialist disability swimming training.
- Links to recognised directories, such as the SEN UK Swimming Directory, where families can identify trained teachers and inclusive providers.

Providing this information upfront will help families identify suitable swimming opportunities more quickly, build confidence and encourage greater participation.



Looking Ahead

Delivering more inclusive swimming opportunities will require collaboration across the sector. Swimming providers, employers, training organisations, governing bodies, funders and community partners all have a role to play in creating more inclusive, high-quality swimming opportunities for children and young people with SEND.

The evidence presented in this report provides a shared foundation for that work. The next step is turning that evidence into meaningful collective action.

KEY INSIGHT

Improving access to inclusive swimming is not the responsibility of one organisation, one provider or one teacher. It requires a collective commitment to ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn, develop and thrive in the water.



Next Steps

Turning Research Into Action

This report represents an important milestone in understanding the experiences of children and young people with SEND within swimming. By bringing together the perspectives of families and swimming teachers, it provides a valuable evidence base to help shape future policy, workforce development and inclusive swimming initiatives.

This report is intended to be the beginning of a conversation, not the end of one. The next step is building on this evidence through collaboration, shared learning and sustained investment, ensuring the recommendations within this report translate into meaningful improvements for children and young people with SEND.

Building Lasting Change

The publication of this report marks an important step, but lasting change will depend on continued collaboration across the sector. SEN UK Swimming and STA remain committed to working with partners to support the implementation of these recommendations, encourage the sharing of good practice and help create more inclusive swimming opportunities for children and young people with SEND.



Working Together

A Shared Vision

Every child deserves the opportunity to learn, enjoy and benefit from swimming.

This report has highlighted both the challenges that remain and the significant opportunity to improve inclusive swimming across the UK.

By bringing together the perspectives of families and swimming teachers, it provides a clearer understanding of where barriers exist, where progress is already being made and where further action can have the greatest impact.

Most importantly, it demonstrates that creating more inclusive swimming opportunities is not the responsibility of any one organisation, provider or individual. Meaningful change will be achieved through collaboration, shared learning and a collective commitment to ensuring that every child and young person with SEND has the opportunity to participate, progress and thrive in the water.

The recommendations within this report provide a practical framework for strengthening inclusive swimming across the UK. Their success will depend on organisations across the sector continuing to work together, sharing expertise, supporting one another and building on the evidence presented throughout this research.

Whether you are a swimming teacher, provider, employer, training organisation, governing body, policymaker, charity, funder or parent, everyone has a role to play in creating more inclusive opportunities and ensuring that no child is excluded from the lifelong benefits that swimming can provide.



A Shared Commitment

Meaningful progress will require collaboration between:

- Families
- Swimming teachers
- Swim schools and leisure operators
- Training organisations
- Charities and community groups
- National governing and sector bodies
- Funders and partners.

Swimming has the power to build confidence, improve health, develop life-saving skills and create opportunities for lifelong participation. By working together, we can help ensure that more children and young people with SEND have the opportunity not only to learn to swim, but to enjoy all the physical, social and emotional benefits that swimming brings.



FINAL THOUGHT

The most powerful message emerging from this report is a simple one:

Children with additional needs are not asking for different opportunities. They are asking for equal opportunities.

Our collective challenge is to ensure that those opportunities are available to everyone.



About SEN UK Swimming

SEN UK Swimming is a specialist organisation dedicated to improving access to swimming opportunities for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEND) and disabilities.

The organisation was founded by Troy Parsonage after his younger sister Lily, who has Down's syndrome, struggled to access the specialist support she needed to learn to swim safely. Inspired by her experience, Troy trained as a swimming teacher and established Lily-Pad, a specialist swimming school. Realising many families faced the same barriers, he went on to create SEN UK Swimming.

Today, the organisation works to improve access to inclusive swimming through advocacy, education, partnership working and practical support, including the UK's first specialist directory of disability swimming teachers and providers. A key priority is building a more confident and inclusive workforce by increasing access to specialist disability swimming training.

The Disability Swimming Teacher Bursary Programme supports this ambition by helping swimming teachers gain the knowledge and confidence to deliver high-quality, inclusive lessons, creating more opportunities for children and young people with additional needs to learn to swim.

This report forms part of SEN UK Swimming's commitment to driving positive change. By capturing the experiences of both families and swimming teachers, it provides evidence to help inform future investment, policy and action to improve access to inclusive swimming opportunities across the UK.

Our vision

A future where no child is left behind in the water.

We envision a future where every child, regardless of their additional needs, has the opportunity to learn to swim with a confident, specialist-trained teacher.



**SEN
UK
SWIMMING**

<https://senukswimming.com/>



About STA

STA is a national governing body for swimming and a UK-registered educational charity (No. 1051631).

Since 1932, STA has worked to create and deliver the highest standards of swimming teaching and today delivers Ofqual-regulated qualifications and award-winning educational content to aquatic professionals in more than 25 countries worldwide.

Its objective - the preservation of human life through the teaching of swimming and lifesaving - is supported by a national tutor network and a membership of more than 20,000 aquatic professionals.

As an awarding organisation, STA develops qualifications and training programmes that support the development of skilled, confident and knowledgeable professionals across the aquatics sector. Its portfolio includes swimming teaching, lifesaving, pool plant and first aid qualifications, alongside specialist programmes designed to support inclusion and accessibility within aquatic environments.

STA is committed to ensuring that swimming opportunities are accessible to all. Through specialist qualifications, continuing professional development opportunities and partnerships across the sector, the organisation works to equip swimming teachers with the skills, confidence and knowledge needed to support a diverse range of learners.

STA continues to work closely with teachers, training centres, employers, leisure operators, charities and sector partners to support workforce development, promote best practice and improve access to swimming and water safety education.

As a partner in this report, STA is proud to support initiatives that strengthen inclusion within swimming and help ensure that every child and young person has the opportunity to develop confidence, competence and safety in the water.

Preserving Human Life Through the Teaching of Swimming and Lifesaving

