

By Sea Swimmers, For Sea Swimmers

Recommendations for more accessible, beneficial and safer sea swimming, co-produced with swimmers on the Isle of Wight

About the collaboration

Swim the Wight is a social enterprise and Community Interest Company (CIC) on the Isle of Wight that aims to make swimming in the seas around the Isle of Wight as accessible, safe and enjoyable as possible. Led by sea swimmers, for sea swimmers, they swim year round in all weathers and at different locations, and lead supervised and risk-assessed sessions several times a week. Their vision is an island where anyone who wants to enjoy the benefits of ‘blue health’ can do so, and they are leading a campaign to create an accessible, eco-friendly tidal sea pool on the Isle of Wight.

Our research team partnered with Swim the Wight to host two workshops, bringing research expertise in participatory methods to apply their ‘by sea swimmers, for sea swimmers’ approach to charting the Island’s sea swimming landscape and identifying recommendations to support safer and more sea swimming. This followed an earlier collaboration on the online ‘Isle of Wight Sea Swimming Survey’ held in the summer of 2023, which provided a baseline understanding of the topics at stake.



About the Centre for the South

This project was funded by the Centre for the South (CftS), a policy institute founded under the University of Southampton.

The CftS uses equitable approaches to stimulate cross-sector collaboration across the Central South, mobilising knowledge and using evidence to drive more informed place-based decision making, for mutual prosperity.



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www.centreforthesouth.co.uk

Thank you

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The challenge



How can the Isle of Wight (IoW) Council, businesses and residents support safe, accessible, beneficial sea swimming and lower barriers for new and existing swimmers on the Isle of Wight?

Sea swimming is growing in popularity around the UK and the Isle of Wight is no exception, with many organised and informal groups across the Island taking to the water. Swim England estimates the social value of swimming to be **£2.4 billion**,¹ due to its significant impacts on health, community and social development, and life satisfaction; and recommend improved access to outdoor blue spaces. How to approach these opportunities holistically, while lowering barriers to permit swimmers to enjoy the benefits, is a challenge for the Isle of Wight and other coastal communities.

Designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2019, the Isle of Wight has historic, cultural and heritage connections with the sea, with a desire among its residents to enjoy, know more about, and protect it. However, the Island also faces issues echoed in many of the UK's coastal towns: four Isle of Wight beaches, all noted as popular swimming locations, were among the top 10 beaches in England in terms of total sewage spill duration in 2023.² Other challenges impacting on the wellbeing of residents include deteriorating coastal infrastructure, limited opportunities beyond unstable seasonal work, and a youth mental health crisis. The Island also has much to be proud of, chiefly its strong sense of community and natural beauty – assets which combine in the local sea swimming scene.

The benefits of sea swimming are well documented by ongoing research and familiar to regular swimmers.³ Workshop participants also noted the risks of swimming and certain hazards specific to the Island's waters such as tides, currents and weever fish, which constitute sea swimming barriers.⁴

Survey results and workshops highlight the need:

- To raise awareness and continue **building evidence** about the benefits of sea swimming. This includes supporting the Island's health authorities and local GP networks **to improve the uptake of social prescribing**, in addition to wider community engagement. To do so, access to data on water quality and sea state, on the availability of accessibility equipment, and on the state of beach infrastructure needs to be improved.
- To increase **connectivity and communication among sea users** by sharing information, discussing the needs and ideas of water users, businesses and visitors, and seeking solutions.
- For the IoW Council to partner with local businesses, schools and universities to expand existing community programmes and create new opportunities for **education and 'ocean literacy'**⁵ that include sharing local and scientific knowledge about the sea. These should build on existing offers (e.g., by Swim the Wight, The Wave Project, the United Kingdom Sailing Academy (UKSA)) with a specific focus on engaging young people, growing their confidence in the water, and further allowing them to understand and value it.



The Sea Swimming survey highlighted a thriving community who sea swim across the Island year round, mostly aged over 40 years (84%), female (73%) and full-time IoW residents (84%). In total, 1179 people responded to the online survey.

% OF PARTICIPANTS REPORTED TOP BENEFITS OF SEA SWIMMING VIA:

74%	IMPROVED MENTAL WELLBEING
54%	IMPROVED FITNESS
43%	IMMERSION IN NATURE
22%	SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

TOP BARRIERS TO SEA SWIMMING:

75%	PRESENCE OF POLLUTION
54%	SAFETY CONCERNS
28%	LACK OF FACILITIES
17%	SWIMMING ABILITY

17% reported a mental or physical health condition that affects their ability to swim

9% have mobility requirements

Recommendations

Informed by prior research, the Sea Swimming Survey and the discussions that took place during the workshops, we recommend the following:

1. CABINET MEMBER LEADERSHIP

Establish an elected Cabinet Member role (with suitable IoW Council Officer secretariat) with responsibility for the Island's coast. These roles would facilitate a Sea Forum to address fragmentation among different sea users and parts of the Island. This role will span silos and create interdepartmental collaboration across Adult Social Care and Public Health, Biosphere, Culture and Leisure, and Coastal Management to deliver a true whole-Island response.

2. A 'SEA FORUM' FOR THE ISLE OF WIGHT

Hosting a Sea Forum would provide space and structure to bring together these groups, leading to progress in knowledge sharing towards shared solutions. Examples include directing local authority and private sector funding for young people to experience the sea, to improve beach infrastructure and facilities for swimmers and other water users, and to increase access to swimming locations through an expanded understanding of accessibility.

3. SEA FESTIVAL

Via the Sea Forum, the IoW Council should convene an annual week-long, business-sponsored celebration of the Island's sea-swimming scene. Held during September when the waters are warmest, this series of events will explore the Island's relationship with the sea, connecting with its tourism sector and designation as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

4. SUPPORT FOR CITIZEN SCIENCE AND WATER QUALITY DATA

Government support and funding should be directed towards a citizen science programme co-developed by the community and researchers, including the co-design of an open-access platform to upload and view water quality data. The programme should expand the reach of community water quality testing, and create opportunities for schools and young people to take part, learn new skills, and develop ocean literacy.

References

1. **"The Value of Swimming"**, Swim England, September 2023.
2. **2023 Sewage outflow statistics**, Friends of the Earth, 9 May 2024.
3. Overbury, K., B. W. Conroy, and E. Marks. "Swimming in Nature: A Scoping Review of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Benefits of Open Water Swimming." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 90, 2023
4. Isle of Wight Sea Swimming Survey 2023, University of Southampton, June 2024.
5. McKinley, E., D. Burdon, and R. J. Shellock. "The evolution of ocean literacy: A new framework for the United Nations Ocean Decade and beyond." *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 186, 2023



Find out more

Swim the Wight's website:
www.swimthewight.org.uk

Isle of Wight Sea pool website:
isleofwightseapool.org.uk

Public Policy Southampton's The Policy Pod Podcast Episode:
<https://publicpolicy.podbean.com/e/by-sea-swimmers-for-sea-swimmers-benefits-and-barriers-of-sea-swimming-around-the-isle-of-wight/>

Project blog post: www.centreforthesouth.co.uk/activities/by-sea-swimmers-for-sea-swimmers

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