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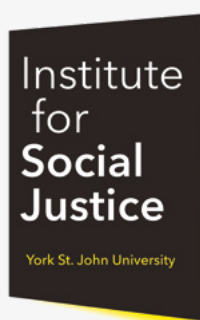
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Disability Access to Blue Spaces

A joint research project between
Open Country and York St. John University

Final Report

July 2023



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Background and Rationale

Open Country (OC) is a Yorkshire-based charity promoting and facilitating access to the countryside for disabled people. While OC have historically focused on access to green spaces, the charity has in the past also facilitated trips to blue spaces (lakes, seas, lidos reservoirs and rivers) for its members. These experiences have revealed that it is dramatically more difficult for disabled people to access blue spaces. Initial investigations by Open Country suggest that there are at least three interrelated categories of barriers which need to be investigated and addressed:

1. A lack of information about the accessibility arrangements at specific sites, and existing work by disability and swimming organisations has not yet succeeded in providing a single, accessible, central database.
2. Little evidence to document disabled people's desire to gain access to blue spaces or understanding of their experience of lack of accessibility.
3. A lack of willingness or ability on the part of blue space owners and managers to prioritise and fund accessibility infrastructure.

While the right to roam is widely established in the UK, the right to swim or otherwise enjoy 'blue spaces' (lakes, seas, lidos reservoirs and rivers) is yet to be fully recognised. Pollution, as well as land and watercourse ownership, are two of the reasons for this difference. However, even at lidos and beaches, where access might be considered a right, the lack of infrastructure prevents many disabled people from traversing the last few metres into the water. In the case of



disabled people, obstacles are often multiplied, as numerous physical barriers limit their accesses to blue spaces for swimming in open water and lidos, kayaking, sailing and other outdoor water-based activities. The potential of blue spaces to improve mental and physical health can therefore not fully be explored in the case of people with disabilities, because of barriers and a lack of prioritisation to create inclusive blue spaces.

Based on these findings and experiences of accessing blue spaces for disabled people, OC have recognised the need for including blue spaces into their agenda and to open up conversations about inclusive access to blue spaces. While OC's evidence had been anecdotal, the Community Research Grants from the Institute for Social Justice (ISJ) at York St. John University (YSJU) provided an opportunity to systematically collect evidence about the barriers, benefits and demands for blue spaces among disabled people in the region, and to use this to build a future database of blue spaces for disabled people in the region to be used as a starting point for strategic planning on building a supply of accessible blue spaces.

The ISJ was established in 2020 and works across YSJU to facilitate social justice research, projects and partnerships that help to pursue and promote a fairer society. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through Community Research Grants, where community organisations are invited to submit their proposal for a research project which addresses themes and issues which are important to them and which they would like help researching. This is based on the premise that it is important to ensure that research is relevant and impactful within the region, as well as open and democratic.

Following the call for Community Research Grants, OC submitted a proposal for research into the barriers for accessing blue spaces for disabled people. The research project was guided by the following research question:

How can we remove the barriers to disabled people's access to open water swimming and blue spaces for recreational purposes?

The project aimed to:

1. Identify the best way to improve centralised **information** about accessibility of blue spaces for disabled people who wish to use them.
2. Understand the barriers to, potential benefits of, and **demand** for blue space access among disabled people in the region.
3. Help Open Country work towards a plan for building the **supply** of accessible blue spaces.

The Project Process

The project was divided into two phases.

In *phase 1*, the research team at YSJU, under the guidance of OC trustee Jonty Warneken, consulted with councils, disability and blue space organisations (ADOWS, Swim England, Swimming Teachers' Association) on accessibility to beaches, lidos and commercially run swimming lakes (especially in Yorkshire). This phase was considered an exploration of what should be included in a blue spaces access database, and to determine what could be included in a database. Two focus groups were then conducted with participants from disability and swimming organisations across Yorkshire and the UK.

In *phase 2*, a series of creative writing workshops was conducted by Dr Catherine Heinemeyer. Participants for these workshops were recruited with the help of three Yorkshire disability groups (Association for Blind Asians Leeds, Converge and Open Country). These took place in blue space settings where possible (Pool Bridge Farm, York, and Safe Anchor Trust, Mirfield). During workshops, participants engaged in creative writing to capture their experiences and desires with regard to blue spaces. This method was chosen to allow participants to express themselves in a creative way, and to be able to highlight participants' own subjective voices and experiences in the dissemination of the research findings, rather than only producing a written report.

The written and spoken material from the workshops were then synthesised by poet and wild swimmer Kate Fox into an overall project poem. This poem, and participants' own poetry, were also the focus of a film which was produced at the end of the project. This film was screened at a final event at YSJU, to which all participating groups were invited.

Participating Organisations

In total, ten organisations worked on this project across phase one and phase two, including Open Country and York St. John University.

Phase One:

Organisation	Website	Brief Description	Contact details
Adaptive and Disabled Open Water Swimmers (ADOWS)	https://sophie-adaptive-athlete.com/adaptive-disabled-ow-swimmers/	Accessible open water swimming forum	adowsse@gmail.com
SUP Active Yorkshire	https://supactiveyorkshire.com/	Inclusive environment for paddleboarding	supactiveyorkshire@btinternet.com
Surfability UK	https://surfabilityukcic.org/	Provides surfing lessons and experiences for people with additional needs due to disability, illness, injury or learning difficulties	benedict@surfabilityukcic.org
The Wheelyboat Trust	https://www.wheelyboats.org/	Builds and provides accessible boats to organisations	ab@wheelyboats.org
The Gwennili Trust	https://www.gwennili.org.uk/	Provides offshore yacht sailing opportunities for people with disabilities	chair@gwennili.org.uk
Wet Wheels Yorkshire	https://wetwheelsfoundation.org/locations/yorkshire/	Powerboating experiences for disabled people.	office@wetwheelsyorkshire.com

Phase Two:

Organisation	Website	Brief description	Contact details
Converge at York St John University	https://www.yorks.ac.uk/converge	Provides courses for adults who use mental health services, helping to develop skills in a supportive educational environment	converge@yorks.ac.uk
Association of Blind Asians	https://abaleeds.org.uk	Promotes independence and empowerment for the visually impaired	info@abaleeds.org.uk
Open Country	www.opencountry.org.uk	Supports disabled people to access and enjoy the countryside	info@opencountry.org.uk

Key Findings

1. Phase 1 - Focus groups

Two focus groups with representatives from the organisations listed above were conducted in phase one. These discussions explored the information needs that were and were not currently being met by different organisations. We identified that, while adventurous and committed individual disabled people are managing to access blue spaces, there is a lack of a blue spaces website for less confident disabled people to find out about reliably accessible experiences.

Over the two focus group meetings the group identified that such a website could act as:

- a 'front door' for disabled people to take their first steps into accessing blue spaces;
- a signposting service, directing users to other organisations that could help them develop their interest in a particular sport further;
- a compendium of best practice in accessibility for blue space managers, incentivising them to improve their provision.

The focus groups provided valuable insights into the design of an online resource for accessible blue spaces.

Participants were asked what information and resources their organisations use when they are planning water activities, or what information they provide to their members to support them to plan activities. Responses to this differed depending on the activity that organisations offered. For swimming activities, for instance, it was noted that there was a lack of information and education, much to the frustration of disabled swimmers who would like to access blue spaces.

Communication about accessibility was often circulated through word of mouth. The following were considered important to include in online entries for swimming spaces so that people could make their own judgements:

- What Three Words location reference (to overcome the reticence of many participants in swimming forums to share favourite locations)
- visual resources, such as photos of entry points
- accessibility of the last 500 metres to the water
- accessibility of toilets, cafes or car parks

Other organisations who use adapted equipment for their water activities use communication channels on social media or newsletters to provide information on what equipment was available, and where. Participants said that it was necessary to encourage people with disabilities to try new activities, often through gatekeepers of disability organisations. It was also noted that it was important to ensure that disabled people cannot just try the sport, but also have the opportunity to continue to do it regularly if they want. All also discussed the variety of disabilities that a database should include including mental health and learning disabilities. Access needs vary so much that a website needs to provide quite extensive information for individuals to be able to determine whether a particular venue will be accessible to them.

Regarding what would make a database a useful resource, participants agreed that it was important to advertise any database nationally,

for example at national disability conferences or other trade fairs of water sports. Information to include would be who to contact, how to attend, the equipment and limitations on who can be invited, changing rooms, toilets, cost and whether there was assistance for the water activity. The importance of the 'last few metres to the water' was frequently highlighted as of particular importance to those with mobility issues. However, the diversity of disabilities was also noted, and that some information would need to be more nuanced.

In the second focus group, participants discussed more specifically what design elements needed to be included on a website. This resulted in a design brief for the website, as follows:

- Ability to search for places locally;
- An easy-to-navigate app that can be downloaded. This would be similar to existing models for providing good accessibility information, for example
 - **Wild Open Water** – has included useful accessibility categories in its user-sourced section;
 - **AccessAble** – a guide providing accessibility information about different places, including shops, pubs, restaurants, cinemas, theatres, railway stations, hotels, colleges, universities, hospitals and more;
 - **OC's BreakFree packs** – designed with wheelchair users in mind, these packs provide information on places to walk and cycle (includes Harrogate District, Leeds, Nidderdale AONB, Wakefield Wharfedale and York);
- Standardisation of information, e.g. What3Words for location;
- Conformity to the 3-click usability rule;
- Easily visible info about access to specific facilities, e.g. accessible toilets, nearest medical facilities, beach wheelchairs or ramps to cover the last metres to the water;
- Location-specific info about hazards like rip tides;
- Information about permissions;
- Information about structured, separate activities for disabled people vs integrated activities with the general community;
- A volunteers/buddies page for people to find support to go out;
- Ability to filter information according to specific needs;
- Visual information: photos, videos; both of which must be captioned;
- Any tool must be tested with a screen reader, a hearing-impaired person, wheelchair users etc.

The group also discussed things they considered needed to be avoided on a website, on accessibility grounds:

- Scrolling banners
- QR codes

2. Phase 2 - Creative Workshops

In phase 2, the research team conducted workshops which were facilitated by different disability groups. In these workshops, participants engaged in reflective exercises to create poems about their water dreams and experiences with water, its value to their wellbeing, and the barriers that prevented them getting to blue spaces. These were then collated by poet Kate Fox who orchestrated them into an overall project poem.

Workshop 1 was held on a narrowboat in Shepley near Mirfield, and was facilitated by the Safe Anchor Trust, with six participants.



Workshop 2 was held at Pool Bridge Farm, with six participants from Converge York.



Workshop 3 was conducted in Leeds with the Association of Blind Asians. Eight participants contributed to this workshop.



The Project Poem

The project poem is not merely an artistic output; it synthesises and reflects the key themes participants spoke about during the workshops. This was approached by first gathering participants' water memories of going to the swimming pool as teenagers, of boat trips with families, and of holidays and days spent by the sea. Participants' stories were often full of emotions, such as fear of water and of what is below the surface; but also happiness evoked by memories of being near blue spaces with family and friends, as well as feelings of calm and serenity by the water.

The workshops then explored themes around access and barriers. These included a desire to have the option to access blue spaces individually, as well as with a group; reflections on challenges to access blue space relating to financial resources and transport; frustrating experiences of being denied participation in triathlons or beach trips because of mobility or health and safety concerns. The poem centres, however, on the dominant response of participants, which was a celebration of the different ways in which blue spaces provide freedom and reflection, and a yearning to be able to do this more often.

While those were stories shared by many participants, individual narratives reflecting participants' memories and personal challenges when accessing blue spaces also found their way into the overall narrative of the poem. For example, many participants at the ABA shared stories about visits to the Golden Temple, which is surrounded by a pool into which participants threw coins to make a wish; or a story about having water poured over one's feet because it was impossible to make the last few metres into the water in a wheelchair on a beach.

Blue Spaces

Written by Kate Fox based on the inputs of participants from ABA Leeds, Converge York and Open Country

Blue spaces
free spaces,
depth and flow
life and glow.

Your body knows blue space is what it needs
pulling free of life's tangled weeds.
Pretty patterns playing on the surface
portals to an underwater world
where you can be with your dogs
your children
your friends
or just you
do whatever you want to do.

Drop a coin by the golden temple
of yourself,
make a wish,
you are bird, you are fish.
A blue space to breathe fresh air,
as long as you can get there.
It can be so far away
eternally postponed for another day
Without a car, or money for petrol,
you hope for a bus, a taxi, a lift,
so you can float free of cares,
let worries drift,
relax and enjoy this life buoy
no need to conform or perform
you can lark about
splash and splish
scream and shout,
overcome fears of judgment
your body, your being on display.

Blue spaces
are magical spaces
where you can trust
that even when something brushes your leg
it won't eat you
you can feel the fear
and not let it beat you.
It's beautiful sunsets
a picture of peaceful perfection
unselfconscious hairy legs
leading you out of the water
like a light.
We look after ourselves
just by being there,
want blue spaces to be given the same care,
cleansed of the pollution of a busy, troubled world,
by the soothing motion of the ocean,
not motions IN the ocean.

Blue spaces
free spaces,
depth and flow
life and glow.
Just being alongside water
is enough
to let go of the weight of stuff.
Or become immersed,
part of it,
alive and adventuring
in the azure heart of it
feeling the breeze
the water that frees,
you are birds, you are trees,
there is blue there is green
you are free, you are seen,
dragonflies buzzing above your head,
it is warmth and being held
past the fear
of being left alone and cold

it ripples, glistens,
embraces you, listens,
if only you could stay as long as you like
in the green and the blue,
or they'd bring the water to you.

Waves, brain waves settling,
brain waves spiking,
treading on the rocks and stones
at the edge of what's allowed
on the banks of your bravery
capable and independent,
sailing your own ship,
really or in metaphor,
knowing this freedom
is what life's for,
cruising, gently moving
sun on your skin,
your hand on the tiller,
a sense of pride
within your own depths
others alongside.

Blue spaces
free spaces,
depth and flow
life and glow.

Yorkshire Directory of Blue Spaces

This project has identified the need for a database about accessible blue spaces. While each blue space and water activity organisation has their own website, information about accessibility on these websites is often difficult to find, or it is simply lacking. Below is a list of a few blue space venues across Yorkshire which provide accessibility information on their websites. While this list is short, which represents the current dilemma we identified in this research, it nevertheless presents a snapshot of blue spaces which are accessible for disabled people.

The list includes lidos, beaches, swimming pools and lakes in Yorkshire, as well as some of the organisations that participated in this research which offer water activities. In addition, AccessAble provides information about wheelchair friendly venues or disabled access and facilities at over 10,000 venues across the UK and Ireland. This includes places such as shops, pubs, restaurants, and cinemas, but also swimming pools.

Ilkley Lido and Swimming Pool

Information about accessibility, including photos of pool access, changing facilities, shower access etc can be found here.

Helmsley Lido

Currently the Pool has very limited resources for the physically disabled, but the proposed new build of the domestic offices will include improvements.

There is a hoist to enable people to access the pool.

Alpamare, Scarborough

Alpamare Waterpark lists several facilities and services available to accommodate less physically able users: Accessible toilets, changing facilities and lockers; lowered reception desk; wide, obstacle-free gangways.

Alpamare has a mobile hoist that can give wheelchair users access to the Infinity pool and the Wave pool.

North Yorkshire Water Park

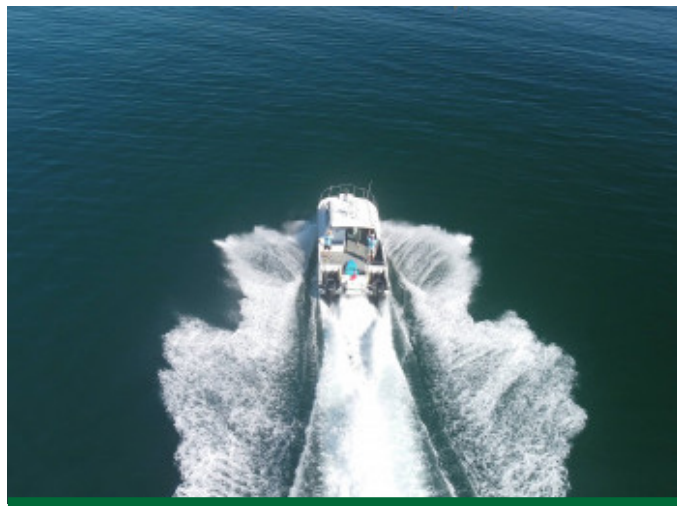
North Yorkshire Water Park is a large area with four lakes where the public has access during our opening hours. Two lakes have concrete slipway access to the water, where a gravel bed slopes off into the water to a depth of 30 feet. On the main water sports lake, which is roughly 80 acres, there are four slip ways in addition to floating pontoons. There are no hoists or lifts at present. At the fishing lake there are three disabled parking bays and at the main reception North Yorkshire Water Park are adding resin pathways to help with access. There are disabled toilets.

Bridlington South Beach

The South Beach of Bridlington is disabled friendly. It has disabled parking on the north ramp down to the Spa, a Changing Places disabled toilet and ramps down to the beach. You can hire special beach wheelchairs, a couple of which float in the sea.

Wet Wheels Yorkshire

Wet Wheels offers boating experiences and helps disabled and disadvantaged people of all ages to access the water. All people are active participants, rather than simply passengers, with the opportunity to steer vessels and learn seamanship alongside peers, friends and families. Boating can be relaxed, but Wet Wheels also offers to take people on powerboats.



SUP Active Yorkshire

SUP Active Yorkshire tries to get as many people on the water and enjoy the great outdoors on paddleboards. They work mainly from Ellerton Lake, with showers, toilets, changing block and a cafe. There are set sessions, but they can also arrange bespoke sessions, for example, on The River Ouse, Ripon Canal, or Semerwater. The sessions are for anyone, beginners or experienced, young or old.



Safe Anchor Trust

Provides boat trips for people who are disadvantaged through physical or mental disabilities, social isolation, age or social deprivation. Boat trips take place from the beginning of March to the end of October, 7 days a week. Trips are tailored to meet individual needs with the overall duration being determined by each group. Boat trips are free of charge to community groups. Some boats are specially designed for wheelchair users or passengers with mobility difficulties. All boats have toilets and four have cooking facilities.

Whitby DAG

Whitby DAG seeks to enable disabled people to live as independently as possible making informed choices through access to services and information. They have all terrain wheelchairs for hire to enable disabled people to access the beach.



The Way Forward and Next Steps

From the focus groups in phase 1, it was identified that there is a lack of information about access to blue spaces for people who are less confident about accessing water, due to their abilities. Through participants' personal stories, phase 2 revealed some of the access issues to blue spaces and how they are experienced. This provided important learnings regarding remaining barriers to blue spaces, as well as where focus needs to be placed to make blue spaces accessible to everyone (for example, incorporating a focus on the last few metres into the water, emphasising both communal and individual experiences, including transport information and organisations that can support the costs of transport and equipment).

Taking learnings from phase 1 and 2, a website

- A. Should be a multi-sport blue space website for those wanting a structured, reliably accessible experience, with a template for all.
- B. Should include a section for venues to provide advice about how to become more accessible and provide signposting to training and assessment for venues.
- C. Should include information on 'wilder' and more regular individual opportunities.
- D. Should provide a volunteers/buddy matching page.
- E. Should include a user profile section where users tick their needs, and it matches them to a venue.

Options for progressing this include fundraising for a tailored, Yorkshire-focused website to be hosted by Open Country, and/or collaborating with an existing organisation or database of accessibility information. Open Country will consult with its trustees and advisory board in deciding how to shape the next phase of its blue spaces campaign.

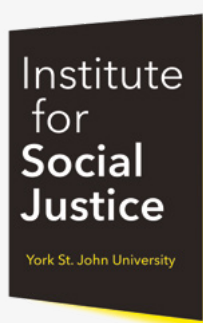
Conclusions

It is dramatically more difficult for disabled people to access blue spaces. This research has identified the need for a database of blue spaces for disabled people where less confident disabled people can find out about reliably accessible experiences. In focus groups with disability and blue space organisations across Yorkshire conducted in phase 1, the idea of a website was discussed, and a design brief developed. It was envisaged that such a website could act as a ‘front door’ for disabled people to take their first steps into accessing blue spaces; but it could also act as a signposting service, directing users to other organisations that could help them develop their interest in a particular sport further. The website could also act as a compendium of best practice in accessibility for blue space managers and incentivise them to improve their provision.

Through a series of creative writing workshops conducted in phase 2, we collected experiences and desires with regard to blue spaces for disabled people. Participants expressed a desire to access blue spaces individually, or with a group; reflections on challenges to access blue space relating to financial resources and transport; and water memories of going to the swimming pool as teenagers, of boat trips with families, and of holidays and days spent by the sea.

Participants’ stories were often full of emotions, such as fear of water and of what is below the surface; but also happiness evoked by memories of being near blue spaces with family and friends, as well as feelings of calm and serenity by the water. The written and spoken material from the workshops were then synthesised by poet and wild swimmer Kate Fox into an overall project poem. This poem, and participants’ own poetry, were also the focus of a project film which was produced at the end of the project.

Going forward, Open Country hopes to progress with the design of the website in order to help disabled people access blue spaces so that everyone can enjoy the benefits of these spaces for their health and wellbeing.



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