

BY SEA SWIMMERS, FOR SEA SWIMMERS

“By sea swimmers, for sea swimmers”: More Accessible, Beneficial and Safer Sea Swimming on the Isle of Wight

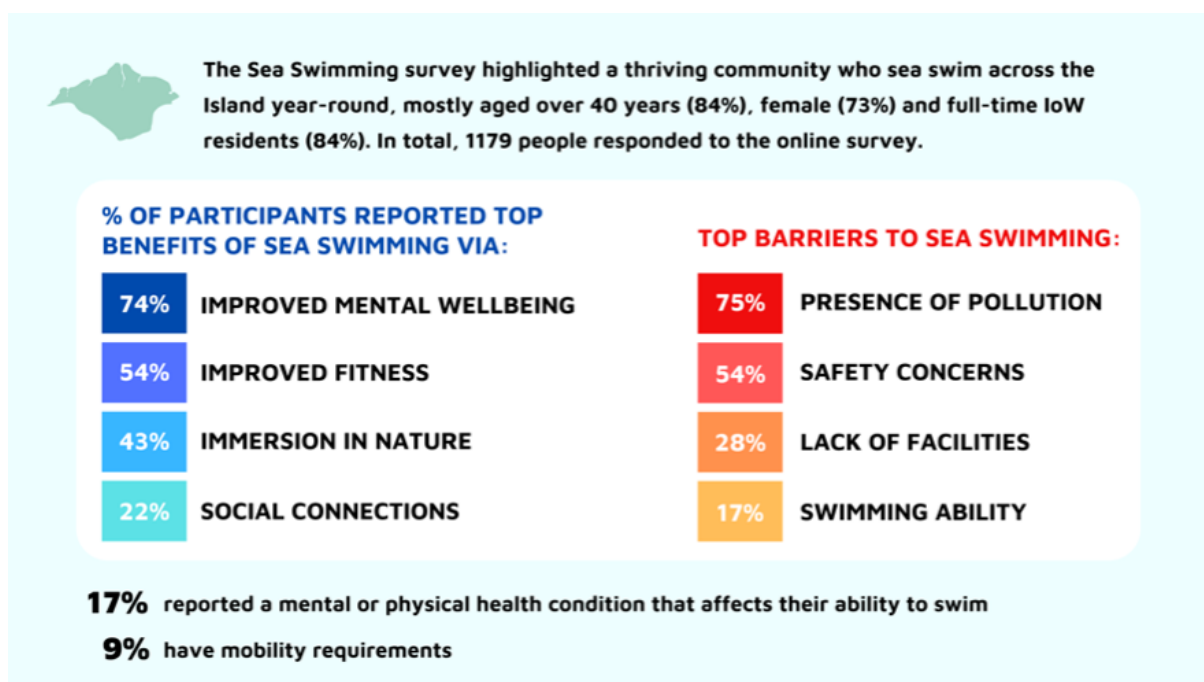
by Fiona Middleton and Giulia Champion



A dip with Swim the Wight at Yaverland in January 2024 to mark the start of the project.

From May to September each year, water quality testing occurs at designated bathing sites around England’s coast. But outside the official ‘bathing season’ cooler waters

await sea swimmers, including the [Swim the Wight](#) group, whom we visited on 29th January 2024 for a frosty dip in Yaverland Bay, on the Isle of Wight. While the swimmers are all too aware of the recent press around water pollution and sewage outflows – and do their own regular testing to guarantee swimmable waters – the clear benefits of regular dips around the Island keep them heading into the waters all year round. Mentally, physically and socially, the positive impacts of sea swimming on the lives of frequent swimmers are backed up by research – and reflected in the 2023 Isle of Wight Sea Swimming Survey (see some key figures in the infographic below). However, despite the potential for sea swimming to play a part in health, wellbeing, social- and nature-connectedness among the Island’s swimmers, concerns over pollution, safety, facilities and accessibility keep people out of the water. As the [Isle of Wight Sea Pool](#) group unroll their campaign to build an accessible, eco-friendly tidal sea pool, a deeper understanding of these positives and concerns is called for.



Our project, entitled [“Coastal \(In\)Securities: Swimming Safely through Blue Heritage on the Isle of Wight”](#) (2023-2024) and funded the Centre for the South [New Things Fund](#), aimed to explore these benefits and barriers, support Swim the Wight’s work and engage with policy makers, local stakeholders and swimmers to think of solutions to these issues.

The team was composed of four researchers based at the University of Southampton: [Fiona Middleton](#) (School of Ocean and Earth Science), [Dr Giulia Champion](#) (Faculty of Arts and Humanities), [Dr Franklin Nobrega](#) (School of Biological Sciences) and [Professor Jo Slater-Jeffries](#) (National Biofilms Innovation Centre), with data analysis supported by Karel Jansen. The project allowed us to lay the groundwork for a policy brief asking:

“How can policy support safe, accessible, beneficial sea swimming and lower barriers for new and existing swimmers on the Isle of Wight? The overall aim of the project was to explore these benefits and barriers of sea swimming on the Isle of Wight, and to make recommendations to the local authority on how to encourage more (safer, more accessible) sea swimming.”

The project was built on work Fiona Middleton had begun with Swim the Wight in 2023, co-designing the online Isle of Wight Sea Swimming survey to gather baseline data on the sea swimming scene around the Island. The resulting report, available below, forms the groundwork for this project.

[Click here to read the results of the Sea Swimming survey](#)

Motivated by the issues and opportunities identified through the survey, funding from the Centre for the South allowed the researchers to organise one online and one offline workshop for swimmers and local professionals in health and wellbeing, safety, regeneration, business and communities. The in-person workshop, held at the UK Sailing Academy (UKSA) in Cowes on the Isle of Wight, took survey results and an

update on the Sea Pool project as food for discussion among groups of participants cycling between four topics:

- (1) health and wellbeing,
- (2) safe access to clean water,
- (3) youth opportunities, and
- (4) community, place and identity.

Participants were asked to discuss what was working well, what had potential, and what was not working well from their professional and personal perspectives. These topics were loosely revisited during the online workshop to bring together a collection of comments and suggestions.

From its inception, this project was co-created with Swim the Wight and with the Isle of Wight local and swimming communities in mind. We aimed particularly to make this project holistic and collaborative in its approach and objectives. For this reason, our approach included working across the humanities and marine social sciences. We used mixed methodologies, including survey data analysis and community-based participatory research to hear from local communities what was needed to affect change, and co-production practices to design and deliver the survey. By prioritising the local community and grounding our work in place-based approaches, we aimed to create a collaboration that will continue beyond this project and produce useful outputs – namely the policy brief and supporting the creation of a website hosting information about the Sea Pool.

Despite its local focus, this project also has a national scope given the sewage outflows around the UK's coastline; many NGOs and groups have been working toward addressing this unacceptable situation, including [Surfers Against Sewage](#), and [while the government recognise the need for solutions](#), more needs to be done and more urgently. We thus aim for our research and policy brief to join this important national effort.

READ THE NEW POLICY BRIEF

<https://DOI.org/10.5258/SOTON/PP0207>

By Sea Swimmers, For Sea Swimmers

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

You can also find out more about this project by listening to our Policy Pod episode.

[**Listen to the podcast here!**](#)

[**Isle of Wight Sea Pool Website**](#)

Read about the campaign for a Sea Pool on the Isle of Wight on their website and on Instagram @isleofwightseapool.

[**Swim the Wight CIC Website**](#)

Follow the amazing work done by Swim the Wight CIC on their website and on Instagram @swimthewight.



Left to right: Sue Barker, Swim the Wight; researchers Dr Giulia Champion and Fiona Middleton, University of Southampton; Victoria Thorneton-Field, Swim the Wight

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