



University of Brighton

A Coast for All

**Barriers and opportunities
for inclusive beach access**

**Findings from the
Beach Access Project
National Survey**

**A collaborative report by
the Beach Access Project and
the University of Brighton**

Acknowledgements

The Beach Access Project and the University of Brighton would like to thank everyone who took part in this survey and shared their experiences of accessing beaches and coastal environments.

We recognise the time, openness and generosity involved in contributing these experiences. The insights presented in this report are shaped by what participants chose to share, and we acknowledge the care and effort this involves.

We also thank the organisations, community groups and networks who helped distribute the survey and ensured that a wide range of voices were included, as well as those who shared images to support this report and the vital work they do to advance access to coastal and blue space environments.

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Project collaboration: our partnership

This report is the result of a collaboration between the Beach Access Project and the University of Brighton, developed through a shared commitment to improving access to the coast, beaches and blue spaces for everyone.

Through the Beach Access Project National Survey, this partnership brought together lived experience, community knowledge and academic research to better understand the barriers that continue to prevent many people from accessing coastal environments.

The survey provides one of the most detailed national insights into disabled people's experiences of beach access in the UK. By working together to analyse and interpret this data, the partnership has been able to place these experiences within a wider research and policy context – highlighting patterns of inequality and identifying where change is needed.

This collaboration brings together complementary strengths. The Beach Access Project is grounded in lived experience and works directly with disabled communities to advocate for more inclusive coastal environments. The University of Brighton contributes research expertise in blue space, health and wellbeing, and inclusive access, supporting the translation of lived experience into evidence that can inform policy and practice.

Together, this partnership places disabled people's experiences at the centre of conversations about access to blue spaces – supporting new approaches that aim to make beaches and coastal environments genuinely inclusive.

May 2026

*“I love the smell of the sea and to hear the waves.
I would have loved to get down on to the beach
and dip my toes in the water...”*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beaches and coastal environments are a central part of life in the United Kingdom. They support wellbeing, recreation and time with family and friends. They are widely understood as shared public spaces – places people expect to access and enjoy.

But access to these environments is not experienced equally.

This report presents findings from a national survey led by the Beach Access Project in collaboration with the University of Brighton, exploring how people with medical conditions and disabilities experience beaches across the UK.

For the purposes of this report, accessing the beach refers to being able to reach the coast and move from arrival points – such as car parks, transport links or promenades – onto the beach environment and towards the shoreline, either independently or with appropriate support.

The findings reveal a clear and consistent gap between the desire to access the coast and the ability to do so in practice.

Demand for beach access is extremely high. Almost all respondents in our survey (98%) said they would like to visit beaches more often, and most wanted to actually reach the water's edge or enter the sea itself.



Yet the reality of respondents' experience is very different. More than half (54%) were unable to access the beach at all during their most recent visit. Only 23% were able to reach the water – and for wheelchair users, this figure was significantly lower.

Many people are able to reach the coast, but cannot go further. They arrive, but are unable to access the beach itself or take part in everyday activities such as paddling, swimming or spending time at the shoreline.

This highlights a critical issue: access to the coast does not mean access to the beach.

Barriers are primarily environmental and infrastructural, but are also shaped by wider practical, informational and experiential factors that influence whether people feel able to visit and participate. Respondents identified soft sand, steep slopes, steps and dunes as key challenges, alongside a lack of accessible pathways, ramps and specialist equipment. Access is also shaped by wider factors, including transport, cost, accessible parking and the availability of clear information.

There is a clear mismatch between what is currently provided and what is needed. While general visitor facilities are often available, the infrastructure that enables people to move across sand and reach the shoreline – such as beach matting, boardwalks, accessible platforms and adaptive equipment – remains limited.

“In the 18 years I have been in a wheelchair I have always had to watch from the promenade while my husband takes my son onto the beach. In the end I stopped going because it made me so sad not being able to join them.”



Above: poorly maintained beach access with damaged matting and uneven terrain.

Where this infrastructure and support are in place, access improves significantly. Respondents were far more likely to reach the water and report positive experiences when appropriate equipment, infrastructure or assistance was available.

The impact of limited access goes beyond mobility. Many respondents described being physically present at the coast but unable to take part in shared activities with family and friends. People are left watching rather than participating; excluded from everyday experiences that others can take for granted.

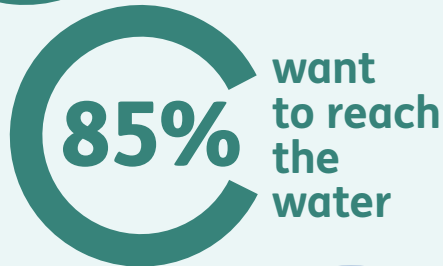
At the same time, respondents consistently described the powerful sensory, emotional and social value of coastal environments, particularly when access to the beach or water was possible.

The report also highlights a significant gap in national evidence. There is currently no comprehensive dataset on how accessible beaches are across the UK, or how accessibility barriers affect those seeking to visit them.

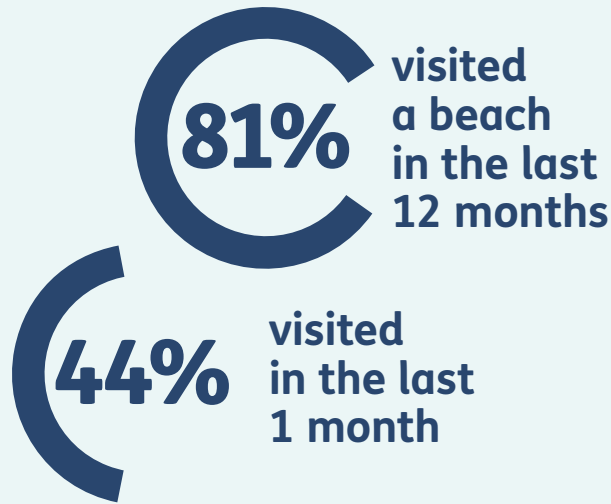
Taken together, these findings are clear. Improving beach accessibility is essential to enabling meaningful participation in coastal environments for all members of our communities. Access is shaped not only by the physical characteristics of beaches and the infrastructure provided, but by the wider systems that enable people to reach and use them.

Key findings:
What the survey shows

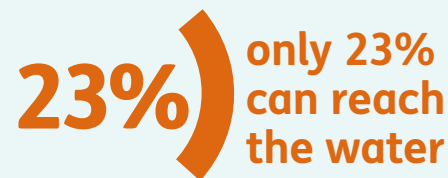
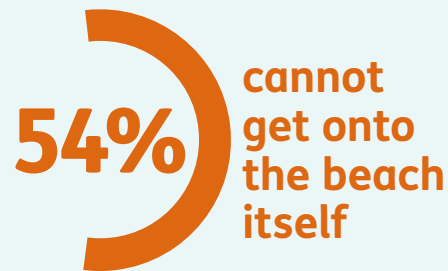
Demand for access is high



People are visiting but not participating



Access is limited



Access would change behaviour



Right: powerful example of an inaccessible beach.



There is a clear gap between the demand for access and the reality of what is currently possible.



Clockwise
from top:
© Photodynamx |
Dreamstime,
Activity Alliance,
Will Behenna



Key recommendations

- **Develop a national evidence base on beach accessibility**
- **Develop national accessibility standards for beaches and coastal environments**
- **Invest in accessibility infrastructure and adaptive equipment**
- **Improve accessible facilities, including toilets and changing places provision**
- **Provide clear and consistent accessibility information about beach environments**
- **Support assisted access services, inclusive beach programmes and community-led programmes**
- **Improve training, awareness and coordination across coastal, leisure and watersports organisations**
- **Strengthen transport connections, accessible parking provision and the affordability of travel**
- **Embed accessibility within coastal policy, planning and funding frameworks**
- **Strengthen coordination and establish joined-up approaches across national and local government, coastal managers and key stakeholders**

SECTION 1: The Challenge

The challenge

The UK coastline stretches for around 31,000 kilometres and includes more than 1,500 beaches. These environments are a central part of national life – supporting recreation, wellbeing and time with family and friends.

Yet access to these spaces is not experienced equally.

While many people are able to reach coastal locations, they are not always able to get onto the beach itself or participate in activities at the shoreline. This highlights a critical gap between being present at the coast and being able to play an active and meaningful role within it.

Access to the beach depends on more than proximity. It is shaped by the conditions that enable people to move through and use these environments. These include step-free and stable routes, manageable surfaces, accessible facilities, appropriate equipment and reliable transport connections.



Where these conditions are not in place, barriers emerge. Soft sand, steep gradients, steps and uneven terrain can prevent movement across the beach. A lack of accessible pathways, toilets, changing facilities or equipment can further restrict participation.

As a result, coastal environments that are open in principle may remain inaccessible in practice.

This report addresses this issue by presenting findings from a national survey exploring how people with medical / mental health conditions and disabilities experience beaches across the UK. It provides new evidence on the barriers that shape access, and the changes required to support more inclusive participation.



Top left and above: Boardwalks, *Sight Support Worthing*
Left: *The Wave Project* © Anna James, *Calm Cave Creations*

Why beach access matters

Beaches are more than physical locations. They are important social, cultural and environmental spaces that support wellbeing, connection and everyday life.

A substantial body of research shows that time spent in coastal and other “blue space” environments contributes to physical health, mental wellbeing and social connection. Activities such as walking, swimming and spending time by the water support physical activity and cardiovascular health, while coastal environments are also associated with reduced stress, improved mood and a sense of calm.

Beaches also play a key role in social wellbeing. They enable shared experiences, family time and informal recreation, and are widely recognised as places where people connect with each other and with the natural environment.

However, these benefits depend on meaningful access.

Where people are unable to navigate onto the beach, move across it, or access the water, these opportunities are limited. For many individuals, barriers to access mean being physically present, observing but often unable to participate in activities alone or with others.

Above: Sight Support Worthing, activity event with rafted canoes at Cobnor Activities Centre Trust,
Right: The Wave Project © Roy Riley



This has implications not only for individual wellbeing, but for inclusion and equality. Around 16.1 million people in the UK live with a disability – approximately one in four people. 50% of the population also have long-term health conditions which can restrict their ability to be physically active. E.g. neurological and musculoskeletal conditions.

When coastal environments do not actively take accessibility into account, a significant proportion of the population is excluded from their benefits.

Ensuring equitable access to beaches is therefore not only an environmental or recreational issue, but a matter of health, participation and social connectivity.





© Michaeljung | Dreamstime

The scale of the problem

Despite the importance of coastal environments to human wellbeing, access to beaches remains inconsistent across the UK.

National data suggests that while around 80% of households live within a 15-minute walk of a green or blue space, access to blue space specifically is much lower – falling to around 37%, and in some cases closer to 28% depending on how it is defined.

These measures are based on simple proximity. They do not reflect whether routes are barrier-free, whether transport is available, or whether environments can be navigated once people arrive.

In practice, access is shaped by a combination of environmental, infrastructural, social, psychological and operational factors.

These include not only the physical characteristics of the environment, but also the information, systems, support and sense of confidence or belonging that shape whether people feel able to visit and participate.

Within this wider context, physical barriers remain significant. Evidence indicates that 35% of disabled people are unable to use local paths due to issues such as poor maintenance, steep gradients and inaccessible infrastructure. In coastal environments, these challenges are often intensified by natural terrain, including soft sand, beach pebbles, weather-related topographical changes and uneven ground or gradients.

Infrastructure and facilities also vary widely. While general amenities such as parking and toilets may be available, features that enable access onto the beach and down the waters edge – such as beach matting, accessible routes, adaptive equipment and Changing Places facilities – are very limited and inconsistently provided.

Access is further shaped by information, cost and support. Inconsistent accessibility information, limited accessible public transport options, and the cost or availability of equipment and assistance all influence whether people are able to visit and participate. This includes not only the availability of support, but also the extent to which staff, lifeguards and organisations are equipped through training and awareness to support people with a range of disabilities.

Access to beaches also varies significantly across the UK. Provision is often determined at a local level, resulting in a patchwork of accessibility where some locations offer appropriate infrastructure and support, while others provide very limited access beyond basic facilities. Beaches may be managed by a range of organisations, including local authorities, private landowners and organisations such as the National Trust and Natural England, contributing to further variation in provision.

This variation reflects the way responsibility for coastal environments is shared across multiple organisations, including local authorities, landowners, conservation bodies and tourism operators. This fragmented governance makes it difficult to establish clear accountability or deliver consistent accessibility standards.



At a national level, there is also a significant gap in evidence. There is currently no comprehensive dataset that records how accessible beaches are across the UK on a country by county basis, or how accessibility is experienced in practice across different geographies.

As a result, there is no unified national approach to accessible beach provision. While some progress has been made through local initiatives, access remains uneven and dependent on location.

The nature of beach environments also varies considerably. Factors such as tidal range, beach material and prevailing weather conditions influence how accessible different locations are in practice. For example, beaches with large tidal ranges or shifting sand and shingle can present additional challenges for access, meaning that a single, standardised approach is unlikely to be effective across all settings.

Taken together, these factors show that access to coastal environments is not determined by proximity alone. It is shaped by the interaction of infrastructure, information, resources, environment and support.

Without coordinated action, access is likely to remain uneven – and the benefits of coastal environments will continue to be experienced unequally.

From top: The Wave Project © Anna James, Calm Cave Creations, Peyton Vellaa, © 8i8 / Dreamstime

SECTION 2: Experiences of the coast – what our survey said

About the survey

This report is based on a national survey conducted by the Beach Access Project, in collaboration with the University of Brighton.

The Beach Access Project, based in Dorset, was established to improve accessibility to beaches and coastal environments across the UK. It was founded by Will Behenna, a wheelchair user, whose experience of more inclusive beach provision in Spain highlighted the contrast with access in the UK and the need for a more coordinated approach here.

The survey was designed to understand how people with medical/mental health conditions and disabilities experience beaches across the UK. It sought to understand peoples' lived experiences, and the barriers many encounter when visiting coastal environments.

Data was collected between June and September 2025, and 1,071 people responded from all across the UK. The survey combined structured questions with open responses, enabling both quantitative analysis and insight into lived experience.

The survey was promoted through disability organisations, community networks and online platforms, enabling participation from a wide range of individuals across the UK.

Participants included individuals responding about their own experiences, as well as parents and carers responding on behalf of others.

While the sample is self-selecting and not statistically representative, it provides one of the largest and most comprehensive national datasets currently available on beach accessibility in the UK.

Statistics included in this report are drawn from the Beach Access Project Survey 2025.

For more information, please visit www.BeachAccessProject.co.uk



*Mae Murray
Foundation*



Mae Murray Foundation

Who took part

The survey gathered 1,071 responses from people with disabilities, long-term health conditions and additional access needs across the UK. The majority of respondents were aged over 40, and 75% identified as female.

Most responses were completed by individuals reflecting on their own experiences, alongside a proportion from parents and carers responding on behalf of children (**Figure 1**).

This provides insight into both individual and family experiences of beach access.

Respondents represented a wide range of impairments and conditions. Around 80% reported a physical impairment, 59% reported a medical condition, and others identified sensory, cognitive and neurodivergent conditions (**Figure 2**).

Figure 1:
Survey responses by respondent type

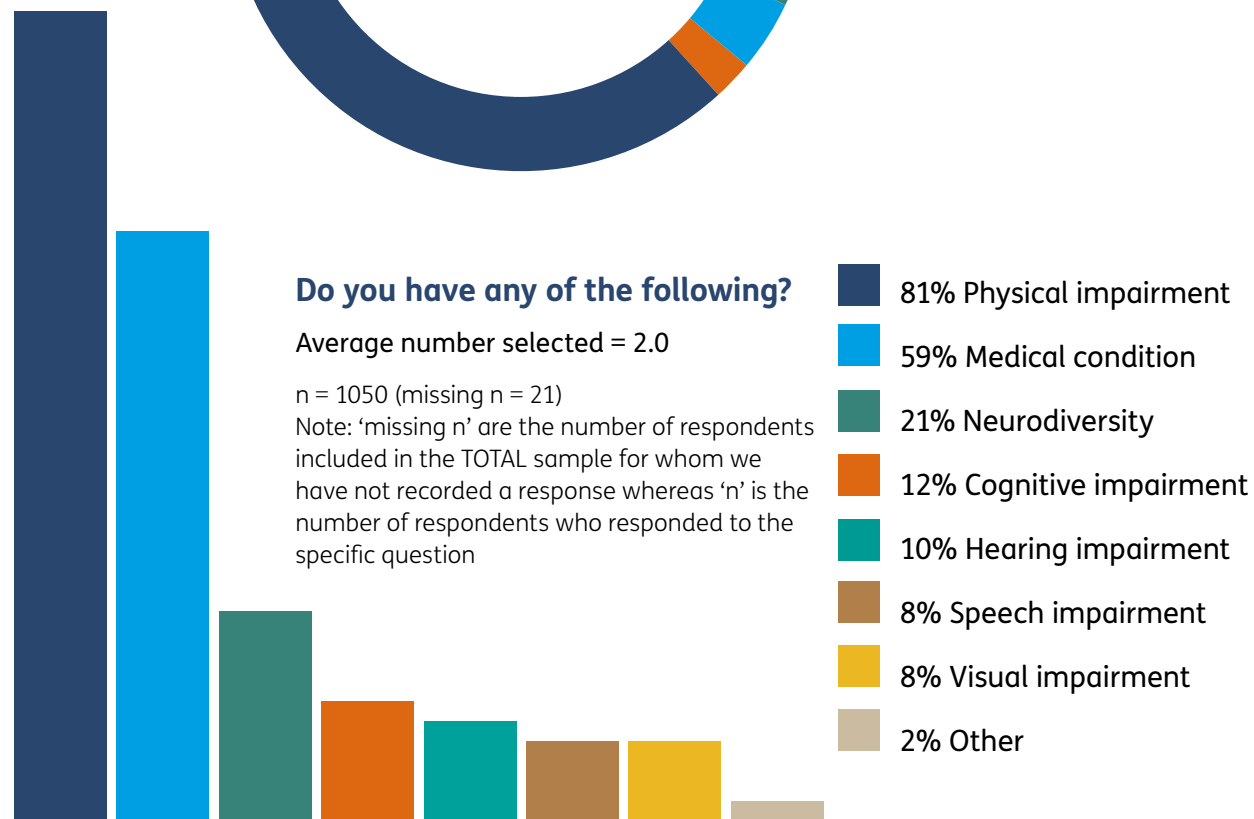
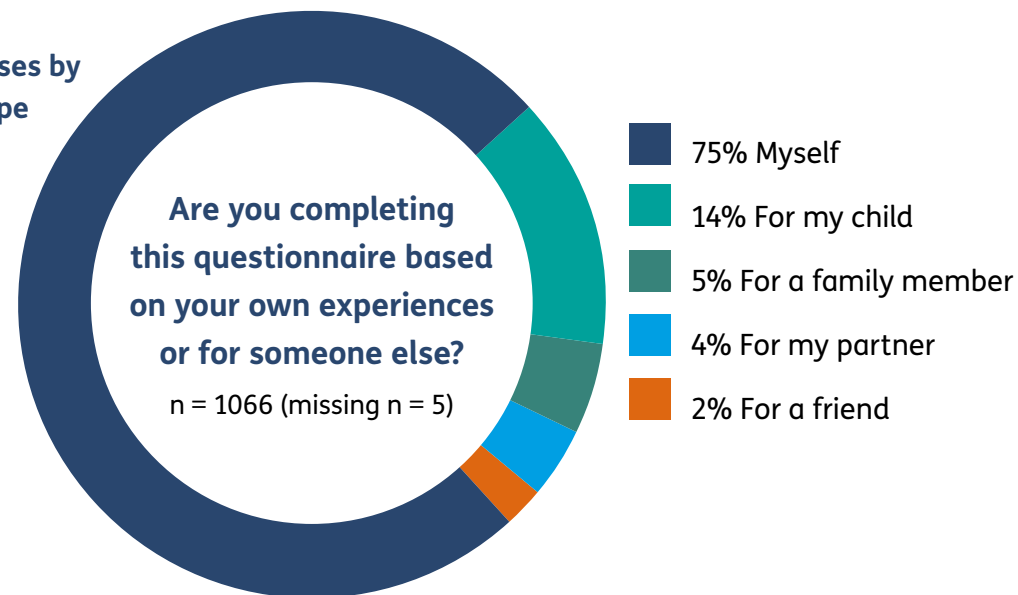


Figure 2: Types of impairment or condition reported by respondents (%)

SECTION 2

Access needs were often complex. While 59% reported a single impairment, a substantial proportion (41%) reported multiple impairments (**Figure 3**), highlighting the need for approaches that recognise overlapping and varied access requirements.

Participants lived at varying distances from the coast. Around 35% lived within five miles, while others travelled significantly further (**Figure 4**).

This indicates that for many, coastal environments are geographically close, but not necessarily accessible in practice.

Responses were received from across the UK, with higher concentrations in coastal regions such as Dorset, Cornwall and Devon.

While the sample is self-selecting, it represents one of the largest datasets currently available on disabled people's experiences of beach access in the UK, providing valuable insight into how accessibility is encountered in practice.

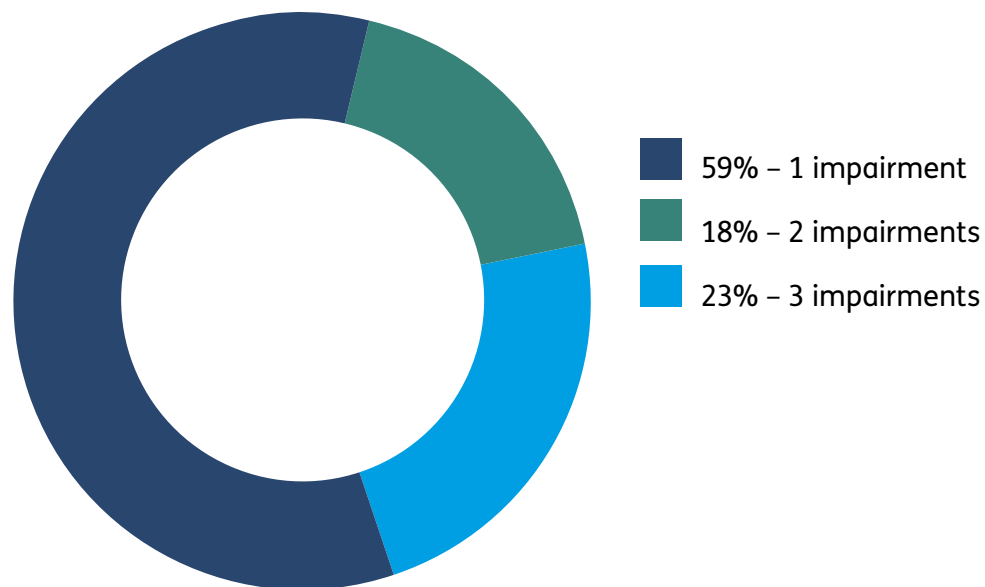


Figure 3 – Number of impairments reported per respondent (%)

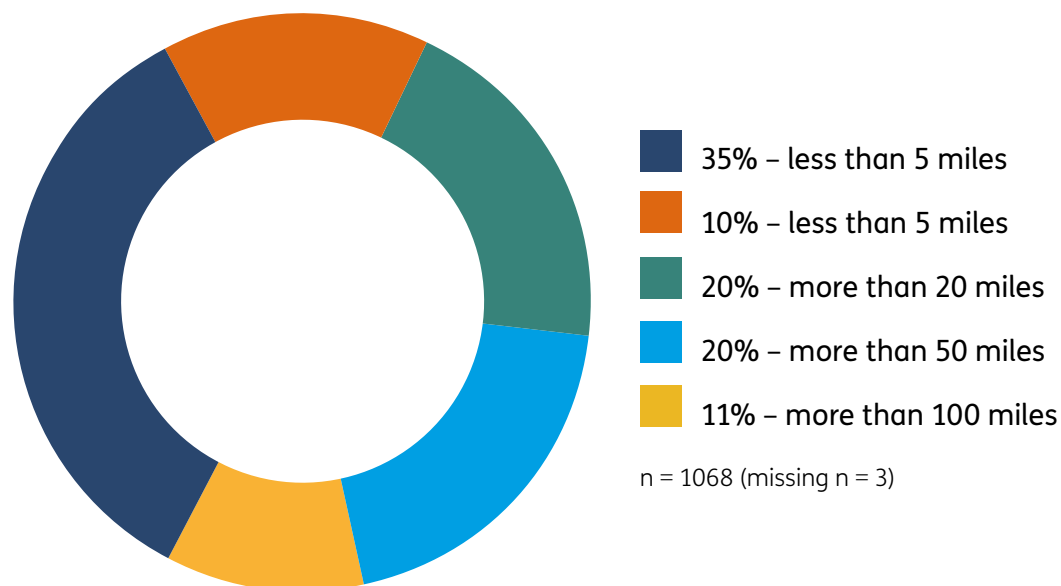


Figure 4 – Distance respondents live from the coast (%)

What people experience

Visiting the coast

Survey findings

Beaches remain highly valued environments for people with disabilities and additional access needs.

Overall, 81% of respondents had visited a beach within the past 12 months, and 44% had visited within the last month (Figure 5). These findings show that many people continue to engage with coastal environments despite the barriers they may face.

“My daughter couldn’t walk/roll with the rest of the family as she had to stay on the promenade. Very upsetting.”

Parent of under-18 wheelchair user, Dorset

For many respondents, beaches are associated with relaxation, recreation and spending time with family and friends. They are places people actively want to visit and return to.

However, visiting the coast does not necessarily mean being able to get onto the beach itself.

Many respondents described being able to reach coastal locations – such as promenades, car parks or viewing points – but being unable to move beyond these spaces. This creates a situation where people are present, but not able to participate.

This distinction between arrival and participation is a consistent theme across the findings.

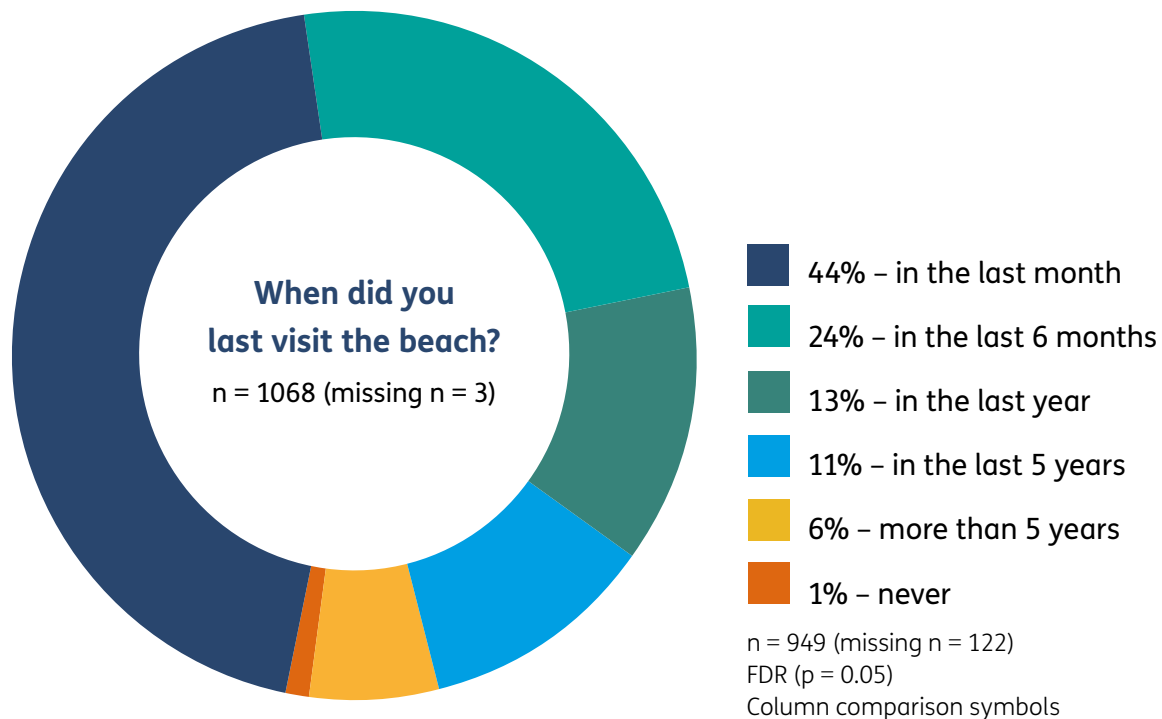


Figure 5 - Frequency of beach visits among respondents (%)



Mae Murray Foundation

SECTION 2

The gap between visiting and participating

There is a clear and consistent gap between the desire to access beaches and the ability to do so in practice.

Almost all respondents (98%) said they would like to visit beaches more often (**Figure 6**), and a large majority (85%) wanted to reach the water's edge or enter the sea.

Would you like to visit the beach more frequently?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

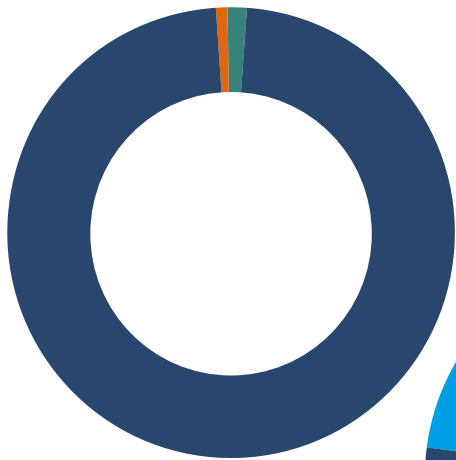


Figure 6 –
Desire to visit beaches more frequently (%)
n = 1066 (missing n = 5)

When you last visited the beach were you able to get to the water's edge or into the water?

- 54% – No, it was difficult to access the beach
- 23% – No, it was difficult to access the water
- 23% – Yes



Figure 7 –
Reported ability to access the water or shoreline (%)
n = 1050 (missing n = 21)

“The view, sunshine, seeing my son enjoying the day made it worthwhile.

“But not being able to get in the water made me very sad and frustrated as I love swimming. The water helps take pressure off my joints and I am able to be my most active in water.”

These findings highlight the importance of coastal environments in everyday life, including recreation, wellbeing and time with family and friends. Yet only 23% reported being able to reach the water (**Figure 7**).

This gap highlights a central issue: while many people are able to visit coastal locations, they are often unable to participate in the beach environment itself. For many, access ends at the promenade, car park or viewing point.

This means that activities such as swimming, paddling, or spending time at the shoreline – central to the experience of coastal environments – remain out of reach. The capacity for both psychological and social wellbeing is thereby greatly reduced for many of our respondents.

The findings show that access is not simply about being able to arrive at a location. It depends on being able to move through the environment, navigate its conditions, and participate alongside others.

For many respondents, this gap between presence and participation defines their experience of the coast.

Respondents repeatedly described this distinction between being present and being able to take part. Being able to see the sea, hear the waves or sit at the edge of the beach did not equate to meaningful access.

For many, the experience of the coast is shaped by limitation rather than participation—watching others engage in activities they themselves are unable to access.

“Walking in sand is a lot of effort and made me feel unstable... flaring me for days after... even just getting to the water’s edge to dip my toes in would be nice.”

**41–50, Family/Carer Support User,
Bournemouth**

What people want to do at the beach

Respondents identified a wide range of activities they wanted to take part in at the beach. The most common was swimming, with 73% expressing a desire to enter the water.

Other activities included spending time at the shoreline, paddling, taking part in beach games, and engaging in activities such as paddleboarding and surfing (**Figure 8**).

These findings highlight that beaches are not simply places to visit, but environments where people expect to actively participate.

The inability to access these activities therefore represents a significant restriction on everyday experiences, recreation and wellbeing.

When you last visited the beach, did you use or need any of the following? Please tick all relevant boxes.
Coded

Which activities would you like to access on the beach?
Coded

	BBQ	Beach games	Swimming	Paddleboarding	Fishing	Surfing	Kayaking / Canoeing	Paddling	Sunbathing	Other	NET
Column Names	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Family, carer / PA support <i>Column comparisons</i>	54%	59%	50%	54%	45%	55%	38%	23%	64%	43%	49%
Manual wheelchair <i>Column comparisons</i>	46%	54%	43%	53%	47%	60%	33%	31%	27%	37%	44%
Power wheelchair <i>Column comparisons</i>	54%	32%	28%	29%	30%	30%	24%	38%	45%	30%	29%
Walking stick <i>Column comparisons</i>	20%	15%	24%	19%	15%	15%	52%	38%	27%	25%	22%
Mobility scooter <i>Column comparisons</i>	11%	7%	13%	9%	12%	7%	14%	15%	0%	17%	13%
Walker frame <i>Column comparisons</i>	7%	6%	8%	6%	4%	5%	5%	8%	0%	9%	8%
Crutches <i>Column comparisons</i>	2%	2%	3%	3%	1%	1%	10%	0%	9%	1%	2%
Other <i>Column comparisons</i>	2%	2%	3%	3%	4%	3%	5%	8%	0%	4%	3%
None of the above <i>Column comparisons</i>	2%	2%	1%	2%	4%	3%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%
NET <i>Column comparisons</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Column n	370	362	694	396	113	220	21	13	11	210	949

Figure 8 – Desired beach activities (%)

n = 949 (missing n = 122)

FDR (p = 0.05)

Column comparison symbols **a,b,c...** (p < = 0.005), **A,B,C...** (p < = 0.001)

Note: low sample for **Kayaking/Canoeing, Paddling, Sunbathing**

SECTION 2

Barriers to access

Physical Barriers

Physical access to beaches remains a major barrier for many people with disabilities and additional access needs.

More than half of respondents (54%) reported being unable to access the beach itself. Access to the water was even more limited, with only 13% of wheelchair users reporting that they were able to reach the water's edge or enter the water (Figure 9).

When you last visited the beach were you able to get to the water's edge or into the water?

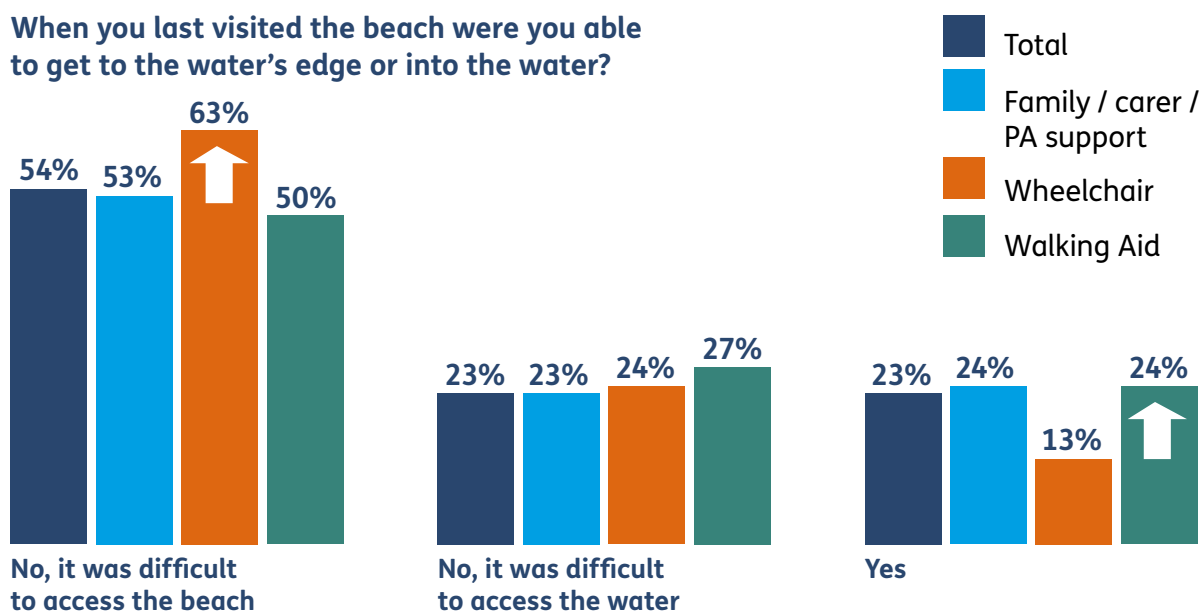


Figure 9 - Reported ability to access the shoreline by mobility aid type (%)

Total n=1050; Family, Carer/PA Support n=475, Wheelchair n=745, Walking aid n=293

Arrows indicate a significant difference (p=0.05)

e.g. arrow on orange bar means the orange bar is significantly higher than the total

Respondents described a range of environmental barriers that prevented access, including soft sand that mobility aids could not navigate, steep slopes, steps and dunes, uneven or unstable terrain, and a lack of accessible pathways or ramps.

These conditions make independent movement difficult or impossible for many people.

In many cases, respondents described being able to reach coastal locations but remaining confined to promenades or viewing areas, unable to move onto the beach itself.

One respondent described how terrain prevented them from joining their family:

“I could not access the beach due to there being no promenade and also you had to get over dunes. My powerchair would have also sunk into the sand. This made my children cry as we were in holiday and they wanted to go ahead to the beach without me but I didn't want to be left alone on the road.”

31–40, Wheelchair User, England

These accounts illustrate how environmental conditions can prevent even basic forms of participation, reinforcing that physical access is not a minor inconvenience but a fundamental barrier.

These findings indicate that physical barriers are not occasional challenges, but consistent features shaping who is able to access and participate in coastal environments.

Infrastructure and System Barriers

Barriers to access are not limited to terrain. Infrastructure and systems also play a critical role in shaping whether people are able to access and use beaches.

Respondents highlighted a lack of key accessibility features, including beach wheelchairs, accessible changing facilities with hoists, well-designed toilets, and clear and reliable accessibility information.

Even where infrastructure exists, it is not always usable in practice. Small design details can significantly affect whether equipment or facilities can be used safely and independently.

“Beach wheelchairs... mean you have to transfer out of your current chair which is not always possible unless there is a hoist, which is extremely rare.”

41–50, Wheelchair User, Cornwall

“At both ends of the matting the level of the surface adjoining the matting was different by nearly 2 inches making it unusable... I can’t bring my granddaughters to the beach because they would want to play in the sea and I wouldn’t be comfortable not being able to be within calling distance of them.”

51–60, Power Wheelchair User, Dorset

“I couldn’t park near the beach as there was a very high cost, including for blue badge holders... bus, coach and train are expensive to get to a beach... not being able to drive and limited public transport means I am restricted in the beaches I can visit.”

51–60, Family/Carer Support User, Dorset



Respondents also described how infrastructure that is labelled as accessible often fails to meet basic usability standards:

“Difficult access to beach and water due to needing to use wheelchair which struggles to move across the sand. No ramps on beach or to water edge. No changing place toilet.”

41–50, Wheelchair User, Lincolnshire

Respondents also identified wider barriers that affect access before reaching the beach itself. These include the cost of travel and parking, limited public transport options, and the availability of support or assistance.

“Parking difficult, expensive due to the length of time needed to be there.”

51–60, Walking Aid User, UK

These accounts show that access is shaped by a combination of environmental, infrastructural and systemic factors. Barriers do not occur in isolation, but accumulate across the journey to and within the beach environment.

These findings show that access to beaches is shaped not only by the physical environment, but by wider systems that determine whether people are able to visit at all.

SECTION 2

What's missing: access vs. provision

There is a clear mismatch between the accessibility features currently available at beaches and those that enable meaningful access.

While general visitor facilities are relatively common – such as accessible parking (70%) and food and drink outlets (68%) – these primarily support arrival at coastal locations rather than movement across the beach or access to the shoreline (**Figure 10**).

For example:

- 90% said beach matting would improve access, but only 8% reported availability
- 72% identified beach wheelchairs as important, but only 16% reported availability
- Only around 7% reported accessible beach platforms
- Fewer than 1 in 10 reported accessible changing facilities with hoists

In contrast, the features identified as most important for enabling access were far less commonly available (**Figure 11**).

Access features which were available, when you last visited the beach

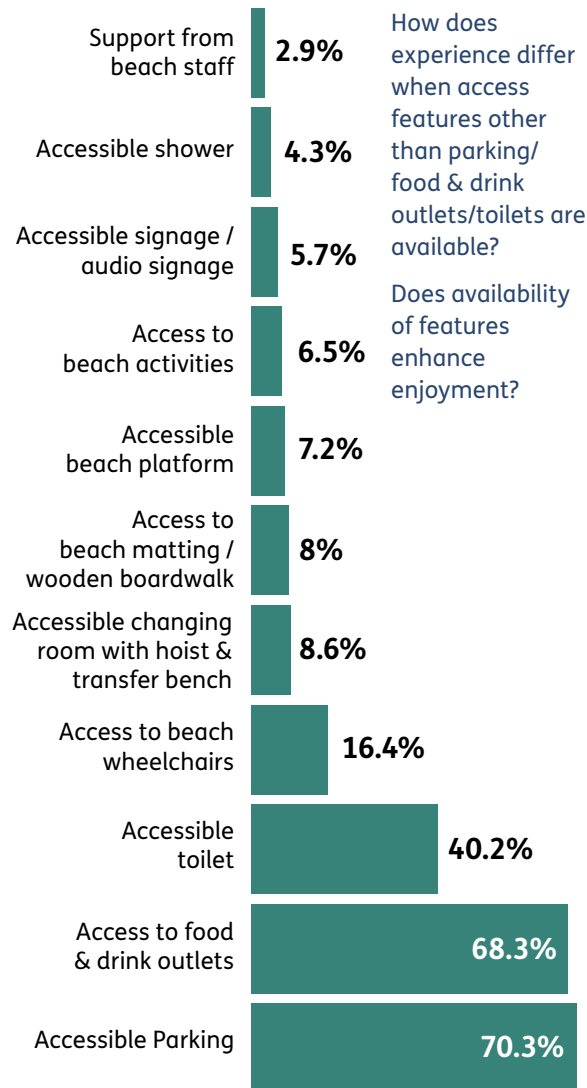


Figure 10 – Availability of key accessibility features at beaches visited by respondents (%)

n = 1071

Access features which would improve your ability to better access and enjoy the beach environment

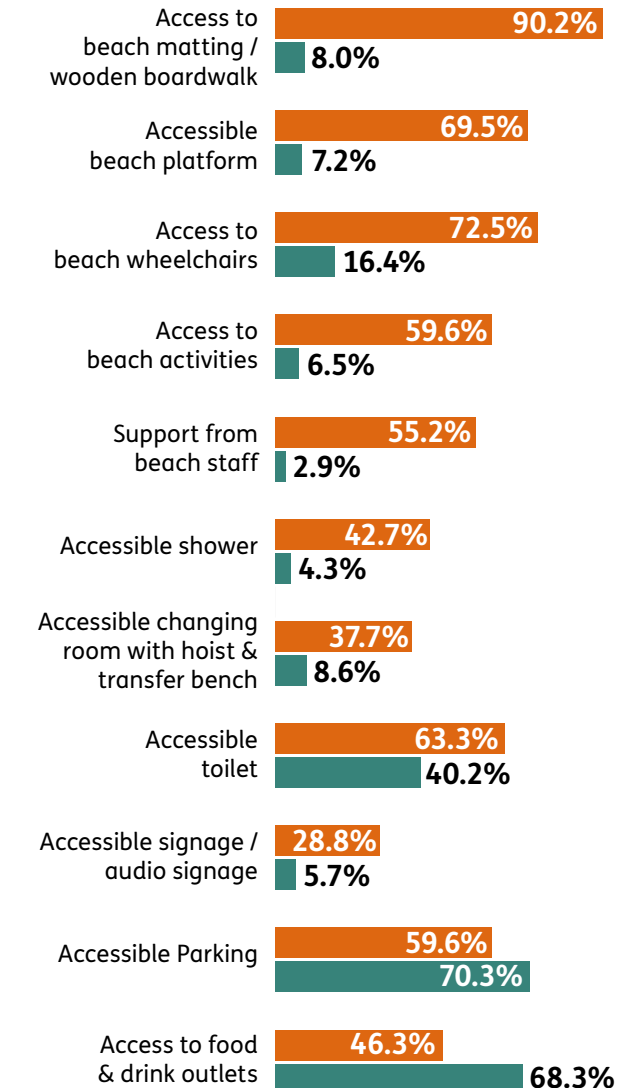


Figure 11 – Desired accessibility features compared with availability at beaches (%)

Figure 11 – Desired accessibility features compared with availability at beaches (%)

n = 1071

Respondents consistently identified beach matting or boardwalks, beach wheelchairs and accessible beach platforms as key improvements. These features were described as essential for enabling independent movement across sand and access to the water.

“I am not interested in beach wheelchairs, I want boardwalks that go down near to the sea.”

18–30, Multiple Mobility Aid User, Brighton

Despite their importance, these features were rarely available. For example, 90% of respondents said beach matting would improve their experience, yet only 8% reported it being available. Similarly, only 16% reported access to beach wheelchairs, and around 7% reported accessible beach platforms.

Accessible changing facilities with hoists were also identified as important but were available at fewer than 1 in 10 beaches.

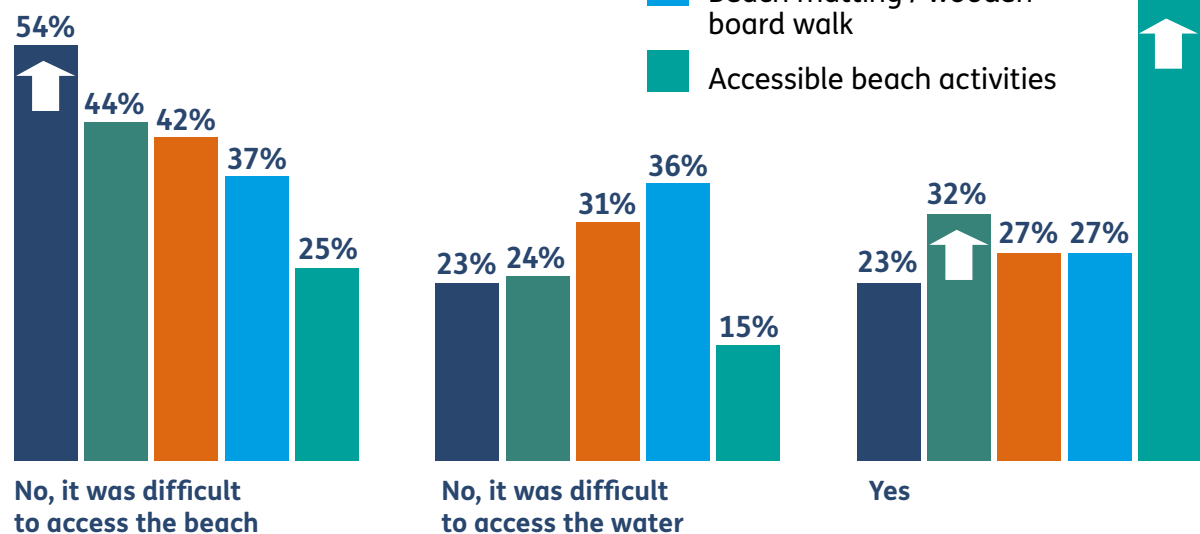
The absence of appropriate facilities also affects dignity and independence:

“Portable toilets labelled as wheelchair friendly had no space to turn, or disabled toilets were located inside the men’s or women’s toilets so my husband couldn’t help me.”

51–60, Wheelchair User (with support), Isle of Wight

When you last visited the beach were you able to get to the water’s edge or into the water?

Where any of these accessible features are in place, people are LESS likely to say it is difficult to access the beach



These findings highlight that accessibility is not only about movement across space, but about being able to use facilities safely, comfortably and with dignity.

Where accessible infrastructure and equipment are available, the impact on participation is substantial. Respondents were significantly more likely to reach the water where beach wheelchairs or organised activities were available (**Figure 12**).

Taken together, these findings highlight a clear disconnect between existing provision and what is required for meaningful access.

Figure 12 – Access to accessibility features and likelihood of reaching the water (%)

Total n = 1050

Arrows indicate a significant difference ($p = 0.05$) e.g. the arrow on the turquoise bar means the bar is significantly higher than the total

SECTION 2

Lived experiences

Experiences of exclusion

Limited access has significant social and emotional consequences.

Many respondents described being physically present at the coast but unable to participate in shared activities with family and friends. A common experience was being able to watch, but not take part.

“My daughter couldn’t walk/roll with the rest of the family as she had to stay on the promenade. Very upsetting.”

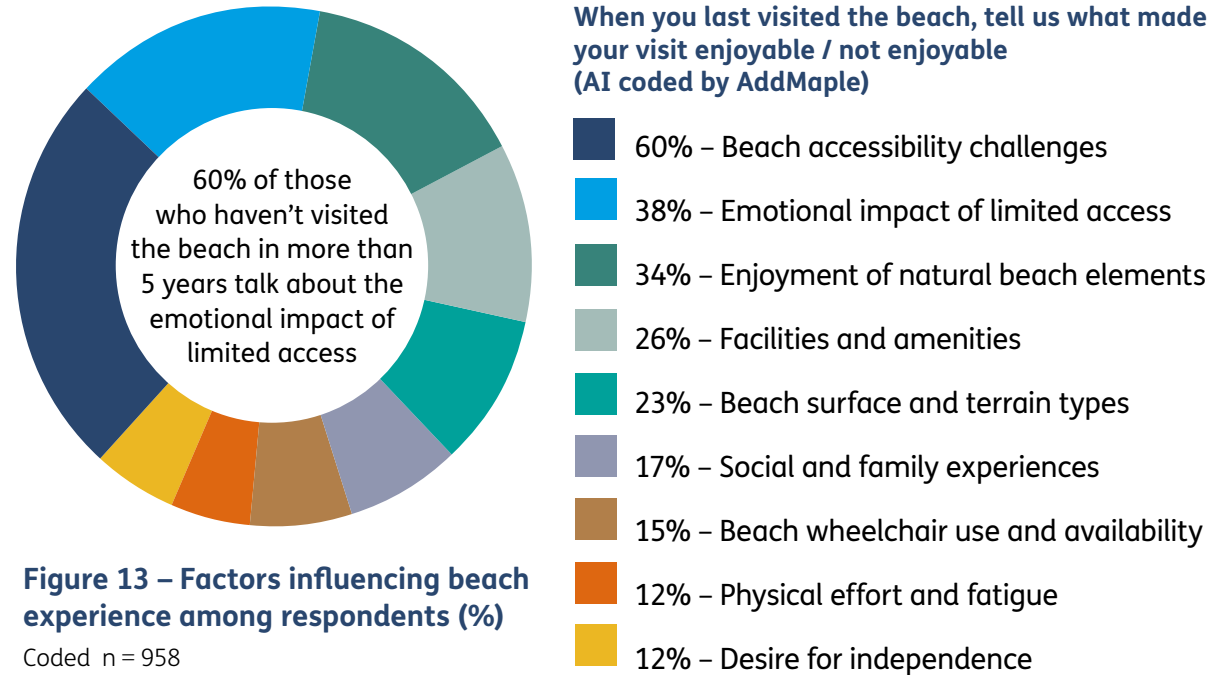
Parent of under-18 wheelchair user, Dorset

“I was able to watch my daughter play with my husband from the pier. I was not able to access the beach.”

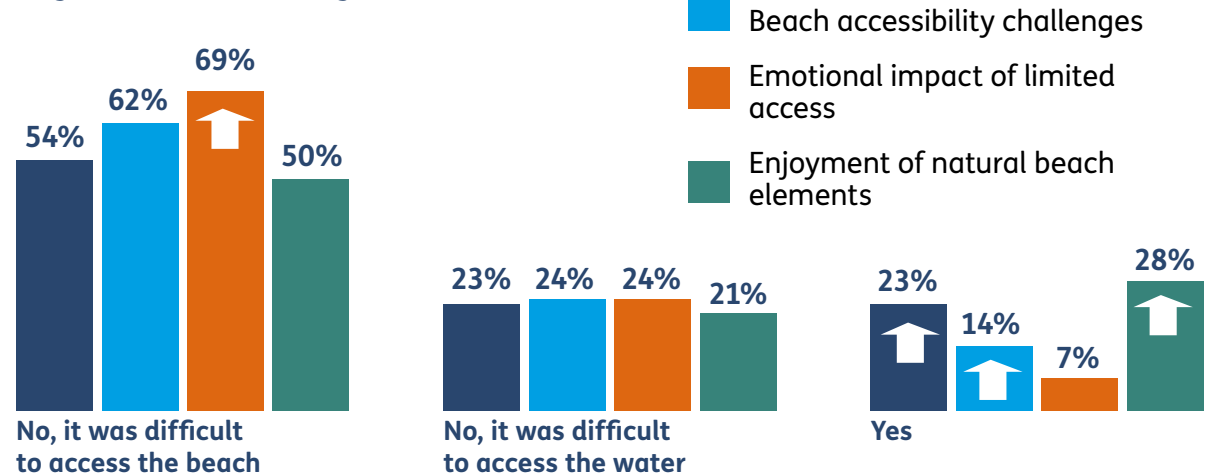
41–50, Wheelchair User, Inverness

Others described the emotional impact of repeated exclusion over time:

“In the 18 years I have been in a wheelchair I have always had to watch from the promenade while my husband takes my son onto the beach. In the end I stopped going because it made me so sad not being able to join them.”



When you last visited the beach were you able to get to the water’s edge or into the water?



Others described the physical effort required to navigate beach environments and its ongoing impact:

“Walking in sand is a lot of effort and made me feel unstable... flaring me for days after... even just getting to the water’s edge to dip my toes in would be nice.”

41–50, Family/Carer Support User, Bournemouth

These experiences highlight how accessibility barriers affect not only mobility, but also participation, comfort and inclusion.

Feelings of frustration, disappointment and exclusion were commonly reported, particularly among those unable to reach the beach or water (**Figure 13 and 14**).



© Romaset



Mae Murray Foundation

“The beach had beach wheelchairs so my son was able to get to the sea like everyone else.”

18–30, Wheelchair User (with support), UK

When access works

Where access is enabled, the impact is significant.

Respondents described highly positive experiences when they were able to access the beach or water, highlighting the sensory, emotional and social value of coastal environments.

“I love the smell of the sea and to hear the waves. I would have loved to get down on to the beach and dip my toes in the water...”

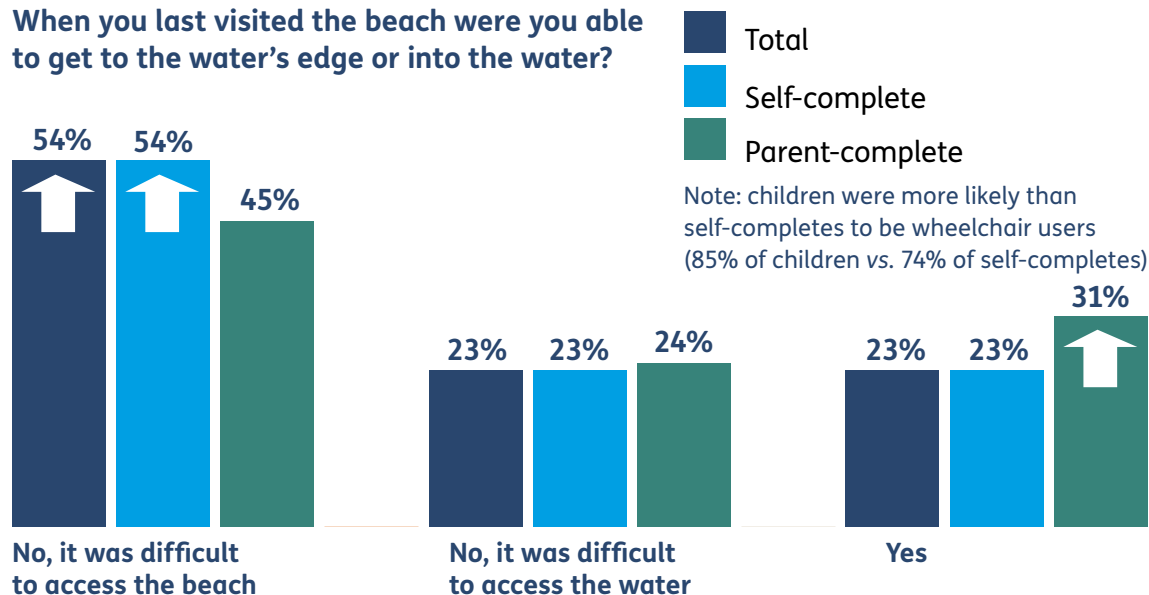
“I love swimming in the sea. As a blind person I find it an incredible sensory experience to visit the beach. I particularly enjoy swimming at the beach, even when it’s cold!”

31–40, Visually Impaired person, Devon

“Blue therapy is the best! Went with friends, we hired a beach wheelchair!”

51–60, Wheelchair User, Cornwall

When you last visited the beach were you able to get to the water’s edge or into the water?



Access to infrastructure, equipment and support enables people to participate fully in activities that would otherwise be out of reach. This is particularly evident in experiences of children and families, where access to appropriate equipment and facilities enables shared participation (**Figures 15 & 16**).

These accounts highlight both the value of coastal environments and the consequences of restricted access.

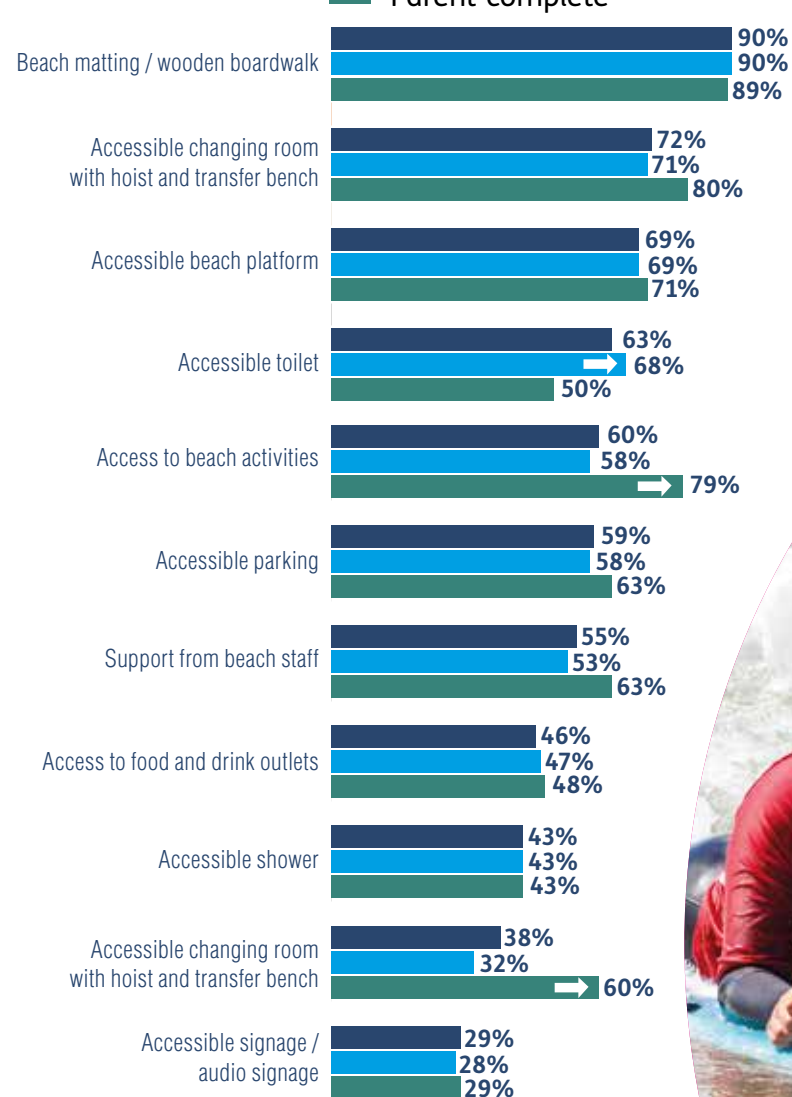
They also demonstrate that where the right conditions are in place, access is not only possible but transformative – enabling participation, connection and meaningful engagement with coastal environments.

These findings demonstrate that barriers to access are not inevitable. Where the right conditions are in place, access improves – and so do people’s experiences. We know from other countries that beach access can be delivered successfully, please refer to our longer document (link at the end of this report) for further information.

Figure 15 – Access to the water: comparison between self-completed and parent-reported responses (%)

n=1050. Arrows indicate a significant difference (p=0.05) e.g. arrow on green bar means the bar is significantly higher than the total.

Features that would improve ability and access to beach enjoyment



Below: The Wave Project
Photograph © Roy Riley



Figure 16 – Access features identified as improving children’s beach experience (%)

n = 1050. Arrows indicate a significant difference (p = 0.05) e.g. arrow on green bar means the bar is significantly higher than the total.

SECTION 3: Understanding access

What shapes access?

Access to beaches is not determined by a single factor. It is shaped by the interaction of environmental conditions, infrastructure, information, resources and support.

The findings presented demonstrate that barriers do not occur in isolation. Instead, they accumulate across the full journey to and within coastal environments. Access begins with the ability to travel to the coast and continues through arrival, movement across the beach, use of facilities, and participation in activities at the shoreline.

This highlights a key insight: access is not simply about whether a place can be reached, but whether it can be used.



Above: Paddle Board workshop with Will Behenna
© Amy Tallula



Mae Murray Foundation

Access is relational, not just physical

Many people are able to arrive at coastal locations but remain unable to move beyond promenades, car parks or viewing areas. This reflects a critical distinction between access to the coast and access within the beach environment itself.

Access should therefore be understood as relational and contingent. It depends on the alignment of multiple factors, including terrain, infrastructure, transport, information, cost and the availability of support. Where one element is missing, access can break down.

For many, beaches that are geographically close remain practically inaccessible. Environmental conditions such as soft sand, steep slopes, steps and uneven terrain prevent movement beyond the edge of the beach, limiting participation in everyday coastal activities.

“I was able to watch my daughter play with my husband from the pier. I was not able to access the beach.”

**41–50,
Wheelchair User, Inverness**

Access depends on multiple aligned conditions

Access is shaped by a chain of interdependent conditions. Travel, arrival, movement, facilities and participation are all connected. Barriers at any point in this chain can prevent access entirely.

This means that access cannot be understood as a single intervention or feature. It is produced through the coordination of systems—transport, infrastructure, information and support working together.

Where this coordination is absent, access becomes fragmented and unreliable.

Right: Rye Harbour





Left: inclusive blue space access
– sailing activity for people with
visual impairment

Courtesy of Sight Support Worthing

Infrastructure enables participation

Infrastructure plays a central role in enabling access. Features such as beach matting, boardwalks, ramps, accessible toilets, changing facilities and adaptive equipment make it possible to move through beach environments and reach the shoreline.

These features are not additional enhancements. They are the conditions that enable participation.

However, provision is often focused on arrival rather than use. While many beaches provide parking, promenades and general facilities, these do not enable movement across sand or access to the water.

As a result, access is often partial – allowing people to reach the coast, but not to participate within it.

Information and support shape access

Access is also shaped by the availability of clear and reliable information. Many individuals must plan visits in advance, requiring accurate details about terrain, facilities and accessibility.

Where information is inconsistent or unavailable, people face uncertainty about whether a location will be accessible. This can prevent visits entirely or result in negative experiences upon arrival.

Access is further shaped by support. Many individuals rely on family members, carers or organised services to access beaches safely. This includes both informal support and the availability of trained staff, lifeguards and service providers within coastal and leisure organisations. The availability and quality of this support can determine whether participation is possible.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that access is produced through systems. It is not a fixed feature of a place, but an outcome shaped by how environments are designed, managed and supported.



Right: Paddle Board workshop
© Amy Tallula

SECTION 3

Inequalities in access

Access to beaches is not experienced equally. The survey findings highlight clear and consistent inequalities in who is able to access and participate in coastal environments.

Mobility shapes access outcomes

Physical mobility is a key factor shaping access. Individuals with limited mobility, including wheelchair users, are significantly less likely to access the beach or reach the water.

This reflects the interaction between bodies and environments that are often not designed to accommodate diverse mobility needs.

Access needs are complex and overlapping

Many individuals experience multiple and overlapping access needs, including combinations of physical, sensory, cognitive and medical conditions.

This complexity means that access cannot be addressed through single or standardised solutions. Participation often depends on the availability of multiple forms of infrastructure, equipment and support working together.

Where these elements are absent, access remains limited—even where some accessibility features are present.

Financial and practical barriers limit access

Access is also shaped by cost and practical constraints. Travel expenses, parking costs, accommodation and the availability of equipment can all affect whether people are able to visit beaches.

Limited access to affordable and accessible public transport further restricts participation, particularly for those who do not drive.

These barriers can prevent access entirely, rather than simply shaping experience once at the coast.

Below: Blue Space joy often requires physical infrastructure *and* human support.

Photograph courtesy Peyton Vellaa, South Coast Disability Ambassador



Geography matters: access is uneven and location-dependent

Access to beaches varies significantly across the UK. Provision is often determined at a local level, resulting in a patchwork of accessibility.

Some locations provide infrastructure and support that enable participation, while others offer limited provision beyond basic facilities.

This unevenness reflects a fragmented system of governance and delivery, where responsibility is shared across multiple organisations and consistent standards are lacking.

As a result, access is contingent rather than guaranteed. It depends on where people go, what is available, and what support can be accessed.

Demand is high, but unmet

The findings highlight a substantial gap between demand and access. Most respondents expressed a strong desire to visit beaches more frequently and to reach the water.

However, only a minority were able to do so.

This indicates that exclusion is not driven by lack of interest, but by barriers within environments and systems.

There is therefore significant latent demand for accessible coastal environments. Improving access would enable many more people to participate in coastal life.



Above: The Wave Project.

Photo credit: Ben Birchall



Where access works

While barriers to access remain widespread, the survey findings also demonstrate that access can be enabled where the right conditions are in place.

Access is achievable with the right conditions

Where appropriate infrastructure, equipment and support are available, individuals are able to move through beach environments, reach the shoreline, and participate in activities.

These examples show that access is not limited by environmental conditions alone. It is shaped by decisions about design, provision and management.

Infrastructure and support enable participation

Accessible infrastructure—such as matting, boardwalks, adaptive equipment and accessible facilities—reduces the impact of environmental barriers and enables independent movement.

Access is most effective where these elements are coordinated, alongside clear information and available support.

This alignment enables people to participate safely, confidently and with greater independence.

Access improves wellbeing and social connection

Where access is enabled, the benefits extend beyond mobility. Participation supports wellbeing, social connection and engagement with natural environments.

It allows individuals to take part in activities that are widely understood as part of everyday coastal life, including swimming, recreation and spending time with others.

Access therefore shapes not only physical presence, but the ability to experience the social and emotional value of coastal environments.

Access remains dependent and uneven

Despite these examples, access is not consistently available. In many cases, it depends on local initiatives, specific funding or the presence of particular organisations.

Access may require advance planning, booking equipment or relying on additional support. This limits spontaneity and creates uncertainty.

As a result, access remains dependent on local conditions and provision, rather than embedded within a consistent national approach.

The challenge is delivery, not design

The findings demonstrate that accessible beach environments already exist in practice. The conditions required to enable access are known.

The challenge is not identifying solutions, but ensuring that they are implemented consistently across the UK.

Improving access therefore requires coordinated action across infrastructure, information, support and policy.

Without this, access will continue to depend on location and circumstance, and the benefits of coastal environments will remain unevenly distributed.

Page 30: wheelchair lounge
in Tenerife.

Below: Access for All Beaches
equipment available to
borrow.



SECTION 4: What needs to change?



Above: composite decking would make such a difference.



Above: how we can use existing beach infrastructure to improve access.

Key insight summary

The findings of this report present a clear and consistent message: access to beaches in the UK is not currently designed to support all members of our communities.

Beaches are widely valued as public spaces for recreation, wellbeing and social connection. However, access to these environments remains inaccessible and, for many people, exclusive.

A central insight from this research is that access to the coast does not mean access to the beach or the water.

Millions of people are able to reach coastal locations, but are unable to move beyond promenades, car parks or viewing areas. As a result, participation in everyday beach activities - such as reaching the shoreline, entering the water or spending time with family on the sand - remains out of reach.

This reflects a systemic failure in planning, infrastructure design and implementation.

Improving access requires coordinated, system-wide approaches

Improving access requires coordinated, system-wide approaches rather than isolated interventions. Physical infrastructure, environment, transport, information support to access the water and operational guidance must be planned and delivered together to enable meaningful participation.

Where these elements are not coordinated, access breaks down, and isolated improvements – such as adding a single facility or upgrading one feature – will not deliver meaningful change.

Psychological access shapes confidence, belonging and participation

Access to coastal environments is not only physical, but also psychological.

Uncertainty about conditions, lack of clear information, and limited representation can create anxiety and reduce confidence in visiting coastal spaces. Where environments do not feel welcoming, predictable or inclusive, people are less likely to engage, regardless of available infrastructure.

Improving psychological access requires clear, reliable information, inclusive communication and environments that signal belonging. This enables people to plan, feel confident and participate more fully in coastal experiences.

Operational access determines whether accessibility works in practice

Operational access plays a critical role in whether accessible environments function effectively.

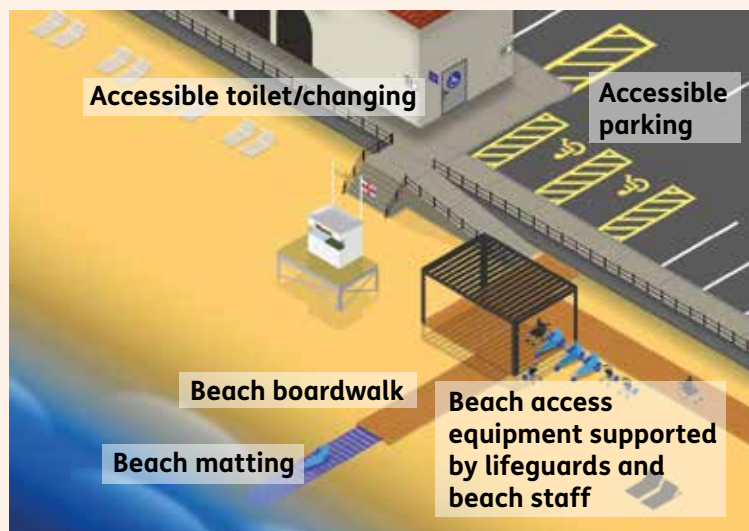
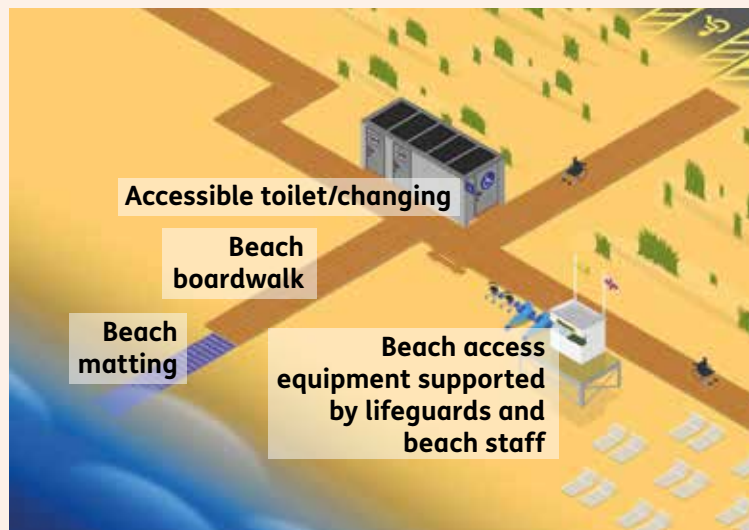
Even where infrastructure exists, inconsistent availability of equipment, limited staff training, poor maintenance and restrictive policies can prevent people from moving across sand, reaching the shoreline or entering the water. These factors can make access unreliable and difficult to navigate.

Ensuring consistent operations, trained staff, clear procedures and well-maintained infrastructure is essential to translate accessible design into meaningful and dependable participation.

Provision must be aligned with need

Provision must be reoriented to enable participation, not just arrival. Investment and planning should prioritise the infrastructure and support required to enable movement across sand, access to the shoreline and entry into the water. This includes barrier-free routes, appropriate surfaces, gradients and widths, alongside equipment, assistance and facilities that enable people to move from arrival points to the water's edge and beyond.

This also requires high-quality pre-visit information, accessible transport and parking, accessible toilet and changing facilities, including hoists. Without all these elements, access is incomplete and participation limited.



Above: The Beach Access Project is working with Second Year Media students from Bournemouth University. Their brief was to create a media campaign promoting the vision: *Dorset: the inclusive Blue Space capital of the UK*. They were asked to visualise beach access in Dorset and created these detailed illustrations that showcase key components of beach access.



Above: it's the last five minutes down to the water's edge that can be the most frustrating.



Above: a poorly maintained beach route.



Above: no access to seating.



Above: no boardwalk matting equals no access.

Access is inconsistent and inequitable across the UK coastline

Access to beaches across the UK is highly variable, with significant regional inequalities in provision.

In the absence of consistent standards, accessibility often depends on location rather than need. This results in a fragmented landscape where some beaches offer meaningful access to the shoreline and water, while many others provide only partial or no accessible routes beyond arrival points.

A more coordinated national approach is needed to assess, map and prioritise accessibility, ensuring that access is delivered more consistently across coastal environments.

Demand for accessible beach access is significantly unmet

There is substantial unmet demand for accessible beach environments across the UK.

Many people are currently unable to access the shoreline, move across sand or enter the water due to a lack of appropriate infrastructure, equipment and support. This limits participation in everyday coastal activities and restricts opportunities for social, recreational and family experiences.

Scaling up provision is therefore essential to meet existing demand and enable more people to actively engage with coastal environments.

Accessibility underpins inclusion, wellbeing and participation

Accessibility should be recognised as central to inclusion, wellbeing and public life.

Enabling access to beaches, the shoreline and the water supports physical activity, emotional wellbeing and social participation. Coastal environments also provide opportunities for rehabilitation, recovery and engagement through structured programmes such as social prescribing and therapeutic activities.

Improving access is not only an infrastructure issue, but a public health, social inclusion and equality priority.

Improving access can strengthen local economies and tourism

Improving beach accessibility has the potential to strengthen coastal economies and support inclusive tourism.

Currently, limited provision restricts participation for many individuals and families, with some travelling abroad to access more inclusive coastal environments. Expanding accessible infrastructure and enabling participation in beach and water-based activities would support increased domestic tourism and wider use of coastal areas.

This presents an opportunity to generate economic benefits for coastal communities while improving access for local residents.

Access supports connection to and stewardship of coastal environments

Access to coastal and marine environments plays an important role in fostering connection, value and long-term stewardship.

Where people are unable to reach the shoreline or enter the water, they are not only excluded from experiencing these environments, but also from participating in their care, stewardship and custodianship. This limits opportunities to engage in conservation activity, community initiatives and decision-making processes related to coastal spaces.

Improving access enables more people to experience, value and actively contribute to the protection and sustainable use of coastal and marine environments.

Learning from existing models can accelerate progress

Established models of accessible beach provision already demonstrate what is achievable. International examples show how consistent standards, long-term investment and integrated approaches can deliver accessible routes across sand, access to the shoreline and supported entry into the water at scale. While UK coastlines present varied environmental conditions, there is significant opportunity to adapt and apply these approaches to local contexts.

Learning from existing practice can accelerate progress and support more effective delivery.

The solutions already exist

Importantly, the findings show that accessible beach environments are achievable.

Where appropriate infrastructure, equipment and support are available, participation increases significantly.

The challenge is not identifying what works, but ensuring that these solutions are implemented consistently and at scale.



Above: there are so many ways to improve beach access in the UK.

Left: accessible beach in Tenerife.



Recommendations

The following recommendations set out the actions required to deliver meaningful change to improve accessibility across the UK's coastal environments.

They are not optional enhancements. They are necessary to ensure that beaches function as inclusive public spaces.

Below: steps make access difficult for everyone.



1 Develop a national evidence base and strengthen monitoring

There is currently no comprehensive national dataset on beach accessibility.

Improving data collection is essential for evidence-based planning, investment and accountability.

A more coordinated approach is needed to understand how accessibility varies across different coastal environments and where improvements are most required.

Key actions:

- Develop a national dataset on beach accessibility, combining infrastructure data with lived experience and user insight
- Establish a coordinated, place-based approach to data collection, working at county or regional level to map accessibility across coastlines
- Implement standardised accessibility audits across coastal locations
- Monitor infrastructure, facilities and access routes
- Embed lived experience within evaluation processes
- Support community-led accessibility assessments
- Identify gaps and prioritise investment based on evidence

2 Establish national standards and embed accessibility in coastal planning

Accessibility provision currently varies widely across the UK. Developing national standards would support a more consistent and strategic approach to inclusive coastal design. These standards should define expectations for infrastructure, facilities and information that enable access for people with a wide range of needs. Accessibility must also be embedded within wider coastal planning, including transport, tourism and environmental management.

Key actions:

- Establish national standards for accessible beach design and infrastructure, including clear minimum requirements for access
- Develop a tiered or progressive framework to recognise and encourage higher levels of accessibility provision across coastal locations
- Define minimum expectations for facilities, access routes and shoreline access
- Embed accessibility within coastal, tourism and planning frameworks
- Require accessibility to be considered in funding and investment decisions
- Ensure co-design with disabled people and representative organisations
- Strengthen coordination between national and local stakeholders

3 Invest in infrastructure, facilities and adaptive equipment

Infrastructure is essential to enabling participation.

Current provision is often focused on general amenities, while the features required for meaningful access remain limited.

Investment should prioritise infrastructure that enables movement across sand and access to the shoreline.

Key actions:

- Expand provision of beach matting and boardwalk systems
- Increase availability of beach wheelchairs and adaptive equipment
- Deliver step-free routes from arrival points to the beach
- Install accessible seating, rest areas and viewing platforms
- Provide accessible toilets close to beach access points
- Expand Changing Places facilities, including hoists
- Deliver accessible showers and washing facilities
- Ensure accessible parking is available, well-located and fairly priced
- Develop a network of accessible beaches across the UK



Above: no access onto the sand.



Above: uneven pathway leading to beach matting.

4 Improve accessibility information and wayfinding

Access to clear and reliable information is critical.

Many people are unable to determine whether a beach is accessible before visiting.

Improving information will enable better planning and increase confidence.

Key actions:

- Introduce national standards for accessibility information
- Provide clear, detailed information on terrain, gradients and distances
- Include comprehensive information on facilities, equipment and support
- Improve on-site signage and navigation
- Provide information in accessible formats
- Develop national and regional accessibility directories
- Include clear transport and parking information

5 Support assisted access and inclusive beach services

Infrastructure alone is not sufficient.

Many people require support to access beach environments and enter the water safely.

Assisted access services – combining trained staff, appropriate equipment and coordinated support – can significantly increase participation and enable people to engage with coastal environments in ways that would otherwise not be possible.

These services also play a critical role in supporting safety, confidence and dignity, particularly for individuals accessing beaches independently or for the first time.

Key actions:

- Provide training for staff, lifeguards and volunteers on inclusive access and the use of adaptive equipment
- Establish assisted access services at key beach locations
- Support safe and supported access to the water
- Develop partnerships with community and disability organisations
- Ensure services promote dignity, independence and choice
- Integrate accessibility into beach safety and management systems



Above: lifeguard stations provide the perfect area to locate access facilities.

The evidence is clear.

The barriers are known.

The solutions already exist.

What is needed now is coordinated action.

CONCLUSION

Beaches are part of everyday life in the United Kingdom. They are places people expect to access – spaces associated with wellbeing, recreation and time with others. Yet for millions of people, this access does not exist in practice.

This report has shown, through consistent national findings, that the barriers to beach access are not isolated or inevitable. They are systemic – shaped by how environments are designed, how infrastructure is provided, how information is communicated, and how responsibility for access is coordinated across organisations.

People are not absent from the coast because they lack interest. They are excluded because access has not been fully enabled.

The consequences are clear. Individuals and families are unable to take part in shared experiences. People are present but excluded—watching rather than participating.

But this is not a fixed reality.

The evidence presented in this report shows that when the right infrastructure, information and support are in place, access improves – and so does participation. The benefits are immediate, extending beyond mobility to wellbeing, connection and inclusion.

This is therefore not a question of whether change is possible. It is a question of whether it is prioritised – and whether systems, standards and investment are aligned to deliver it consistently across the UK.

Improving beach accessibility is not a niche issue. It is central to ensuring that coastal environments function as genuinely shared public spaces.

The actions required are clear. The solutions are known. The demand is already there.

What is needed now is coordinated national and local action to deliver change at scale – embedding accessibility within the design, management and future planning of coastal environments.

Beaches are blue spaces where everyone has the right to participate fully and equally, for wellbeing, joy, community and health. This is within our reach, but only if coastal accessibility is treated as a natural and essential human right, not an optional or aspirational one. Beaches are for everyone.

People are not absent from the coast because they lack interest.

They are excluded because access has not been fully enabled.



PROJECT TEAM



Will Behenna
Founder,
Beach Access Project

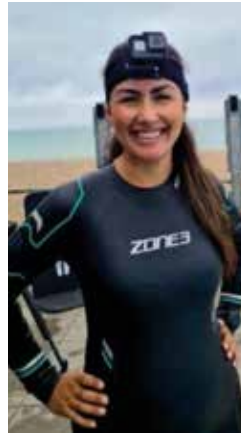
“Beach life is part of British culture. Everyone has so many positive memories being by the seaside, yet for millions of individuals and families, they are forced

to sit at the back of the beach and are unable to play a meaningful role.

“We can look at what they do in Spain and France and see that we can radically improve access to beaches and blue space in the UK. These changes will make these spaces more accessible for everyone. Being on, in, and near water has so many wellbeing benefits. We are reimagining the beach environment as a space for everyone.”

Will Behenna founded the Beach Access Project after his experience of being unable to reach the water’s edge from his local beach. The project works to improve accessibility to beaches and coastal environments across the UK, combining advocacy, partnership working and practical action to support inclusive coastal access.

will@beachaccessproject.co.uk
BeachAccessProject.co.uk



Sadie Rockliffe
PhD Researcher,
University of Brighton

“Working together on the Beach Access Project National Survey has created an important opportunity to bring community experience and research together.

My work focuses on understanding the barriers disabled people face when accessing coastal and water environments, including research with people with visual impairments and projects such as Accessible Waters. By combining lived experience, community insight and research expertise, this collaboration helps turn people’s experiences into evidence that can influence how beaches and blue spaces are designed, managed and accessed.”

Sadie Rockliffe is a PhD researcher specialising in inclusive access to blue spaces and coastal environments. Her research focuses on the relationship between accessibility, wellbeing and participation, working closely with disabled people to inform more inclusive approaches to environmental design and policy.

S.Rockliffe1@uni.brighton.ac.uk
AccessibleWaters.co.uk



Dr Catherine Kelly
Senior Lecturer,
University of Brighton

“Blue spaces are natural places of joy and wellbeing for many humans. These benefits must be afforded to all, equally, and without delay.”

Dr Catherine Kelly is a geographer and wellbeing researcher and practitioner specialising in blue space. Her work explores the relationships between water environments, health and inclusion, the reciprocity of human and blue space environmental wellbeing and contributes to the development of research, policy and practice that supports more equitable access to blue spaces. She is the author of bestselling book *Blue Spaces: How and Why Water Can Make You Feel Better* and has been featured on BBC Radio 4, National Geographic, the Guardian and many other media spaces. She is a long serving steering committee member of the Environment Agency’s national Blue Space Forum, and contributed to their seminal report on equality of access to blue spaces for health and wellbeing.

Email: C.Kelly5@brighton.ac.uk
[@bluepsaces_uk](https://twitter.com/bluepsaces_uk)



About the Beach Access Project and the Beach Access Survey

Will Behenna, Founder of the Beach Access Project, grew up in Cornwall spending school holidays on the beach until a cycling accident at 16 left him with a spinal injury and a full-time wheelchair user. Having spent a career in sports development and training and education his passion has always been out on the water; whether sailing, scuba-diving or kayaking and helping others to do the same.

However, the introduction of paddleboards opened up the possibility of being able to go out paddling independently. In 2023 he achieved this, having designed and made a foam seat which attaches on to the paddleboard.

Will set up inclusive paddleboarding in the same year with the specific intention of enabling people with medical/mental health conditions and disabilities to better access blue space using paddleboards.

With funding from Sport England he designed and built a range of equipment to support people who have difficulty standing to access a paddleboard. Collaborating with physios and working with clients with complex disabilities He started finding it increasingly difficult to find accessible launch sites to take clients out on the water. It also became apparent to him that UK beaches were totally inaccessible to him to access the water to go paddleboarding.

Following extensive research he identified that the UK has no blue space access guidelines, no meaningful beach access standards and that the provision of blue space access as a result is extremely limiting if you have a medical condition or disability. He was also inspired by the authorities in Spain and France who have been providing amazing beach access for over three decades.

The beach access project was born in January 2025 and the beach access survey ran between June and September. The data provides clear evidence that people with disabilities and medical conditions want to go to the beach and want to get down to the water's edge.

Armed with a strong body of evidence his vision is to make Dorset the inclusive blue space capital of the UK and to ensure that the recommendations in the beach survey report are delivered on to ensure that the UK enhances and improves beach access to enable people with medical/mental health conditions and disabilities to play a meaningful and active role in beach life and blue space.

***“We have to connect accessible transport and parking with barrier free access routes to toilets and changing facilities leading onto boardwalks and platform areas so people can hang out independently. We then need to connect people to the water using beach access matting and beach wheelchairs. The critical factor is supporting and helping people with medical conditions and disabilities to access the water. We need lifeguards and beach staff to play this critical role.*”**

***“If we make beaches accessible to someone like myself as a full-time wheelchair user, we will inherently make it more accessible to every member of the community.”*”**



University of Brighton

Beaches are widely valued as public spaces for recreation, wellbeing and social connection yet access remains uneven and exclusionary.

Millions of people can reach coastal locations, but struggle to go beyond promenades, car parks or viewing areas, limiting participation in activities like entering the water or spending time on the sand.

Founded by wheelchair user Will Behenna, the Beach Access Project highlights these challenges. In collaboration with the University of Brighton, this report presents one of the first national datasets on how people with medical conditions and disabilities experience beaches across the UK.

A key finding is that access to the coast does not guarantee access to the beach or water.

The report emphasises that with appropriate infrastructure, information, and support, access can improve significantly.

It calls for a more inclusive approach to coastal design, ensuring beaches can be enjoyed by all communities.

