



A Guide For Health & Wellbeing Practitioners,
Sports & Leisure Centres and Swimming Pools

How to set up your own swim sessions and discover
the difference it makes in people's lives

by
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2025

About OutSwimming Cancer

OutSwimming Cancer started in Chesterfield in 2020, set up by swimming teacher Lesley Rechert. It is a swimming group for people who have had cancer to attend a supportive, free of charge, 1-hour weekly swim. OutSwimming Cancer continues to be very successful in helping people return to exercise, socialise and find support after cancer diagnosis.

About Lesley

Lesley is the creator of OutSwimming Cancer. A regular swimmer since childhood, Lesley's happy place is in or on water, swimming or sailing. Swimming then was a natural choice of activity to help her recover from some tough cancer treatments.

Having picked up a leaflet in hospital promoting free swim sessions for people with cancer at the outdoor pool in Hathersage, Derbyshire, Lesley quickly found the significant benefits of the exercise and the friendly support and understanding between people who have experienced cancer.

After retraining as a swim teacher, Lesley broached the subject of introducing cancer swim sessions at her interview for a swimming instructor job with Chesterfield Brough Council. This enabled her to set up the OutSwimming Cancer group at Queen's Park Sports Centre in Chesterfield, in 2020. Since then, OutSwimming Cancer has been successful in helping hundreds of people return to exercise, socialise and find friendly support after cancer diagnosis.



About Sarah

Sarah is a chartered health psychologist and senior lecturer in Health Psychology at the University of Staffordshire. She is an experienced researcher and enjoys working with communities, particularly in participatory action research.

Sarah also loves swimming and joined the OutSwimming Cancer group in 2022 when recovering from surgery. As a psychologist she was naturally interested in the effects the group had for different people taking part and suggested carrying out a research project.

The research took place in summer 2024, it quantifies the benefits of swimming with the group and is reported in this document. For further information, you can contact Sarah by email: s.dean@staffs.ac.uk

About the research

The University of Staffordshire's Participatory Action Research Programme funded the research which took place at Queen's Park Sport Centre, Chesterfield centre. Over 9 weeks, members of the OutSwimming Cancer group met post-swim in the café. Data was also collected at the poolside and in the pool.

People shared ideas and experiences about how attending 'OutSwim' – the nickname participants tend to use for the group – made them feel, what they liked about the group and what they would change about the group. This was done in different ways, such as writing ideas on post-it notes, having discussions and chats, and interviewing some of the group members.

We started to analyse the data together, put together an action plan of what we hoped would happen with the group moving forwards, and thought about who we wanted to share our research with.

Through this research we were able to capture how valuable the group is. We have combined it with Lesley's knowledge and experience to put together this guidance on how to set up an OutSwimming Cancer session and extend its amazing benefits to more people.

We hope that health & wellbeing practitioners, sports & leisure centre employees, and swimming pool staff will take this information and start their own swim sessions to help others actively recover from cancer.

How to set up health & wellbeing boosting swim sessions for people with or recovering from cancer

- ◆ **Plan your swim sessions.** When will the sessions take place – time/day? Who will deliver them? Will you offer group/1-2-1/ad hoc sessions? Who will meet and greet your participants? How many lanes can you use in the pool? Can you meet for a chat post-swim?
- ◆ **Consider costs.** Include pool time, swimming instructor time, admin time, production of marketing leaflets, plus tea and coffee for participants after swimming.
- ◆ **Find funding.** Identify sources e.g. charities, that offer financial support for activities for people recovering from cancer.
- ◆ **Spread the word.** Tell the world! Make the most of local cancer networks and services – network and share. Promote what you are doing through local media outlets. Don't underestimate the power of a printed leaflet to hand to people or include in cancer information packs. Use local community and council social media channels. If people are willing to be filmed, make short videos of real stories to share via YouTube and websites.
- ◆ **Gather feedback.** Ask your people what works for them, what improvements they might like, and so on. And share what you find!
- ◆ **Keep up the good work.** Keep going, find the funding and don't stop – even a global pandemic didn't stop us!

Read on! That was the quick version – now take a deeper dive to find out more.

Learn from what we did in Chesterfield

Plan

Lesley wanted to set up a series of weekly 1-hour group swim sessions with the support of a swimming instructor, followed by 1-hour coffee/tea chat time. It also included some 1-2-1 swim sessions and some ad hoc swims for those who could not attend the regular Monday group. A title was needed for promotions and publicity; a friend came up with OutSwimming Cancer which encapsulated the motivation for creating the sessions.

Costs

These included pool time, swimming instructor time, admin time, production of marketing leaflets, plus tea and coffee for participants after swimming.

Funding

Weston Park Cancer Hospital in Sheffield specialises in cancer treatment and treats patients from a wide area, including Chesterfield. Weston Park Cancer Charity funds various activities including cancer research and support for people recovering from cancer. Lesley applied to the charity to support the swimming session costs.

After the welcome funding from Weston Park Cancer Charity the sessions are now covered by public health funding to Queen's Park Sports Centre from Derbyshire County Council.

What happened

The first OutSwimming Cancer session was held on 16 March, 2020 and resumed after the lockdowns in June 2021. Due to Covid restrictions the focus was on delivering the weekly group sessions. These ran in school term-time on Monday afternoons when the pool was quiet.

The swimming instructor (Lesley) was in reception from 1pm to give a 'meet and greet' to participants which created a welcoming atmosphere. In the pool there was a variety of options for slower and faster swimming and for congregating and chatting.

By December 2021 we had 6 to 8 people attending each session, and this gradually increased in June 2024 to 16 to 20 people. The highest number in attendance at one session was 23 people. By the end of June 2024 when Lesley retired there had been 118 sessions of OutSwimming Cancer, with 128 individuals having attended, totalling 1,500 swims.

The majority of the sessions were delivered by Lesley and a colleague Anna stood in when needed. The continuity was important to the participants. Since Lesley retired swim teachers Anna and Kerry continue to run the sessions. At the time of writing in 2025, the group is going from strength to strength.

Attendees range from 17 to their eighties, mostly 45+ and predominantly women (75%). Each week brings new faces, with some attending regularly, others briefly, and many finding confidence and support, regardless of their cancer type.

Marketing and promotion

This was mainly achieved through an A5 size printed leaflet distributed widely from outlets including Queen's Park Sports Centre, Chesterfield Royal Hospital, Weston Park Hospital, and local health centres and practitioners.

Macmillan Cancer support at the Chesterfield Royal Hospital has been and is a great supporter handing out leaflets and featuring OutSwimming Cancer on their website. Breast

care nurses, lymphoedema nurses, complementary therapists, psychologists, and the Prostate Support group all distribute leaflets. The Inspire Health and Wellbeing project at the Chesterfield Royal Hospital promotes OutSwimming Cancer in their introduction pack and videos.

In print and on-line OutSwimming Cancer has featured in borough and county council magazines, council social media posts, and news print articles.

Word of mouth is a powerful tool too. OutSwimming Cancer participants spread the word about the benefits of the sessions they experienced.

And you can put yourself forward to speak to any groups or make presentations to anyone who will listen to your message!

Always remember to acknowledge your funders – this might include using promotional bunting at your sessions, wearing a funder's t-shirt and referencing them in all marketing collateral.

Video – the power of people's stories

Queen's Park Sports Centre had some videos made. Three people from the group featured and said what the sessions meant to them. The videos are on the Sports Centre's webpage and help inspire others to attend. These videos are on YouTube and can be viewed at: <https://www.chesterfield.gov.uk/sport-and-leisure/activities/outswimming-cancer/>

Who attends?

Attendees range from 17 to their eighties, mostly 45+ and predominantly women (75%). Each week brings new faces, with some attending regularly, others briefly, and many finding confidence and support, regardless of their cancer type.

Ongoing aims and successes

The Queen's Park Sports Centre group set several goals at the end of the research, making great progress. They aimed to expand OutSwimming Cancer groups, promote life after cancer, and highlight the benefits of staying active and connected.

Other goals included adding more aquarobics-style exercises, extending swimming sessions to school holidays, and continuing café meetups beyond the research project to sustain community support.

Exporting OutSwimming Cancer sessions to more venues

It has been a pleasure to work with other centres and offer advice and guidance for them to start new sessions as well.

In 2025, there are opportunities to be supported at an OutSwimming Cancer session an amazing FOUR times a week within a ten-mile radius of Chesterfield.

It is great that the name OutSwimming Cancer is being used to identify and connect the sessions, even though they are all run separately.

Networking

OutSwimming Cancer sessions are now embedded in our area's cancer community.

Staff from the Chesterfield Royal Hospital, took part in our sessions and spoke to people while swimming. They found it really useful, to hear people's experience in a non-medical setting.

There was also a chance to network with other projects to become more joined up with services in the area. It helped us all to refer people to different services.

A selection of cancer support leaflets are available poolside each week to support people and show the services available. These have been gathered over the course of sessions from different sources. Many participants have taken advantage of what is offered, and many people were not aware of the services before

Awards and Recognition

In December 2021, OutSwimming Cancer at Queen's Park Sports Centre received national recognition for helping people in our community as the winners of the Swim England Award for Health Impact. This gained us lots of publicity from Swim England and also locally.

More on money

Money makes things possible, and there are different ways to fund the sessions. There are some small grants available like the ones we obtained from Weston Park Cancer charity, although all pots of money will be limited.

Hospitals or cancer charities could have funds that you may be able to apply for. It could also be part of your local public health authority offer to your customers, or use core funding. It would also be possible to charge a small fee, although this may exclude

people (cancer has many hidden costs) or put people off trying the session out.

There are other benefits to sports and leisure centres too, for instance extra café customers and potential new customers (either participants or their families) for other classes and memberships.

Bonus extras

Partner swimming was not something we advertised, but we made it available in the OutSwimming Cancer session if people really needed to be supported. Lesley asked partners to swim in the public side of the pool. It meant that all people in the session have had the experience of cancer, which made it more comfortable for people to chat about themselves if they wanted.

Many people who attend haven't swum for many, many years and some don't swim at all. Some people went on to join adult swimming lessons and became competent swimmers.

OutSwimming Cancer is primarily a social session and not a swimming lesson, although if you are a swim teacher it is hard to resist the urge to offer occasional swim tips!

OutSwimming Cancer – Please use the name!

A friend of Lesley's came up with the lovely title of **OutSwimming Cancer**. It's a great name so feel free to use it for your sessions. That way we will all be loosely linked together and the session 'does what it says on the tin!'

Your checklist for how to make a great OutSwimming Cancer session

- Offer free swimming sessions if possible. The research shows this is important.
- Choose a leader for the session who is invested in the group's motivation – they are more than just a person on poolside.
- Make sure staff support is available. In the main the experience of leading these sessions is overwhelmingly positive, but there are times when difficult things may occur. Your staff will need to feel they have emotional support to look after their wellbeing.
- 'Meet and greet' in reception – it helps steady nerves of new people, it is nice to say hello to people as they arrive. Many people said this made the difference between them getting to the pool or turning around and leaving as they were so nervous. It was very clear in the research that this was really important to people.
- Continuity of staff supporting the sessions, so that people are recognised and feel part of a group on first name terms.
- Support services leaflet selection – many people don't know about what services are offered in their area. If possible provide a selection of leaflets either on poolside or in a central meeting point so people are aware of services that may help them. Start by contacting your local Macmillan support advice centre they will point you to the most popular support leaflets, as well as promoting your session.
- If anyone seeks advice on whether they should swim, they need to be told check with their GP or cancer specialists.
- Introducing new people to others (even if there is no chance that they will remember others names). Introductions allow people to feel included, more welcomed and able to chat.
- Remember everyone's names. It's personal.
- Accessible to people without a referral from medical practitioners.
- No questions asked about cancer, unless people want to share.
- Partner swimming if required is allowed for support.
- Offering advice on what to wear – mastectomy costumes/prosthesis for those who have had breast cancer (e.g. Nicola Jane Company); skirted costumes for women with colostomy bags; long sleeve swim tops for men who have scars on their tummy or for people who feel the cold (e.g. Alpkit).
- Print those supposedly 'old-fashioned' leaflets – these have been our best and most consistent referral tool. It is definitely worth investing in them as people may not be ready to access the session during treatment, but will still have the leaflet at home to remind them when they are ready.
- Investing energy into finding your local contacts for free promotions and advertising – and keep checking in with them every 4-6 months, it is very worthwhile and ensures a constant stream of new people attending. Talking to the right people and building your communications network will ensure that you have a continuing supply of people to your sessions.

The important benefits of the sessions

- It helps people re-gain confidence.
- Swimming is a great all-round for your body.
- Seeing people on their first session lose the weight of the world off their shoulders.
- Usually after the first couple of lengths they will have a big grin on their faces.
- The benefits of being socially connected.
- People have often progressed on to other exercises and activities after using the session as an initial stepping stone.
- People have lost weight, gained fitness and more mobility.
- Two people have joined our volunteer swim programme to become swim teachers.
- Space and time to just be yourself, rather than a cancer patient.
- Ability to learn new coping mechanisms or find out about other services from people who have used them.
- Reassurance that side-effects of treatments are experienced by others and sometimes are long-lasting.
- Some people's relatives have been inspired to start exercising too.
- Relatives say it is great to see their loved ones participating and enjoying themselves.

Practical stuff to bear in mind

It is impossible to please everyone. You need to create the right type of session for your facility, timetable and staff. For example, a colleague led a short water exercise session when she covered the sessions as that was her skillset. Another pool closes completely to the public whilst running the session. Initially at Queen's Park, we did term-time swims only, school holiday sessions have now been successfully trialled.

“So much more than just a free swim”: A Participatory action research project to explore the experiences of adults attending a swimming cancer support group.
Dean, S.E. and Rechert, L.

Background

Worldwide the number of cancer survivors is growing with approximately 50% of people diagnosed with cancer having a survival rate of 10 or more years (Cancer Research UK). Cancer and its treatment can have a negative impact on several aspects of individuals' lives such as quality of life and physical and mental wellbeing (Buffart et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2021). While physical activity has several health and wellbeing benefits and plays a role in the prevention and recovery from cancer (e.g. Leach et al., 2014). Swimming is an exercise that can improve health and life satisfaction, and because it is a low-impact activity it is an accessible form of exercise for a broad range of individuals with varying health needs (Swim England, 2023).

“Outswimming Cancer” is a free weekly swimming group for adults who have had a diagnosis of cancer. Anecdotal evidence from members indicated that there were several benefits to attending and that it is so much more than just a free swim. However, given the lack of research into groups such as OutSwimming Cancer and the fact that several swimming pools in the UK face financial challenges (Sport England, 2024), high quality research evidence is needed to support new and continued funding for programmes such as Outswimming Cancer.

Aim

The aim of the current research was to use a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model to explore the experiences of adults who

attend the “Outswimming Cancer” group in order to evidence its value and to make positive changes for the group.

Method

Participatory Action Research is a type of research that highlights the value of developing relationships and working with local people to conduct research that results in meaningful change (e.g. Gratton & Reynolds, 2022). We took this approach and over 9 weeks worked collaboratively with members of OutSwimming Cancer to collect and analyse data relating to their experiences. The research took place in the leisure centre café directly after the swim each week, with additional data collection on the poolside. Data analysis with group members took place alongside the data collection, with subsequent thematic analysis carried out by the first author (SD).

Results

Three themes were identified that encapsulated adults' experiences of attending OutSwimming Cancer.

Theme 1, “Attending the group is an intensely positive experience”, highlighted the broad range of positive effects group members experienced, how important the group was to members and how motivated they were to attend.

Theme 2, “An inclusive and freeing and experience”, demonstrated how welcoming and inclusive members found the group and the feelings of freedom that OutSwimming Cancer brought.

Theme 3, “(Nearly) Everyone feels anxious at first”, focussed on the experience of attending OutSwim for the first time and demonstrated the importance of support in enabling people to overcome their anxiety so that they could join in.

Discussion

The current research demonstrated that exercise groups such as OutSwimming Cancer can have an extremely positive impact on individuals who have experienced cancer. As well as reporting that it had improved their wellbeing, physical fitness and swimming abilities, group members viewed OutSwimming Cancer as a source of social connection and emotional and practical support. Despite the majority of members feeling anxious about attending their first session, they also reported on how welcoming the group was and how free they felt in the

water. These findings demonstrate the value of the group and the importance of supporting individuals to attend sessions. As a result of the research, positive changes were made to the OutSwimming Cancer group (e.g. sessions were previously term-time but now run throughout the year) and group members reported that taking part in the research was a positive experience that enhanced how socially connected the group felt.

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The research is currently being written up for publication in an academic journal. For further information on the full research, you can contact Sarah by email: s.dean@staffs.ac.uk

What would you say to someone thinking about trying the group?

- 💜 Take the plunge! Join in – it's good therapy.
- 💜 It's free! Make that initial effort – it will be worth it.
- 💜 You don't need to be self-conscious. Give it a go!
- 💜 Just do it. You can chat if you want or just swim. It's very welcoming and friendly.
- 💜 Even if you are not a confident swimmer, give it a go as Lesley has ideas to give you confidence.
- 💜 You have nothing to lose, there is no pressure, no one asks about anything you might prefer to keep private.
- 💜 You should come and give it a try, you don't have to talk about cancer if you don't want to! Or there will be people there all in a similar situation. It's very relaxed.
- 💜 It is very beneficial as it helps me with arthritis, keeping joints supple, meeting other people which would otherwise not see anyone other than my husband. Would definitely recommend to others.
- 💜 It has been invaluable to me and my wife to experience the swim, so I would highly recommend to anyone to attend even if they just chat in the shallow end. Any exercise is vital to recover from cancer physically or mentally.
- 💜 It is a very friendly, informal group; you can just turn up, give it a try, you don't have to stay for the whole hour, moving in water is just the best for you, so gentle, just swim at your own pace, no stress...

If we made a list of the important things for any new group setting up, what would they be?

- 💜 A well-informed leader (ideally with experience/knowledge of cancer and the side effects).
- 💜 Think about where you advertise – people having treatment may have to wait before they can start swimming.
- 💜 Remember people's names.
- 💜 The importance of 'meet and greet' in pool reception area.
- 💜 Consider a buddy for new people.

Lesley's observations from poolside

Throughout all the sessions I organised at Queen's Park Sports Centre, I saw that OutSwimming Cancer was so much more than just a free swim, and is much more than the sum of its parts. It has been great to work with Sarah Dean on the research to quantify what I witness in the pool on a weekly basis.

It is really rewarding to see people getting stronger and fitter, whilst also enjoying themselves. The format of 'meet and greet' in reception works really well, a friendly tone. There was always lots of chatting in the session, sometimes more chatting than swimming! Some of the tentative heads-up breaststrokers became goggle-wearing front-crawlers.

Everyone is really supportive to each other, and I saw tears, laughter and hugs. New and lasting friendships have formed. It was amazing to see people grow in confidence and fitness over the weeks and gain knowledge from each other (and myself) of different strategies and ways to help recover from cancer. Many have found confidence in the pool to use in other areas of their lives such as returning to work or gaining new employment. There is also a ripple effect to attendees' family and friends from the sessions, who benefit from happier swimmers. One lady said that she felt the sessions were a real community. For many it has been a stepping stone to better fitness and seeking support for their wellbeing.

What OutSwimming Cancer group participants say

Here are some of the actual responses from people who took part in the post-it note activities. These capture the thoughts and experiences of the group:

Feeling I have achieved something

Just getting to the centre was the first achievement.

Feel my fitness level coming back and improving.

Noticed change in my stamina and now being able to swim more and more lengths.

From just swimming a few lengths at the beginning, I now feel I have achieved my goal of 30 lengths during the session.

Feeling more confident

Yes, the more I come, the more confident I am.

Great to get out and gave me a lot of confidence.

My body can still swim!

My limbs work!

Being out in public and not being isolated. I am more sociable and have a sense of purpose.

Feeling liberated

Free to walk around in a costume with prosthesis has felt liberating.

YES and relaxing atmosphere from being in the pool.

Yep, water does that to me, affords huge feelings of freedom.

Liberated in company where you don't have to explain or ask.

Water makes the rest of your body 'invisible' and is a great 'equalizer', we all look the same when we have wet hair, so the chemo effects are somewhat washed away - very liberating.

Feeling better about myself

Absolutely! Increases feeling of great wellbeing and being alive.

The more I swim the fitter I feel.

I can influence my recovery!

Shows me there is life after cancer and not just a waiting room for further problems.

Feel better after talking to others that have gone through the same as me. I feel fitter.

Feeling happy

Happy due to being sociable not just the activity.

Freedom to just "be" without explaining.

Chat with others in similar situations - happy that I'm improving at swimming.

A positive group doing something not just sitting around talking about cancer over tea.

No compulsion to chat, free relaxed atmosphere, great people, exchange ideas/experiences.

Feeling energised

Good exercise, stretching my body, my lungs get a workout from talking.

That fresh, renewed, clean feeling. I can face the rest of the day's challenges.

When I started the swim group I felt I lacked energy. At first I could only swim a few lengths. As the weeks go on I was able to swim for further, and got out of the pool feeling so full of energy. I feel fit and healthy. This is how coming to the group makes me feel.



Acknowledgements

As always, nothing happens in isolation. Many thanks to the following people:

Becks Truman, Swim Team manager at Queen's Park Sports Centre for encouraging and helping make OutSwimming Cancer a reality in Chesterfield.

Weston Park Cancer Charity for financially supporting and believing in the power of the sessions.

Sarah Dean for her brilliant research confirming in an academic way the things that Lesley witnessed on a weekly basis.

Mila Krajewska for her illustrations in this report.

Alison Riley for coming up with the name OutSwimming Cancer and for editing this guide as part of a corporate volunteering initiative through her employer: Peak District National Park Authority.

Chesterfield Borough Council employees and volunteers at Queen's Park Sports Centre for their support in delivering the sessions.

The Macmillan centre, the breast care nurses, the prehab/rehab team at Chesterfield Royal hospital and all other cancer support services that have signposted people to the sessions.

University of Staffordshire's Participatory Action Research Programme for funding the project and **Dana Jundi** and **Associate Professor Nicola Gratton** for their support with the project.

Sarah Gillott for her design and help putting this document together.



For further information about running sessions contact Lesley at: outswimmingcancer@gmail.com