



Case Study: Walking Into Wild Swimming - A Partnership Journey in Plymouth

Overview

In summer 2026, the Outdoor Partnership Plymouth supported a new collaboration between YMCA Plymouth's Wellbeing Walks group and outdoor instructor Cathy Harshaw. What began as a simple idea—"Could we learn to wild swim?"—grew into a four-week programme blending walking, swimming, confidence-building and shared adventure across the South West Coast Path and Dartmoor.

This project demonstrates Outdoor Partnership principles in action: strong partnerships, community-led design, accessible progression, and supporting people to build lifelong connections with the outdoors.



Partnerships at the Heart of the Project

YMCA Plymouth – Community, Social Connection and Local Knowledge



YMCA Plymouth's Wellbeing Walks, led by Bryony Chalcraft and linked to Livewell South West's citywide walking programme, support adults living in Plymouth to stay active through gentle, sociable walks. The group already had strong trust, cohesion and a shared interest in exploring more of the outdoors. The YMCA were able to pay for Bryony's time to support this programme.

Cathy Harshaw – Specialist Outdoor Coaching and Guiding



Cathy is a professional outdoor instructor, wild swimmer and guide with deep knowledge of Dartmoor, the South West Coast Path and safe water practice. Her expertise made it possible to design a programme that was both adventurous and safe, giving participants the confidence to try something new.

The Outdoor Partnership Plymouth – Enabling Access and Removing Barriers



Through Sport England funding, Stuart from the Outdoor Partnership was able to cover the coaching costs, removing the financial barrier that would otherwise have prevented the group from accessing specialist instruction. This reflects The Outdoor Partnership's mission: supporting communities to access high-quality outdoor experiences regardless of background, ability or income.



Together, these partners created a programme that was co-designed, locally rooted and genuinely inclusive.

The Programme: Four Weeks of Walking, Learning and Wild Swimming

Interest was high—over 14 people signed up, with 10 able to attend each session. The programme was designed to gradually build confidence, skills and independence.

Session 1 – South West Coast Path: First Steps Into the Sea.

A gentle introduction, combining coastal walking with a safe sea swim. This session helped Cathy assess confidence levels and gave participants experiences of supported wild swimming.



Session 2 – Dartmoor: Ditsworthy Warren and River Skills.

A moorland walk to Ditsworthy Warren House (famous from War Horse) and a river swim. Participants learned about currents, eddies, navigation and moorland safety.

Session 3 – Sharrah Pool: Confidence and Community.

A beautiful river swim at Sharrah Pool, with shared lunch, laughter and learning.

Session 4 – Penlee Point: A More Adventurous Swim.

A coastal walk to a more challenging swim spot. Participants applied their new skills, supported each other, and reflection. By this point, the group had bonded deeply and were already planning future adventures together and began to see themselves as “cold-water swimmers”.



Learning and Development

The programme delivered far more than swimming skills. Participants developed:

- Outdoor confidence – navigating moorland, understanding water safety, reading landscapes
- Peer support – encouraging one another, sharing fears, celebrating achievements
- Independence – forming their own WhatsApp group to continue walking and swimming
- New identities – seeing themselves as swimmers, explorers and outdoor participants

Cathy reflected:



“It’s been such a pleasure to watch them grow into cold-water swimmers, adventurers and more. We’ve laughed, learnt, shared stories, and built relationships. Seeing them exchange phone numbers and promise to keep swimming together—that’s what it’s all about.”

Participant Achievements and Stories

The human stories are the strongest evidence of impact:



Some of the participants learned to tread water for the first time

Swimming in new locations outside of simple beach type locations

8 expressed a desire to learn navigation so they can explore Dartmoor independently

The group formed a WhatsApp community to continue walking and swimming together

Participants reported reduced stress, increased confidence and a sense of belonging

One participant shared:

“I really appreciated knowing the path and pool had been scouted in advance. It took any stress away. Cathy passed on so much helpful info about river currents and how to navigate them safely.”

Another described the experience as “life-changing”.

What This Project Shows About Outdoor Partnership Principles



1. Partnership Working. This project succeeded because YMCA Plymouth, Cathy Harshaw and the Outdoor Partnership combined their strengths—community engagement, specialist coaching and funding support.

2. Removing Barriers. Cost, confidence and lack of knowledge are major barriers to outdoor participation. This programme addressed all three.

3. Co-Design and Participant Voice. The idea came directly from the walkers themselves. The programme was shaped around their interests, fears and ambitions.

4. Progression Pathways. Participants moved from gentle walks to adventurous swims, from supported sessions to planning their own outings.

5. Building Community and Long-Term Engagement. The WhatsApp group, new friendships and shared achievements mean this project will continue to have impact long after the funded sessions ended.

Conclusion



The Walk and Swim programme is a powerful example of what happens when organisations collaborate to remove barriers and support people to explore the outdoors. Through partnership, skilled coaching and participant-led design, a group of adults in Plymouth discovered new landscapes, new skills and new confidence.

Most importantly, they discovered each other—and built a community that will keep walking, swimming and exploring for years to come.

