

## Catherine Smith



**Please give details of all diving industry related interests, whether remunerated or not, and any other potential conflicts of interest**

None

**What do you think are the key challenges facing BSAC, and what should we be doing to address them?**

The most significant challenge currently facing BSAC is the gradual decline in membership. Conversations I have had with members across a wide range of clubs suggest that this is rarely due to a lack of enthusiasm for diving, but rather frustration with how their time, effort and expectations are managed within the club environment.

For newer members, a common source of dissatisfaction is slow progression through training. This is often linked to clubs relying heavily on a small core group of instructors and volunteers, without sufficient capacity to share the responsibility of training. Where this pressure is sustained, it can lead to delays, reduced morale and volunteer burnout.

More experienced members can experience frustration for different reasons. Many have contributed significant time to training, club administration, or the numerous other jobs which ensure the smooth running of their club. It is not uncommon for it to be felt that these efforts are not sufficiently supported or valued. In some cases, experienced divers feel that expectations to focus on training leave limited space for 'just going diving', which for many is a key motivation for remaining active within BSAC. Other experienced members are reluctant to become instructors due to worries they will be consistently expected to conduct training.

These challenges should be recognised as realistic and common across many clubs. Addressing them requires an approach which strengthens training quality, supports the development of instructors beyond only instructing, helps prevent volunteer burnout, and actively values long-term contribution at all levels of diving. One

practical way to help bridge the gap between training and enjoyment would be to encourage skills development within normal club diving, where it is safe and appropriate to do so. One project I would be particularly keen to lead would be improving how volunteer contribution is acknowledged, by strengthening systems that make it clear to volunteers that their time, expertise and commitment are appreciated and valued.

Cost and accessibility of diving and snorkelling also remain barriers to participation and are reflected in the current demographic of BSAC membership. Broadening this profile will be essential to long-term sustainability. This includes exploring partnerships with existing outdoor and community organisations, and embedding diversity within BSAC in a meaningful way – not through tokenistic initiatives. I want to promote an inclusive, welcoming organisation which attracts, retains and supports every generation of divers..

### **Please describe how you would contribute to any / all of these areas**

Through my internship at BSAC, I gained knowledge of how BSAC operates as a National Governing Body. This included observing how council decisions and ideas are developed, discussed and implemented, and how governance responsibilities interact with operational delivery by staff. I developed an understanding of the importance of clear roles, effective communication between council and HQ, and evidence-based decision making in supporting clubs and volunteers. Building on this experience would allow me, as a council member, to engage constructively with governance and discussions and contribute an informed perspective grounded in recent, first-hand experience.

My involvement in membership-based organisations is based in my participation in BSAC. I have served in several different committee roles including under 18 representative, social media, training officer, chair and diving officer, giving me a wide range of experience of contributing to strategic planning and supporting club growth. The leadership roles I have held have given me a strong appreciation of the realities of volunteer led-organisations – particularly when plans have either been successful, or unsuccessful. Often success has related to the pressures on members' time, the challenges of sustaining engagement, and the importance of recognising and supporting those who contribute.

As a board member, I would use this experience to help ensure that strategy and policy decisions remain connected to the lived experience of members and clubs. I am particularly interested in how governance frameworks can support volunteer-led activity, and how membership organisations can balance consistency with flexibility to reflect local club needs. My academic background has equipped me with strong analytical and research skills, and I am keen to continue to build my skills through serving on the board, and in collaboration with more experienced council members.

## Personal statement

I joined the Aberdeen BSAC branch in 2012, and I became an open water instructor in 2020. Also in 2020, I helped lead a team which developed and implemented a club strategy which has brought membership to over 140. This experience showed me the impact that clear priorities, volunteer support and realistic planning has on the long-term health of a club. With the club, I have dived all around the UK with favourite trips including St Kilda, Shetland and Plymouth.

In 2022 I began a PhD Manchester on the cultural history of underwater exploration in Britain from the 1950s to the 2000s. This work involved meeting and interviewing divers across the UK, giving me a broad understanding of the motivations, barriers and expectations that shape member experience. From 2024-2025 I acted as chair of the Manchester University BSAC club, which I helped relaunch after it folded during the covid pandemic.

In 2025, I spent five months as an intern at BSAC HQ. During this time, I worked on a range of projects and gained a detailed understanding of how council decisions translate into operational realities for staff and clubs. You can read more about my internship [here](#).

As a council member, I would focus on:

First, gathering club experiences to present to council. I would actively engage with branches and university clubs to produce feedback reports on what is working and where support is needed, to support this perspective being reflected in council decisions.

Second, strengthening recognition and support for volunteers. I would work to ensure that council continues to prioritise initiatives that reduce unnecessary barriers for volunteers, clearly communicate expectations, and acknowledge the contribution that instructors, officers and active members make to BSAC.

Third, supporting membership growth and retention by advocating for clear, practical guidance for clubs such as volunteer development. I am particularly keen to promote the sharing of successful approaches between clubs, so that good practice is easier to adopt.

I am passionate about helping divers build confidence, recognise their achievements, and overcome perceived barriers to progression. I strongly believe that encouragement, recognition and a supportive club culture are central to member retention and engagement. At its core, BSAC has always been about community: building friendships, sharing experiences and fostering excitement about diving. As a council member, I would bring a constructive, evidence-based approach, informed by club experience and national-level insight.