

Free Swimming Initiative Review



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Abstract

The Welsh Sports Association (WSA) is the independent umbrella body that supports and represents the sport sector in Wales, including the National Governing Bodies of Sport.

The WSA understands the 'sport sector' to mean anyone involved in the business of sport and active recreation in Wales. Our role is to provide the collective voice for this sector and enable our members to become stronger, more successful and sustainable through providing a wide range of business support services.

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The WSA's vision is for a 'vibrant, active nation', and our mission is to empower our members to be stronger and more successful, contributing towards a society fit for the future. Ensuring that there are accessible opportunities for the people of Wales to be active through sport and physical recreation is key to delivering a generational shift in attitudes towards health and wellbeing.

We represent the deliverers and facilitators of a broad range of sports and activities in Wales, including governing bodies and local authorities, and are therefore grateful for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The following is an amalgamation of responses received from those of our members who have an interest in swimming.

1. Has Free Swimming **achieved the outcomes** for children, young people and older adults that were intended when they were first introduced (or since they have been revised) and **can they achieve a greater impact** on sport and physical activity participation levels?

Our aquatics members hold the 'gift' of the Free Swimming Initiative (FSI) in very high regard but believe that it deserves efficient management. Currently, measures of success are very broad and little detailed research on the individual or group success is being undertaken apart from usage figures, which do not indicate the outcomes achieved other than participation levels.

In addition, it is not felt that an effective and consistent approach has been adopted to each Unitary Authority area. Essentially, it is believed that the reporting on usage has led to a significant amount of duplication and double handling within the figures.

Arguably, it has been suggested that it might be more helpful for deliverers to undertake localised research on what their customers want and allow the budget holders to have more flexibility with the project money to meet customer needs and demands – which may be across the sporting pathway. Nevertheless, with swimming being the second most popular activity among adults in Wales¹ and since 2013 consistently the most popular activity among the target demographic of girls² between 7 to 18, there is clearly a strong obligation to ensure that there are equitable opportunities for access to swimming opportunities.

2. How does/should Free Swimming **connect to and reinforce wider health, wellbeing and physical activity objectives**?

The Free Swimming programme encourages all people to access swimming under the age of 16 years throughout holiday periods, and for the Over 60's it enables people to swim for free all year around in some local authorities.

¹ <http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2017/170628-national-survey-wales-2016-17-headline-results-en.pdf>

² http://sport.wales/media/1656889/school_sport_survey_2015_-_state_of_the_nation_english.docx

Under 16's – the current scheme reinforces that physical activity is accessible to all regardless of their financial circumstances or background. However, the pathway fails immediately as there is a subsequent charge for swimming lessons to learn to swim; perfect their swim; and increase their water confidence.

Inevitably, participants then continue to use the scheme to access the free swim opportunity rather than develop the necessary swimming skills to become competent swimmers. Thus, if there is flexibility within the funding to allow more tangible delivery sessions, it would help ensure that every child can learn to swim.

Over 60's – Free swimming for over 60s has had a positive impact on social isolation, loneliness and for maintaining activity levels of this age group. However, questions should be asked around how GP's are prescribing exercise as a tool to improve health as while the National Exercise Referral Programme is seen favourably, our members report that they are currently unaware of the value that GP's, Consultants and Doctors place on the free swimming programme for over 60's.

It should also be recognised that the FSI has a much wider social impact than its intended objectives, for example in providing childcare for children and in tackling isolation and loneliness in older people. We believe that these wider societal benefits should be acknowledged and understood by those Welsh Government departments tasked with holding budgets for these policy areas, so that they too contribute to the outcomes and protect the programme against future funding cuts.

3. What part should Free Swimming play in the new strategy which Sport Wales will be preparing?

Our members believe that there is a strong place in the new strategy for free swimming but with accountability, measured outcomes and consistent delivery from all partners holding funds. We are encouraged by the commitment to moving to an outcomes-based approach for funding, and hope that with this structure in place Sport Wales will be better able to evaluate and restrict funding should outcomes not be achieved.

In addition, it has been suggested that further clarity is required with regards to the ownership of responsibility for the learning to swim element of the free swimming outcomes. This has historically been an objective within the curriculum for education, rather than sport, and according to members it is evident that FSI funding is being used to prop up the delivery of the Welsh Government commitment by education. Again, it could be argued that there is an obligation on education to contribute to the costs of the learning to swim element within the curriculum, if FSI funding is currently being used for this purpose.

4. What **learning from other programmes and activities can be drawn on** and applied to optimise the impact and outcomes of any future Free Swimming programme?

As above, a more stringent commercial approach to the allocation of funding should be implemented. Creating a clear set of outcomes will be crucial to establish the success of any future FSI programme and using transparent measurement systems which also include a social value so that the emphasis is not just on numbers but on quality and impact are vital.

Currently FSI, LAPA, workforce, development, performance plans are all created separately and a "one plan" model should be employed, to cover all focus areas and which links back to the objectives of the investment. A national model would help to ensure that a consistent approach is delivered across all local authority areas in Wales and would provide the means to identify best practice for shared learning.

A recommendation is that a holistic Aquatic Development plan for key stakeholders is created, with set outcomes aligned to overarching strategic objectives. This would provide clarity and transparency for signposting into other aquatic activities so that we are better placed to deliver a stronger aquatics pathway.

5. Is **cost really a barrier to participating in swimming** and if so for whom and in what circumstances?

Any cost to any sport can be a barrier to activity depending on people's affordable income and their circumstances. While Free Swimming for Under 16's is welcomed, the costs of a family swimming experience can be a barrier as parents have to pay for their own swim. During term time a swim for a family of 2 adults and 2 children could cost in the region of £11. In highly deprived areas, this could be the difference between feeding the family and a trip to the pool. We believe that this is a significant issue which should be explored and targeted further.

In relation to the over 60's access, our member's experience is that in general many customers would be able to pay a small charge. However, we appreciate that this is not always the case and means testing would be the only fair way of addressing this which in turn can be deemed degrading. We would welcome any further research to establish an appropriate nominal costing method that would be acceptable by users.

6. How do the '**Elements of Engagement**' and the '**Worlds of Participation**' relate to **free swimming**, and what are the **other barriers to participation** in swimming – for example accessibility to leisure centres, cultural and religious barriers specifically for women, body image, poor facilities, and so on?

Our members are committed to removing barriers to access for any demographic, particularly among the protected characteristics. Some members have reported experiencing issues in relation to the cultural and religious barriers and whilst we removed

these barriers to ensure accessibility for all, the uptake of sessions was poor. Unfortunately, as funding is based on quantity not quality, these were cancelled with immediate effect. Again, an outcomes and measurement system which valued social return would assist in demonstrating the significant impact on these sessions to some of the most vulnerable in our communities.

7. How does swimming **compare with other sports/pathways to physical activity**? Is free swimming **a cost-effective way to develop physical literacy**?

We strongly believe that learning to swim is a fundamental life skill which opens up opportunities to access a wide variety of aquatic activities reliant upon the participants' ability to swim. The key to FSI is that it must deliver skills and not "splash time."

In Torfaen for example, swimming is their strongest sporting pathway, as a result of the dedication and passion of their Go Swim Team. However, there is still a financial barrier in some circumstances.

8. How can the **benefits of Free Swimming be sustained if there is less funding available**? **Could provision be better targeted**? Could councils do the same (or more) with reduced subsidy?

Our members believe that there is a definite need for the free swimming initiative to continue for Under 16's but it has been suggested that both Sport Wales and Welsh Government should recognise that the majority of people who are over 60 could afford a nominal fee which could offset the deficit in funding. It is appreciated that this is a brave and potentially politically unpopular move, but the reality is that almost a quarter of working adult in Wales lives in poverty³ as do almost one third of children⁴, whilst pensioner poverty is decreasing⁵.

If the whole budget was cut with no contributory nominal fees, local authority members who deliver the FSI report they would have no alternative than to deliver the programme on a much smaller scale - therefore achieving less outcomes.

However, one local authority member responded that they would be determined to secure a commercial provider through private funding to ensure that the under 16's children in their area are not significantly adversely affected.

9. **What alternative uses are there for the resources invested in Free Swimming** to extend participation and serve the Wellbeing objectives and how would they compare in terms of return on investment?

³ http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/economic-indicators/poverty_wealth?lang=en

⁴ <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/households-below-average-income/?lang=en>

⁵ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/work-poverty-keeping-poverty-rates-wales-high>

Without robust social measurement systems in place it is very difficult to propose an alternative use for free swimming budgets as any current data is unlikely to be comparable, and will likely not take into account the wider impact achieved via FSI as identified previously.

Notwithstanding this, our members have suggested widening the scope of the initiative to enable families to access pockets of free swimming, with closer alignment to the Learn2Swim Programme and the wider aquatics pathway to encourage physical activity and wellbeing throughout.

For further information on this response, please contact kate.evans@wsa.wales