



## Free swimming initiatives

This briefing provides details of the recent free swimming announcements and draws on lessons learnt from Wales. It is provided to local authority chief executives, council leaders and all APSE leisure contacts.

### Key issues

1. Free swimming initiative announced as part of a Legacy Action Plan for 2012 Olympic Games
2. Information on the plans, how to apply and the qualifying criteria
3. Lessons learnt from free swimming in Wales

### 1. Introduction

On 6 June 2008, a new £140 million fund to increase sport and fitness through free swimming for over 60's was announced by Olympics Minister Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Andy Burnham and Secretary of State for Health, Alan Johnson. The initiative is part of a Legacy Action Plan for the 2012 Olympic Games. Since then, on 17 July 2008, Andy Burnham has written a Ministerial statement and this is available by clicking on the following link: [http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference\\_library/minister\\_speeches/5295.aspx](http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/minister_speeches/5295.aspx)

This briefing paper outlines the plans in more detail and draws on lessons learnt from the Welsh Assembly Government's Free Swimming Initiative, which has been running since 2004. A copy of the data summary report for the Welsh Assembly Government's free swimming initiative for the period April 2004 to September 2007 is available by clicking on the following link: <http://www.sports-council-wales.org.uk/18097.file.dld>

### 2. Free swimming scheme plans

The free swimming announcements as part of the 2012 Legacy Action Plan include the Government announcing a £140 million package to encourage as many local authorities as possible to participate in making swimming free for over 60s and under 16s in their local communities. It is also aimed to stimulate ambitious authorities to maximise and sustain uptake through other initiatives such as free lessons for adults who cannot swim, the introduction of swimming co-ordinators and to provide incentives for the most ambitious to move towards a universal free swimming offer. More details on the proposals are as follows:

#### **a) Free swimming for the over 60's**

The Government is keen to encourage as many local authorities as possible to participate in making swimming free for the over 60s and is making available £15 million per annum in 2009-10 and 2010-11 for free swimming for the over 60s. They will write to all Chief Executives of all local authorities in England which are responsible for leisure services to ask them to confirm whether they wish to take up this offer. The deadline for responding is 15 September 2008. The letter will provide details of the funding.

The qualifying criteria is: 'free swimming for the over 60s means that people in that age group who wish to swim at any time throughout the year when they would normally be admitted to the pool for public swimming, and in accordance with local programming, should not be charged'.

If an authority is already offering free swimming that would have qualified for this funding, then they can deploy their allocation to fund initiatives which will 'further increase and sustain participation for the over 60s and extend such measures to wider groups of the population'.

#### **b) Free swimming for the under 16s**

The Government is keen to extend free swimming to under 16s and is making available £25 million per annum in 2009-10 and 2010-11. All authorities who choose to participate in the free swimming initiative for over 60s can submit (no later than 15 September 2008) an expression of interest to make swimming free for under 16s.

The qualifying criteria is: 'free swimming for the under 16s means that people in that age group who wish to swim out of normal school hours throughout the year when they would normally be admitted to the pool for public swimming, and in accordance with local programming, should not be charged'.

If an authority is already offering free swimming that would have qualified for this funding, then they can deploy their allocation to fund initiatives which will 'further increase and sustain participation for the under 16s and extend such measures to wider groups of the population'.

#### **c) Modernising pool provision – capital reward fund**

The Government is also making available £10 million of capital funding in 2008-09 to modernise pool provision. All authorities who sign up for free swimming for over 60s and for under 16s will be entitled to a one-off capital grant in 2008-09.

#### **d) Modernising pool provision – capital challenge fund**

The Government is also making available £25 million capital per annum in 2009-10 and 2010-11 to modernise pool provision and support more ambitious plans for free swimming. Sport England will administer this fund and will publish a prospectus for bids for funding by 31 July 2008. Local authorities who sign up for free swimming for over 60s and for under 16s will be invited to submit costed plans for this no later than 15 October 2008.

### **3. Lessons learnt from Wales**

The Free Swimming Initiative (FSI) is a partnership between the Welsh Assembly Government and local authorities in Wales. It was the first in its kind in Europe; being

piloted and then implemented in all 22 local authorities in 2003 (for children) and in 2004 (for over 60s). The Assembly Government fund free swimming in Wales for:

- Children and young people aged 16 and under during all school holidays; and
- Older people aged 60 and over outside school holidays

Total funding until 2006/07 was £13.4 million. Typically, around 120 pools have been involved in the FSI at any one time and the majority are owned and directly managed by the local authorities themselves.

The Data Summary report on the Welsh Assembly Government Free Swimming Initiative April 2004-September 2007 shows analysis on the breakdown of free swims, structured swims and paid swims.

### a) Children and young people

For children and young people, the results show that the number of free swims for 16 years and under has fallen since 2004-05; however, the number of free structured swims (activities which are led by an instructor or a member of staff) has increased:

**Table 1.1 Free swims and structured swims for 16 years and under**

<i>Number</i>		<i>Type of swim</i>	
		Free swims	Structured swims
2004-05	Easter	128,394	2,380
	Whitsun	56,379	961
	Summer	483,854	16,731
	Autumn Half Term	57,547	1,382
	Christmas	12,608	71
	February Half Term	69,055	2,138
	<b>Total</b>	<b>807,837</b>	<b>23,663</b>
2005-06	Easter	120,874	7,723
	Whitsun	59,634	4,317
	Summer	395,608	27,683
	Autumn Half Term	57,053	4,708
	Christmas	12,218	31
	February Half Term	64,605	5,497
	<b>Total</b>	<b>709,992</b>	<b>49,959</b>
2006-07	Easter	107,178	12,697
	Whitsun	48,265	4,289
	Summer	355,341	43,382
	Autumn Half Term	44,084	4,982
	Christmas	16,223	556
	February Half Term	57,641	4,937
	<b>Total</b>	<b>628,732</b>	<b>70,843</b>
2007-08 (a)	Easter	96,009	9,253
	Whitsun	48,367	3,945
	Summer	355,326	38,754
	<b>Total</b>	<b>499,702</b>	<b>51,952</b>

Source: Data Unit

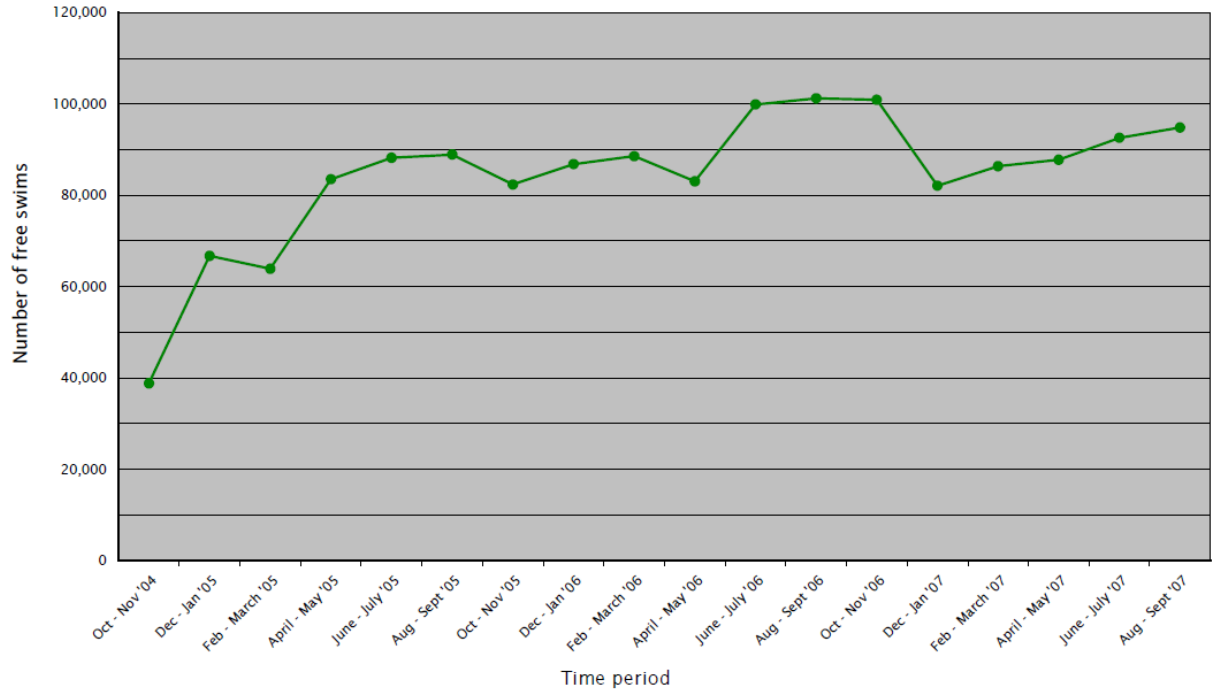
The most represented age group for free swims is the 8-11 year olds, which account for 46% of the total during 2006-07 compared with 19% of under 8 year olds and 35% of 12-16 year olds. In addition, the gender split is marginal for free swims for 16 years and under with 51% males and 49% females for 2006-07.

The number of paid swims has increased over time for 16 years and under age group from 194,772 in 2004-05 to 320,212 in 2006-07. Paid swims refer to where juniors pay for swimming sessions (structured and public) during free swimming holiday periods. The increase in the number of paid swims could be a result of the FSI encouraging greater use of swimming pools for other swimming sessions.

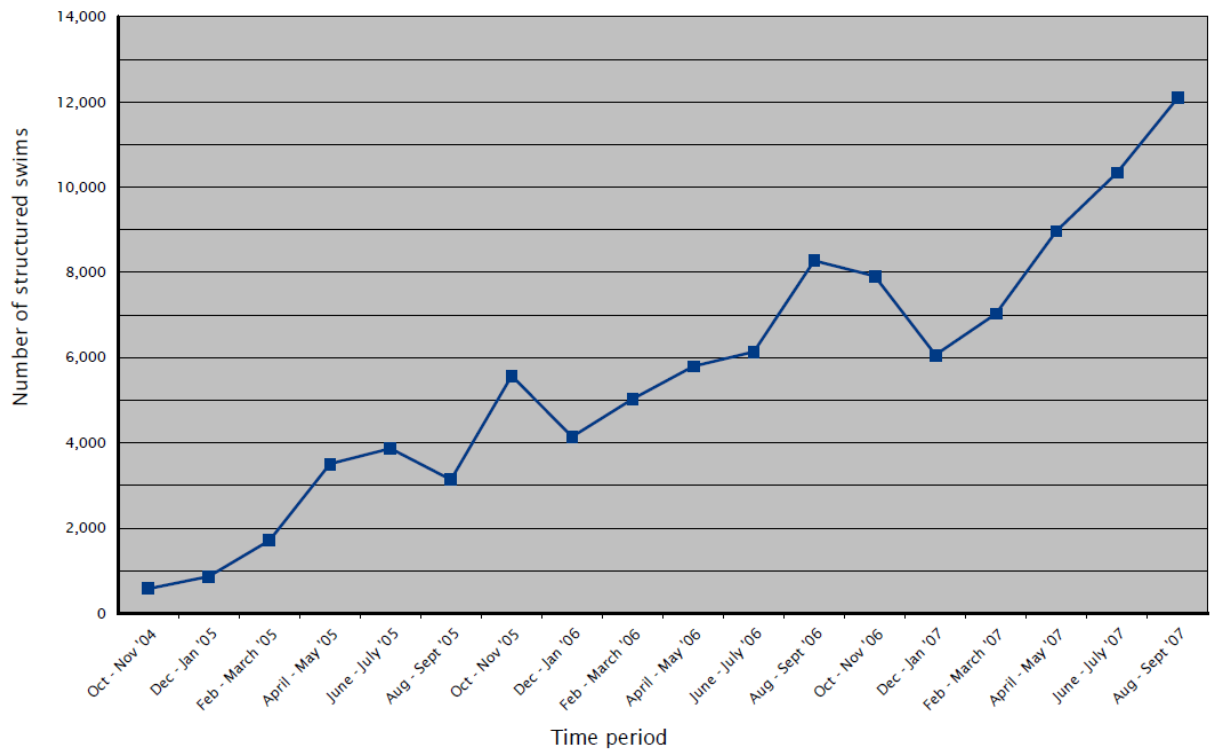
**b) Over 60s**

For over 60s, the results show that the number of free and structured swims has increased over time:

**Figure 2.1a Total free swims for 60 years and over**



**Figure 2.1b: Total structured swims for 60 years and over**



In the 2006-07 financial year, male swimmers took fractionally more of the proportion of free swims than females with 50.3%. In addition, AquaFit/therapy was the most popular type of structured swim recorded between April and September 2007, with 60% of the total. Paid swims for people aged 17 years and over showed a general increase with just over 384,000 recorded in 2005-06 and just fewer than 696,700 in 2006-07.

#### **4. Commentary**

The DCMS's commitment to meeting a target of getting 2 million people more active by 2012 calls for barriers such as cost to be removed. APSE has welcomed Government plans for free access to swimming pools and the positive contribution that this will have in terms of health and mental wellbeing benefits. The benefits of free swimming initiatives have been evidenced above from the lessons learnt in Wales, particularly in relation to over 60s.

However, these plans come in the face of years of under-investment in public sports and leisure facilities. The results are often all too apparent in deteriorating council facilities, 65% of which in England alone are more than 20 years old. Lord Coles' Review of National Sports Effort and Resources showed that investment is needed but there is little financial incentive to do so in areas of greatest deprivation. Yet this is where the benefits can be felt most.

APSE would argue that these free swimming announcements should be the first step in further investment to kick-start outreach programmes in all areas of sport to offer local residents community-based activities that encourage more healthy lifestyles. APSE would like to see the Government go one step further and allow for business rate relief for public sports and leisure centres, where councils are demonstrating the value of sports development for healthy living across local communities. This would create a national pot to fund sports development initiatives.

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