



Free Swim Should be a first step to investment in healthy communities

APSE (Association for Public Service Excellence) has welcomed Government plans for free access to swimming pools. But it called for this to be the first step in investment to kick-start outreach programmes in all areas of sport to offer local residents, community-based activities that encourage more healthy lifestyles. Business rate relief for public sports and leisure centres, where councils are demonstrating the value of sports development for healthy living across local communities, would create a national pot to fund this, according to APSE.

APSE has 260 members from councils who deliver front-line services, including sports and leisure, across the UK.

Speaking in response to Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, Andy Burnham's scheme for over-60s and then the rest of the public to be able to swim for free ahead of the 2012 Olympics, APSE's chief executive, Paul O'Brien said: **"Plans for free swimming are obviously a great start. Positive health and mental wellbeing benefits will be reaped and savings to the health budget will follow. However we would like to see Government go one step further. One easy way to incentivise local authorities to increase their sports development initiatives would be to create a national funding pot to allow councils to recoup the value of the business rates charged against their sports and leisure facilities if they can demonstrate that projects are boosting active participation of the population in their centres".**

Mr O'Brien added: **"As well as greater investment around the country in new public sector facilities, we also want to see investment in initiatives in existing facilities that would maximise the benefits from current infrastructure".**

APSE welcomes culture minister Andy Burnham's indication that councils will get £80m next year to scrap over-60s' charges and £50m for the upkeep of pools. But it points out that these plans come in the face of years of under-investment in public sports and leisure facilities.

Notes to editors

APSE is the UK's leading local government think tank on front line services provided by councils

APSE works with over 260 authorities throughout the UK and also hosts the UK's largest voluntary benchmarking club for local councils including data and information on sports and leisure facilities.

The announcements made by Government form part of the Legacy Action Plan for the 2012 Olympic Games and include:

- Encouraging Local Authorities to open up nearly 1,600 publicly owned swimming pools free to over 60s in England through a new £140 million fund; using the fund as a "challenge fund" to encourage Local Authorities to offer free swimming to under-16s and to rejuvenate and maintain pools.
- Committing to meeting a target of getting two million people more active by 2012 - to be achieved through the new Sport England strategy to get 1 million people more active through sport and supported by programmes coordinated by Department of Health and other departments.

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