

Free Swimming in Wales: A Review



UK Research and Consultancy Services
Ltd

UKRCS

July 2018

Foreword

It has been a privilege for us to undertake this review of Wales' free swimming programmes. They have been an important and longstanding intervention designed to encourage young people and those aged 60 and over to swim, with a particular focus in the later years on those who are less likely to learn to swim, on disadvantaged communities, and on people with disabilities.

We have been assisted ably and patiently by the officers of Sport Wales, by a Project Steering Group, and by the many individuals who agreed to be interviewed or participate in workshops, or complete our online survey. They have provided a wide range of in-depth evidence which underpins our analysis, and we thank them sincerely for their valuable input. They obviously bear no responsibility for our conclusions and recommendations.

As will be seen in the body of this report, we consider that the time has come to re-think the purpose, focus and delivery of the free swimming programmes in Wales. It is time to change, but not to forget the value that has been achieved through these programmes hitherto. Change should be done in ways which can build on the positive difference that the current offer has made to the many individuals and communities who have made use of them. Wales' national wellbeing objectives now provide a key point of reference for future development.

July 2018

UKRCS Review Team:

Dr Clive Grace (Review Director)

Dr Nicola Bolton, Sandra Harris and Professor Steve Martin (UKRCS Steering Group)

Sally Church, Aled Eurig, Becca Mattingley, Dr Alex McInch, Liam Whittington (Research Delivery Group)

UKRCS is a consultancy which operates as a social enterprise partnership between its founders and a wide range of Associates. We undertake reviews, evaluations and research studies across the broad field of public and community services, in both the UK and internationally. For more information see our web site www.ukrcs.uk or contact: sandra.harris@ukrcs.uk

Contents

Foreword.....	2
Executive Summary.....	4
Section 1: The Promise of Free Swimming.....	8
Section 2: Methods and Evidence.....	9
Section 3: Background and Current Operation.....	11
Section 4: Findings.....	23
Section 5: Conclusions and Options.....	47
Glossary and Acronyms.....	58

References

Executive Summary

The operation of free swimming: Free swimming in Wales was introduced in 2003. At the time, it was the first national free swimming programme. It aimed to increase participation among young people (aged 16 and under), and older people (aged 60 plus). Free swimming is funded by the Welsh Government and delivered by local authorities and since 2005 it has been managed by Sport Wales. The two programmes have been reviewed periodically over the last fifteen years and have developed and changed to place a greater emphasis on learning to swim and the needs of deprived communities.

Since 2010, free swimming has formed part of annual local authority partnership agreements (LAPAs) that set out action plans for sport and physical activity. These integrate swimming with a broader aquatics offer and have a greater focus on achieving the goal of 'Every Child a Swimmer'. The minimum criteria and funding formula have also both been revised. Local authorities now receive the grant based on a combination of population size and deprivation levels subject to the delivery of a minimal level of free swimming. Sport Wales has been an active steward of free swimming since the transfer of responsibility for delivery of the scheme to them in 2005. However, there is no performance related element to the grant aid and no realistic incentives or sanctions to ensure accountability.

The numbers: The free swimming programmes had significant initial success in increasing participation in both their target groups. The number of 'free splash' swims by young people rose from under 400,000 to 800,000 in 2004/2005, and most of the increase was maintained thereafter for several years. The number of 'free splash' sessions by older people also increased rapidly, reaching 600,000 and remaining fairly steady thereafter. Structured swims for young people also increased and reached 94,000 by 2009/2010, and for older people they also rose, in this case to 104,000 in 2013/14.

However, in later years the numbers of free splash swims by young people has dropped off dramatically, falling to just 145,000 by 2016/17, and with the number of free structured swims also declining significantly. For older people the number of free structured swims also declined, but less so. These reductions were not the result of any decline in popularity of swimming amongst either the general or the two target populations, nor is it explained by the relatively modest decline in the number of public swimming pools. And paid swims increased from 300,000 to 400,000 from 2009/2010 to 2016/2017.

What has changed, however, is the number of available free swimming sessions, which has reduced markedly whilst the number of participants per session has held up much better. We assess that the steep decline in the number of free swims by young people is largely the result of local authorities reducing the number of hours of free swimming that they offer in response to a combination of increased pressure on mainstream leisure budgets, changes in

the free swimming minimum criteria, a shift in emphasis towards free swimming for older people, and reductions in the overall funding and changes to the funding formula.

The cost of free swimming: The two programmes collectively currently cost £3m p.a. in grant distributed. Funding is a ring-fenced element of Sport Wales' grant in aid from the Welsh Government and is distributed according to a Welsh Government funding formula. It is intended to reimburse local authorities for income they forego as a result of the requirement to offer free swimming sessions, but this is a notional calculation only. Our analysis is that, in practice, between 2008/2009 and 2016/2017 local authorities received a total of £28.7m in grant aid as against a best estimate that the total notional income foregone during the same period was around £29.2m on an inflation adjusted basis. So there is broad equivalence between grant distributed and the maximum possible income foregone, even assuming that every free swim would have been paid for at a full rate.

However, our estimate of the actual current costs of providing free swimming by local authorities is a maximum of £1.5m. p.a., which is half of the actual grant in aid that local authorities currently receive. In practice many local authorities have come to rely on the grants as an income line and it is very difficult to link actual expenditure to specific results and performance.

Stakeholder views: Users value the free swimming programmes and are clear that they wish to see them continue, although some question whether focusing on young and older people and on just swimming is the most cost-effective way to increase physical activity and improve health and wellbeing. Local authorities and Swim Wales also value free swimming, and wish to see it continued.

Sport Wales, Swim Wales, the WLGA and some other local and national bodies have doubts about whether free swimming is fit for the future, and many believe that there is a need for change. Concerns about delivery of the programmes focus on the lack of incentives and sanctions available to encourage better performance, and the absence of any monitoring of outcomes (as opposed to monitoring the numbers of free swims). Concerns about the scope of the current offer centre on whether an exclusive focus on swimming and on the two target groups is the best way to achieve physical activity and broader health and wellbeing objectives. However, the major national stakeholders have very different views on the best way forward.

Conclusions: Both programmes generated significant initial increases in participation levels among both target groups, and this has been sustained for older people. Free swimming has adapted to broader policy changes over time, and some local authorities have demonstrated an ability to implement it effectively where there is good leadership and a clear vision of how it can work as part of a wider aquatics plan. However, the evidence

suggests that the current approach to free swimming is not the most cost-effective way to use the £3m. p.a. allocated to it. The current investment in free swimming does not represent best return on investment, or make the biggest contribution to increasing levels of activity. Several core features of how free swimming operates in the current financial climate and policy context mean that it is no longer fit for purpose. In particular it is not serving the equalities' and the wellbeing objectives of the Welsh Government or of Sport Wales effectively. In relation to older people (which target group now gets a much larger share of the overall resources than initially) more than 80% of the resources are devoted to only the 6% of those who are 60 plus who swim. This is not therefore a 'universal benefit'. There is a need for change to be considered in the:

- Way free swimming is performance managed at all levels from the Welsh Government, Sport Wales and local authorities, and other potential partners including Swim Wales;
- Choice of target groups; and
- Alignment of free swimming and subsidised physical activity with broader sport policy, and health and wellbeing objectives.

Options: We suggest three indicative options ranging from relatively minor improvements in the way the programmes are managed and delivered to a fundamental re-thinking of their purpose and focus. Whichever option is adopted, it should be shaped with explicit reference to the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, and to the wellbeing objectives of the Welsh Government and of Sport Wales, and their partners in any new scheme.

Option A would focus on the same target groups but introduce changes to ensure more effective delivery and stronger accountability for achieving broader policy and wellbeing objectives as opposed only to activities. This would involve:

- Retaining public subsidy for free swimming;
- Continuing to focus provision on young people and on older people; but
- Strengthening the delivery of the programmes through improved accountability for achievement of outcomes and better national marketing of the programmes.

Option B would introduce new target groups, retain a strong element of swimming, and also include related activities and life skills, linked to broader policy and wellbeing objectives. This option would involve:

- Retaining some public subsidy for free swimming;
- Changing or broadening the target groups;
- Adding the provision of related activities and life skills; and
- Delivering the new programmes through a funding formula linked to agreed national and local aquatics strategies or via a challenge fund to which local authorities and others bid for funding.

Option C would integrate swimming with a broader range of sports and physical recreation linked to broader policy and wellbeing objectives. This would involve:

- Continued recognition of the value of physical activity in improving health and wellbeing and public subsidy to incentivise participation by vulnerable individuals and groups;
- An acceptance that swimming should not be privileged over other beneficial physical activities; and
- Funding to enable local authorities and other partners to develop integrated interventions to encourage both swimming and a range of other forms of physical activity.

Our assessment is that the greatest public value from the investment is much more likely to be found in Options B and C or some variant thereof. Both options would need to be accompanied by:

- **Greater clarity of purpose**, with interventions designed to achieve explicit objectives and underpinned by evidence-based theories of change;
- **Sufficient flexibility** to allow local authorities and others to design interventions most likely to address **local needs and priorities**;
- Robust **performance monitoring of outputs and outcomes** (rather than inputs and activities) linked explicitly to the vision for sport and national health and wellbeing objectives; and,
- Effective arrangements to encourage **identification, sharing and promotion of good practice**.

Section 1: The Promise of Free Swimming

Free swimming in Wales has been a long standing and substantial policy intervention. In 2003, the Welsh Government introduced free swimming for young people (aged 16 and under) particularly in the school holidays, and for older people (aged 60 plus) which focused on school term time swimming. Public funding of £3m.+ a year was set aside with the aim of stimulating a significant increase in swimming initially through ‘free splash’ sessions but with an increased emphasis on structured aquatic activities in later years.

The case for free swimming is compelling. It is a very popular participation sport with fairly broad reach and significant latent demand (i.e. more people would like to swim or to swim more often than they currently do). This has been confirmed in the results of Sport Wales’ Sport and Active Lifestyles Survey 2016-17¹. Moreover, increasing the frequency of swimming uses expensive public capital investment in pools more intensively at low marginal cost. And swimming is a core life skill which enables people to access a wide range of other aquatic sports and activities, increases personal safety (reducing deaths from drowning), and is known to have a range of benefits in terms of health and wellbeing. Potentially it is especially valuable for people with disabilities and to those experiencing issues with the onset of the ageing process.

Yet many policy makers, sport bodies, and those who deliver free swimming have doubts about how it is currently delivered and question whether it offers value for money. Their concerns include whether free swimming is reaching the right people, the level of ‘substitution effects’ in the programmes (they believe that significant numbers of people accessing free swimming would swim just as often in the absence of public subsidy), and the reduction in the volume of free swimming by young people.

The concerns are amplified by some significant changes in the broader policy environment in the fifteen years since free swimming was introduced. There is now much greater pressure on public expenditure in Wales. Furthermore, the public expenditure squeeze alongside the discretionary nature of leisure spending has led to major reductions in local authority leisure provision - with some pools closing and many transferring out of direct local authority control. There is also now a much greater emphasis on embracing the contribution that physical activity (not just sport) can make to broader health and wellbeing objectives. In light of these developments Sport Wales and the Welsh Government signalled that it was time to review the programmes and test their effectiveness and their impact.

¹ Sport Wales, *Sport and Active Lifestyles Survey 2016-17*, Cardiff, Sport Wales, 2017.

Section 2: Methods and Evidence

Sport Wales and the Welsh Government commissioned this external review to consider programme effectiveness and help shape and steer the future strategy for community sport in Wales. The review was overseen by a Steering Group comprising representatives of Sport Wales, Welsh Government, Swim Wales, and the Chief Leisure Officers of Wales. It was asked to:

- *Consider the contribution of free swimming to community sport and physical activity, as well as their impact across a number of Welsh Government priorities and wellbeing objectives.*
- *Determine whether the programmes have achieved their stated outcomes for children, young people and older adults and whether they can achieve a greater impact on sport and physical activity participation levels.*

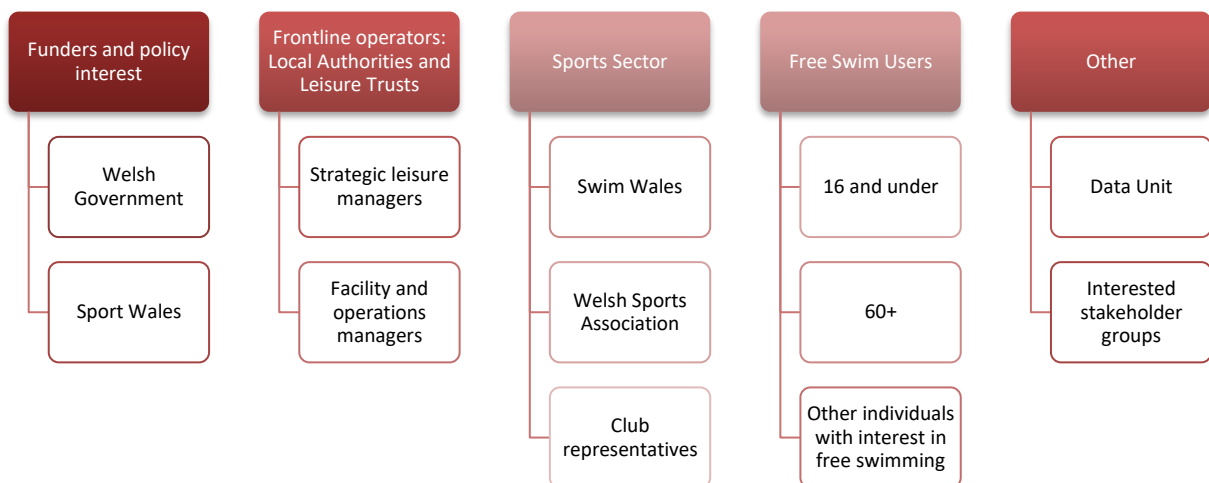
To answer these questions we collected a wide range of data, including drawing out the findings of previous research on free swimming programmes in Wales. We also examined a series of related issues, including:

- The changing profile in the numbers of free swims over the course of the programmes, and the reasons for reductions and changes in the use of free swimming, especially by young people.
- The views of key stakeholders including those of users, deliverers, and national stakeholders.
- The ‘cost’ of free swimming in terms of Welsh Government grant aid but also the actual cost to local authorities, and also to what extent cost is a barrier to participation.
- The equalities’ impact of the programmes, including the impact on those with protected characteristics.
- How the programmes compare across the success factors which have been previously identified in studies of free swimming, including:
 - Clear guidance about the objectives of free swimming programmes;
 - Effective marketing of free swimming programmes;
 - Funding mechanisms which allow free swimming to be tailored to local contexts;
 - Monitoring and evaluation which facilitates accountability;
 - The development of effective partnerships between the funders and agencies responsible for delivery; and
 - Maximising the synergies with other policies and programmes and especially the relationship of free swimming to ‘learn to swim’ and the school curriculum.

To examine these issues, we analysed existing data and gathered a wide range of views from stakeholders at both local and national level. We deployed a series of research methods:

- Assembling and analysis of substantial public documents and data sets, and an extensive literature review including grey literature;
- Interviews and workshops with local authorities and a wide range of other stakeholders. There were 40+ interviews and 37 participants in 3 workshops (in Cardiff, Swansea and Llandudno) and a session with the Board of Swim Wales. ;
- Case studies of five local authorities plus a constructed ‘avatar’ local authority that displayed less positive features;
- Analysis of local authorities’ plans in order to assess variations in local approaches;
- Analysis of the ‘cost’ of free swimming using a range of different assumptions;
- Specific analyses of connections between free swimming and other key policy areas and issues, including the curriculum, and other issues such as marketing and promotion; and
- An on-line survey available to all with an interest in free swimming.

Our coverage of stakeholders is indicated in the Table below:



We have presented the review through a description of the background, development, and current operation of the programmes (Section 3), our findings (Section 4), and our conclusions and suggestions for optional ways forward (Section 5). Our working papers and further details of the methodology are available from RCS.²

² See contact details at the Foreword.

Section 3: Background, Development and Current Operation

Introduction

Free swimming is a Welsh Government nationally funded programme involving the distribution of £3m. p.a. to local authorities by Sport Wales. The total funding available was originally informed by an assessment of the notional 'income foregone' by local authorities and related to the number of 'free' swims that were anticipated. Funding was initially allocated by direct grant to local authorities according to a population formula. Since 2015/16 the formula has also taken into account deprivation and there has been an added focus on 'Learn to Swim'. Funding is triggered by submission of local authority plans that must provide specified minimum levels of free swims for young people aged 16 and under and older people aged 60 plus, and form part of a broader plan that delivers the aquatics pathway in line with the aspiration to achieve "Every Child a Swimmer". In this section we describe the background, development, and current operation of the two free swimming programmes and the way in which Sport Wales has managed them.

Background

The Free Swimming Initiative was launched by the Welsh Government in 2003 and was Europe's first national free swimming programme. It began with a pilot with ten local authorities for young people during the school holidays, which was then extended in 2004 to all 22 Welsh local authorities. In late 2004, free swimming was also offered to older people at local authority pools outside of school holiday periods. Whilst it has been linked to a range of policies and strategies over the following fourteen years, a core objective was and remains "*to increase participation in physical activity and improve the health and wellbeing of the nation*". The assumption has been that by removing cost many more citizens would be encouraged to swim and do so more often, suggesting that cost is a major barrier to swimming.

Free swimming was seen as contributing to the broader policy set out in 'Climbing Higher'³ which suggested that adults should take at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise five times a week and that children should participate in 60 minutes of physical activity five times a week. The provision of free swimming as a 'universal' benefit was in keeping with a range of other Welsh Government initiatives that provided free services including, for example, free prescriptions.

Alongside and (mainly) after the Welsh Government launched the Free Swimming Initiative in 2003, a number of national and local schemes were implemented in various parts of the United Kingdom. The largest and most significant of these was the England Free Swimming Programme, but a number of small pilots delivered within a single local authority area were

³ Welsh Assembly Government, *Climbing Higher*, Cardiff, 2005.

also implemented. Free swimming provision has been offered as a stand-alone public health intervention (i.e. an initiative which is not part of a formal 'package' of measures), or as one component of broader programmes designed to encourage physical activity and healthy lifestyles. Most of these schemes have ended or radically reduced in scope since 2010, often associated with large scale public expenditure reductions.

Development of free swimming in Wales

Free swimming achieved significant initial success in increasing the number of swims among both target groups. Increases among older people have been largely sustained but the numbers of free swims by young people declined steeply from 2010 onwards. We explore the reasons below, in Section 4.

Free swimming has undergone significant change over time. In particular, the minimum provision for young people has changed and there has been an increased emphasis on structured activities for both age groups and, since 2015, on 'Every Child a Swimmer'. Prior to 2011, local authorities were required to provide free swimming for young people in school holidays *"for a minimum of 50% of all public swimming session times across the authority area"*. From 2010/11, they had to offer *"14 hours of free swimming per week per Local Authority area during all school holidays, of which a minimum of 7 hours would be structured aquatic activities"*.

The minimum criteria for 'splash' sessions for older people remained the same and covers all public swimming sessions outside school holidays. But there was an increased emphasis on structured activities, such as swimming lessons, disability sessions, aquafit classes, canoeing, lifesaving and multi-sport sessions, for both target groups. In addition, multi-sports opportunities and dry side activities became an eligible part of the free swimming offer, and provision for young people was extended to cover weekends as well as school holidays. These are seen as more likely than 'free splash' sessions to equip participants with the motivation, confidence and skills to participate in swimming and other aquatic activities. However, instructor/participant ratios, pool capacity and the availability and cost of employing or upskilling suitable instructors restrict the numbers who can participate.

Also in 2010, the funding for free swimming was included in individual annual local authority partnership agreements (LAPAs) that set out how free swimming is incorporated with wider sports development priorities (including swimming provision) and other funding streams. This strengthened the trend for local authorities to have much greater discretion in how the grant was deployed.

Current operation

The current operation of the free swimming programmes is best understood in terms of the policy context and the swimming landscape in which it operates, and also Sport Wales' stewardship of the scheme and the delivery arrangements in local authorities.

Policy context: The current policy context for free swimming is set out by the Welsh Government in *Taking Wales Forward*⁴. Free swimming is seen as contributing to achieving a Healthy and Active Wales as part of the broader goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015⁵. *Getting Wales Moving*⁶ states that "increasing levels of physical activity will be a key component of achieving the ambitions within the...Act". Sport Wales' remit letter from the Welsh Government defines free swimming as a dedicated budget line and sets out criteria for distribution of the grant.

Swimming in Wales: As noted above, young people's participation in free swimming has declined in recent years, but the School Sport Survey shows that, in common with most sports, the overall numbers participating in swimming have increased since 2011. Swimming also remains popular among adults with around 358,000 participants in Wales, 14% of those aged 16 and over⁷, although this reduces to about 6%⁸ amongst the 60 plus age group. Only walking and exercise activities have higher participation rates. Paid swims for those aged over 16 peaked in 2011-12 at almost 2 million⁹ and paid swims as a whole have remained largely steady over the past decade, but with a 16% increase in 2016/2017. National surveys also show that latent demand for swimming continues to be higher than for any other sport.

The number of swimming pools has reduced slightly. Seventeen have closed in the last ten years but eight have opened or re-opened following major refurbishments. There are currently 120¹⁰ local authority pools in Wales including traditional 'lane' pools and leisure pools with flumes and fun activity areas, and 84 pools operated by hotels, spas, private fitness providers, and further and higher education establishments.

Sport Wales' stewardship of free swimming: Sport Wales has been an active steward of free swimming. Responsibility for the delivery of free swimming transferred from Welsh Government to Sport Wales in 2005. Sport Wales introduced a menu of additional Upskilling Programmes for local authorities to draw on to strengthen their capacity to manage and deliver free swimming. They also commissioned a review which led to the revision of the

⁴ Welsh Government, *Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021*, Cardiff, 2016.

⁵ <https://futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/>

⁶ Public Health Wales and Sport Wales, *Getting Wales Moving*, Cardiff, 2017.

⁷ Sport Wales, *Sport and Active Lifestyles Survey 2016-17*, Cardiff, 2017.

⁸ This figure equates to some 49,000 people and was calculated by the Sport Wales Insight Team from Sport and Active Lifestyles Wales 2016-17 and Statistics Wales Mid-Year population estimates for 2016

⁹ This is from the Data Unit figures

¹⁰ Information provided by Sport Wales and Swim Wales

free swimming criteria mentioned above. The incorporation of free swimming delivery into the LAPAs was accompanied by a change of focus which required local authorities to focus “on what you achieve rather than where you spend the money”. Across the period to 2015/16 there was a series of initiatives to engage stakeholders and develop free swimming into a broader aquatics offer, including the introduction of Results Based Accounting, the development of aquatics plans, sharing best practice, and moving towards the goal of ‘Every Child a Swimmer’ by the age of 11.

The reductions in expenditure on free swimming in 2015/16 prompted further re-thinking about the objectives of the programmes. Sport Wales’ Impact Assessment of budget reductions concluded that even in high performing local authorities, on average a young person only accessed free swimming twice a year, and that in practice it was not accessible to the 25% of young people who are unable to swim. National survey data showed that people living in deprived areas were less likely to be swimmers, and it was concluded that there was a need for greater emphasis on targeted investment on learning to swim and on the swimming pathway for these groups.

The current criteria introduced in 2015/16 for young people (aged 16 and under) require local authorities to provide:

- 14 hours of free swimming per week per local authority area during all school holidays, of which at least seven hours must be structured aquatic activities;
- one dedicated structured session for disabled children per week per local authority area during all school holidays; and
- two hours of free swimming or a dry side activity per weekend per local authority area throughout the year.

The criteria for older people are that local authorities:

- are required to provide free swimming during all public swimming sessions outside of school holidays;
- are encouraged to extend the provision to all public sessions throughout the year where this is possible; and
- should offer a minimum of one hour per day per local authority of unstructured swimming, and a minimum of one hour per week per pool, dedicated to a free structured activity session such as swimming lessons, aqua aerobics etc. These activities should be targeted locally and ensure inclusive provision for older people, such as: people with a disability, black and ethnic minority groups, Welsh speakers and other individuals and groups according to local circumstances, needs and priorities.

Plans developed by local authorities and agreed with Sport Wales are expected to provide details of Learn to Swim in each local authority area. Other requirements are for the local authority to:

- Demonstrate how any voluntary sector delivery of pools is being supported if appropriate (and, in practice, other pools including private ones);
- Evidence the level of investment into each pool and why the resource has been allocated; and
- Evidence how the Welsh Government's free swimming investment is being used to support the delivery of the aquatics pathway. This should include how the local authority is improving the transition between school swimming, Learn to Swim, and aquatic club programmes.

Sport Wales' requirements also recognise that the injection of national grant aid creates a risk of 'displacement', and therefore include a number of prohibitions such that the scheme must not:

- Displace the responsibility of schools to teach young people to swim;
- Interfere with the commercial opportunities for local authority swimming pools to raise income from swimming lessons; and
- Be used as an income line against swimming.

The free swimming plans produced by local authorities are discussed and agreed with Sport Wales' liaison officers, and monitored actively on a six monthly basis. For example, the 'Active Gwent' region's KPIs for 2017/18 included:

- Achievement of the minimum criteria of hours of provision for the two beneficiary groups;
- Adoption of the Learn to Swim framework and associated targets;
- Upskilling of teachers, coaches and volunteers;
- Marketing;
- Targeting of under-represented groups; and
- Pool access.

However, in practice, as long as a local authority meets the core minimum criteria in terms of hours of provision there are no incentives or sanctions available to Sport Wales to influence performance. Nor is there any performance related element to the grant itself, although some authorities do operate a degree of performance related budgeting between pools and leisure centres within their own compass.

Delivery arrangements in local authorities: In keeping with local prioritisation and a focus on results rather than specified activities, there is considerable diversity of approach and provision at local authority level. Most local authority pools are now managed under arms' length arrangements through leisure trusts, which in some places has shifted the ethos

towards a greater focus on cost and return, and has sometimes added additional complexity to the accountability arrangements. The core funding distributed to local authorities was initially divided between £2.4m. allocated to the young people programme and £1m. for the older people programme, plus a budget for marketing and promotion. But there is now no distinction in the grants allocated to the two programmes so in practice local authorities deploy the grant in a wide variety of ways and with a much stronger weighting towards older people than previously.

This in turn produces a wide range of results. Swansea, for example, has a relatively high number of free swims for both young people and older people, although in keeping with national trends this has declined in absolute terms amongst young people whilst the latter has remained relatively level. For young people the number of free swims exceed those which are paid for. In Bridgend, the young people free swim numbers are mid table but for the older age group it is the highest in the country. Twice as many paid swims are taken than the number of free swims for young people. Only 21% of Bridgend pupils at year 6 appear to meet the national curriculum learn to swim standard, compared to 85% for Swansea¹¹. The contrast between two adjoining coastal authorities could hardly be more stark.

In Powys the free swim numbers for both target groups are relatively low, and free swim numbers for young people have declined dramatically since 2011, and are down by more than 80%. But the number of paid swims has held steady, such that by 2016/17 they stood at more than 10 times the current number of free swims by young people. Yet interestingly, for Powys free swimming remains a “vital scheme” even though the “current grant doesn’t cover anywhere near what we provide and would like to provide.” Anglesey, in contrast, has an unusually strong focus on free structured ‘swims’, and in 2015/16 there were four times as many free structured swims as free splashes. For the older age group there was also a high level of structured activities. But by 2016/17 this had reduced, and there were three times as many paid swims as the number of free structured and free splash swims combined by young people.

Blaenau Gwent has quite high numbers of free swims for young people relative to other local authorities, and low relative rates for older people, and with few structured swims for the former and very few for older people. But it has a relatively high Learn to Swim level of 73% for Year 6 pupils.

The extent of variation is clear, and there are also variations between authorities in the extent to which local authorities target the needs of disabled people beyond the minimum required provision, how they engage with swimming lessons, the connection to any GP

¹¹ However, the data are not entirely reliable as a result of wide variation in how it is collected and reported at local authority level, and so these figures must be treated with caution.

referral schemes, and almost all other dimensions. The examples below give a more detailed insights into these and other variations.

Swansea has a population of 245,000 people, with 45,000 young people aged 16 and under and 61,000 adults aged 60 plus. The local authority operates 4 pools and the Wales National Pool offers free swimming for 60+. In the 2014 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), 18 (12%) of Swansea's 148 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) were in the most deprived 10 per cent in Wales and with leisure centres other than the National Pool being based in areas of deprivation, free swimming is thought to have value as cost is considered a barrier for people in some parts of the authority. An adult public swim session in Swansea costs £2.90 (£3.76 Wales average) and £2.20 for juniors (£2.30). Paid swims have increased slightly in the last two years.

Swansea's budget was reduced in 2015/16, and like most LAs, swims for young people have fallen since 2012/13, although the LA had the 3rd highest rate of free public swims at 409 per 1,000 population in 2016-17. Provision for 'splash' has been reduced and more emphasis has been placed on structured activities. Being a coastal authority, learning to swim and water safety is seen as paramount.

Free public swims for 60+ have held up well over time and Swansea is currently ranked 7th with 848 swims per 1,000. Older adults are viewed as a prospective customer to target for other activities offered through leisure services. The health and wellbeing and social benefits of swimming for older adults are a positive outcome. Swimathon and friendship groups have developed among older adults from their free swimming participation. Taking into account deprivation and cost barriers, Swansea emphasises the targeting of resources and outreach work to focus on those excluded from participating. There are active links between leisure staff and sports development and schools for Learn to Swim, the BME forum and disability forums. In terms of any future development, flexibility in the age ranges covered may be beneficial: *"We are getting more and more grandparents and looking at that linkage to engage with both young and old at the same times, rather than see them separately"*.

Free Swimming is considered worthwhile and useful: *"It gives opportunities for all, but we have to get the message out from an equalities' and inclusiveness point of view and target areas of inactivity - whether it is cultural as in poor/deprived areas of Swansea or culture of the family... The principles of it are still there – and perhaps we all need a challenge that it is a grant and not just a transaction, so we need to make the best use of it"*.

Blaenau Gwent has a population of 69,600 people, with 12,900 young people aged 16 and under and 17,700 adults aged 60+. Since 2014, Aneurin Leisure have operated the three pools. Blaenau Gwent had the least change to its budget when there were

reductions in 2015. The authority has a high level of deprivation and in the 2014 WIMD, 23.4% of 47 LSOAs were in the most deprived 10 per cent in Wales. The price of an adult public swim session in Blaenau Gwent is £3.40 and £1.45 for juniors, lower than the average for Wales at £3.76 and £2.30 respectively. Paid swims for U17s have increased since 2015.

With regards to 60 plus, participation rates per 1000 for splash and structured are in the lower third with 449 swims per 1,000 but considered to be rising due to links with the GP referral scheme. Over 60's have access to all public and adult only sessions in Aneurin Leisure swimming pools 39 weeks a year.

Blaenau Gwent had the 8th highest rates of free public swims at 323 per 1,000 population for young people in 2016-17. However, free-splash is thought to be '*much of a muchness*'. Blaenau Gwent's school Learn to Swim figures are strong - 73% of Year 6 pupils met the national curriculum standard in 2016/17. All 3 pools deliver entry level swimming lessons on the weekend for years 7, 8 & 9 pupils from deprived demographics to engage into the Learn to Swim pathway.

Funding for workforce development was considered a problem. Blaenau Gwent's plan shows that funding is allocated for part time swimming pathway mentors and volunteer development. The mentors will contribute to an aquatics pathway that links free swimming, LTS and exit routes into club swimming, but also bridge the gap between exit standards of the LTS programme and entry level of club swimming. Additional responsibilities will include developing volunteers through CPD, coach education and into employment, driving additional swimming lessons and increasing numbers and class capacity. Targeting of resources is evident and disability provision is in place across all pools.

Dual use contracting was thought to be detrimental to effective delivery. Free Swimming had potential to have a positive impact in other policy domains, although the reporting of it was seen as invalid, with greater partnership working needed, especially with schools due to the strengths of physical literacy. Free Swimming is viewed as valuable but needs more structure.

Powys has a population of 132,200 people, with 22,800 young people aged 16 and under and 44,400 adults aged 60 plus. Freedom Leisure operates 13 pools in Powys, the highest number of pools per local authority in Wales. 1.3% of Powys' 79 LSOAs are in the most deprived 10 per cent in Wales.

In 2015/16, Powys had the largest budget reduction of all LAs. The price of an adult public swim session in Powys is £4.60 and £3.20 for juniors, higher than the average for Wales.

"The current grant doesn't cover anywhere near what we provide and indeed, what we'd like to provide. We also find it very restrictive as it doesn't give us the freedom to provide the opportunities that we'd like too in all pools at all times."

Rural deprivation was considered the main barrier in this area. Powys had the third lowest rate of free public swims at 77 per 1,000 population for 16 and under in 2016-17 and in the lower half for 60 plus (672 swims per 1,000 for adults). However, the 60+ group were felt to participate strongly and really value the 'free' element – swimming being something they wouldn't continue with if a cost was incurred. Free Swimming is thought to be valuable, especially as an educational tool for young people. As a result, a range of aquatic activities are offered. 70% of Powys Year 6 pupils met the required swimming standard in 2016/17.

Powys staff reported strong links to other policy domains such as mental health and wellbeing, social inclusion. *"It's a vital scheme for both target groups. There would be a huge noise if it was removed, especially for the 60 plus. We are rurally deprived here, and we have already cut back on their provision. Because of the spread of the authority it can be costly for people just to get to the facility"*.

The annual grant cycle is seen as detrimental to the effectiveness of the delivery of the program and respondents thought FS should form an integral part of future sport strategy. More collaboration needed with the delivery/reporting of the program, for example with Swim Wales.

Gwynedd has a population of 123,600 people, with 22,200 young people aged 16 and under and 35,100 adults aged 60+. There are eight pools, and the price of an adult public swim session is £3.50 and £2.40 for juniors.

In the 2014 WIMD, 4.1% of Gwynedd's 73 LSOAs were in the most deprived 10 per cent in Wales and Gwynedd had the largest reduction in budget in North Wales in 2015/16. Whereas there were very high numbers of swims in the early days of the scheme, these have fallen since the change in funding formula. *"Rurality here is even more of a priority and the distance to travel – that wasn't a factor in the change in funding of free swimming"*. The numbers of public and structured swims per 1,000 population are now in the lower third for both age groups.

Free splash is felt to work better in this area rather than free structured: *"When we offered free structured classes, take up was very low. When we offered free structured classes for £1, take up increased. That gave us the message that people prefer to pay something, so they can see whether there is value in it. There is no 'value' in a free structured class: for the individual to see a value there has to be a heavily subsidised*

activity...It looks like we don't do it but in fact it is just heavily subsidised. No appetite – what engages their parents is the free if a child is under 7 the parents go free and it was well used but unfortunately it was not part of free swimming”

83% of Year 6 pupils in Gwynedd meet the standard although free swim is not perceived to contribute directly to the success of passing this test, as pass rates have remained around this level for the previous 10-15 years. Those who sign up for Learn to Swim can swim free at weekends anyway. The local authority works in partnership with schools and has good membership systems - this information tells them which young people are not getting access, and whether they come from deprived areas. *“Commonly in deprived areas we put on additional targeted lessons as we know the numbers signing up and learn to swim rates are lower there compared with the population overall. So that's where free swim is used to top up”.*

An example of a successful outcome of free swimming was given: *“There was one pool in quite a deprived area with not much use in 2003. There were questions about its future. By allowing free swim, the kids got engaged at that pool – 4 hours of provision. The pool has turned itself around and now is the best performing. It now has a highly successful swimming club which is attributed to free swimming – people started coming in, enjoying themselves, then becoming more and more involved. Coming out of free swimming to learn to swim we now have a performance club for all. Free Swimming doesn't underpin that sort of thing now”.*

Gwynedd's grant now supports only the minimum levels of provision equally across all 8 pools, whereas previously four hours per day were offered per pool, bringing in *“fantastic numbers”*. Looking to the future, if changes and flexibility are an option, Gwynedd would rebalance the criteria and provision towards young people and providing an enjoyable, free basic entitlement that is not overcomplicated by multiple objectives.

Bridgend has a population of 143,200 people, with 27,400 young people aged 16 and under and 37,000 adults aged 60 plus. 10.2% of Bridgend's 88 LSOAs are in the most deprived 10 per cent in Wales. Halo Leisure has operated the five pools since 2013. This move to Halo has resulted in an increased focus on cost effectiveness and determining value – *“a repositioning”*. The 60+ group engages well in Free Swimming here – in 2016/17, Bridgend had the highest rate of swims per 1,000 (2,076) in Wales. For young people, there were 263 free public swims per 1,000 population, moving from a rank of 22nd in 2012-13 to mid-table.

The price of an adult public swim session in Bridgend is £3.90 and £2.10 for juniors. Free swimming is seen as a product that can encourage more regular swimming throughout the life course - but there are also many other low budget offers, and other free

swimming options are available 'outside' of the scheme. For example, those who sign up to 'Learn to Swim' are given free access, and there are holiday offers and sessions such as 'Free Swim Fridays' for families. The 'Access to Leisure' scheme provides an affordable offer.

Free Swim offers are available at all times, not just at 'down times' for disadvantaged communities, and it is set up as 'distinct' in current format. *"We've never integrated it in as the core budget. It's always been distinct – it is apportioned as part of the management and performance of centres rather than a gratuity to be shared... The truth for us is we could earn more money without it. But the offer is right, but hard to keep it working effectively and refresh and renew it...could do more to connect to broader outcomes".*

Teaching of swimming has a clear pathway, but free swimming is not necessarily used for this *"We were pretty early with the intensive model – a strength. We now focus most of our primary sport on this model and consistency of staff teaching. School swimming and the connection of school swimming into Halo swimming is positive. We have a pathway on to the Development centre and the regional performance situation is clear."* At face value however, the results provide a clear contrast to this statement. 21% of Bridgend's Year 6 pupils met the national curriculum standard in 2016/17, a fall from 78% prior to the change in criteria of how the standard is measured. That change which makes the standard harder to achieve, and this may explain the difference, but also the consistency of measurement across Wales and quality of the data is questionable, so these results must be treated with caution.

Structured swimming is felt to work better for younger people than splash, although there are doubts over whether it can increase participation. As an activity, swimming is not the only free offer available *"we also offer free dry side activities at 14 locations during holidays and we also are funded by the town and community council for free activities in holidays for other things"*. This additional provision accounts for 8,000 to 9,000 attendances although this is 'invisible' activity because it is not collated in monitoring returns. As with other areas, 'free' is not necessarily considered a good offer but understanding what kinds of membership and use is affordable for those who are excluded is important. *"I'm interested what are the opportunities for regular, sustainable activities, a multi offer, not a single sport offer. The one membership should give access to 20 activities in these places and spaces, take account of the seasonal aspect. Could be a large sports club if wanted to brand it that way. That is where the FS could connect to a concept"*. Geography and the transport the issue for some communities in Bridgend and with the Valleys, lack of doorstep provision is a factor. *"Culturally if it's not there, people don't use it. Unless young people get activity through school, then they don't get it from*

family. Young people now have ownership and more control over decisions, but whether swimming is part of their menu of choice I think it varies”.

We also analysed aspects of free swimming implementation that were less robust. This enabled us to create an ‘avatar’ local authority comprising the features of a notional local authority which displayed characteristics which in our assessment are associated with less effective free swimming provision at local level. One or more than one of these characteristics are present in many cases. These are assembled in the box below.

Features of an ‘avatar’, less effective local authority:

- The free swimming grant is absorbed into a bigger pot and seen as an income stream, not a grant.
- The free swimming ‘plan’ is unclear and does not go beyond delivering the ‘minimum’ criteria. There is no clear link to a broader aquatics plan or other development work with partners.
- Take-up is varied within a local authority area, but no resources are devoted to addressing the areas that might benefit from support and targeted work.
- Irregular data collection and monitoring of effectiveness.
- Marketing of Free Swimming is not a priority. Local promotion of the offer is difficult to find for a member of the public and free swimming and the relevant timetables are not high profile on local authority websites.
- Discussions about Free Swimming within the local authority or region are disjointed from other workstreams – it is a standalone topic.
- Workforce shortages and lack of funding for training and developing the right workforce may be an issue. Additional training may be needed to upskill to develop Welsh medium provision and suitable offers that can engage with underrepresented groups.
- No relationship with school provision or signposting to a pathway of aquatics opportunities for potential customers.
- No designated lead in the authority with clear lead responsibility for delivery of free swimming and ensuring that the grant is used to good effect.

Section 4: The Findings

Previous research

As part of our review, we analysed the findings of previous studies of free swimming in Wales. The independent evaluation of the Free Swimming Initiative in Wales, which was published in 2008, concluded that it promoted a rise in swimming participation among both age groups and had a positive impact with hard to reach groups. There was some evidence of progression into other aquatics opportunities, and although the population of young people was decreasing, the number of swims per 1,000 population remained steady after the initial surge in participation until 2009.

The 2008 evaluation¹² and other previous studies note that free swimming monitoring data (collated by local authorities and reported by the Data Unit: Wales) tell us where, when and how many free swim opportunities are accessed. But it does not record the characteristics of the participants: where they live, how often they attend, their level of swimming ability, and whether they access other types of aquatic opportunities and sport generally. Data on swimmers' personal outcomes, experience and satisfaction with free swimming are not available. However, analysis of swimming participation in Wales shows that, as for most sports, young people living in more deprived areas of Wales are less likely to access sports opportunities, particularly formal activities which may include swimming lessons and club based opportunities¹³.

This is not just a matter of cost. The 2008 evaluation reported that other factors such as the location of pools, the times when free swimming was available, the desire to avoid noisy over-crowded pools, and a dislike of swimming, were all significant deterrents to participation. These same kinds of issues are reflected in Sport Wales' current insight on the importance of considering the 'elements of engagement'¹⁴ and how individuals have very different levels of access, motivation, confidence, awareness, and perceptions of the experience of being active.

Previous research has also concluded that cost is a less important barrier to the older age group. It found that the two reasons older people cite most often for not swimming are a lack of fitness and a feeling that they are simply 'too old' to engage in this form of exercise¹⁵. Identical issues were found in our analysis of 2016 Sport Wales Sport and Active Lifestyles data. Cost was not a prominent issue for the older age group, whereas it was a barrier reported by younger adults aged 16 to 34.

¹² N Bolton, *et al Free Swimming evaluation 2008*, Cardiff, InVEST, p32.

¹³ www.schoolsportsurvey. See RCS Working Paper *Free Swimming Data Analysis*, Cardiff UKRCS Ltd, 2018.

¹⁴ <http://sport.wales/research--policy/tools-and-resources/publications.aspx>

¹⁵ Sports Council for Wales, *Adult participation in sport*, Sports Update, No. 61, Cardiff, 2009

From 2008 Sport Wales adopted a greater focus on ‘structured’ sessions and less emphasis on ‘free splash’ sessions. There have been debates over the respective merits of high participation in free splash at busy public sessions as opposed to small numbers attending structured sessions that can support wellbeing objectives and sport development progression. On the one hand structured opportunities that focus on engagement and skill development provide a gateway to accessing swimming and other aquatic opportunities, as well as helping to equip people with an essential life skill. This was viewed by some as a more appropriate justification for using public money to support free swimming. On the other hand, a free splash can be an accessible, fun opportunity for young people, but this offer may not develop physical literacy or target resources to groups most in need. This is an issue which we followed up, as reported below.

Free swimming: The numbers

Free swimming is in some respects extremely data rich, and reliably so, and in ways which are better than for many other free swim programmes. Free swimming monitoring information is collected by the 22 local authorities and submitted to the Data Unit. Data have been consistently collected and verified since 2008 and published on the Free Swimming Portal¹⁶.

The story in numbers is fairly straightforward in overall, national terms. It is set out in Figure 1 and shows participation in free splash and in free structured swims. For young people the number of free splash swims initially increased very rapidly, reaching more than 800,000 in 2004/5 (from a total of 387,000 swims by young people during the summer holidays in 2002¹⁷) but then declining to 600,000 in 2009/10 and to just 145,000 by 2016/17. Structured swims for young people reached 94,000 by 2009/10 before declining significantly but more slowly than free swims to 47,000 by 2016/17. Paid swims meanwhile increased from some 300,000 to some 400,000 from 2009/10 to 2016/17.

For the older age group, the story is of an initial increase to more than 600,000 ‘free splash’ swims which has remained fairly steady since. Meanwhile structured swims peaked at 104,000 in 2013/14, before falling back to 73,000 in 2016/17.

The key questions which the data throw up are why free swimming numbers have held up for the older age group, and why has there been such a steep decline for young people’s participation in the scheme, especially given that the national funding for free swimming has not declined to anything like the same extent. Funding was reduced overall from £3.4m.

¹⁶ <http://www.freeswimmingwales.net/IAS/launch>

¹⁷ From the 2008 InVEST report: “In 2002 the year before the implementation of the FSI, there were a total of 387,000 swims taken by the 16 and under age group during the summer holidays (SCW 2004a)” (Ref: Sports Council for Wales (2004a) *Report to the Welsh Assembly Government on the Free Swimming Pilot – Summer Holidays 2003*, Cardiff: Sports Council for Wales). Bolton, N, et. al. (2008) *Free Swimming: An Evaluation of the Welsh Assembly Government’s Initiative*, Cardiff: Sports Council for Wales.

to £3m. p.a. in 2015/16, and has reduced further as a function of the (relatively benign) level of inflation since then, having been held level financially in absolute terms. Nonetheless the decline in participation among young people both pre-dates the real terms financial reduction and has been far steeper.

The reduction in young people's swims: We have assessed the secondary data to explore the issue of these falling numbers. Figure 1 shows the drop particularly affecting young people, and the latest reported data from the Data Unit for December 2017-January 2018 continues to show this decline, with a 15% decrease in the number of free public swims for both younger and older people compared to the same period the year before¹⁸. We have considered the following potential explanations of the reduction in free swims by young people:

- National decline in the popularity of swimming;
- Population changes;
- The balance between free swimming and paid for swims;
- The balance between investment in free splash as against structured swimming activities; and
- The changes in the minimum provision criteria associated with reductions in funding, and local authorities differentially protecting provision for the older age group, set against broader reductions in public expenditure.

¹⁸ <http://www.freeswimmingwales.net/IAS/news/>

Figure 1: Free and paid swims for 16 and under

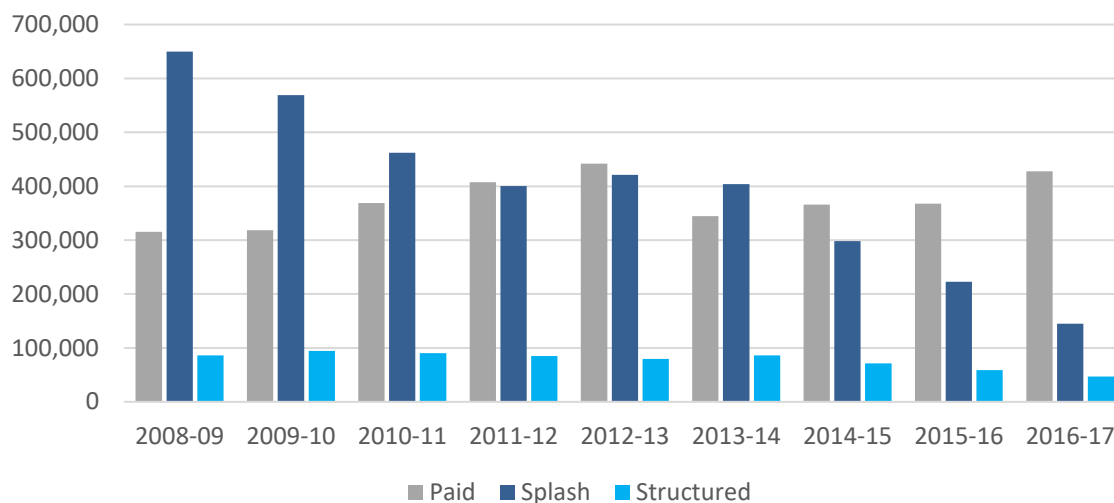
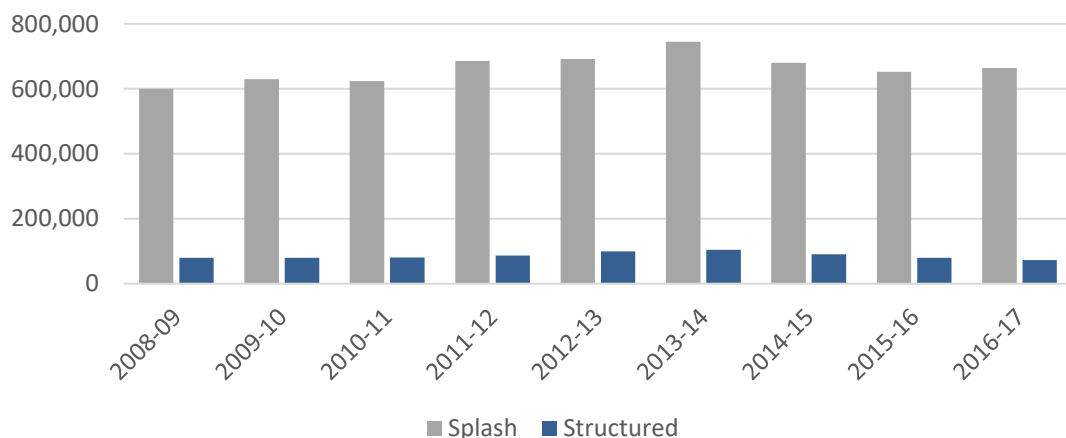


Figure 2: Free swims for 60+



The fall in free swimming does not in fact reflect a general fall in **national sport participation** levels or interest in swimming as a popular activity. Sport Wales’ survey data show that the percentage of young people aged 7 to 16 taking part three or more times a week in sport has actually increased from 27% in 2011, to 40% in 2013 and 48% in 2015¹⁹. No methodological changes to the survey were made during this time. In relation to swimming more than half of young people (57%) aged 7 to 16 reported they had taken part in swimming in 2015 and 48% in 2013. In 2015, 45% wanted to do more swimming. The reduction for the older age group is in any event much smaller, as shown in Figure 2, and survey data show that 14% of adults take part in swimming - the most popular activity reported after walking – and that 58% of all adults report an unmet demand for sport, the greatest demand for which is swimming (18%). Thus the interest in ‘swimming’ has not

¹⁹ Sport Wales School Sport Survey and www.schoolsportsurvey.org.uk and Sport and Active Lifestyles http://sportwales.org.uk/media/1929053/state_of_the_nation_report_english.pdf

decreased despite a fall in free swims and swimming continues to show high 'latent demand' and participation.

Neither do **population changes** account for a fall in swims. Although a demographic analysis of Wales reveals fewer young people and more older people this does not account for the extent of change shown in the data. As reported by the Data Unit, even keeping that factor constant the number of free swims per 1,000 population of young people shows the same steep downward trend.

Nor does the increase in **paid swims** which has occurred compensate for reduced free swim provision and take up. The numbers of paid swims for the 16 and under age group peaked in 2011-12 at almost 2 million. Although paid swims for young people aged 16 and under during holiday periods over time show a slight increase (Figure 1), they do not compensate sufficiently for the fall in free swims during the same period. In fact, paid swims for this age group were higher in 2012-13 (442,000) when free swims were also higher, compared with paid swims in 2016-17 (428,000). For the period 2008 to 2018, the difference between the highest and lowest recorded year of **paid** swims for the 16 and under is 127,000. The difference between the highest and lowest recorded years for **free** swims (free splash plus free structured) for the same age group and period is approximately 544,000.

We considered whether areas with bigger budget cuts in 2015/16 recorded a greater number of paid swims to compensate for any 'lost' free swims. There is no clear pattern. In 2016-17, paid swims also increased in all the local authorities that had a budget increase for free swims. It is also unclear from the data how far provision is affected by budget changes, as reductions in average hours of provision at local level do not always correspond with a reduction in budget.

It could be possible that the reduction is a consequence of a re-balancing of resources between **free splash and free structured** swim activities. This appears unlikely because the number of structured activities for young people has reduced as well as the numbers for free splash, although not as much, as Figure 1 shows. However, the cost profile of free splash and structured activities is completely different. Free splash has a very low marginal additional cost unless pools become full to over-capacity because the pools are generally open anyway. However, structured activities incur specific additional costs per session. Moreover, it is possible that free splash and structured activities are not 'either-or', in the manner of a zero-sum game, but rather that the provision of structured activities stimulates and is complementary to free splash by way of introducing new entrants to swimming or building confidence.

The **minimum provision** requirements of grant funding for free swimming have not been onerous throughout the programmes, notwithstanding the changes that have been

introduced. Many local authorities initially exceeded the minimum requirements considerably, and some still do. However, the reductions in grant and the revised distribution formula in 2015/16, and the wider reductions in local authority expenditure, have exercised downward pressure on the amount of provision. We analysed unpublished data supplied by the Data Unit and Sport Wales on the average number of hours provided for free swimming from 2011 to 2016. It should be noted that in recent years, the collection of this data was not mandatory or subject to the usual validation process²⁰. Bearing this in mind, data were still worthy of exploration to understand whether declining swims coincided with falling provision, and it seems this is the case.

The analysis shows that the average hours of free splash provision for young people fell by more than half from 2011-12 to 2016-17 - the hours of free splash fell from approximately 25,800 hours to 12,000, and free structured from 8,000 to 3,400 hours. In contrast, free splash for the 60 plus age group fell by under a quarter (24%) from 2011-12 to 2016-17 from 174,200 hours in 2011/12 to 141,700 in 2015/16. Moreover, the average hours of free structured provision for young people fell by 60% from 2011-12 to 2016-17. Again, free structured hours for the older age group did not change as much – falling by 28% from 2011-12 to 2016-17²¹. But the numbers of participants per session hour held up much better across the period, albeit with some fluctuations.

The evidence from local authorities is that reductions of provision towards the minimum criteria - particularly for free splash for young people - are due to budget cuts and changes in funding formula, and the cost of covering the swims. Reducing the hours can free up pool time for paid-for lessons. In terms of how this played out at local level, one local authority interviewee described the changes in these terms:

“The main driver of reducing the provision toward the minimum criteria was the level of grant received. Since 2003 the level of grant was not increased with inflation whereas fees for entry to swimming pool increased substantially. There was therefore, a loss of income when the free sessions were programmed which led to the initiative losing its appeal to operators. Also, the funding formula was changed in 2015/2016 which led to the North Wales local authorities losing a substantial proportion of the grant to South Wales local authorities. This has resulted in the provision becoming worthless in my opinion compared to where we were in the early years.”

Our best assessment is that the reductions in the use of free swimming arise principally in the changes in the minimum provision criteria associated with reductions in funding, and

²⁰ See RCS Working Paper *Free Swimming Data Analysis*, Cardiff UKRCS Ltd, 2018 for calculations on average hours across different school holiday periods. For adults, averages were reported every two months.

²¹ Hours of provision rounded to nearest 100. It should be noted that hours of provision are based on averages and the quality of the data has not been verified in last two years.

local authorities differentially protecting provision for the older age group. Pressures on local authority leisure budgets made it more difficult for them to go above and beyond the required minimum levels of provision, combined with changes to the funding formula in 2015 to “*better reflect the degree of socio-economic deprivation in each local authority*”²² that led to a reduction in funding to 16 of the 22 local authorities. Although most authorities continue to provide more than the minimum, they have reduced provision and numbers of swims have reduced accordingly – and of course they still receive the same level of grant²³.

This analysis also accords with the evidence we obtained from authoritative observers working closely with free swimming on the ground with long experience of the scheme and with the changes which have taken place.

Stakeholders

We received evidence from a wide range of stakeholders who we interviewed and surveyed in the course of our review. These include officials from the Welsh Government, Sport Wales, Swim Wales and Welsh Sports Association, Disability Sport Wales, the Data Unit and local authority staff responsible for managing and delivering free swimming, and respondents to our on-line survey (N=359 – mainly free swimming users).

The ‘user’²⁴ view: Our online user survey of 359 respondents confirmed that users were generally strongly in favour of free swimming and emphasised its importance and benefits. In general, survey respondents considered all of the national aims associated with free swimming to be ‘Very Important’ or ‘Quite Important’. Very few respondents considered any of the aims to be ‘Not Very Important’ or ‘Not at All Important’. The national aims of free swimming that were identified as ‘Very Important’ by the largest proportion of survey respondents were: *To help young people learn to swim (83%); To increase participation in physical activity for young people aged 16 and under (82%); and Improve the health and wellbeing of the population in Wales (77%)*. Other aims considered ‘Very Important’ by well over half of respondents were: *To support an all-Wales ambition of Every Child a Swimmer (73%); To make swimming more accessible for those living in disadvantaged areas (72%); To increase the opportunities for people with disabilities to swim (69%); and, To increase*

²² <http://gov.wales/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/previous-administration/2015/freeswimming/?lang=en>
<http://www.swimwales.org/pages/learn-to-swim-wales>

²³ There is potentially also the issue of arms-length bodies and whether this move intensifies the commerciality of the operation and mean that local authorities have driven provision closer to the minimum criteria. It is not clear that is the case – respondents thought that it might partly have an effect, but that this was also happening prior to a move to an arms’ length operator and also where free swimming remained in a local authority.

²⁴ We refer here to the ‘user’ view although the survey was also completed by some people with an interest in the programmes who were not completing it as swimming participants or ‘for’ a participant (e.g. participants’ parents). A secondary analysis has confirmed that the ‘actual’ users have a similar response profile to respondents overall. See RCS Working Paper, *Free Swimming Survey Analysis*, Cardiff, UKRCS Ltd, 2018 for a fuller analysis of the results.

participation in physical activity for adults aged 60+ (68%). Fewer respondents considered as important the aims: To provide structured organised sessions that lead to progression in swimming and other aquatic activities (51%); To provide an opportunity to swim for social purpose (50%); and, To help older adults learn to swim (49%).

Respondents indicated that the programmes had a range of impacts on both target groups relating to increasing participation in swimming and physical activity, improving health and wellbeing, and bringing new customers to leisure centres. They felt that the programme has had more of an effect on *bringing in older customers to leisure centres* than *bringing in new young customers to leisure centres*. Views were much more mixed as to whether the programmes had a positive impact on potential black and ethnic minority participants, and people with disabilities. They were also more mixed on whether the programmes were cost effective, and whether they had led to joining a swimming club and identification of swimming talent.

The online survey revealed that the most significant perceived barriers to participation for young people were perceived as *Cost; A lack of awareness of what is available; Transport – the local population find it difficult to access provision; and, A lack of interest from the community in the type of opportunities offered*. The *Quality of Facilities* does not appear to be a particularly important barrier to participation in swimming for younger people, and *Cultural and Religious Barriers* were identified by very few respondents. The barriers which are perceived to be the most significant to older people differ - *Cost* is seen as a much less significant barrier, although *lack of awareness of what is available* is also seen as a very important barrier for them. The other most important barriers to participation for them were seen as *Internal barriers such as low confidence, self-esteem, Lack of physical capacity (inability to swim), and Transport*.

In relation to performance monitoring, respondents generally either did not know whether the national arrangements are appropriate or whether local arrangements were in place, or had no opinion either way. The responses do clearly indicate that the vast majority of respondents believe that free swimming should be a core part of the new vision which Sport Wales is preparing for the sector.

Deliverers' views: We undertook extensive interviewing with local authority officers and held a number of workshops. Views were gathered from all 22 local authorities. Much of the evidence was consistent, but there were different views on important issues including the relative value of the approaches being adopted and the perceptions of the outcomes they can achieve. The different approaches adopted reflect the discretion local authorities have been given via the LAPA agreements which has resulted in different objectives driven by local needs' analysis. There was also considerably variation in the perceived quality of delivery and plans – some are thoughtful and comprehensive, with free swimming closely

connected to explicit broader aquatics objectives, whilst other plans are cursory in terms of implementation and critical success factors.

In terms of **objectives and funding**, many authorities are keen on free swimming and were energised about delivering it, even when in some cases the written plans themselves are relatively weak. Free swimming is generally seen as a cost-effective way to increase overall participation and to create links to other areas of work. Thus 'Every Child a Swimmer' was mentioned frequently as a key objective, as was the objective of tackling deprivation and opening access for underrepresented groups. Local authorities often see a focus on learn to swim and top-up lessons as a strength:

"That in itself works better (than free splash) – greater onus on the LA to work for the money... With the change in focus naturally the numbers decrease but overall you get more out of it" (West Wales LA).

In several local authorities individuals who sign up for local authority swimming lessons can access swimming for free in any case. So in those areas there is an effort to add value in using the free swimming money to target deprived areas and schools that have not achieved the required Key Stage 2 standard of learn to swim. Local authority interviewees noted that it was not always easy to get parents and children to take up the free offer of lessons – despite promoting the activities via the schools. There was spare capacity in some areas where sessions either were not filling or where attendance fell short. Feedback from one workshop cited only around a 20% attendance at a free 'Learn to Swim' holiday course and it was thought the low take-up partly related to underlying issues where swimming is not prioritised or perhaps is viewed as inaccessible among families living in socially deprived areas of Wales.

In contrast, some local authorities feel that structured and 'learn to swim' offers have limited appeal for young people. It can be viewed as a test, rather than giving access to an enjoyable experience that encourages participation. As one interviewee commented:

*"I don't think really that 'every child swimmer' is an outcome, it's a test. What happens as a result of that, how will it be used? Every child a **regular** swimmer would be different". (South Wales local authority).*

Some local authorities favour continuing the 'free splash' offer and then trying to develop sustained participation from there, perhaps through taster sessions. One interviewee commented that originally, free swimming was:

"a fantastic incentive and successful in getting new swimmers regularly using it who would not normally be using the pool and getting confidence to take back to learn to swim in the school environment. Anything more than that I would question whether free swimming is able to do. Don't overcomplicate it". (North Wales local authority).

A consistent message from frontline stakeholders is that the funding criteria currently favours the older age group and that this may warrant review. Many would re-balance the focus towards younger people because they face bigger barriers especially in relation to cost and access, especially when parents are faced with the cost barrier of paying to accompany younger children and travel to and from many pools that cannot be easily reached. The persistent view from those who operate the programmes is that funding for the 60 plus supports those who would swim anyway and who could afford to pay. The contra-argument, but which we heard much less frequently, is that free swimming can offer important physical activity opportunities and also social interaction to overcome loneliness. Also issues of social exclusion are (in part) being overcome through access to activities such as Aqua Fit, which do benefit non-swimmers and provide much needed social interaction for some people. With regards to older people, frontline stakeholders feel stronger links to other policy areas need to be made explicit and efforts to build on areas such as some existing links with the National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS) would be valuable as well as considering the wider benefits of involving the whole family.

“For older adults it is health and wellbeing but also social participation. There have been friendship groups established from structured sessions and they have started a swimathon group -from ladies who couldn’t swim at all - now they see the benefits of being able to swim, they can participate more when on holiday, they can keep enjoying the benefits of water in other situations and they are not frightened of it. If a parent is frightened of water, the child is, and it breaks down that barrier and we have a lot of grandparents looking after children and cared for children, so to bring all those elements together can improve that.” (West Wales local authority).

The flexibility of the programmes was valued. However, there were mixed views among local authority staff as to whether the programmes should be part of future Sport Wales strategy – some would prefer an uncomplicated ‘national’ offer rather than pursuing multiple outcomes which are not commensurate with the resources.

The **barriers to swimming** identified by interviewees reflect those highlighted in previous studies and relate particularly to those living in areas of deprivation. They include access, motivation, cost, transport, and support from ‘agents’ – which means having the right workforce to be able to deliver enjoyable and progressive and tailored opportunities such as Welsh medium provision, and provision for disability and black and ethnic minority groups. Indeed, some considered that for young females, barriers to swimming may be even greater than some other sports, given body image and confidence issues, especially for those with low levels of physical literacy. However, national surveys show swimming remains one of the most popular activities in terms of equal gender participation and demand, as well as its

strength in being able to cater for all ages, ethnic communities and abilities when designed appropriately.

In the view of frontline deliverers, the decline in swims has been exacerbated by an absence over some years of national promotion of free swimming, and a piecemeal and variable approach to marketing at local level, which is sometimes left to the discretion of each pool. This almost certainly means that there is a lack of knowledge and awareness about the free swimming offer and the times when it is available in each area. Most interviewees wanted national promotion reinstated, and some commented that if public awareness of free swimming is raised this will increase public pressure on local authorities to deliver it well.

We found very mixed practice with regards to local promotional campaigns. Some local authorities use multiple platforms (e.g. social media) and are really making a concerted effort to push the initiative. Others rely on minimal promotion by leisure centres, therefore probably only reaching the existing customer base. Our own review of local authority web sites in relation to the programmes confirmed that there are wide variations in terms of quality and clarity of local promotion. This is, however, perhaps to be expected given that the cost of any local promotion would need to be taken from the grant or otherwise found from an authority's, but with no prospect of significant additional income even if the promotion were to be very successful.

Raising awareness, sharing knowledge and promoting learning among deliverers of the scheme was also considered important by frontline stakeholders. They reported that national/regional meetings about free swimming have mostly been lost (with some exceptions). Some local authority interviewees felt there was a lack of direction and challenge for the funding received compared with other programmes like Active Young People. Good practice and sharing of evidence would be valued, as generally interviewees from local authorities felt they were working independently rather than collaborating on free swimming. For some, the problems of free swimming are rooted in its lack of flexibility. One seasoned practitioner saw it in terms that *"there is still a need for some free family splash. Although it isn't likely to affect activity levels, it provides a fun enjoyable family experience in the pool and at the leisure centre. There should be less emphasis on the 60+ who can pay – but again keep some of the offer for social, health and mental well-being, lessening the impact on NHS, and encouraging prevention. Free Swim is a bit outdated and too rigid and prescriptive in the criteria for the two specific age bands - it needs to be more flexible and allow targeting and to be used more with learn to swim and school swimming."*

Frontline stakeholders also considered that designing a programme around a 'free' offer may in fact be less appealing to the end user than heavy subsidy and price sensitivity is not tested. As one commented: *"What is the price tolerance for those who are excluded? What*

would a £1 swim do for the scheme? Free is not always a good offer". Another reported that:

"When we offered free structured classes, take up was low. When we offered free structured classes for £1, take up increased. That gave us the message that people prefer to pay something, so they can see whether there is value in it. There is no 'value' in a free structured class. For the individual to see a value, there has to be heavily subsidised activity and swimming paid a price. In general, free structured hasn't worked here. It looks like we don't do it, but in fact it is just heavily subsidised.....it was a strange phenomenon.....Our only conclusion was that they felt there was a value to the nominal price as opposed to it being for free – even though charged and free sessions were of the same content and quality, the free session was probably viewed as being of lesser quality. We tried varying our communication in order to ensure that parents were aware that they were the same but the numbers attending showed that free was not appealing – perhaps a behavioural scientist can explain this to us!!"

This view that 'free' is not necessarily being valued was echoed by several local authority interviewees, and there was support from workshop participants for creating a universal subsidised scheme to reduce the cost of access for all.

Reduced funding has resulted in less time available for free swimming. For example, a four hour period of free swimming in the timetable being reduced to one hour, makes this far less attractive to the end user. This was an issue affecting parents of young people who might see value in paying for a half day multi-sport offer but find it logistically difficult if children are only occupied for an hour of free swimming. The issue of reduced time slots combined with limited transport availability (exacerbated by cuts to local bus services) was also seen as inhibiting older adults from attending.

Finally, 'local' factors are seen as playing a big part – e.g. seasonality and weather in coastal authorities/tourist locations, distance between facilities in Powys and Gwynedd, and competition for the attention of young teens in urban areas. The local authority representatives considered that the resources were not targeted sufficiently towards deprived areas/individuals, and a number expressed concerns as to whether rural deprivation is sufficiently reflected in the funding formula. In rural areas, transport and rural deprivation are seen as major barriers. The need to have flexibility within a framework to allow areas to better cater to local needs was a consistent response from stakeholders. Despite the issues, there remains enthusiasm and positivity about what can be achieved with the programmes.

National stakeholders' views: We interviewed and had discussions with a range of national bodies with a stake in the programmes including the Welsh Government, Sport Wales, Swim Wales, Disability Sport Wales (DSW), Welsh Sports Association (WSA), the Children's Commissioner, the Cymru Older People's Alliance (COPA), WCVA, WLGA, and Public Health Wales. All recognised that the programmes have value but there were also strong voices calling for revision and change. Both DSW and COPA emphasised the wider potential benefits of the programmes in terms of health and wellbeing, and the desirability of extending the range of potential activities available. But COPA in particular highlighted the need to do this without diluting the funding currently available to free swimming. Indeed, the observation that it is difficult to justify public funds for free swimming but not for other beneficial physical activities was made by a number of the national stakeholders.

Perhaps most strikingly, all three national sport bodies expressed major reservations about the programmes as they currently work. For Sport Wales there is a sense of frustration that for many local authorities the grant aid is treated as an income line against easily achievable minimum criteria of provision. The straitened financial circumstances of local authorities is entirely recognised, but the structure of the grant conditions makes it harder to encourage better performance against what is now a complex set of objectives. Sport Wales' liaison officers engage with each local authority on the programmes formally on at least a twice yearly basis but have very limited influence. They view the programmes as having limited value for the investment made. They question whether it is targeted optimally either in relation to young people (where they see deprivation and learning to swim as the priority areas) or older people (where they see a disproportionate weighting of resources towards a relatively small and relatively better off section of the population).

Swim Wales also consider that there is a need for major change. They believe that consistency and collaboration is key, and that simplicity of administration and operation is vital. They favour creating a clear set of outcomes through a holistic Aquatic Development Plan for key stakeholders leading to a situation of 'flexible consistency' across all local authorities. They want to see change rather than abolition of the programmes, and a more significant role for Swim Wales in setting outcomes aligned to overarching strategic goals. They see the future focus being on the theme of getting young people 'Fit for the Future' as well as accessibility, areas of deprivation and disability, and that free swimming should complement the current school swimming programmes in Wales.

The WSA reported that their aquatics' members hold the 'gift' of free swimming in very high regard but want to see more 'efficient management', by which they mean greater clarity of objectives and a much stronger emphasis on performance management of outcomes, which can be incentivised and / or sanctioned if not achieved. They see learning to swim as a fundamental life skill which opens up opportunities to access a wide variety of aquatic activities – and that means delivering skills rather than 'splash'. They also favour a 'one plan'

model to cover all the focus areas of sport related grant aid, linked back to the objectives of the investment. Whilst they believe that there is a definite need for the programme to continue for young people, they raise questions about whether the majority of older people using the programme could afford at least a nominal fee.

The WLGA see free swimming scheme as a long standing and much valued scheme. Local authorities and the WLGA have supported the drive towards a more targeted and evidence based approach to free swimming while holding also to the original universal ethos. They emphasise that over time authorities have become increasingly reliant on the grant as a supplement to diminishing core funding especially as the years of austerity have put a massive strain on local government budgets and discretionary services such as culture and leisure, which have borne a disproportionate share of the cuts. Thus they consider that any cut or changes to the grant funding, would have an impact on overall provision, and that now is not the time to change the funding arrangements. Their preference would be the continuation of funding along current lines with a greater clarity of purpose, better marketing, a focus on good practice and proportionate monitoring. The WLGA would not want to see any impact on current provision, and would want to avoid approaches which might add complexity or bureaucracy.

The 'cost' of free swimming

It is surprisingly difficult to pin down the costs of the free swimming programmes, and the return for the public good as a result of the investment. The headline cost in public expenditure terms is clear enough at £3m p.a. held constant in cash terms since 2015/16 in Welsh Government grant distributed to local authorities by Sport Wales. But there is no direct relationship between the grant and either the grant trigger requirement of a minimum of hours of provision or of the outputs or outcomes achieved, unless individual local authorities themselves decide to put one in place. In practice few do, and where they do the relationship is particular to each authority. This does not mean that the grant is not important to local authorities, and many use it thoughtfully and to good effect. But that does not make it any easier to trace through the trail from public financial investment to outcomes. As two of our respondents explained:

“One of the main weaknesses from our point of view is that most local authorities now view it as an income line in their core budget which means that any change in funding now is basically seen as a cut not treated as a grant generally.” (North Wales local authority).

“If it were to stop with short notice the amount lost would be the equivalent to running a medium to large size leisure centre – that would be the impact. Yes, we’ll save money from not running activities if it stopped, but it would leave a black hole. It is budgeted for as grant income. If we didn’t have free splash could we do other things and sell the space?”

Probably some, but not all. The structured provision would be the biggest decline in the types of young people that can go through it -they are the one outcome-based programme that we couldn't do without the grant. Huge pressure anyway to cut 50% of budget, already cut to bone". (West Wales local authority)

We have carried out an analysis to try and pin down the cost of the programmes according to a range of possible approaches. These are:

- Assumed income foregone;
- Actual current income foregone; and
- Actual cost.

Assumed income foregone: The original basis of the free swimming grant appears to have been that local authorities should be reimbursed for the income foregone as a result of providing swimming for free. This of course immediately raises the question of whether all those accessing free swimming would have swum anyway. Nonetheless, our analysis suggests that in broad terms local authorities have in fact been reimbursed on the basis that every free swim, both splash and structured, would have been fully paid.

In summary, we have calculated the 'lost' income if all free swims had been paid for across the period 2008/9 to 2016/17 inclusive²⁵. In round terms there were 3.6m. young people free swims and 6m. older people free swims at a current average price of £2.30 and £3.76 respectively, making a total in current prices of £30.7m. There were also structured swims of 0.7m for young people and 0.77m. for older people at an average current price of £4.07. This makes a total of £36.7m. Although we do not have detailed figures of the price of swims across the whole period, discounting that total to the mid-inflation year of the period of 2011 gives a figure of £29.2m. The grant in aid distributed to local authorities across the same period was a total of £28.7m. – that is, there was a broad equivalence.

Actual current income foregone: The current position for free swimming programmes is not the same as it was in 2008/9. In the last full year there were 145,204 young people free swims and 664,500 for older people. Using the above formula this would indicate income forgone of some £3.31m. if it assumed that all the free structured and free splash swims would have been paid for. However, although it is difficult to say how many paid swims there would have been in the absence of the programmes, it is clear that there would have been fewer. As to young people, the number of free swims has already declined radically from the previous free swim levels, and it may be therefore that all or most of the current free swims represent paid swims forgone. For older people, it is likely that the number of swims would have been much closer to the level of less than 200,000 swims

²⁵ RCS Working Paper, *The Costs of Free Swimming*, Cardiff, UKRCS Ltd, 2018.

recorded for this age group at the time when the programmes began. Insofar as the level would remain above that (as many deliverers believe), then that itself is reasonably attributable to the long term public investment in free swimming, which is what boosted the number of swims to 600,000+. So this should not really be counted as income foregone so much as an ongoing benefit of additional activity for the investment made. On this basis, and assuming that all structured swims for both age groups also represent income foregone, the total would be about £1.6m. p.a., or just over half of the free swimming grant distributed.

Actual cost: As to the actual cost incurred by local authorities in providing free swimming, it is reasonable to assess this in part on the basis of the actual income foregone as set out above. Arguably the actual marginal costs of providing free swimming for any age group where the swimming facility itself would in any event be open would itself be absolutely minimal, unless the extent of extra usage required additional staffing or opening hours to accommodate demand. However, if the same reasoning were applied to all categories of users, there would be no core income base on which to provide such marginally costed provision. So the reasonable actual cost of free swimming in our view is the sum of income reasonably foregone in terms of young and older people who would otherwise have swum and paid for free splash, plus the actual costs of structured activities because they clearly do involve additional costs for local authorities. On this basis we assess the actual current costs of free swimming to be of the order of a maximum of £1.5m. p.a., or half of the actual grant in aid distributed.

Cost to users: It is also important to bear in mind that the real cost of free swimming to users is also something of a slippery concept, despite its apparent simplicity and clarity. For all swimmers there is the cost of transport, which in rural areas can be considerable. Where young children access free swimming, they often have to be accompanied by a paying adult. And there are collateral costs which can arise in terms of clothing and equipment, and refreshments. Nonetheless these are relatively straightforward considerations compared to working out the 'real' cost of free swimming to the public purse, which is far more complex.

Whilst cost is seen as a barrier to swimming participation by users and others, the weight of judgement of interviewees and survey respondents was that this was more of an issue for young people than for the older age group. We also had evidence (see 'Delivers' Views', above) that providing 'free' swimming might be less attractive than subsidised swimming, which adds a further nuance to the issue of cost as a barrier to swimming participation.

Equalities

In an important sense, the idea of equality is central to the idea of free swimming. By making swimming free, it is intended to be available as a universal benefit in respect of the target groups. Moreover, equalities' objectives have been specifically pursued both by

weighting the funding distribution formula in favour of local authority areas with higher levels of deprivation, and by introducing criteria which include a requirement to make provision for people within the target groups with protected characteristics – people with disabilities or from BAME communities, and Welsh speakers.

There is limited evidence in local authorities' plans to suggest that there is a strong focus on equalities' aspects, but some certainly do make it a focus. One authority emphasised how they were very keen on looking at exclusions – *“it could be BME, disabled, deprivation – we know where they are....and do outreach work.....we have a large number of pupils with disabilities so we look to engage with those via the development officer”*. Another commented that a disability focus was a strength for them:

“Our disability programme has expanded a lot with free swimming. We run 7 sessions a week for just disability swimming. What we try and do is have under 8s through to intermediates at one pool. Parents go in with their children when they are under 8, and also working with the swimming club to link in. They then have somewhere to go”.

In another authority free swimming had been promoted as 'all inclusive' but the incoming responsible officer felt that there was no real targeting, because simply advertising sessions as 'inclusive' was not getting disabled people (or other groups) to come along. Over the last 3 years he has been working with the local authority's Disability Sport Officer and directly with special schools to provide organised lessons. This is the model that works best, going direct to Special Educational Needs schools and to community disability groups. The disability sessions are separate first, but then swimmers are signposted into the free swim disability sessions and Learn To Swim programme in the same way as mainstream school swimming teaching then enables children to access to free swim and further lessons. The pathways are critical.

A review conducted internally by Sport Wales in 2015 of local authority provision also identified a range of examples of initiatives in relation to Welsh speakers and BAME communities, and a focus on linking Learn To Swim activities to schools and pupils in areas of higher deprivation and with lower levels of swimming attainment. This indicates a concern to respond to the priorities which Ministers and Sport Wales have built into the two programmes. However, some of the more interesting and positive initiatives in relation to BAME communities have actually had as their target the needs of BAME women and children which did not correlate to the free swimming slots or criteria, such as in Cardiff. Moreover, although aimed at women in areas with a relatively high BAME population, they were open to all and 50% of the participants were not BAME.

Notwithstanding these efforts, there are three features of the current free swimming programmes which make it very difficult to impact significantly on equalities' objectives.

The first is that although the grant formula is weighted towards local authorities with higher levels of deprivation, there is no necessary weighting *within* local authorities towards those swimming pools which are in local areas of greater deprivation or which have higher proportions of users who are less advantaged. Indeed, such a calculation may be very difficult if not impossible for local authorities to do. This means that, in practice, the grant resources which are deployed on free splash swim sessions is 'used' almost entirely on a self-selected basis – if young people or older people wish to take up the opportunity, and can do, then they access it. If they are non-swimmers, or cannot get to the pool for some reason (possibly transport availability and cost in rural areas) then they do not.

This is the second feature of the current programmes which limits their equalities' impact, because the vast majority of the grant resources are attributed to free splash swims. Our estimate is that about 15% of the grant is deployed on free structured swims, for which local authorities have to spend specific sums for instructors and life guards, and sometimes pool hire as well. The balance, of about 85% or some £2.5m a year, is allocated to the budgets of swimming pools to represent lost income on free splash swims. It is thus a small minority of the grant resource which goes on free structured swims, which are the sessions which are targeted towards the equalities' objectives.

The third limitation of the programmes is that the majority of the grant resource which goes to the older age group is in practice only available to those who swim because it is attributed to income foregone from free splash swimmers from the older age group. Non-swimmers can only realistically access the free structured swims.

Our best estimate is that the free structured swims for older people cost no more than £300,000 p.a. It is difficult to estimate precisely how much is attributed to free splash swims by older people, because local authorities can distribute the grant 'internally' according to their own discretion, and they use different approaches to the way in which they distribute the grant to the budgets of their pools. Nonetheless, the amount which is attributed to free splash by older people is likely to be at least 50% of the £2.5m p.a. attributed to free splash swims across both programmes, and may be as high as nearly 80% - that is, between £1.25m and £2m p.a. However, and this is critical to appreciate, the services provided through this grant resource can be accessed by only 6% of the 60+ population, because it is only 6% of those 60+ at most who swim.

For adults generally (those aged 16 or over), some 14% participate in any indoor or outdoor swimming. But the equivalent figure for those 60+ drops to 6%²⁶, with most of these being swimmers, or a population of some 50,000 who swim on average about 12 times a year, a figure which is consistent with what we know from a previous survey. Moreover, we know

²⁶ *ibid.*

that this 6% is likely to be from better off households, because we know that adult sports participation levels generally are affected by household material deprivation however. Some 49% of adults who live in a household in material deprivation took part in a four week survey period compared with 61% of adults (aged 16+) who did not²⁷.

Thus a very substantial share of the grant resources of the free swimming programmes is attributed to only 6% of one of the two target groups. This means that free swimming is not, in practice, a universal benefit

Success factors for free swimming programmes

As part of a wider analysis and to provide insight to this review we undertook a comprehensive analysis of reports of previous evaluations of free swimming interventions in the UK over the past fifteen years²⁸. This highlighted six key factors that are important to the success of free swimming:

- Clear guidance about the objectives of free swimming programmes;
- Effective marketing of free swimming programmes;
- Funding mechanisms which allow free swimming to be tailored to local contexts;
- Monitoring and evaluation which facilitates accountability;
- The development of effective partnerships between the funders and agencies responsible for delivery; and
- Maximising the synergies with other policies and programmes.

These success factors provide a useful framework for assessing the strengths of and potential areas for improvement in the way in which the free swimming programmes operate in Wales.

Clear Guidance for Deliverers: Our review of the wider evidence showed the need for agencies charged with delivery to be given clear guidance about the objectives of free swimming and the funder's expectations in terms of marketing, monitoring and outcomes. Some local authorities in England cited inadequate guidance from central government as one of the reasons for their failure to market free swimming. The evaluation of free swimming in Wales also pointed to the importance of national guidance about Ministers' expectations and in recent times less national and local marketing.

Welsh Government guidance on the minimum criteria for free swimming focuses on numbers of hours and type of provision required. Guidance from Sport Wales amplifies this and makes it clear that free swimming is intended to help to reduce poverty, improve health and enable people to learn to swim. But it is not clear how this drives local choices about the mix of activities that are offered at local level. There is evidence that free splash sessions

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ RCS Working Paper, Free Swimming Literature Review, Cardiff, UKRCS Ltd, 2018.

can generate increases in the frequency with which people swim (market penetration), at least in the early years of a programme. But structured activities, such as lessons, are known to be a more effective way to encourage people to learn to swim and improve their skills (market development), providing them with the means for more sustainable, longer-term participation. More targeted provision also provides clear activity pathways for specific groups of beneficiaries.

There is, therefore, a need for greater clarity about the objectives of free swimming and for clear strategy which prioritises the kinds of provision that are most likely to produce the desired broader outcomes. Moreover, those objectives (some of which have been stated and form part of the current implementation arrangements) need to be linked to effective monitoring and incentivisation to encourage better outcomes.

Effective Marketing: For free swimming to be effective, the public needs to be aware of the offer and understand how, when and where they can access it. This requires effective marketing, particularly to target groups and especially to non-swimmers. Under-resourced and poorly implemented marketing has been identified as a problem with free swimming programmes elsewhere. In the first year of the national free swimming initiative in England, local authorities adopted a range of approaches to marketing the scheme in their areas. Some were effective, whilst other local authorities engaged in only minimal promotion but areas that invested in marketing saw the greatest increase in participation. Similar variability marked the early years of free swimming in Wales.

Our review considered the marketing that is currently undertaken. The Welsh Government's website gives very little information about free swimming beyond a link to Sport Wales. On the Sport Wales website information about both the young people and older people programmes is found under "Community Sports, Adults" along with information about the benefits of swimming and the minimum criteria. We then observed wide variations between local authority websites in the types of information they provide about free swimming. The architecture of local authority web sites varies, as does ease of access to information about Sport and Leisure. In some cases, this can be found on front pages, but in others it has to be located by searching in the A to Z, and it is not always located using obvious service names. Some local authorities provide direct links to timetables with days and times when free swimming is offered, some give a written explanation of the free swimming scheme for both programmes, and some had no information about this or the days and times when it was available.

In our view, the lack of information at national level and wide local variations in the accessibility and content of information about free swimming are significant weaknesses which could be relatively straightforward and inexpensive to address, subject to there being clarity about objectives and provision.

Flexible funding and delivery tailored to local needs: The way in which free swimming is funded is key to its success or failure. Clear guidance about what free swimming is expected to achieve (see above) has to be combined with the flexibility for local authorities to implement it in ways that work best in their local contexts. Funding in England and Wales has been based on population size and/or levels of need. But evaluations in both countries have advocated that the funding formulae need to do more to incentivise local authorities to maximise and sustain levels of participation and also to target those most in need.

Our analysis echoes this. A shortcoming of the current approach to funding in Wales focuses on levels of provision (inputs) rather than outcomes such as improvements in health, wellbeing or learning to swim, and there is no requirement for local authorities to maximise participation levels. They simply have to fulfil the minimum criteria. Moreover, whilst the allocations to local authorities reflect the overall level of deprivation in their areas, there is no external top-up incentive in the funding mechanism for them to prioritise the needs of their most deprived communities. Indeed, the easier way simply to increase the numbers of participants may be for them to focus provision in areas where there are fewer barriers to swimming (such as lack of private transport to leisure centres or, in some extreme cases, even a lack of swimming gear).

In our view then, the current arrangements give local authorities very considerable discretion to the point where some regard the free swimming grant as one of their sources of income, at a time when other sources are under severe pressure. Sport Wales' guidance is very clear that this is not how the grant is to be used, but in practice it lacks the means to prevent it. For this reason, is a clear case for re-thinking both the funding mechanism and strengthening the monitoring and accountability frameworks for free swimming. There could be more incentive funding for local authorities to strive to maximise their effectiveness in meeting the objectives of free swimming and achieve more in terms of engaging 'hard to reach groups' rather than focusing on the inputs and meeting the minimum criteria.

Monitoring and evaluation which enables accountability: Several evaluations of free swimming programmes have highlighted a lack of effective monitoring and evaluation and in some cases of even basic information management systems that can provide reliable data about the numbers of participants and levels of physical activity. This information is vital to understanding the impact of interventions and identifying ways to maximise their effectiveness.

There have been improvements over time in the monitoring of free swimming programmes in Wales. But the focus is still on the numbers of swims. There is a lack of data on the types, frequency and intensity of physical activity, and it is not possible to judge the extent to

which the programmes lead to wider outcomes such as improvements in health, the numbers of children who learn to swim or levels of deprivation. The plans submitted by local authorities are judged by Sport Wales against the basic criteria set by the Welsh Government and those added by Sport Wales itself. Our analysis of local authority plans revealed wide variations in the quality, level of detail, focus and methods used to calculate the costs of free swimming. There is no formal annual report on free swimming to the Sport Wales Board or from Sport Wales to the Welsh Government. This means that the annual report produced by the Data Unit, which focuses on the numbers of swims, is not supplemented by analysis and insight that those coordinating the scheme could provide, or by more in-depth evidence about changes in the quality of participants' lives.

Effective Partnership Working: Several studies have highlighted the importance of developing partnerships to building and sustaining increases in participation in physical activity generated by free swimming. This includes the development of links between free swimming and other networks of community based activities and organisations. These partners can offer a means of raising awareness among specific target and 'hard to reach' groups. The lack of an effective partnership infrastructure was identified as one of four key weaknesses of the free swimming offer for older people in one socially deprived area of South Wales. In this case, the local authority developed a link between free swimming and its own GP referral scheme, but links with other external organisations (for example, with Age Wales/Age UK, Healthy Living for Older People and Healthy Living for Carers) were far less developed and there was little evidence of overt information sharing, consultation and pooling of resources.

The key partners in the free swimming programmes in Wales are the Welsh Government, Sport Wales, and local authority leisure providers. But, partly for the reasons discussed above, the conditions for fully effective partnership working are not in place. Good partnership depends on having clear and aligned objectives, and appropriate accountability, and these features are not currently present. Indeed, that is likely to be made more difficult by the devolution of leisure provision in most Welsh local authorities to arms-length bodies.

More widely, another important partnership dimension is that between the local delivery and community organisations and networks. This linkage can play a significant part in engaging hard to reach groups, and also in helping to develop progression and a pathway to sustained participation. However we found no evidence that this is any stronger now than when identified as a weakness in previous studies. The experience of programmes such as Calls for Action suggests that there are potential gains to be had from involving non-traditional partners that have strong community links and can act as a bridge.

Maximising synergies with other policies and programmes: Free swimming is only one of many instruments that can be used by policy makers to try to increase physical activity

levels, and ultimately the health and wellbeing of the population. The school curriculum is perhaps the area in which free swimming interacts most closely with other policies and programmes, but the relationships between it, the National Curriculum for Physical Education and School Sport are not clear. Swimming and water safety are a recognised part of the National Curriculum, currently sitting specifically within the adventurous part of the 2008 National Physical Education Curriculum and also featuring in each of the areas of experience in the curriculum. At the same time, contributing to the national objective of learning to swim has also been an objective of the free swimming programmes since 2010.

In addition to school swimming provision, local authorities provided 30,660 swimming lessons during 2016-17 using the free swimming grant. But although free swimming is being used to supplement educational provision, the data cannot tell us anything about whether those swimmers achieving the Learn To Swim standard have continued to participate. Of course, free swimming is – for the most part - only accessible to those who have been taught to swim, and as mentioned above, national survey data suggests that people living in deprived areas are less likely to be swimmers – thus making access more difficult for the very groups that free swimming aims to support.

All children should have access to swimming during Key Stage 2. However, the relationship between free swimming and the curriculum is largely ambiguous, as is the responsibility and funding mechanisms for ensuring ‘Every Child a Swimmer’. The National Curriculum does not provide clarity about the desired swimming attainment levels, although attainment levels are built into the primary sector through ‘Nofio Ysgol’ (School Swimming). Swim Wales (2018) leads the scheme which has a comprehensive developmental pathway of eight levels which include summative assessments. Guidance on delivery is flexible, although the minimum guidance is for 26 hours between years 2 and 6. It is suggested that this is best organised as 7 hours contact at each of these years, although it is permissible to deliver the hours intensively if schools are constrained. Participation in the scheme is not compulsory. Guidance from other agencies, such as Estyn and the regional Education Consortia, is very limited and it remains unclear how swimming will feature in the new curriculum.

The Learn to Swim (school swimming) monitoring undertaken by the Data Unit for Sport Wales shows that national ‘pass’ rates have fallen during the past three years from 75% reaching the standard by Year 6 in 2014-15, to 67% in 2016-17. The highest and lowest percentages recorded at local authority level are not consistently the same authorities each year²⁹. The criteria for measuring achievement of the standard also changed (it became harder to achieve) which local authority interviewees thought would account for some of this change in pass rates. ‘Learn to Swim’ data is unpublished and there have been concerns over the quality of it. However, it is used by Sport Wales and local authorities as an indicator

²⁹ LGDU figure 2016/17 – see <http://www.data.cymru/freeswimming>

and a means of targeting free swimming resources locally to 'underperforming' areas, being those areas/schools within a local authority where the percentages of children meeting the standard are lower. However, the data may not be a firm base of reliable information on which to make those judgements.

In the workshops we held, the groups considered that larger schools benefited from school swimming more than small schools because they had greater resources. When school budgets are cut, swimming tends to be cut, and the general interest of a school's Head Teacher in swimming/sport can affect access,. In spite of these challenges there are examples of good practice. A good example was provided where a local authority and their leisure provider programmed after school classes in centres close to the school clusters. This allowed the children to walk to the classes and for parents to pick them up after. Swim Wales, the WSA and other stakeholders all suggest further clarity is required with regards to the ownership and accountability for the learn to swim element of the free swimming outcomes and links to the current and future curriculum. Clearly free swimming cannot replace curriculum based learn to swim, and unless there is more clarity there is a self-evident risk of failures to co-ordinate and to use public resources optimally.

Section 5: Conclusions and Options

This review was charged with addressing two principal issues. In summary:

- *What has been the contribution of free swimming to community sport and physical activity, and its impact across Welsh Government priorities and wellbeing objectives?*
- *Has free swimming achieved its stated outcomes and can it achieve a greater impact on sport and physical activity participation levels?*

This final section answers these questions by:

- Setting out our conclusions on the way free swimming currently works
- Assessing free swimming against national priorities and wellbeing objectives
- Outlining three indicative options for the future development of free swimming in Wales.

Conclusions on how free swimming currently works

Our summary conclusions on how free swimming in Wales currently works are:

- Both programmes increased participation among their target groups in the early years of the scheme. Overall they have provided opportunities for young people and older adults to be active through swimming. From 2008 to 2017 (the years of most reliable data) there were in total some 10m. free splash and structured swims by young people and by older people at a cost of some £30m. in grant aid at an approximate cost therefore of £3 per free swim
- Both programmes have proved adaptable. There has, for example, been a move away from 'free splash' sessions in favour of structured activities and an increased emphasis on 'learn to swim' and tackling deprivation, and some contribution to meeting the swimming needs of disabled people and BME communities.
- Free swimming continues to offer a range of both free splash and free structured swims to both age groups. Opportunities for free structured swims remain significant, although they have reduced for both age groups, and more markedly so for young people.
- The number of free splash swims taken has remained broadly stable for the older age group, but declined greatly for young people. This is associated with a major reduction in the number of free swim sessions for young people, which has in turn been prompted by expenditure reductions in local authorities. Although local authorities continue to exceed the basic minimum criteria to satisfy the very low grant aid requirements, they have reduced the extent to which they go beyond them. In recent years the grant has been focussed more on the older than the younger age group, reversing the earlier 70/30 weighting towards the young.
- Local authorities take very different approaches to the way in which they deploy the free swimming grant, and there is great variation in the quality of their plans and in how they deliver them. Many local authorities treat the free swimming grant as an

income line, notwithstanding the explicit injunction not to do so which is set out in the grant arrangements which Sport Wales. Nonetheless, some local authorities have provided effective leadership and adopted holistic approaches that integrate swimming successfully within broader aquatics plans.

- Whilst users of free swimming are very positive about it, other stakeholders – both deliverers and national bodies - have varying degrees of concern about how it works, and are looking for change.
- The free swimming grant has broadly equated with the notional lost income to local authorities if every free swim had been paid for in full. However this does not relate to actual cost, which is in our assessment at most half of the grant aid which is distributed.
- In terms of the equalities' aspects of free swimming:
 - the weighting towards local authorities with greater deprivation through the funding formula is not necessarily reflected in the weighting towards deprived communities within local authorities, nor in terms of actual take up
 - In any event, providing free swimming is not sufficient to encourage participation by most 'hard to reach' groups.
 - many authorities do try and focus some of the grant aid towards the target groups of disabled people, BAME communities, and those who are disadvantaged, but this represents only a small proportion of the grant aid
 - in relation to older people, effectively only 6% of the 60+ population is able to make use of the free swimming offer, and the evidence is that that 6% is from the better off part of the community
 - accordingly, in relation to the bulk of the grant distributed (which is to the older age group) the free swimming grant is not at all a 'universal' benefit, but one which is skewed towards a very small part even of the 60+ population of Wales. There is also evidence of substitution effects because many older participants would probably swim regularly without public subsidy.
- Against the success factors which have been associated with a wide range of free swimming programmes, free swimming in Wales meets them in part.
 - Clearer guidance about the objectives of free swimming programmes is needed
 - The marketing of free swimming is not as effective as it should be
 - The funding mechanism does allow free swimming to be tailored to local contexts but the "minimum criteria" approach makes it more likely that the grant will be treated as an income line
 - The current monitoring and evaluation arrangements do not facilitate accountability against objectives beyond the minimum criteria. The funding formula is not linked to performance, and monitoring does not provide sufficient accountability for achieving intended outcomes because it focuses

on the number of swims rather than the impacts on swimmers. Sport Wales cannot reward excellence - so long as local authorities meet the minimum criteria, they receive the funding.

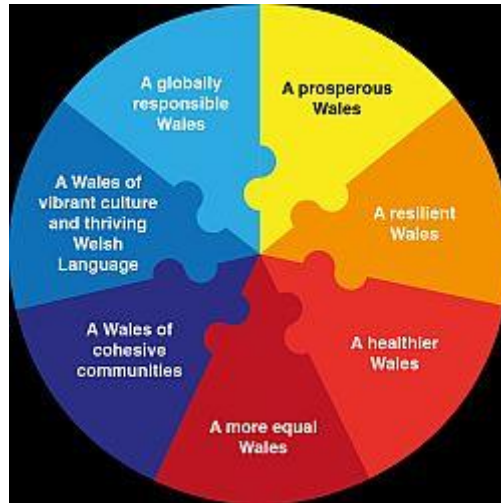
- The grant arrangements inhibit effective partnership between the funders and those responsible for delivery.
- The synergies with other policies and programmes, and especially with 'learn to swim' policies, are not sufficiently clear.

Our overall conclusion on the current way in which free swimming works is that there are now increasing mis-alignments within it between its objectives, the grant conditions, and the management arrangements. These have been created partly from the impact of austerity as local authorities have struggled to optimise their income and balance the books. In our view free swimming will only be able to work well if it is changed in fairly radical ways. Moreover, the programmes have not kept pace with broader policy developments. In particular, they are not yet explicitly linked to the achievement of the seven national wellbeing goals or to the priorities set out in the Welsh Government's 'Prosperity for All' agenda. These should be the key reference points for the change which is needed.

National priorities

The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 now provides a framework for both the goals of public services and the ways in which they are required to work. The legislation was of course not in place when free swimming was started. But it is an important reference point for assessing how the programmes relate to the current and emerging priorities for Wales, and even more so in relation to how free swimming may be changed and developed. The well-being goals of the Act are depicted diagrammatically below, and the definitions of them help to identify clearly that potentially the most relevant for the free swimming programmes are:

- **A Healthier Wales:** A society in which people's physical and mental well-being is maximised and in which choices and behaviours that benefit future health are understood
- **A More Equal Wales:** A society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances (including their socio economic circumstances)
- **A Wales of vibrant culture:** A society that promotes and protects culture, heritage and the Welsh language, and which encourages people to participate in the arts, sports and recreation



The 'ways of working' include, *inter alia*, a requirement to take account of the long term, to focus on prevention, to collaborate with other partners, and to 'integrate' (which means to consider how well-being objectives may impact upon each of the well-being goals and on the objectives of other public bodies).

More broadly, free swimming clearly has potential to contribute directly to a wide range of public bodies' objectives and Welsh Government's 'Prosperity for All' strategy. In the Welsh Government's Wellbeing Statement for 2017, "Prosperity for all: The National Strategy" the objective to 'Promote good health and wellbeing for everyone'³⁰ is four square with the core aim of free swimming to help people be more healthy and active. This objective is designed to help give effect to three of the Act's goals - a healthy Wales, a more equal Wales and a Wales of cohesive communities. Other objectives relevant to free swimming include to build healthier communities, and supporting young people to make the most of their potential.

Sport Wales has also published its Wellbeing Statement³¹, and has focussed on four high level objectives, one of which concerns children and young people becoming physically active for life, and another which strives for healthier lives for all through physical activity.

To assess free swimming against these objectives, it is important to distinguish free 'splash' from free 'structured' swims, because they have a very different relationship to the objectives. Clearly if some people are swimming more, and if some people swim in free splash sessions who would not otherwise have done so, then that supports an objective of 'healthy and active'. If those people are drawn differentially from disadvantaged backgrounds, or are disabled or from BAME communities, then that supports an objective of

³⁰ <https://beta.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2017-10/prosperity-for-all-the-national-strategy-well-being-statement-2017.pdf>

³¹ <http://sportwales.org.uk/about-us/how-we-work/well-being-statement.aspx>

equality. Whilst we do not know sufficient about the characteristics of 'free swimmers' to form hard and fast judgements, we do know that amongst the older age group only 6% of those 60+ swim, and that they are differentially better off. And we know that there are now relatively very few free swims by younger people than hitherto. The relatively low level of swimming in disadvantaged communities suggests that in practice in its current form it is unlikely to make a major contribution to tackling disadvantage. As a 'universal' benefit free swimming differs dramatically from others such as free public transport and free prescriptions where the benefit is much more closely geared to need in the target population.

In many ways the more significant potential contribution to the key Welsh Government and Sport Wales wellbeing objectives is in relation to free structured swims. These take many forms across different local authorities, and they are geared to a wide range of relevant aims – helping people learn to swim, sessions for disabled people, a focus on BAME participation, and encouraging social inclusion through sport participation, to name just some. The shift towards a greater focus on these activities was one of the major developments in the free swimming programmes. They clearly are much more likely to impact on the wellbeing objectives because they are focussed and targeted, and linked to clear aims around activities which are supported and led by trained staff. This is in contrast to free splash swims which are mostly self selected and of recreational value only.

However, it is significant that only some 15% of the free swimming grant distributed is spent on structured swims. The vast majority goes to subsidising free splash.

Options for the future

We believe that there is a need to strengthen the links between free swimming and other aquatic activities and to show how free swimming contributes directly to improving health and wellbeing, especially amongst those who are not currently physically active. There are a wide range of ways in this might be achieved. The possibilities range from improvements in the ways in which free swimming for the current target groups is managed and delivered through to a fundamental re-think of the objectives of the programmes and the most cost-effective ways to achieve them.

In this report we outline three indicative options. There are, of course, several possible variants on each of these options, and any of them would, to differing degrees, require further work and a period of transition and/or piloting prior to full implementation. The aim of spelling them out in these broad terms is to help inform discussions between Ministers, Sport Wales and its partners about which route is best suited to current needs and priorities. Each of the options takes its cue from the wellbeing objectives of the Welsh Government and of Sport Wales, and whatever option is considered in the future, this needs to be in light of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. These are the stated goals of

public policy to inform the development of sport participation, so they now become the key reference point.

Option A: The same target groups but introduce changes to ensure more effective delivery and stronger accountability for achieving broader policy and wellbeing objectives as opposed only to activities.

This option would involve:

- Retaining public subsidy for free swimming;
- Continuing to focus provision on young people and people aged 60 plus; but
- Strengthening the delivery of the programmes through improved clarity and accountability and better national marketing.

This option responds to the views of stakeholders, notably Swim Wales and some local authorities, who expressed strong support the continuation of free-swimming programmes for young and older people, but accepts the need to ensure that they are cost-effective. To deliver this we believe it would be necessary to introduce four key changes:

- Much greater clarity of purpose;
- Much more effective monitoring and accountability;
- Better marketing to raise awareness of the programmes; and
- Stronger support to local authorities to access and adopt good practice.

These changes are equally important to other options, and we explain in detail why and how we believe they need to be implemented below.

We do not consider that Option A offers the best way forward because in our view it is unlikely to reverse the decline in participation by young people or broaden participation among those aged 60 plus who participate. Nor does it address the concerns about substitution effects which we highlighted above or guarantee that resources are directed sufficiently to the most deprived communities and to other target groups.

Option B: New target groups, retain a strong element of swimming, and also include related activities and life skills linked to broader policy and wellbeing objectives

This option would involve:

- Retaining some public subsidy for free swimming;
- Changing or broadening the target groups;
- Adding the provision of related activities and life skills; and
- Delivering the new programmes through a funding formula linked to agreed local strategies or via a challenge fund to which local authorities and other bid for funding.

Like Option A, this approach would recognise the broad appeal of swimming. But unlike Option A, it would embrace swimming's potential to deliver benefits to alternative target

groups working in tandem with closely related activities. It would require a significant re-focusing of free swimming and a new approach to managing and delivering the programme(s) which could take a number of different forms. Depending on its focus and objectives, it could be delivered 'top down' or 'bottom up' both of which have advantages and disadvantages and would need to be fully gauged

Here we outline two illustrative examples, but we recognise there are other variants of this option that could be pursued.

Option B1: One possibility is a 'top down' approach that re-casts free swimming as an All Wales programme with the objective of ensuring that every child can swim. This would have the benefit of clarity of purpose across the country as a whole. It would be governed by clear national guidance and agencies receiving funding would be held accountable for achieving targets with future funding contingent on performance. It would focus on a narrow range of activities that are known to be effective in enabling children to learn to swim, and it would focus on groups and localities which face particular barriers to learning for swim – for example children with disabilities and those living in the most deprived communities.

A key aspect of such a programme would need to be much greater clarity of responsibilities in relation to learning to swim within the current and future school curriculum, and the part which extra curriculum sport and physical activity is to play in helping to achieve the core national objective.

Option B2: As an alternative to a 'one size fits all' focus across the whole country, it would be possible to offer a 'bottom up' approach that re-designed free swimming to give much greater discretion to local authorities and others to tailor provision to the needs of local communities. Under this option, the target groups might, for example, include:

- Children and adults living in deprived communities
- Isolated older people
- BAME communities with low swim rates
- Women and girls, especially groups where there are cultural and social factors which inhibit participation
- People suffering from mental ill health
- Obese children and/or adults
- People with physical disabilities.

Local authorities could be invited to develop plans which meet the needs of their particular communities. These would need to demonstrate clear evidence of need and to show why the proposed intervention(s) were considered to be the most effective use of resources. They would also agree with Sport Wales bespoke frameworks for monitoring and reporting

outcomes. Funding could be allocated on a formula basis as now, subject to approval of an authority's plan by Sport Wales. Alternatively, it could be distributed via a challenge fund that rewarded proposals that offered the best value for money (i.e. well evidenced proposals that addressed important needs that were based on a clear and compelling theory of change).

Either of these versions of Option B would require a more hands-on approach by Sport Wales which would need to allocate sufficient in-house capacity to enable it to evaluate local plans and monitor their delivery. There would need to be clear incentives and potential sanctions to encourage and drive better performance. Building on the experience of the Calls for Action Programme, local authorities would need to work with partners with links to target groups such as voluntary sector organisations, schools and community groups and leaders.

Option C: Integrating swimming with a broader range of physical activity and recreation swimming linked to broader policy and wellbeing objectives

Option C would involve:

- Continued recognition of the value of physical activity in improving health and wellbeing;
- Acceptance that whilst it is very popular with the public swimming is only one of a range of physical activities that can contribute to these outcomes; and
- Incentives for local authorities and other stakeholders to develop integrated interventions to encourage participation in swimming and a range of other sports and physical activities.

This option would take account of the broader policy context in which swimming exists as set out in *Taking Wales Forward* and the contribution that swimming can make alongside other physical activity in promoting a Healthy and Active Wales in line with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. It would also resonate with the Minister's Remit Letter to Sport Wales in October 2017 which highlighted four priorities for Sport Wales:

1. Getting more people active at every stage of their lives;
2. Providing children with the best start in life by helping schools to teach them the skills and give them the knowledge, motivation and confidence to be, and stay, active;
3. Investing effort and resources where it is needed most, where there are significant variations in participation and where there is a lack of opportunity or aspiration to be active; and
4. Helping sport to continue to nurture, develop and support talent to deliver success that inspires people and reinforces our identity as a sporting nation.

We understand that Public Health Wales and Sport Wales have worked closely to create new opportunities for stimulating participation geared to the wellbeing goals including the planned Healthy and Active Strategy. Natural Resources Wales is also now involved.

Proposals have been encouraged to include the following components:

- A common set of agreed measures and indicators to track progress;
- Narrative with clarity on respective roles and contributions to this agenda; and
- Identified areas where resource and interventions will be aligned to achieve common outcomes, and a clear set of deliverables with timescales.

Option C would be aligned with this broader vision, for which the wellbeing objectives of Public Health Wales and Natural Resources Wales would also be a key point of reference³². It would focus on the contribution that swimming can make to an individual's physical literacy journey and focus funding on integrated strategies that combine swimming with other activities.

This represents a more ambitious and far reaching set of changes and would need much more discussion between stakeholders to work out how best to implement it. We envisage that it would require a collaborative approach to design with the involvement of key organisations including Sport Wales, Public Health Wales and Natural Resources Wales, national governing bodies (including swimming but also other sports), local authorities, and partners with strong community links. It is likely that funding for such a scheme would be best allocated through some form of challenge fund rather than through funding formula. There would clearly need to be a period of transition during which the details of the new approach were developed, trialled and evaluated, and in which financial changes for local authorities and for 'free swimmers' are signalled well in advance and cushioned where appropriate. We would expect such a scheme to be refined as Sport Wales and its national and local partners learned what works in practice.

Management of the programmes

The three options outlined above would have slightly different implications for how programmes are organised, but all three would require the four improvements which we highlighted under Option A above, namely:

³² Natural Resources Wales' Well-being Statement and Well-being Objectives:

<https://naturalresources.wales/media/681277/nrw-well-being-statement.pdf>

Public Health Wales' Well-being Statement and Well-being Objectives:

<http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/documents/888/PHW%20H%26SH%20Well-being%20Statement%20%26%20Objectives%20PDF%28e%29.pdf>

- 1. Clarity of Purpose:** Free swimming can potentially serve a range of different policy ambitions and can be interpreted in different ways by different stakeholders and in different local contexts. However, there needs to be a clear steer at national level about what a public subsidy for swimming and/or other sports and physical activities is intended to achieve and how it is expected to do so. Put another way, there needs to be a much clearer articulation of the theory of change that underpins whichever option is chosen to replace the current free swimming programmes and this needs to be co-produced with stakeholders and communicated clearly so there is shared understanding of the rationale for the intervention(s).
- 2. Monitoring and Accountability:** Clarity of purpose needs to be accompanied by a framework for all the key actors which focuses on outputs and outcomes rather than inputs and activities, and is linked to the national health and wellbeing objectives. We see this as essential, and operating at all levels – deliverers to users, two-way between deliverers and Sport Wales (and other funding bodies if appropriate), and between funding bodies and the Government and Assembly.

Sport Wales, local authorities and other delivery partners need to agree a monitoring framework which reflect the theory of change and enables local authorities and other partners to give a clear account of how well they are delivering these. We recommend that Sport Wales provides an annual assessment of the programme(s) which highlights achievements and any problem areas, and proposes revisions based on learning from their own insight and analysis and supplemented periodically by complementary independent assessment and review. The aim should be to enable stakeholders at all levels to understand what the investment of public money in free swimming and/or other sports is achieving.

Monitoring should have teeth. For example, funding could be linked to results. As now, it might in part relate to whether local authorities deliver minimum levels of provision, but it should also gauge the extent to which programmes deliver outputs and higher level outcomes which contribute to the agreed objectives.

- 3. Raising awareness:** National marketing of free swimming has dropped away in recent years. If free swimming is retained there needs to be an investment in national and local campaigns to increase awareness of it. Equally, if the current programmes are replaced, the interventions which take their place will need marketing to potential participants.
- 4. Promoting good practice:** Finally, we believe that there is a need for specific arrangements for identification, sharing and promotion of good practice between local authorities and other deliverers. The greater the diversity of approaches based on the

exercise of local discretion, the greater the need to capture and leverage what works well. There is already learning to be drawn on from this review and some of the underlying evidence – for example, Sport Wales’ liaison officers identified a series of key factors which combine to make the programmes work well at local level, and we have seen various aspects of good and best practice across local authorities plans and practices. They are an asset to be optimised, and they are the kind of asset which is augmented rather than diminished by frequency of use and adoption by others.

July 2018

Glossary and Acronyms

BAME	Black Asian and Minority Ethnic
COPA	Council of Old Peoples Associations
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DSW	Disability Sport Wales
FS	Free Swimming
LA	Local Authority
LAPAs	Local Authority Partnership Agreements
LGDU	Local Government Data Unit (also known as Data Unit: Wales)
LSOA	Lower Super Output Areas
LTS	Learn to Swim
WAG	Wales Assembly Government
WCVA	Wales Council for Voluntary Action
WIMD	Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation
WLGA	Welsh Local Government Association
WSA	Welsh Sports Association

References

- N Bolton, *et al Free Swimming Evaluation 2008*, Cardiff, InVEST, 2008.
- Public Health Wales and Sport Wales, *Getting Wales Moving*, Cardiff, 2017.
- RCS Working Paper *Free Swimming Data Analysis*, Cardiff UKRCS Ltd, 2018.
- RCS Working Paper, *Free Swimming Literature Review*, Cardiff, UKRCS Ltd, 2018.
- RCS Working Paper, *Free Swimming Survey Analysis*, Cardiff, UKRCS Ltd, 2018.
- Sport Wales, *Sport and Active Lifestyles Survey 2016-17*, Cardiff, Sport Wales, 2017.
- Welsh Assembly Government, *Climbing Higher*, Cardiff, 2005.
- Welsh Government, *Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021*, Cardiff, 2016.