

A revised Free Swimming Initiative A briefing for Welsh Government and Assembly Members.

Overview

October 2019 will see the introduction of a revised Free Swimming Initiative (FSI), including new national objectives, which aims to get more Young People from areas of deprivation accessing pools and swimming as well as older people over the age of 60 from areas of deprivation.

The current initiative has seen some considerable successes since starting but a recent independent review showed continuing with the current scheme wasn't an option. Change was needed if it was going to reach more young people from areas of deprivation. It is estimated that currently only 6% of the over 60s population are using the FSI and there has been significant decline in the numbers of young people accessing free sessions.

The revised initiative will mean a minimum requirement for Local Authorities [LAs] and their delivery partners to provide a free splash session to young people each weekend, in every Local Authority-run pool. During the summer holidays, each pool will also be expected to deliver an additional two free sessions during the week with thought given to finding the best time to encourage young people to attend.

Over 60s remain a target audience. Local Authorities [LAs] and their delivery partners are expected to find ways to best cater for this audience. This will include a free swim option, with supplementary offers including subsidised swimming and/or multi-sport offers.

Local Authorities will be working with less revenue funding which has been offset this financial year by additional capital investment of £1m. This is to be utilised before the end of the financial year to improve the customer experience in some pools.

From April 2020, funding will be reduced to £1.5m per annum and is expected to be spent on ensuring the offer is right for each of the target groups.

The background to Free Swimming in Wales

Free Swimming in Wales was first launched in 2003 – the first national free swimming programme in Wales – with the aim of getting more young people (aged 16 and below) and over 60s swimming, learning to swim and swimming more regularly. It is a Welsh Government-funded initiative, managed by Sport Wales and delivered by the 22 Local Authorities (LAs).

The initiative has seen some considerable successes since starting but a recent independent review showed continuing under the current Initiative wasn't an option. Change was needed if it was going to reach more young people from areas of deprivation.

As stated above, it is estimated that only 6% of the over 60s population are using the FSI and there has been significant decline in the numbers of young people accessing free sessions. This can be attributed to a number of reasons, one of which includes the fact that if you're unable to swim in the first place, you're less likely to take advantage of free swimming sessions.

Following the review, Sport Wales was asked by Welsh Government to look at ways to renew the Initiative and better align it with the Vision for Sport in Wales – created to unite partners across Wales, both in and outside of the sport sector, in helping people across Wales to enjoy the benefits

of being active through sport. As well as this, the revised Initiative needed to take into consideration the Government's wellbeing objectives.

How is the revised FSI different?

Following the independent review, Sport Wales received clear steer from Welsh Government that young people and older people over the age of 60 from areas of deprivation were to be prioritised under the revised Initiative. A minimum requirement for LAs and their delivery partners was set requiring them to provide a free splash session to young people each weekend, in every LA-run pool. Further to this, during the summer holidays, each pool will also be expected to deliver two free sessions during the week to complement the weekend session. These sessions should also be held at times that suit young people and their families to make it more likely for them to utilise the service.

Over 60s remain a target audience. LAs and their delivery partners are expected to find ways to best cater for this audience and create offers that meet with their needs. This will include a free swim option, but it may also include subsidised swimming and/or multi-sport offers.

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What this means for people currently accessing sessions under the scheme

Change will mean that under the revised initiative some over 60s in areas across Wales may not be able to access their usual sessions and in some cases, may need to pay a subsidised amount for sessions. Although a free swim option will remain. Sport Wales and Swim Wales will work closely with LAs over the next 18 months to ensure a range of opportunities are made available to over 60s under the revised Initiative, and where possible, at no cost to the individual.

Local insight will be important in making sure sessions are held at times that suit young people (including their parents or guardians) and over 60s.

Next Steps

LAs and delivery partners will now work to implement their revised Free Swimming offering. This includes, for some, reaching out to parts of the community they have yet to engage with.

Sport Wales and Swim Wales will continue to work with LAs and their delivery partners as they begin this transitional phase. Under Sport Wales' new strategy we will actively look to find different ways of working with partners to gain access to under-represented groups and those who need a helping hand to access sporting opportunities. This will mean working with partners, old and new, as well as listening to the needs of local communities and being willing to trial new approaches. It will be less about numbers of people who take part and more about whether we are getting the right people to sessions and whether those sessions produce the outcomes we are looking for.

It is expected that each Local Authority will continue to review feedback and insight gained on the communities they are trying to engage with to tweak sessions and better cater to their needs. A review of progress to date will take place at six months, with a further review at 12 and then again at the end of the 18 month transitional phase.

Implementation will vary locally, therefore current users of the FSI are invited to speak to their local pool to find out whether any changes will affect sessions they currently attend. They can also ask for a timetable of new sessions which they can attend instead.

Local organisations, who work with young people from deprived areas or over 60s, interested in finding out how they can help members access sessions under the FSI, are invited to speak to their local pool to find out what is on offer. They are also invited to share insight on ways to break down barriers to access and help LAs ensure more people get the best out of the revised FSI.