

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Leisure Facilities Cabinet Sub-Committee

Date of Meeting: 30 July 2010

Report of: Head of Health & Wellbeing

Subject/Title: Information Update on the Swim Free Programme

1.0 Report Summary

- 1.1 To provide Members of the Committee with an overview of how the Council is approaching the 'Swim Free' programme in the light of the recent decision to stop external grant funding on 31 July 2010.

2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 That Members note the information provided in relation to the 'Swim Free' programme including the Communications Plan and associated publicity.

3.0 Background and Options

- 3.1 As Members are aware, the Council is currently taking advantage of the Government's two-year 'Swim Free' programme which commenced on 1 April 2009. Following an announcement on the 17 June 2010, the funding from the Department of Culture, Media & Sport will cease from 31 July 2010 and the Council will only receive the pro rata funding for up to this date.

- 3.2 To support the programme the Council has received the following funding per year for 2009/10 and was due to receive it for 2010/11:

- To support public swimming for those aged 60 and over: £119,493.
- To support public swimming for those aged 16 and under: £209,269.

Total: £328,762

The cost of running the scheme in Year One was £111,263. In order to offset the additional costs of the scheme in Year Two the Council added a growth item of £100,000 for 2010/11 to cover this additional cost of delivering the programme.

- 3.3 The scheme currently has the following numbers registered:

- Swim Free Senior: 6,316
- Swim Free Junior: 31,327

Although not all of those registered will have taken advantage of the scheme during the first year, the Council was placed 11th out of 258 participating authorities with total swim numbers of 192,536. This compares with 127,406 the previous year prior to the commencement of the scheme.

- 3.4 In addition to the increased participation in swimming that the programme has generated, the Council has also been able to utilise £108,000 of additional capital funding to support physical improvements at several of the Council's pools. This funding was made available to the Council as it is running both age groups in the scheme.
- 3.5 Following agreement with the Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing, these improvements have included upgrades to the male and female swimming pool changing rooms, showers and toilets at Wilmslow Leisure Centre, which were completed in December 2009. A similar refurbishment scheme is in place to be completed later this year at Sandbach Leisure Centre, and a new main entrance and reception is being provided at Nantwich Swimming Pool. This will provide, as at Sandbach, significantly improved access for disabled people. This is currently awaiting planning permission, but is due for completion later this calendar year.
- 3.6 As a result of the decision to end the funding, the Council was faced with a series of options on how to proceed from 31 July 2010 onwards. A series of options was presented to the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing:

Option A:

Give notice to all existing free swimming card holders that as a result of the withdrawal of funding, free swimming will end on 31 July 2010.

With this option the Service would continue to promote swimming as an effective form of exercise through its normal marketing strategy and will identify new opportunities for promotion. Some of the possible marketing activities would include:

- Continue to run centre 'family fun days' which offer free swimming in association with the Amateur Swimming Association.
- To identify suitable price promotions at key times throughout the year in line with normal marketing planning.
- Consider providing certain sessions free of charge for target user groups, e.g. specific days or certain school holidays.
- Ongoing promotion of the 'Everybody' options scheme which provides discounted access to certain target groups, including those affected by the withdrawal of the Swim Free scheme.
- Promotion of the Everybody memberships which include swimming as part of a monthly fee paid by Direct Debit and offer considerable savings when compared to casual payment.

Option B:

Discontinue free swimming for the 60's and over on 31 July 2010 in line with the Government announcement, but allow juniors 16 and under to continue free swimming for the school summer holidays until 31 August 2010.

With this option at the end of August 2010 the service would promote swimming as in Option A above.

Option C:

Discontinue all free swimming on 31 July 2010 in line with the Government's announcement, but to offer to transfer all previous junior and senior free swimming cardholders to the existing Council 'Everybody' options card at no extra charge.

With this option all existing Swim Free cardholders would access the existing discount scheme which provides a 50% discount off the standard adult charge for swimming on a 'pay as you go basis'. The normal annual charge for an 'Everybody' options card on this basis is £5. The charge for a 'Swim Free' card has been £2 per person.

- 3.6 Having considered the various options available, the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing has requested officers to proceed with **Option B**; to discontinue free swimming for those 60 and over on 31 July 2010 but to continue free swimming for those 16 and under until 31 August 2010.

This decision was made taking into account the following:

- (i) That there was sufficient funding available both from the Government (four months to 31 July 2010) and £100,000 from the Council's own revenue funding to allow the Council to remain within budget. This takes into account the usage trends for last year and the first two months of this year, where there was a disproportionate use of the facilities earlier in the financial year than through the winter months.
- (ii) That maintaining the 'Swim Free' for the 16 and under for the summer holiday was a positive approach.
- (iii) For the future there is still the ongoing ability to market some limited free swim activities as part of the normal programming as set out in 3.5 above.
- (iv) Option C was considered (transferring all users to the 'Everybody' options scheme). Based on current usage trends there would have been a shortfall of over £75,000 above the available budget. There remains, however, the availability of the Options scheme to anyone at an annual payment of £5.

4.0 Reasons for Recommendations

- 4.1 The decision was taken based on the options set out in Section 3 of this report.

5.0 Wards Affected

5.1 All.

6.0 Local Ward Members

6.1 All.

7.0 Policy Implications including - Climate change - Health

7.1 No direct implications.

8.0 Financial Implications 2009/10 and beyond (Authorised by the Borough Treasurer)

8.1 The decision to implement Option B was based on the finance available. There will be a need to continue to proactively market the service to ensure that income levels are maintained.

8.2 As part of the annual approval of fees and charges, those for swimming for both age groups are already approved and in operation for those who are not registered on the 'Swim Free' scheme. In addition, the pricing policy for the 'Everybody' options card which gives a range of discounts, has also been approved by the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing.

8.3 Implementation of any change will not affect those targeted groups that already have approved free access, including Cheshire East Council's "cared for" children and young people, current members of the armed forces, those with severe long-term disability, and children under three years of age.

9.0 Legal Implications (Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)

9.1 The provision of Leisure facilities is a discretionary service and is subject to powers primarily under Section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, the Local Government Act, 1972 and the general "Wellbeing" powers in the Local Government Act, 2000.

9.2 Under S.19 (2) of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, the Local Authority may make any recreational facilities provided by it "...available for use by such persons as it thinks fit either without charge or on payment of such charges as the authority thinks fit."

9.3 Local Authorities have a duty under Section 507B(1) Education Act 1996, as amended by Section 6(1) Education and Inspections Act 2006 to provide, as far as reasonably practicable, sufficient educational leisure-time and recreational leisure-time activities to children within its area.

- 9.4 In the absence of any funding being received specifically to be used towards providing free swimming in the area, the proposals contained in this report comply with the council's current powers and obligations.
- 9.5 As part of the agreement where customers signed up for the 'Swim Free' scheme there is a clause within the terms and conditions giving the Council the right to withdraw or amend the conditions of the scheme without notice.

10.0 Risk Management

Customer Communications:

- 10.1 Leisure facilities customer service standards promise a notice period of a minimum of two weeks for any major changes to activities, availability or pricing. A detailed Communications Plan has been produced (Appendix 1) which aims to deliver the message to the maximum number of users without incurring costs.
- 10.2 Consideration was given to more direct methods of communication, such as letter. Whilst this is more likely to ensure the message is received by every customer, the postage costs incurred would have been in excess of £10,000. An example of the poster publicity being used to inform customers of the changes in service provision is shown in Appendix 2.

11.0 Access to Information

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting the report writer:

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