

Oaklands Pool - Public Health Response

Dr Andrew Mortimore, Director of Public Health

1. Introduction

This paper summarises some of the benefits of swimming towards improving health. It summarises some of the evidence from work undertaken in recent years to understand the way people in our city exercise, or don't, and sets this against a national context. Whilst the loss of any swimming facility is likely to mean some users will no longer swim as regularly, the EIA provides the information to enable members to assess the adequacy and suitability of the alternatives.

2. The importance of physical activity

The benefits of regular physical activity have been clearly set out across the life-course. Physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality, accounting for 6% of deaths globally. This follows high blood pressure (13%), tobacco use (9%) and high blood glucose (6%). Overweight and obesity are responsible for 5% of global mortality¹.

There are a range of other potential benefits associated with different activities such as increasing cycling and walking leading to a reduction in transport costs, saving money and helping the environment. Fewer car journeys can reduce traffic, congestion and pollution, improving the health of communities¹. Benefits linked to physical activity in children and young people include not only health related outcomes and the prevention of obesity but also the acquisition of social skills through active play, better concentration in school and displacement of anti-social and criminal behaviour¹.

The strength of the relationship between physical activity and health outcomes persists throughout people's lives, highlighting the potential health gains that could be achieved if more people become more active throughout the life-course.

3. Current levels of physical activity in the population

Current levels of physical activity in adults are estimated from the national measurement of adult participation in sport and active recreation. Physical activity plays a crucial role in the prevention and treatment of obesity for both adults and children. In Southampton there is evidence that higher rates of obesity are found in areas with the lowest recorded levels of physical activity.

It is evident that children's levels of physical activity are directly related to family and household factors including attitudes and behaviours of adults to physical activity. It is recognised that there is much to be gained from families being active together. Active parents and the opportunity to do things with other family members influence young people's participation in physical activity.

4. Swimming and its contribution to physical activity levels

Swimming is the most participated in sport in England, excluding walking². It has been estimated that approximately 36% of the population are either regular or

irregular swimmers, the latter being defined as someone who has swum once or more in the last 12 months. For the vast majority, this was in indoor pool facilities. Some 60% of the population do not swim and around 20% of adults state that they cannot swim. However, adult participation in regular swimming has not changed significantly during the period 1987-2006 and unlike many other 'sports', female participation has increased whilst at the same time male participation has decreased.

5. Local context

In the 2008 Southampton health survey, year 10 children were asked what activities they currently undertook. Swimming was the third most popular activity for girls at that time, and when asked what would they most like to start doing or do more of as activities, swimming came out as top for boys and girls.

In the 2010 survey which asked all school years, the top three activities requested by pupils and parents across all school types were football, swimming and dance.

The current Catch 22 Active Women's Project, aimed at increasing levels of physical activity in young women, surveyed 109 women between August to October 2011 from a number of areas across the city including Woolston, Weston, Millbrook, Redbridge and parts of the inner city. 40% said they had not taken part in any exercise during the past week. Of those taking part in any sport/activity, the most popular by far was swimming at more than twice the level of the second most popular activity of cycling.

In April 2009 Southampton City Council was one of 211 councils who signed up to offer the free swimming initiative for both 16 and under and over 60 year olds. Prior to April 2009, Southampton City Council pools had approximately 4,000 young people signed up to the under 12s free swimming scheme. From April 2009 to March 2010, an additional 11,591 joined the free swimming scheme giving a total of 15,591 young people registered for the 16 and under free swimming initiative and a total of 60,000 annual free swims, of which, 87% were children and young people living in Southampton. With the over 60s, Southampton recorded 26,905 free swims with 86% being Southampton residents.

Local Exercise on Referral Schemes, historically and currently, have included swimming as an option for those with health needs and/or a range of long term conditions and disabilities, referred by their GPs. This is due to its suitability and the high level of interest in swimming as an activity. Early feedback from the new scheme that was launched in May 2012 is that swimming remains a popular choice as part of overall activity plans, as are health walks.

6. Conclusions

- Accessible and affordable swimming facilities are popular and surveys show people would like to be able to swim more
- Swimming as a form of physical activity can make a significant contribution to improving fitness levels in a community, and in individuals with health problems
- Low physical activity levels in a population have wide-ranging consequences and costs to both individuals and society as a whole

- If a local facility closes, the reduced convenience, extra time involved and additional costs of travel associated with using alternative swimming provision is likely to reduce the number of people on low incomes who swim
1. Department of Health (2011): *Start Active, Stay Active: A report on physical activity for health from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers*
http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_128209
 2. Sport Industry Research Centre, Sheffield University (2007): *A guide to swimming participation statistics in England to assist ASA regions in the preparation of their strategic plans for 2009-2013*
www.swimwest.org/region/index.php?/news/content/download/3739/