

Ensuring Every Child in Scotland Can Swim and Gain Equal Access to Swimming Opportunities

Joint Response to the Report on the Inquiry into Support for Community Sport from Scottish Swimming and Save the Children

1.0 Introduction

Scottish Swimming and Save the Children welcome the Health and Sport Committee's invitation to contribute further to its inquiry into community sport; specifically to submit further information and advice regarding recommendation 15 –

Swimming is a key component of 'physical literacy' but the Committee was concerned to learn that 25% of children leave primary school unable to swim. The figure is likely to be even higher in deprived areas. The Committee welcomes the views of Save the Children Scotland and Scottish Swimming, the Active Schools Network and the Scottish Government on what can be done to remedy the situation

This paper provides further background information on this specific issue and outlines key recommendations on how this issue could be addressed.

2.0 Summary

There are still a significant minority of children who leave primary school unable to swim and research suggests this is a particular issue in deprived areas¹. Steady progress has been made towards ensuring more children in Scotland can swim but there is still more to do. The Learn to Swim Top Up programme, run by Scottish Swimming, has confirmed and highlighted the variation in school swimming delivery in Scotland, has challenged how school swimming is currently being delivered and how it can be improved. It has enabled a collective approach to addressing the problem enabling more effective partnership working between local authorities and leisure trusts. It has been a catalyst for highlighting a number of key issues and is important for keeping the issue alive. To achieve the vision we need to ensure that the current investment in teaching learning to swim to children across Scotland be retained, including the top up funding, but over a longer time frame.

The key issues young people have told us are important in determining access to swimming opportunities for young people are **affordability**, **accessibility** and **quality** of swimming opportunities. If these barriers to inclusion are addressed, it will bolster existing efforts and commitments to widen access to swimming and go a long way to supporting more young people from deprived backgrounds to enjoy the benefits of swimming.

In order to make further progress and achieve the vision of ensuring every child in Scotland can swim and gain better access to swimming, Scottish Swimming and Save the Children make the following recommendations:

- **Investment:** Scottish Government should continue to provide funding for Scottish Swimming's Top up programme. This should be resourced over the longer term, with a key focus on providing opportunities for children from areas of multiple deprivation.
- **Entitlement :** Scottish Government should introduce an entitlement to learn to swim for all primary school aged children and young people. This would set a clear direction, consistent approach, standards and a base line of provision across Scotland. In

¹ MacDonald, S. (2010) Audit into Primary School Swimming Provision in Scotland, Scottish Swimming

addition, the Scottish Government, local authorities, leisure trusts, education directors and other key partners should endorse the vision for Scotland, that all children should be given the opportunity to learn to swim. In order to retain current investment in school swimming programmes by local authorities and to maximise the outcome of the investment by Government, an endorsement is required by the Scottish Government which states, that all children should be given the opportunity to learn to swim and that it forms part of, and is integral to other manifesto commitments such as the delivery of two hours of quality physical education, increasing physical activity levels of our young people as well as delivering the four capacities of the curriculum for excellence. Swimming can deliver on them all and would be a commendable part of the Government's Commonwealth Games legacy programme.

- **Improve Access to affordable public transport for young people:** Several local authorities provide free transport during the school holidays for young people to enable them to get to and from the leisure centres and swimming pools. Falkirk Community trust is a good example of where this happens. Scottish Government should encourage local authorities to offer similar incentives.
- **Provide incentives for local authorities and leisure trusts to invest in improving access to swimming for children living in poverty:** For children aged 16 years and under the cost of going to the swimming pool ranges from being free to £2.50. A family swim (2 adults, 2 children) costs from £6.00 to £8.00. If public transport costs are added, it can make the cost of going swimming too expensive for low income families. Whilst research suggests that free swimming as a standalone initiative is not effective,² when it is part of a targeted initiative or programme it can help to increase participation in swimming for young people. Several local authorities have developed targeted initiatives such as Edinburgh Leisure's Jump In programme which targets pre-school children living in socially disadvantaged areas of Edinburgh and provides free swimming lessons and transport to the pool. Scottish Government should provide incentives for local authorities and leisure trusts to invest in improving access to swimming for children living in poverty.

If the four key recommendations outlined above are implemented, we believe more children, particularly those from deprived backgrounds will learn to swim and be able to gain better access to swimming resulting in them being able to take advantage of the many social, mental and physical benefits swimming can bring.

3.0 Background

Scottish Swimming's vision is Everyone Can Swim. In its Corporate Plan 'Pushing On 2006 – 2014' a headline target is to secure a swimming entitlement to ensure all children can swim before they leave primary school.

It is currently estimated that approximately 25% to 30% of primary aged children in Scotland cannot swim at the time of leaving primary school³. A higher proportion of those who cannot swim live in the more socially deprived areas of Scotland. A swimming entitlement would address this significant safety, health and equality issue. Trying to secure a swimming entitlement is not new. Work through Scottish Swimming has been on-going since 2000. Key documents have been produced and research carried out which all demonstrate and outline the need to ensure all children are provided with the opportunity to learn to swim.

² Fred Coalter: Free-swimming-a-need-for-a-more-strategic-approach

³ MacDonald, S. (2010) Audit into Primary School Swimming Provision in Scotland, Scottish Swimming

In September 2010, significant progress was made in realising this vision when the Scottish Government stressed the importance of this headline target with the announcement of investment (£800,000) for a National Learn to Swim Top Up programme. This welcome funding was to assist local authorities to improve the opportunities for primary aged children to learn to swim. One of the aims of the funding was to support transformational change to current provision in 2010-2011.

Based on the success of year one and the findings of the evaluation report the Scottish government invested a further £420,000 to enable the continuation of the programme for a further year commencing August 2012 to June 2013. The programme has been revised to take into account several of the recommendations outlined in the evaluation report. All 32 local authorities have again engaged in the programme and completed an action plan outlining how they would improve the swimming ability of the children in their area.

Last year Scottish Swimming partnered with Save the Children to jointly promote the importance of a swimming entitlement to ensure every child in Scotland learns to swim and gains better access to swimming, regardless of their background. Save the Children's Get In...to Swimming campaign called for:

- Every child and young person in Scotland to be able to swim, no matter their background
- All children and young people to have equal access to swimming opportunities
- The barriers to children and young people in poverty accessing swimming pools to be removed

A joint parliamentary reception was held in October 2012 at which Save the Children's Young Ambassadors and Scottish Swimming highlighted the issues outlined above to the Minister for Sport and Commonwealth Games and other attending MSPs.

3.0 Findings from Top Up Evaluation Report

The Learn to Swim Top Up programme was independently evaluated by the Sport Industry Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University in March 2012. The report highlighted several key findings and outlined recommendations on how the programme could be improved to make it more effective in the future.

Following the evaluation, Scottish Swimming have implemented a number of key recommendations including:

- We have shared best practice, highlighting examples of transformational change.
- We have created a new National Swimming standard and guidelines for assessment.
- We have developed a new school swimming programme called Triple S – Scotland Safe Swimmer. Triple S includes aquatic training, resources and equipment and an event programme.
- We have developed a simpler monitoring framework.
- We have ensured the revised top up programme takes account of feedback and managed the implementation of year 2 of the programme.

Many of these developments are in their infancy and will take time to be fully implemented and embedded before results will be seen. The independent report confirms that there are no simple and quick fixes for improving the swimming abilities of Scotland's primary school children and in retrospect, the challenges faced by school swimming in Scotland were never going to be solved by an investment of £800,000 over a one year period. Rather than the swimming top up funding being a one-off unsustainable injection of funding to address a perceived problem,

it should be seen as the start of a process whereby children in Scotland are given the best possible opportunity to learn how to swim. As such the top up programme has:

- Confirmed and highlighted the variation in school swimming delivery across Scotland,
- Challenged how school swimming is currently being delivered and how it can be improved and
- Enabled a collective approach to addressing the problem enabling more effective partnership working between local authorities and leisure trusts.

The programme has been a catalyst for highlighting a number of key issues and is important for keeping the issue alive.

4.0 Get In ... to Swimming Campaign

Although swimming is one of the more affordable leisure activities available to young people, Save the Children's campaign identified five key barriers which can prevent children and young people living in poverty accessing swimming:

- **Cost of swimming lessons:** For those children who do not learn to swim at school it can be expensive to learn to swim later on in life.
- **Cost of admission to swimming pool:** The provision of free swimming for young people varies substantially across Scotland. Some offer free or discounted swimming during school holiday periods whilst some don't offer free swimming at all. For example, swimming at local authority pools is free in Glasgow whereas it costs £2-3 in North Ayrshire. This means that many children and young people living in poverty have to pay if they wish to go swimming – an expense they often cannot afford.
- **Cost and access to transport:** The cost and availability of public transport is a major barrier to children and young people accessing swimming facilities. This is a particular issue in rural areas, where bus and train services can be limited at times when young people need the most – for instance, in the evenings and at weekends. The cost of a return ticket for a child is often around £1.50-£2.00. As children and young people living in poverty are less likely to have parents who have access to a car, this is a particular problem for young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.
- **Cost of equipment:** Swimming does not need a great deal of equipment compared to some other sports, but there are still a number of costs associated with buying equipment such as a swimming costume. For children and young people from low income backgrounds this can be a significant expense.

When the cost of lessons, transport and entrance fees are added up, a trip to the swimming becomes an expensive activity for young people living in low income households.

5.0 Key Recommendations

In order to make further progress and ensure more children in Scotland can swim and gain better access to swimming Scottish Swimming and Save the Children make the following recommendations:

- **Investment:** Scottish Government should continue to provide funding for Scottish Swimming's Top up programme. This should be resourced over the longer term, with a key focus on providing opportunities for children from areas of multiple deprivation.
- **Entitlement :** Scottish Government should introduce an entitlement to learn to swim for all

primary school aged children and young people. This would set a clear direction, consistent approach, standards and a base line of provision across Scotland. In addition, *the Scottish Government, local authorities, leisure trusts, education directors and other key partners should endorse the vision for Scotland that all children should be given the opportunity to learn to swim.* In order to retain current investment in school swimming programmes by local authorities and to maximise the outcome of the investment by Government, an endorsement is required by the Scottish Government which states, that all children should be given the opportunity to learn to swim and that it forms part of, and is integral to other manifesto commitments such as the delivery of two hours of quality physical education, increasing physical activity levels of our young people as well as delivering the four capacities of the curriculum for excellence. Swimming can deliver on them all and would be a commendable part of the Government's Commonwealth Games legacy programme.

- **Improve Access to affordable public transport for young people:** Several local authorities provide free transport during the school holidays for young people to enable them to get to and from the leisure centres and swimming pools. Falkirk Community trust is a good example of where this happens. Scottish Government should encourage local authorities to offer similar incentives.
- **Provide incentives for local authorities and leisure trusts to invest in improving access to swimming for children living in poverty:** For children aged 16 years and under the cost of going to the swimming pool ranges from being free to £2.50. A family swim (2 adults, 2 children) costs from £6.00 to £8.00. If public transport costs are added, it can make the cost of going swimming too expensive for low income families. Whilst research suggests that free swimming as a standalone initiative is not effective,⁴ when it is part of a targeted initiative or programme it can help to increase participation in swimming for young people. Several local authorities have developed targeted initiatives such as Edinburgh Leisure's Jump In programme which targets pre-school children living in socially disadvantaged areas of Edinburgh and provides free swimming lessons and transport to the pool. Scottish Government should provide incentives for local authorities and leisure trusts to invest in improving access to swimming for children living in poverty.

Conclusion

There are no simple and quick fixes for improving the swimming abilities of Scotland's primary school children. However, if we are to support young people to enjoy swimming and to benefit from current investments in school swimming programmes that are made by local authorities and Scottish Government, it is essential that steps are taken to remove the additional barriers that prevent children and young people from low income backgrounds from learning to swim and taking up swimming opportunities.

Ensuring every child in Scotland can swim and gain equal access to swimming is about delivering lasting change across Scotland now and in the future. Scottish Swimming and Save the Children recommend we use the unique opportunity of the 2014 Commonwealth Games to help to deliver this lasting change now, in the run up to the Games and in the years beyond and make it an integral part of the Games legacy.

⁴ Fred Coalter: Free-swimming-a-need-for-a-more-strategic-approach