

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

Report of Stephen Askew, Executive Member for Communities to the Cabinet 9th September

Free Swimming Programme

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to outline the Department of Culture Media and Sports (DCMS) proposal for free swimming as publically announced in June 2008. The report details the level of grant support available to the Council and the various options that are being proposed. It also gives an overview of the practical issues relating to the implementation of the scheme and the current position of other districts and their anticipated response to the offer.

2. Recommendations

- It is recommended that the Council
- 2.1 Accept the government grant of £47,574 and offer free swimming for people aged 60 and over and submit an expression of interest to roll the scheme out to people under the age of 16 subject to DCMS clarification of arrangements for pools managed by third parties.

Note: In preparing this report, due regard has been had to equality of opportunity, human rights, prevention of crime and disorder, environmental and risk management considerations as appropriate. Relevant officers have been consulted in relation to any legal, financial or human resources implications and comments received are reflected in the report.

3. Information, Issues and Options

3.1 Background

- 3.1.1 In June 2008 the DCMS publically announced their 'Free swimming programme' proposal which would enable all over 60's to access free swimming from April 2009. The DCMS also announced that they intended for this programme to roll out to include under 16's and then eventually provide free swimming for all.
- 3.1.2 Confirmation of the details of the free swimming proposal were sent to all local authorities in early August with a deadline for buy in to the scheme by 15th September 2008.
- 3.1.3 £15m will be provided according to a formula based on the local 60 or over population to those of the 354 local authorities who choose to provide free swimming for those aged 60 or over. A further £25m will be available to provide free swimming for those aged 16 or under, these allocations will be based on expressions of interest.
- 3.1.4 The scheme has a number of elements and options.
- Authorities who wish to participate in the free swimming for over 60's offer will be given a grant, pre-fixed, based on the local authorities population of those 60 or over. The deadline for sign up to this scheme is 15th September 2008.
 - Authorities who wish to participate in the free swimming offer for those aged 16 and under must also submit an expression of interest by 15th September 2008. For these authorities, DCMS will then aim to provide details of their prospective allocation by 30th September 2008 Confirmation of participation in this element of the scheme will then need to be submitted by 15th October 2008.
 - Those Authorities who currently offer free swimming are also eligible for the grant but must spend this money to further enhance their programme. While Parkwood Leisure currently promote a range of swimming offers including free swimming

vouchers, these do not qualify for the government free swimming programme.

- In addition, DCMS is providing a total of £60m capital for projects designed to modernise pool provision, which are integrated with providing free swimming as outlined above. £10m of this pot will be made available in financial year 08/09 for local authorities who sign up to both schemes. These authorities will be rewarded by a pro-rata population based share of the £10m in the financial year 08/09 and may submit bids for the remaining funding from 09/10 onwards.

3.1.5 The DCMS has ring fenced a grant of £47,574 for Breckland Council to enable free swimming for the over 60's within the district. Under the conditions of the grant, free swimming for the over 60's is defined as 'free swimming for those aged 60 and over who wish to swim, at any time throughout the year, when they would normally be admitted to the pool for public swimming, and in accordance with local programming, should not be charged for doing so.'

3.2 Issues

3.2.1 The scheme is designed to increase participation in swimming and make it more accessible for key target groups. This is in line with the Council's priorities of Stronger Communities and Prosperous Communities. It will assist in improving the health of residents in the district and allow more people to access leisure activities which they may have previously been excluded from for financial reasons.

3.2.2 Buy in to the scheme is optional and the level to which an authority chooses to participate is also optional. However failure to sign up to the whole scheme (over 60's and under 16's) prevents the authority from being eligible for the capital grant scheme. This has less of an effect on Breckland than other authorities due to the nature of our PFI agreement. All improvements to existing PFI facilities and maintenance of those sites under the PFI agreement are the sole responsibility of our contractual partner. However, if Breckland Council were to buy in to the scheme, then there is potential to improve facilities beyond any proposals from Parkwood Leisure.

3.2.3 Due to the Council's PFI agreement with Breckland Leisure Ltd it will be necessary to reimburse the leisure operator Parkwood leisure for loss of income if the Council chooses to implement the scheme. There is a high risk that the grant awarded for either of the age groups will not be enough to cover the costs and the Council will need to budget for the shortfall. It is difficult to accurately predict the full financial implications to the Council, however Appendix 1 shows estimated costs based on the information we have at present.

3.2.4 Implementation of the scheme will be complex. There is a risk that if other districts do not sign up to the scheme then implementation to Breckland residents will be complicated, particularly for residents who live on the edge of the district and swimming in facilities owned by our neighbouring authorities. The impact of this situation could be negative if those residents on the edge of the district are only able to swim at Thetford and Dereham for free and get charged for swimming in other pools. It will also result in increased demand for new facilities from the market towns without pools.

3.2.5 There is a risk of raising expectations for the initial two years while the grant is available and then failing to deliver a comparable scheme in following years due to lack of funding if the level of grant is reduced or withdrawn completely.

3.2.6 The proposal does not take into consideration partnership arrangements, management / operator agreements, or risk to lost income for the leisure facilities. In Breckland's case the Council will be responsible for picking up the full cost of all free admissions to the pools. In addition, the DCMS have stated that local authorities which do not own their own pools will not be eligible for the grant. While it is not believed that pools under PFI agreements are excluded, we are awaiting clarification on this matter.

3.2.7 The DCMS have confirmed that the scheme is not limited to residents of participating authorities. Anyone can swim for free providing they are of the right age and the pool

they chose to attend is in a district which has opted to provide free swimming and take up the grant. This is positive for the Breckland residents living on our borders of neighbouring authorities as it means that they will be able to access their nearest pool rather than travelling to Thetford and Dereham (providing that district offers free swimming). However it does mean that residents of Suffolk are likely to use Thetford pool and in effect Breckland will be subsidising this.

3.2.8 Practical implementation of the scheme will require new methods of monitoring users and changes to the current membership scheme which is used at both sites and all Parkwood sites nationally. This will be less of an issue if other Parkwood sites under PFI agreements or management agreements opt into the scheme as it will call for a review of all Parkwood membership schemes.

3.2.9 The proposal does not take into account implications of LGR.

3.2.10 A County wide meeting was held on Thursday 14th August where the DCMS proposal was discussed. Generally districts are disappointed with the short timescales that have been given for a response and there are concerns about the practicalities of implementing the scheme. There are concerns about the potential lost income from facilities which are run in house as well as the difficulties in predicting additional funding that will be needed to implement the scheme and reimburse our private sector partners.

3.2.11 The table below summarises the current position of other authorities:

District	Likely approach	Issues
North Norfolk	Implement over 60's Submit expression of interest for under 16's	Grant will not cover costs therefore financial resources will need to be allocated
South Norfolk	Implement over 60's Submit expression of interest for under 16's	Loss of income from in house facilities. Need to make up shortfall from secondary spend
Kings Lynn	Implement both elements of the scheme	Do not believe there will be any financial implications
Broadland	Would like to enter scheme but is dependent on partnership working with other authorities and redistribution of grant	Do not have any facilities Will rely on partners buy in and have approached DCMS about reallocating grant or allowing buy in to other districts services
Great Yarmouth	No feedback received	
Norwich City	Currently no formal steer however not supported at officer level	Capacity issues with existing pools Competition issues with UEA sports park – do not want to take away trade which will impact on UEA's income Will be supporting / subsidising majority of Broadland residents Believe there to be massive

		financial implications Unsure if Leisure operator will buy in to scheme
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3.2.12 A letter is currently being drafted to DCMS asking for clarification on a number of operational / implementation / financial / monitoring questions.

3.3 Options

3.3.1 Not to take part in the scheme

3.3.2 To sign up to provide free swimming for people aged 60 and over

3.2.3 To sign up to provide free swimming to people aged 60 and over and submit and expression of interest to provide free swimming to people aged 16 and under.

3.4 Reasons for Recommendation(s)

3.4.1 This scheme will make swimming more accessible to the residents of Breckland while providing and opportunity to increase participation in sport and physical activity. The health benefits of such a scheme are clear and in addition it will provide a legacy for the Breckfest programme.

4. **Risk and Financial Implications**

4.1 Risk

4.1.1 Not taking part in the free swimming scheme may result in negative publicity especially is neighbouring authorities choose to opt into the scheme

4.1.2 Risk that the grant from the DCMS will not meet the cost of free swimming and the shortfall will need to be met by the Council.

4.1.3 Potential legal implications under the terms of the PFI agreement. Potential knock on effect to maintenance schedules, pricing policies and reporting requirements

4.1.4 Potential hidden costs in terms of extra staffing requirements at the centres, wear and tear issues and extra resources required for monitoring the scheme and the operator.

4.1.5 Risk of grant funding not being continued after the two year period therefore scheme will either need to be withdrawn creating criticism from the public or further financial resources will need to be allocated.

4.2 Financial

4.2.1 See appendix 1

5. **Legal Implications**

5.1 Potential legal implications under the terms of the PFI contract.

6. **Other Implications**

a) Equalities: The Council in conjunction with its Partners Parkwood Leisure are committed to providing fair and equitable services

b) Section 17, Crime & Disorder Act 1998: None

c) Section 40, Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006: None

- d) Human Resources: None
- e) Human Rights: None
- f) Other: [e.g. Children's Act 2004] None

7. Alignment to Council Priorities

- 7.1 Functions and activities relating to sports development and leisure services support delivery of the following Council Priorities:
- Stronger Communities
 - Prosperous Communities

8. Ward/Community Affected

- 8.1 The leisure services within the district are available to all members of the community.

Background Papers

None

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Key Decision Status (Executive Decisions only):

This is a key decision

Appendices attached to this report:

Appendix 1 – Estimated financial implications