

END CHILD POVERTY NETWORK CYMRU RHWYDWAITH DILEU TLODI PLANT CYMRU

The End Child Poverty Network Cymru is co-ordinated by



Children in Wales
Plant yng Nghymru

The End Child Poverty Network Cymru (ECPN) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the following area of the Terms of Reference to the National Assembly for Wales Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee Inquiry into Participation levels in sport in Wales

- **The opportunities and barriers to sports participation that exist for different groups of people, including by equality strand and socio-economic group**

The response will mainly focus on swimming opportunities and participation levels for children, young people and families.

1.1 The ECPN Cymru has recently released a Working Paper¹ on the participation opportunities for Swimming including the Welsh Government Free Swimming Scheme for children and young people who are 16 and under.

1.2 The Free Swimming scheme was launched by the Welsh Government in 2003, and is now a key part of the 'Creating an Active Wales' physical activity plan which was launched in January 2010² In its Programme for Government 2011, the Welsh Government has committed to continue to support the Free Swimming Scheme to help improve health outcomes and reduce health inequalities for families, children and young people who are living in poverty and to widen access to sport and participation³.

1.3 Local authorities in Wales have agreed to offer children and young people under 16 years of age, fourteen hours of free swimming sessions per week during school holidays out of which seven hours have to be specific water activities under the Free Swimming Initiative

¹ Swimming for Children, Young people and Families,

<http://www.childreninwales.org.uk/areasofwork/childpoverty/povertypublications/index.html>

² <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/phhs/publications/activewales/100121activewalesen.pdf>

³ Programme for Government (Chapter 9 Tackling Poverty) , Welsh Government 2011, pp 18, 34, 35, 48
<http://wales.gov.uk/about/programmeforgov/poverty/?view=Standard&lang=en>

(2010). Since 2010, local authorities have also committed to offer two hours of free swimming or a dry side activity during the weekends throughout the year⁴.

1.4 The scheme to date has been successful with 4.3 million free swimming sessions for children and young people between 2004 and 2010⁵. Despite the recent drop in participant levels, there were 400,539⁶ free swims for children and young people and 90,000 free aquatic activities during 2012.⁷

1.5 Participating in free swimming lessons for children and young people can potentially set a lifelong trend to being physically active and healthy. This can lead to less childhood and lifelong obesity, diabetes, respiratory, circulatory and coronary diseases and other chronic health conditions. It can be especially crucial as a means of improving the mobility and wellbeing of children who have physical and medical disabilities. Better health means less days off school due to ill health leading to improved educational achievements and better life chances. Ultimately participating in the scheme could result in less young people and families living in poverty in the future.

1.6 It is, therefore, imperative that children and young people from all social backgrounds are able to participate and enjoy this valuable facility. Recent trends indicate that while the nation's health is improving, the greatest improvement in healthy lifestyles is seen in more affluent families⁸.

1.7 The third strategic objective of the Child Poverty Strategy for Wales, 2011, states that the Welsh Government has committed itself to closing this inequality gap and

'Reduce inequalities that exist in health, education and economic outcomes of children and families by improving the outcomes of the poorest'.⁹

The free swimming scheme can, therefore, play an important part in contributing towards these objectives.

Free Swimming Scheme and the hours it is available

2.1 The study found that most of the local authorities provided free swimming sessions on both days during the weekends. However, hours varied between 1hr a day at some pools to all day in others¹⁰. There is also variation within local authorities with some swimming pools offering the free sessions for an hour while other pools in the same local authority offering two hours on Saturdays and Sundays. Some leisure centers provided free swimming sessions on one day only during the weekends. There was also wide variation in the

⁴ Sport Wales <http://www.sportwales.org.uk/community-sport/public-programmes/free-swimming/16-and-under.aspx>

⁵ Statement on Free Swimming, Welsh Government Plenary, Tuesday 8 June, 2010
<http://wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/cabinetstatements/2010/100608swim/?lang=en>

⁶ Free Swimming Scheme, Welsh Data Unit, 2012

⁷ Programme for Government (Chapter 9 Tackling Poverty) Progress Report
<http://wales.gov.uk/docs/strategies/120528progress9en.pdf>

⁸ Denis Campbell, health correspondent, The Guardian, 23 August 2012

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/aug/23/class-divide-health-widens-thinktank>

⁹ Child Poverty Strategy for Wales (2011),

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/childrenyoungpeople/poverty/newcpstrategy/?lang=en>

¹⁰ Fishguard

number of hours the scheme is available during school holidays. One swimming pool offered the scheme for 1.5 hours a day while one local authority provided it between 11am and 4.30pm with an additional hour for families between 4.30pm and 5.30pm¹¹.

2.2 In order to ensure that no child is disadvantaged by poverty and by where they live, free swimming sessions should be equitable and available for the same number of hours throughout Wales. More children and young people could and potentially would participate in the scheme if it was available for longer, possibly at least three hours each day.

2.3 Increasing the number of hours it is available would enable children and young people who travel by public transport to participate in free swimming sessions. Travelling by public transport from many rural areas may not coincide with the timings of sessions if they are shorter than three hours. In addition, travelling costs can be upwards of £10 for one adult and two children. To enable the scheme to be truly financially accessible for low income families, consideration also needs to be given to the potential to reimburse travelling costs for those who rely on public transport.

The additional cost for an adult who supervises children under the age of eight

3.1 The study found that the number of children under the age of participating in the Free Swimming Scheme continues to be significantly less than in the other age groups.¹²

3.2 All the swimming pools in the study required an adult to be present with a child who was younger than 8 years of age. There was usually an admission charge for the accompanying adult.¹³ This means that a 'free' swimming session can cost a family between £2.45 and £4.50 per supervising adult. Furthermore, although registration at some swimming pools is free, sometimes children and young people, as well as the adult, have to buy a membership card to qualify for free swimming.

3.3 The fact that accompanying adults have to pay an admission charge to accompany under eight year old children may hinder a family's financial ability to participate in the free swimming scheme, especially if they have three or more children who are under the age of 8. One of the best practices can be seen in RCT. Free swimming has been extended to 19 year old young people in local authority pools and accompanying adults and carers are allowed into the pool free of charge.

Public swimming and family sessions (outside the Free swimming Scheme)

4.1 Allowing every child and young person to use the swimming pool free of charge or at a discount during public swimming sessions would enable them to benefit from the positive effects of participating in swimming.

¹¹ Rhondda Cynon Tâf

¹² Free Swimming Scheme, Welsh Data Unit, 2012. The data for 2011-12 shows that there were 85,201 free swims for children under the age of 8 compared to 187,267 for 8-11 year olds.

¹³ In one swimming pool, an adult also had to accompany young people who were between 8 and 15 years of age.

4.2 There are wide variations between local authorities as to whether they allow families who are on benefits to use their facilities for free or at a discounted rate. One local authority had no specific concessions for unemployed families apart from the £10 per month saver ticket which was universally available whilst no concessions were offered in another local authority. However, Swansea's swimming pools allow unemployed adults to buy a leisure ticket for £2 and then charges £1.55 per swimming session instead of the full adult rate of £3.10.

4.3 One can also narrow the inequalities gap and increase participation levels among low income families by making family swimming sessions more financially accessible to families who are on low incomes and those who receive welfare benefits. In this snapshot study, family tickets, which include two adults and two children, cost between £8.70 and £13.05 for non-members but less if the family are swimming pool/leisure centre members.

Swimming and disabled children

5.1 Local authorities across Wales have agreed to offer disabled children one structured aquatic session per week when committing to the Free Swimming scheme (2010). One of the observations of the snapshot was that although most local authorities do not charge disabled children and their carers an admission fee, some local authorities do charge a disabled child and allows a carer in for free (outside the free swimming scheme)¹⁴.

5.2 Some disabled children and young people rely on taxis or family cars as public transport is not always suitable. This increases the cost of swimming for disabled children and young people.

Swimming as part of the school curriculum

6.1 The Welsh Government has pledged to ensure that every child will be a competent swimmer by the time they transfer to secondary school. This is a very positive target. However, presently whereas there is no charge for the actual swimming sessions, some primary schools charge for the bus journeys to and from the swimming pool.¹⁵ This is especially burdensome for families who have more than one primary school aged child.

6.2 Schools should also ensure that children from low income families have the necessary means to buy swimsuits and goggles or look to identify funding to support low income families with this cost¹⁶.

Recommendations

7.1 The ECPN Cymru recommends that the Welsh Government

- Undertakes a full evaluation of the Free Swimming Scheme to date which includes an analysis of the issues raised in the working paper

¹⁴ One of the local authorities in the snapshot charges £2.20 per child outside of free swimming sessions and the carer goes in for free.

¹⁵ one school in Gwynedd charges £1.70.

¹⁶ [Tackling Child Poverty in Wales: A Good Practice Guide for Schools](#), 2011 - This guide aims to increase awareness of poverty and what schools can do to promote achievement and well-being amongst children who are living in poverty.

- works with local authorities to address the different application of the scheme in terms of its availability (Times/days etc)
- Works with local authorities to explore the cost of swimming sessions outside the Free Swimming Scheme
- Works with schools to address any additional costs for children participating in swimming sessions within the curriculum
- Monitors the impact of any leisure centre closures or public/private sector partnerships on the Free Swimming Scheme

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ABOUT US

The **End Child Poverty Network Cymru** (ECPN) is a coalition of concern focused on the eradication of child poverty in Wales, co-ordinated and managed on a day-to-day basis by Children in Wales. Its steering group include representation from across the voluntary and statutory sectors and the Network has an increasing supporting membership from a broad cross-section of agencies.

Steering Group members include Barnardo's Cymru, Children in Wales, Save the Children Wales, NEA Wales, Action for Children, NSPCC Cymru, WLGA (observers), Citizens Advice, Oxfam Cymru, Public Health Wales, Shelter Cymru, the Frank Buttle Trust, Fairbridge Cymru-Princes Trust, TUC Wales (observers), Consumer Focus Wales and the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales (observers).

Operational since 2001, the ECPN is supporting the Governments vision that no child in Wales should be living in poverty by 2020, and is working to achieve this by

- Increased public and professional understanding of child poverty in Wales
- Public and professional support for measures to tackle child poverty
- Ensure that policies are in place at all levels of Government (local, Assembly and Westminster), which contribute to eradicating child poverty in Wales.