

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET 26<sup>th</sup> August 2010

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF TECHNICAL SERVICES

## **FREE SWIMMING**

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### **1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report provides background information on the free swimming programme for juniors and elderly people. It asks Members to consider retaining the free swimming option for juniors during the school holiday period and elderly people at all times following consultation with leisure centre managers and swimming clubs.

### **2.0 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Free swimming for juniors (under 18s) during the school holidays was introduced as part of the 2004/05 'Policy Options' with the aim of improving the health and fitness of young people and reducing the incidents of youth crime. By way of example, swimming attendances in the first year (04/05) rose by 62% during the summer holiday period and the number of reported incidents of anti-social behaviour within a 1km radius of each swimming pool, fell by on average 50%. The total cost of the free swimming scheme was £180,000, which reflected the loss of income, additional staffing and other costs required during this period.
- 2.2 Free swimming for elderly people during all public opening hours was introduced as a 'pilot' in May 2006, on the back of the success of the free swimming for junior's programme, with the aim of increasing the number of elderly people swimming. Because of the low number of attendances in the 12 months prior to May 2006 – 20,541, the loss of income cost of the scheme was only about £40,000. For the comparable 12 month period in 2009/10, there were 70,776 recorded elderly people swims. Almost a 250% increase in numbers.
- 2.3 Cabinet on the 19 February 2007, approved the following minute regarding 'free swimming';-
- 'That the sum of £180,000 be used to consolidate into the revenue budget the cost of free swimming for young people during the school holidays. That this consolidation recognises the fact that this pilot programme has proved extremely successful in increasing the number of young people swimming, with all the consequent health benefits and in providing diversionary activities which have led to a marked decrease in anti-social behaviour in surrounding areas. That it be recognised that free swimming for pensioners has also proved extremely successful with more than four times as many elderly people taking

up the opportunity to swim and increase their fitness and that this programme can continue and be funded from within the current resources available’.

- 2.4 In July 2008 the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) announced a £140m package of funded programmes, designed to encourage as many local authorities as possible to participate in making swimming free for over 60s and under 16s in the run up to the London 2012 Olympic Games. The majority of local authorities in England applied to be part of the Government’s Free Swimming Initiative and Wirral’s pro rata total population-based allocations for Year 1 amounted to £293,635 and a capital grant of £94,314 (plus an additional £19,316.66 received in February 2010) which Cabinet have agreed will be used to improve changing facilities at Guinea Gap Baths.

### **3.0 CURRENT POSITION**

- 3.1 The Government announced on 17th June 2010, that the Free Swimming Programme would cease on 31st July 2010 three months into the second year of funding. Wirral’s remaining proportion of the grant from 1st April 2010 has been determined by the DCMS as £100,269.
- 3.2 Research commissioned by DCMS at the end of year 1 indicated that the Free Swimming initiative was not delivering value for money, in that the great majority of free swimmers were already regular swimmers. It did identify that swimming has the highest latent demand of all sports with 12.9% of the population saying that they would like to participate in swimming or swim more often. Swimming lessons are provided to all Wirral children as part of the school curriculum and classes are available at all Wirral pools for children and adults who wish to learn to swim and swimming clubs provide ‘improver sessions’.
- 3.3 On 24<sup>th</sup> June 2010 Cabinet resolved the following – ‘That despite central government cuts to grant funding, Cabinet is committed, within our current financial constraints to putting people first when providing front line services. Therefore, free swimming at Council facilities for residents under 18 and over 60 will be extended beyond the end of the central government grant funding period and continue throughout the school summer holidays until 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2010, at which time this decision will be reviewed. The Director of Technical Services is instructed to provide a report setting out the costs and benefits of this scheme.

### **4.0 OPTIONS AVAILABLE**

- 4.1 The cost of continuing free swimming outside school holidays for juniors and providing additional classes for the elderly (previously paid for by Government grant) would be £293,635 per annum. Take up by juniors outside school holidays for free swimming has been limited but holiday sessions have remained popular. In 2008/09 there were 148,428 junior free swims and in

2009/10 this was down to 138,076. The cost of providing free swimming for juniors during school holidays and elderly people all the year round is £180,000 per annum which is included in the base budget.

4.2 Members may also wish to consider as part of this review the provision of free access to Wirral's Leisure Centres for service personnel currently in the forces and ex service personnel living in the Metropolitan Borough of Wirral. No significant added cost is anticipated if this option was adopted.

4.2 Wirral also provides free swimming passes for looked after children and their carers during all public sessions and it is proposed that this is continued.

4.3 Cabinet agreed at their meeting of 22 July 2010 that 'The Director of Technical Services be instructed to undertake an initial review of arrangements for the future provision of swimming and indoor leisure. The review will include consultation with Leisure Centre users and non users from groups who would benefit from increased physical activity.

## **5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 There are no additional financial implications if free swimming is retained for juniors during the school holidays and for elderly people at all times.

## **6.0 STAFFING IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 There are none arising from this report.

## **7.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 There are none arising from this report.

## **8.0 PLANNING IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 None

## **9.0 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 Free swimming has been shown to reduce anti-social behaviour.

## **10.0 HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 None

## **11.0 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS**

11.1 None

## **12.0 SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPLICATIONS**

12.1 None

### **13.0 ANTI-POVERTY IMPLICATIONS**

13.1 Free swimming allows those on low income to make regular use of swimming facilities.

### **14.0 ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT**

14.1 Department for Culture, Media and Sport –  
'Evaluation of the Impact of Free Swimming' - PricewaterhouseCoopers

### **15.0 LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS**

15.1 Applies to all of Wirral

### **16.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Whilst consideration of the Wirral's free swimming arrangements will of course form part of the Council's consultation on its priorities. "Wirral's Future, be a part of it", Cabinet resolves that:

**16.1** Free swimming be provided for juniors in school holidays and elderly people all year round.

**16.2** Free access to Wirral's Leisure Centre facilities be provided for personnel currently serving their country in the armed forces and ex service personnel who live in the Metropolitan Borough of Wirral.

**16.3** Wirral's Leisure Centres provide free swimming passes for looked after children and their carers during all public swimming sessions.

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