



#ARBEDNOFIO

**The Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee inquiry into the impact of the increasing costs on our sector (aquatic activities and sports).**

**September 15<sup>th</sup> 2022**

For the third time in 18 months Swim Wales have been invited by the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee to provide written contributions to an inquiry. Swim Wales is very grateful to the committee for the opportunity to highlight the impact of the increasing costs on our organisation, our network and our sector and for taking an interest in this extremely challenging issue.

**Background**

As the National Governing Body for Aquatics in Wales, Swim Wales works with 270+ partners across the aquatic spectrum in Wales. This includes local authorities, facility owner/operators, leisure trusts, swimming clubs, aquatic activity groups, swimming schools, and of course our primary schools. In addition to this we work closely with partners outside of core sport in areas such as social care, diverse and minority community groups, health and education. The information and views in this paper draw on intelligence taken from across the various teams Swim Wales who are in daily, weekly and monthly contact with these groups.

It has been widely publicised that COVID lead to restrictions in public participation in our sport, this not only impacted our 11+ user groups across Wales but also resulted in facility closure which placed extreme financial pressures on facility owners and operators. Despite a lot of support from Welsh Government through various support funds and access to local authority 'hardship funds' many of these facility owners and operators are still to this day in recovery mode, trying to 'keep the doors open'.

In parallel however, we have welcomed resurgence in aquatic participation over the last 12 months mainly in areas such as public swimming and swimming lessons (Learn to Swim). A high percentage of local authorities that we work with have reported growth in these programmes being between 120-150% versus pre COVID levels.



#ARBEDNOFIO

This is a fantastic recovery across Wales after a very damaging period (March 2020-April 2021) However, the residual cost issues facing facility owner/operators have been now multiplied by the current energy crisis and this has introduced a 'second wave' of risk to participation in our Welsh aquatic activities and sports.

#### **Learn to Swim - Impact of increasing costs**

The committee will know through previous submissions from Swim Wales and our other national partners that learning to swim can mean far more than just improving the physical health of an individual, it is a life skill and can mean the difference between life and death. Too many children already leave school unable to swim (52% of Welsh children left school in 2019 unable to swim – Ref: Swim Wales National School Survey) particularly those from less affluent families and those from ethnically diverse communities (80% of children from Black, Asian of Minority Ethnic Groups cannot swim Ref: The Black Swimming Association 2021) These were already challenging our work to get our nation aquatically active, the very real prospect of price increases and pool closures in Wales would only serve to make this situation even worse, widening health inequalities and excluding those most in need of these facilities.

As we alluded to in the background section of this document, demand for swimming lessons in Wales is at a record high. However, availability of lessons is currently restricted due to a lack of teachers, this is magnified too by the rise in living costs with some parents/carers unable to access swimming lesson provision; there is significant concern that there could be a generation of children that miss out on learning to swim and being safe in and around water. This is on the back of an estimated 15 Million cancelled or lost swimming lessons due to COVID related closures.

Many years of research tells us that social patterns are evident among swimming participation with children from lower socioeconomic class less likely than those from higher socioeconomic class to engage in swimming (Audrey, Wheeler et al. 2012). This is supported by recent data showing that across the Swim Wales network the average cost of a



#ARBEDNOFIO

swimming lesson is approximately £6.50; and with low income families spending just £3.75 per week on 'active sport' this shows that socioeconomic class is a serious consideration in relation to access to extra-curricular lessons and the reliance on school swimming programmes.<sup>1</sup>

For a significant percentage of the population, experience in school may be the only opportunity that they have to learn to swim. It is being reported by providers and schools that some schools are reducing or cancelling school swimming sessions due to increased costs associated: increased cost per head to participate and increased transport costs. If the opportunity to develop skills of water competence is not specifically included in the curriculum more children and young people will miss out on learning these potentially lifesaving skills.

Schools provide the main opportunities for children to get active, normally through timetabled 'PE' sessions, which included swimming. (Street Games, 2019) After school clubs are not an easy option for most families due to cost and logistics of getting to-and-from the activity, which is even harder if there are multiple children. (StreetGames, 2019).

The Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament's Petitions Committee has recently published a report into water safety and drowning prevention in Wales in response to a petition and campaign by Leeanne Bartley from Ruthin, whose son Mark died in a reservoir in 2018. The report makes some important recommendations to Welsh Government about how it can further support drowning prevention in Wales. Specifically, "**Recommendation 3.** The Welsh Government should ensure that there is a coherent education and water safety programme in schools, delivered from a young age. Increasing awareness of the risks presented by water and an understanding of how to stay safe or respond in an accident can save lives." Ensuring that all children and young people have the opportunity to learn skills of water competence and have extensive 'experience of water' specifically links to the goals of A More Equal Wales, A Healthier Wales and A Globally Responsible Wales. In addition to this the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy (2016, p.17) and the Wales Drowning Prevention Strategy (2020, p.25) set out to 'promote and develop learning to swim and water safety

---

<sup>1</sup> Living Costs and Food Survey, 2019



#ARBEDNOFIO

education’ and ensure that ‘every child should have the opportunity to learn to swim and receive water safety education at primary school and where required at Key Stage 3’.

Private swim Schools have reported to us that pool hire costs are increasing significantly due to energy costs. There are 127 privately run Swim Schools in Wales, many are small businesses supporting 3-10 staff and thousands of children in Learn to Swim. This impact on swim school providers means that they are forced to pass this cost onto the customers to remain sustainable.

#### Survey Statistics\*

- Over a third of families have cut back on the number of extra-curricular activities their child does per week.
- Over half (54%) agree they have had to cut back on things to help pay for an extra-curricular activity.
- Nearly a third will only let their child do extra-curricular activities if they are within walking distance of their home.

\* Swimming Teachers Association 2

#### Facility Operators - Impact of increasing costs

In the preparation of this paper, we were concerned to hear from our partners across local authority pool operators, private operators and leisure trusts that increased energy costs could result in an estimated financial gap of £26 million across Wales, the equivalent of the total investment in sport by Welsh Government total annually. UK Active who represent a number of leisure organisations have indicated that their member’s organisations could apply a surcharge of £1 on every visit across their leisure estate. If we apply this model to the 500,000 users per week in aquatics alone (adults & children) this would have a detrimental effect on accessibility and affordability, and from a participation perspective potentially eclipse the impact of the COVID ‘shutdown era’.

Providers and customers are reporting that pool temperatures are being reduced by some operators in a desperate attempt to reduce energy expenditure. This in itself is having an



**#ARBEDNOFIO**

negative impact on participation numbers particularly in Learn to Swim and public family sessions where the water temperature is too cold so participants are not having a positive experience. Reduced pool temperatures do not allow for Early Years (baby and toddler) swimming to be facilitated safely, some pools have reduced by 2-3 degrees (the recommended safe temperature for under 5's is 30 degrees) just to stay open.

When we extend this outlook and look ahead to the next 12 months (June 22 - May 23), operators have reported:

- 78% of facilities are likely or extremely likely to increase customer prices
- 85% of facilities are likely or extremely likely to reduce services
- 63% of facilities are likely or extremely likely to reduce staffing
- up to 79% of facilities are likely or extremely likely to be forced to stop operating completely (this indicates the likelihood of having to stop operations for 'some or all' of their facilities as multi-site operators)
- 30% of swimming pools in Wales (150+) may find themselves in a permanent deficit position with no alternative but to close for ever

Partners are having to react to the exorbitant increases in energy, chemical and staffing costs and make decisions to employ cost cutting measures and increase fees. These measures are clearly detrimental to users and their ability to access and afford/prioritise their funds to access aquatic activity for health, wellbeing and lifesaving purposes.

Insight shows these risks will result in a reduction in participation and usage and is expected to result in up to 85% of public leisure facilities needing to make decisions on the future of these sites. The following impact has already been seen and will be exacerbated in coming months with a higher adverse effect on those with protected characteristics and lower socio-economic groups.

### **Events & Competitions**

Swim Wales national, regional and club level competitions and events have also been severely under threat due to cost increases across the board with noticeable reductions in entries especially where extensive travel is required, several community events and three



#ARBEDNOFIO

regional events have already been cancelled this year as they were not feasible to run, the majority in North Wales & West Wales where as usual transport links are not strong and the distance between communities and their 25m pool can be significant.

The committee will be reminded of the fact that Wales only has two long course (Olympic regulated size) pools in the whole of Wales, which are both located in the South (Cardiff International Pool & the National Pool Swansea). This leaves much of the country at a disadvantage due to the spiralling fuel and accommodation costs to access these venues and opportunities for national events of which we have 8 per year. Historically, some families from mid and North Wales have spent £1000 in travel and accommodation for one of our summer, winter or spring national competitions these costs are now completely out of most people's reach. The 8 events have annually brought approximately £1.8m+ to the local Swansea economy, and the reduction or loss of these events will not only impact the pathway and development of future Welsh swimmers but will be a huge blow to us and our ability to generate our own revenue.

### **Community Clubs & Volunteers**

Swim Wales' member clubs have been profoundly impacted by COVID with 2021-22 season seeing a 30% reduction in paying members. The challenges building in 2022 from rising pool hire costs and reduced pool access has made our recruitment of new members and justification of fees virtually impossible. Membership has fallen significantly as a result of rising training fees and families have had to make the difficult decision to stop activities in order to prioritise the payment of items to fulfil their family's basic needs, quoting the rising cost of food, fuel and energy as major factors.

This impact has already been experienced with a third less Swim Wales members compared to pre pandemic levels, and further insight suggests this will increase dramatically as these prices continue to rise.

Swim Wales, Swim Wales member clubs and many facility providers rely upon Volunteers to manage and deliver quality aquatic programmes and events. We have already seen a 20% reduction in volunteers across this area.



#ARBEDNOFIO

Cost of living has been the main factor in people's decision to commit to events and/or run programmes. Sadly, we have already seen 3 clubs close their doors completely and leave communities with no local provision, with more to follow this winter as energy requirements go up, and fuel prices follow.

### **Suggested remedies & interventions**

Swim Wales with multiple industry partner's estimate that compared to 2021 levels, energy bills for the sector will increase by up to 240% in 2023. This clearly causes a threat to the health and wellbeing of millions of Welsh people if there is no support for fitness and leisure facilities, amid rising energy costs.

A universal reduction in programmes, increases in costs for public participation, community clubs, competitions, and decreases in volunteers could be crippling.

With a clear threat to viability of swimming pools through rising electric gas and water and lower participant usage we would suggest the following interventions;

- 1) **Increase in FSI** - The Free Swim Initiative provides a beacon of hope for many participants, who without the opportunity to access the pool at no cost or at a subsidised rate is the only opportunity they have to benefit from the lifesaving and wellbeing powers of the water.
- 2) **Subsidise energy costs** or provide and support access to funding for investment in more sustainable energy sources.
- 3) **Fund the support of pools to be used as wellbeing hubs** to increase aquatic use for social prescription to produce a 'More Active and a Healthier Wales' and reduce the burden on Welsh health services.



#ARBEDNOFIO

- 4) **Funding for school swimming** (£4m per annum) could be ring fenced, to support the new curriculum and remove the pressure on head teachers to fun pool time and bus hire/travel. Every child a swimmer! Every adult a swimmer by 2040.
- 5) **Support Swim Wales and its partners** by increasing links with other government depts. to ensure people who are less likely to access the pool due to low-income can do so in other ways through social care, allowance/vouchers or reduced travel costs.
- 6) **Accelerating the partnership with health** - Partnering with health-economic analysis has demonstrated the benefit and savings to the NHS of pool based activity to physical, social and emotional wellbeing. This is significantly at risk if centres close. A single health intervention unit at a pool has been proven to create over £90k in health savings in a month!

## Conclusion

Over the course of the last 125 years, our organisation has enjoyed a highly productive and collaborative working relationship with successive governments in Wales. We are always grateful for the opportunity to share our perspective on our sector and highlight the issues of the day. It is not an exaggeration to say that this 'cost of living crisis' is a significant threat to everything we do from drowning prevention, teaching Welsh children to swim, recreation, health and medals on the world stage.

Swim Wales will continue to work alongside the current administration to tackle the many barriers to participation that exist in our sector and we will support the committee in its inquiry with all of our resources.

Aquatics for everyone for life...







SWIM WALES  
NOFIO CYMRU

#ARBEDNOFIO