



## **Committee Inquiry into local authority leisure and library services – Swim Wales Evidence March 2023**

**Swim Wales appreciates the opportunity to provide the following supporting evidence document to the Welsh Government's Inquiry into local authority leisure and library services.**

### ***Introduction***

Aquatic activity & sports play a significant role in the health and wellbeing of the people of Wales, and as the national governing body for aquatics including disciplines such as swimming, water polo, diving, open water, artistic swimming and disability swimming, we are dedicated to ensuring that everyone in Wales has access to the essential services provided by leisure facilities across the country.

We see one of our roles as providing advice and support to both Sport Wales Local Government Partners and the Welsh Government to help them make informed decisions about the future of leisure services in Wales, and to ensure that the needs of all members of our large and active community are met.

### ***Supporting Evidence***

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, **500,000** people in Wales participated in aquatic activity each week across **309** pools in Wales. The recent Active Adult Survey 7 Scholl Sports Survey has again confirmed similar numbers despite a small drop off of approximately 15% which is in line with all activity and sport in Wales. Swimming is not only a life skill, but a life-saving skill and our wider aquatic activities are unique in the fact that people from 6 months to 96 years+ with all abilities are able to participate, learn and compete in the water.

### **Learning to Swim**

- The youngest members of our communities develop vital skills in and around water during their early years. Learning to swim can mean far more than just improving the physical health of an individual, it is a

‘gateway’ activity and a life skill, and can mean the difference between life and death. It is also a chance for parents and young people to develop self-confidence and social connections through aquatics.

- Too many children already leave school unable to swim, particularly those from less affluent families and those from ethnically diverse communities - **58% of children in years 3-6 are unable to swim a length unaided** - and this situation will only get worse without the pools we need for children to learn in.
- Wales’ first Drowning Prevention Strategy was launched by FM Mark Drakeford in December 2020. *The Water Safety Wales vision is:* Water Safety Wales is committed to reducing drowning deaths and keeping our communities safe around water. **We have an aspiration of zero water-related deaths. Without pools this will not be possible.**

#### Current Demand & Latent Demand

- The National School Sport Survey 2022 suggests swimming is the **second most commonly participated sport** in a community setting in Wales.
- School Sport Survey also highlighted that **swimming had the highest percentage of latent demand - 60.7% of Year 3-6 pupils.**
- Swimming had the **highest percentage of latent demand for pupils that identify as having a disability or impairment.**
- 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 the Future Generations Act.**

#### Leisure Participation & Health

- According to the National Survey for Wales, **234,000 adults in Wales want to swim more**

- Regular swimming has been **proven to lower stress levels, reduce anxiety and depression** and improve your sleep patterns.
- **Swimming improves heart health, lowers blood pressure, improves lung capacity, increases bone strength** and reduces joint pain as it is a low impact sport.
- Regular swimming can help to **reduce long-term health conditions such as heart disease and diabetes by up to 40 per cent** and is key in rehabilitation and prevention of health conditions, which in turn eases pressure on the NHS.
- Many people with disabilities utilise the unique properties of water to unlock the vital health and wellbeing benefits of exercise. **Pools and leisure centres make it possible for people with disabilities to live active lifestyles.**
- In 2019-20, 15% of people in Wales classes themselves as lonely. **Leisure facilities are vital community hubs through which people can make connections through activity.**
- Our pools and leisure centres are also **key employers in our communities with a diverse work force.**

#### *Examples from the Swim England Value of Swimming Report 2019*

- **Swimmers report feeling on average 6.4 per cent healthier than non-swimmers** – this is comparable to feeling 12 years younger.
- Adults who swim were **4.3 per cent happier than non-swimmers.**

#### Competitive

- Swim Wales has an **active membership of almost 8,000 competitive swimmers across 80 clubs** in every region of Wales.
- Our club network gives **opportunities to people of all ages and abilities to participate, coach, compete and enjoy aquatics** within a fully inclusive community.
- The Swim Wales pathway consistently **produces world class athletes who represent Wales on the global stage.**

- **Without community facilities, many of these athletes would not have the opportunity to take their first strokes towards the Olympics or Commonwealth Games** - This is even more true for the para athletes, many of whom live with conditions that mean swimming is the only sport they can take part in.

### Risk & Consequences

- Across all of our accessible pools in Wales Swim Wales have estimated a **total energy bill increase of between £26m and £32m over the next 12 months.**
- **One major operator in Wales have reported a gap of £3.5m** across their leisure centre estate (18 sites)
- **Harlech and Ardudwy Leisure (HAL)** has seen energy costs triple and this, combined with fewer people using the pool, has forced the board of the community-run pool to announce its imminent closure at the end of the month
- **Cardigan Leisure Centre** are desperately fundraising across their community to save their centres.
- **Pentwyn Leisure centre in Cardiff has not opened since COVID** and there are discussions to never open its doors again.
- **Community Leisure UK say 80% of its members (across the UK) have told them they are at financial risk** amid skyrocketing costs.
- Before the Spring Budget announcement – CLUK research showed **more than half of community pools in the UK were at serious risk of closure.**
- **Swim Wales estimate a possible reduction of 150,000 active adults and children** across Wales over next 18 months

### Drowning and Fatalities

- Drowning is the **third most common cause of accidental death in children.**
- 49 water related fatalities – 26 of which confirmed accidental (**8% increase on Wales Drowning Prevention Strategy baseline**) 51% of which did not intend to enter the water

- **The rate of accidental drowning has started to increase 0.82 per 100,000 in 2021, compared to 0.74 in 2017**
- 69% of fatalities were male, 20-29-year-old males highest group of drowning fatalities
- 62% of fatalities occur at coastal locations
- 1,755 (average) water-related incidents annually that require emergency response, approximately 5 every day.

### ***Introduction***

Swim Wales continue to work closely with all of our operator/facility owners on their ongoing challenges to maintain leisure facilities and services in Wales.

We have engaged with external energy consultants to produce a guide to short term efficiencies and savings which have been shared with our leisure partners and we have commissioned a project to identify sustainable investigate. We will continue to support Sport Wales, Local Government Partners and the Welsh Government to help them make informed decisions about the future of leisure services in Wales, and make a strong case for investing in local leisure services.

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