

# Free swimming in

*A pilot scheme for free swimming for the under-16s has been taking place in Wales – and has proved very successful in three pools within the Vale of Glamorgan*

BY JAMIE MORGANS

In July 2003 the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) launched a national pilot scheme to deliver free swimming for all children aged 16 years and under across Wales – the first scheme of its kind anywhere in Europe.

The initial pilot scheme began at Easter, involving 10 of the 22 unitary authorities in Wales. Following the Easter trial, the scheme was rolled out to all 22 authorities. The WAG is providing £2.5 million in the 2003 / 2004 financial year to fund the scheme, the basis of which was the phenomenal impact of Glasgow's free swimming scheme 'Give Kids a Chance'.

The scope of the initiative targeted increased participation in swimming and other sports and physical activities, but also focused on a common theme of tackling disadvantage and healthier lifestyles.

By increasing swimming occasions, the pilot also aims to raise general standards in swimming proficiency by incorporating a degree of structure to the sessions as opposed to just providing a free 'splash'.

The adoption of the Welsh Amateur Swimming Association (WASA) challenge, 'Swim Wales / Nofio Cymru', was regarded as a key component to the delivery of this objective and provided the competitive platform for a national gala at the national 50-metre pool in Swansea in August.

The WAG Research and Evaluation Unit, in partnership with the Sports Council for Wales and the Local Government Data Unit, has commissioned a comprehensive research project that will evaluate the success of the summer pilot. The evaluation report will be published early in 2004.

The framework of this article is focused very much on the front line operational management of the scheme and how the Free Swimming Initiative (FSI) influenced and affected the three pools in the Vale of Glamorgan.

The Vale of Glamorgan is situated along the South Wales coast, neighboured to the east by Cardiff and to the west by Bridgend. The main towns with leisure centre pools are Barry, Penarth and Llantwit Major. Penarth is virtually on the south west border of the capital and, in some

instances, is the closest pool to some residents of the city.

Prior to the Easter pilot scheme, I briefed my management teams at the leisure centres in Penarth, Barry and Llantwit Major about the proposed Free Swimming Scheme. I was met with a barrage of questions, observations and expletives. Nevertheless, the two-week Easter session went ahead and the centre management teams and their staff had a yardstick to gauge its effects on the operation. The general consensus was that the children welcomed the scheme and looked forward to the summer.

Conversely, the leisure centres prepared themselves for a summer trip to the dentist for full extraction of all wisdom teeth without a whisper of any anaesthetic.

The Vale of Glamorgan leisure centres offered their pools to children participating in the FSI for six hours per day for the full six weeks of the summer holidays. The WAG was not prescriptive in its requests for pool space, and most operators tailored their scheme around their normal day-to-day operations and programme of activity.

The managers in each of the leisure centres met prior to the scheme to discuss their particular requirements for opening and where they felt that operational anomalies might occur. My focus was to ensure that all sites were functioning in a corporate manner.

The discussions at this stage focused on administration for the enrolment of children, beginning with the location of administration. The reception teams still needed to greet and meet the public and to ensure a quick, free flow of clients via the front of house reception desks. In view of the limited reception crush space in two of the centres, the location for all enrolment was taken away from the main entrance area. The cost of setting aside dedicated staff to enrol all the

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# Wales



children was separately cost-centred to give a true reflection of the financial impact of the FSI.

The issue of pass cards was discussed. Some of our fellow authorities utilised smart cards. However, our current IT system is not capable of this. Cards were printed in house, but thought was given to fraudulent copies being created. The cards also detailed Data Protection guidelines and there was a raft of boxes for each applicant to complete. These boxes, however, have provided extremely meaningful information. Our IT database guru can create charts, user patterns and profiles that give meaningful management information. The database is also mail-merge friendly for all new marketing initiatives.

The reverse side of the cards had a grid to detail each day of the holiday, to ensure that no more than one swim was permitted per day. However, the management teams at the centres were well aware that some entrepreneurial children had more than one card!

The management teams decided that the normal bather-loads would be reduced and separate lanes marked for those adults who wished to pay for an immediate swim. Also our Lifestyle Fitness members (Lifestyle is the fitness brand in the Vale and for a monthly direct debit members are able to access the fitness studios and pools) would be carefully monitored by the operations manager for any attrition during the FSI.

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Spreadsheets were prepared to monitor the



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numbers of FSI attendances daily, but also other factors that affect our trade – mainly the weather, as the beaches influence our business.

The opening foray of the holidays saw very inclement weather with high numbers of children attending the centres and, naturally, a huge novelty factor playing a part.

In total 11,120 children enrolled for the FSI (51 per cent of the school population for the Vale of Glamorgan). However, from the database, several hundred were from outside the authority boundaries, Cardiff, Rhondda, Newport etc. We also traced several users to the north of Scotland, South East England and one in France. (Barry Island is still a very popular tourism honeypot!)

This issue was discussed and agreed by my fellow colleagues as 'cross border trading'. The merits of the issue will be debated later. There were several major operational issues that related to the scheme that included:

- **Reaching bather capacity very quickly.** This was monitored by a traditional colour band system for a minimum of a one hour swim;
- **Requesting those who do not adhere to the pool rules to leave, and the associated abuse that lifeguards receive;**
- **Large, long, noisy queues of children (and adults) at reception;**
- **Vandalism and unsociable behaviour.** The police were called daily to the larger of the centres in Barry and Penarth for cases ranging from theft and vandalism to racial abuse and threatening behaviour. In one instance, all the floor level locker keys were stood on and snapped. This limited the number of lockers that were available, causing the children to spill into the dry side changing. This led to numerous complaints and clients wishing to suspend their membership to Lifestyle for the duration of the holidays. As a result of the number of police responses, community police officers were tasked to the leisure centres on a daily basis, and this did have a positive effect and created a



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feeling of safety and security, especially for our older users.

- **Building cleanliness.** Penarth and Barry leisure centres were inundated with comments relating to the level of cleanliness. Additional cleaners were recruited to address the general areas. However, the cleaning of the changing rooms proved difficult because of virtually 100 per cent usage during the FSI opening hours.
- **Catering.** My area catering managers have

advised a significant increase in sales in relation to one particular product – chips! We adopted a very simplistic performance indicator to gauge 'chip sales' at both of the larger centres in Barry and Penarth. The portions of chips sold daily equated to approximately 50 per cent of the number of FSI users daily. However, the trade figures on vending sales saw no major increase and maintained a status quo with previous years.

- **Financing.** WAG is to provide funding to the tune of £2.5 million for the financial year 2003 to 2004 for the pilot project. Funding for each council was a formula based on young people in the Statutory Spending Assessment calculations. Larger authorities received larger percentages of the SSA than the smaller councils (9.98 per cent to 2.04 per cent respectively). The funding has yet to hit our ledger, but I am minded that I have colleagues in the area who operate Trust services and cash flow is a major consideration. The final allocation of funds and mechanisms for payment will be discussed at a meeting of the joint Welsh Assembly Government / Welsh Local Government Association Working Group meeting early in October, when an interim evaluation report on the pilot will be available;
- **Impact on staff.** The FSI has focused attention on the health and welfare of all operational staffing; lifeguards being at their most vigilant

in the pool hall and having NOPs and EAPs drummed into them daily; receptionists demonstrating patience and composure; cleaning staff attending and clearing up after some offensive and deplorable youngsters; and managers receiving a barrage of complaints regarding cleanliness, youth annoyance and verbal threats.

My personal feelings are that the scheme is worthy of continuation, as the potential impact on health and wellbeing will be manifested in the next decade. Likewise, senior managers must be mindful of the conditions and framework that their staff have to operate in to ensure their health and welfare.

I am sure that the 'wash up' with my colleagues across Wales will highlight good practices and improvements for the future scheme.

As closing comments, leisure service providers impact on a plethora of objectives that affect our communities for all ages and backgrounds – healthier lifestyles, tackling disadvantage, wellness and improved active participation. Free swimming for all? A panacea for ills which may be worthy of consideration... ●

#### **Biography**

**Jamie Morgans** is leisure services manager with the Vale of Glamorgan.