

**Report of:** Strategic Director, Physical Environment

**To:** Executive Board

**Date:** 3 April 2006

**Item No:**

**Title of Report :** The Operation of the Junior Free Swim Scheme at Oxford City Council's Leisure Facilities

### Summary and Recommendations

**Purpose of report:** The purpose of this report is for members to approve the operational requirements for implementing free swimming for under 16's in the run leisure facilities

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor Mary Clarkson

**Report Approved by:**

Sharon Cosgrove - Strategic Director

Jeremy Thomas and Lindsay Cane – Legal Services

Emma Burson - Finance

**Policy Framework:** None

**Recommendations: That the Executive Board**

1. Approves details of the Junior Free Swim Scheme including details of the young people free swimming scheme including:
  - The issue of a new Slice Card to ensure accurate performance monitoring of the Scheme;
  - The operation of a time limited period during times of high demand with the exception of Hinksey Outdoor Pool
  - The increase in specific sessions to facilitate adult users.
  - The reduction of the Slice Card rates to reflect free swimming for young people
2. Approves the expansion of Junior Free Swim Scheme to:
  - Include the under 17s
  - Operate the scheme with no residential requirement.
3. Requests that the Business Manager review the Junior Free Swim Scheme after it has been operating for 6 months to assess its impact on the City of Oxford Swimming Clubs attendance.

## **Background**

1. Oxford City Council at their meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> February 2006 approved a budgetary adjustment of £125,000 per year to subsidise the operation of a Junior Free Swim Scheme for Oxford residents under the age of 16 during general swimming sessions at Council-run leisure facilities.
2. The purpose behind this initiative of offering free swimming to young people was to eliminate the barrier of cost and encourage the promotion of healthier lifestyles thus contributing to the Council's objectives. The Council's aims for the ways in which leisure activities should contribute to quality of life in Oxford that are set out in the Council's draft Leisure Strategy:
  - To ensure equity of access and diversity of provision.
  - To encourage participation in healthier lifestyles.
  - To advance lifelong learning.
  - To protect and enhance the natural and built environment.
  - To enhance the recognition of Oxford through the pursuit of excellence, both locally and internationally.
  - To nurture community well-being and enable the expression of community spirit.

## **Operational Issues**

3. It has been held that distinguishing between resident and non-resident by creating a two tier pricing structure can be unlawful under European law. Following a recent ruling by the European Court, involving free admissions for local residents to museums and other state-provided facilities in Rome, it was held that it was unlawful for a public authority to offer a discounted price to users of their facilities by reason of the fact that they lived in a particular area (i.e. were local residents). At the time this judgment was given the SLICE card was reviewed for compliance, and because it contained no Oxford-residential requirement, it was considered lawful. If the Council now stipulate that to take advantage of the free swimming children must live at an Oxford address, we could be held to be acting in a way the European Court deems to be unlawful. It is therefore suggested the scheme is not based on a residential requirement.
4. Many authorities have had experience of introducing free swimming schemes and this report draws heavily on the lessons learnt from these Councils and the suggestions in 'Guidelines for Pools on Free Swimming' issued by Sport England South West. It is to be expected that the introduction of free swimming for young people will increase numbers wanting to swim at any one time; other authorities operating similar schemes have seen attendances increase by more than 100%, with significant increases in swims from black and ethnic minorities. Increases in attendances, if not handled properly, could create

operational problems and these need to be addressed at the outset if the scheme is to be successful.

5. Bather numbers will increase and it is important that these increases are effectively managed. To do this it is suggested that the Centres operate a band system during busy times, which would limit the time spent in the water to one and a half hours. The exception would be Hinksey Outdoor Pool, which currently operates a 'one in one out' system during busy periods. It is considered that the operation of a band system would not work at Hinksey as the user experience of this facility is about a 'day-out' rather than just a swim. It is therefore suggested that the 'one in one out' policy remains.
6. Another operational issue that is likely to arise is that swimmers who currently swim at quiet times may in future be subject to higher numbers and experience more disturbed swims; particularly if they are fitness swimming. To manage this issue smoothly it is suggested that increased provision is made for more dedicated sessions and segregations such as 'lane swimming' and 'adults only'.
7. The City of Oxford Swimming Club has also expressed their concern that their numbers might suffer as a result of the Junior Free Swim Scheme and have suggested that some discount should be offered to them for pool hire as compensation. The club's assumption is that juniors would prefer free unstructured swims as opposed to paying the club for structured swim training. However, experience elsewhere suggests that the opposite is more likely to happen.

### **Slice Scheme**

8. It is important to be able to measure the success of the scheme and to understand the impact the scheme has on delivering the Council's objectives. To undertake this, it is proposed that a new Card should be added to the suite of Slice Cards. Introducing a new Slice Card will enable full and proper registration of all participants, who will be required to produce proof that they qualify for this concession, and will enable Leisure & Cultural Services to monitor patterns of subsequent use. These cards will be renewed on an annual basis.
9. The introduction of free swimming for juniors will also impact on the current pricing structure of the Slice Card Scheme. The current pricing of cards available within the scheme include an element for the cost of swimming; for example, an Aqua Slice Card charges for swimming, squash and badminton. As swimming makes up an element of the pricing of these cards, the public would naturally expect that a reduction is given for juniors holding and wishing to purchase these cards in future.
10. To take into account the free junior swim element in the Junior Slice card scheme, it is suggested that the following adjustments be made to each of the relevant Slice Cards:

- a. Aqua Slice reduced by 25% (£12.10 to £9 per month)
- b. Active Slice reduced by 20% (£16.90 to £13.50 per month)
- c. Cool Slice reduced by 15% (£31.50 to £26.75 per month)

*Figures based upon 2005/06 charges for monthly direct debits*

11. It could be argued that there are similar issues for holders of Family Slice Cards, however family tickets already provide for free activities for juniors as they are based on the cost of two adults undertaking leisure activities with children going free. Further subsidies to this card is likely to reduce the uptake of single adult slice cards as adult customers would pair up to take out a family card. It is suggested that the Family Slice Cards remain the same price with marketing material emphasising that children are free.
12. The Junior Free Swim Scheme originally proposed was for those young people under 16 years of age. The current Slice Card offer provides junior concessions for those under the age of 17 and it is proposed suggested that the Junior Free Swim Scheme should be expanded to cover that age group in line with this current practice.

### **Promotion**

13. One of the objectives of the Junior Free Swim Scheme is to provide swimming opportunities to those that would normally be disadvantaged by cost. It is important therefore that a promotional material is produced and delivered to reach these people that may otherwise not know or be aware of the scheme.
14. Promotion and Advertising materials and plans are currently being developed.

### **Recommendations**

15. That the Executive Board approves details of the Junior Free Swim Scheme including details of the young people free swimming scheme including:
- The issue of a new Slice Card to ensure accurate performance monitoring of the Scheme;
  - The operation of a time limited period during times of high demand with the exception of Hinksey Outdoor Pool
  - The increase in specific sessions to facilitate adult users.
  - The reduction of the Slice Card rates to reflect free swimming for young people
16. That the Executive Board approves the expansion of Junior Free Swim Scheme to include the under 17s (with no residential requirement);

17. That the Executive Board requests that the Business Manager review the Junior Free Swim Scheme after it has been operating for 6 months to assess its impact on the City of Oxford Swimming Clubs attendance

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**Background papers:** None

