

Free swimming for children – a review of the first twelve months

Since April 2006, all children under the age of 17 years have been entitled to free swimming in Council pools during general sessions. The initiative is delivered by issuing children with a KIDS Slice card upon proof of age.

The policy has unquestionably increased the number of swimming sessions undertaken by children – which in the first twelve months increased by 88% on the previous year. The analysis below seeks to investigate whether this policy has been successful in raising the level of swimming by children who wouldn't otherwise attend i.e. children in low-income families for whom cost is a barrier.

This report analyses the data from 74,054 children's swimming sessions¹ that were recorded on the LeisureFlex system in the period April 2006 to March 2007, the first twelve months of the Council's free swimming for children policy.

Key Findings

- There were 8395 child members who had an average of 6.4 free swimming sessions during 2006-07
- The majority of free swims were taken at Temple Cowley and Ferry pools
- Children living outside Oxford city took 11% of free swims. On average they swam on fewer occasions than children living in the city
- The peak age for membership was between 10 and 13 years
- The take-up of the scheme varied enormously across the city – from 15% to 64% of children
- There is a relationship between take-up of free swimming and proximity to a Council pool
- Children living in Barton & Sandhills Ward accounted for 21% of all free swims. This is to be welcomed given that it is an area of high multiple deprivation
- Children living in areas of high child poverty are less likely to take up the scheme than other children – a finding which might be expected
- However there is no data to indicate the situation before the free swimming scheme was introduced
- In order for the take-up in the poorest areas to be brought up to the average, another 300 children from these areas would need to attend swimming sessions

Leisure & Cultural Services are investigating the findings in this report so that immediate action can be taken to address them.

¹ In this report a 'swim session' refers to one child or group of children attending in a single day. For example, if one child attended ten times in one day, this would only count as a single session. If a whole group were booked in under a single card, this would only count as a single swim session. This approach has been taken to avoid distortion of the figures. Multiple sessions of this kind accounted for around 8,000 additional sessions in 2006/07.

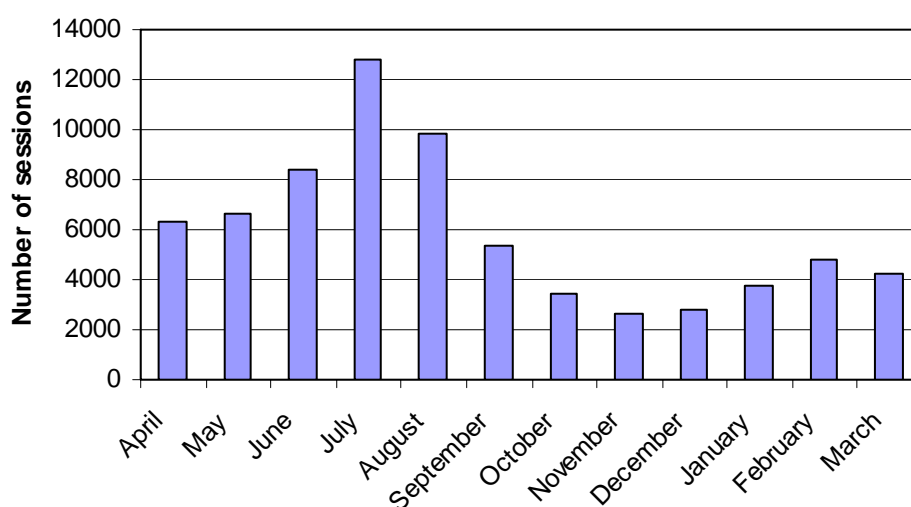
When and where were free swimming sessions taken?

Number of children's swimming sessions by pool, 2006-07²

Swimming pool	Sessions	
	Count	Percentage
Ferry Sports Centre	22308	30.2%
Temple Cowley Pool	19834	26.9%
Barton Pool	13617	18.4%
Hinksey Pool	12665	17.2%
Blackbird Leys Pool ³	2930	4.0%
Peers Sports Centre	2489	3.4%
Total	73843	100%

The majority of swimming sessions were taken at Ferry and Temple Cowley Pools, with Barton and Hinksey Pools also accounting for a large proportion of the sessions. Very few sessions were undertaken at Peers Sports Centre and Blackbird Leys Pool. It should be noted that Ferry Sports Centre and Temple Cowley Pool have longer opening hours than the other pools, which influences the level of usage.

Number of children's swimming sessions by month, 2006-07



The peak month for children's swimming was July, when over 12,000 sessions were undertaken. The peak time for swimming is April to August. The opening months of Hinksey Pool partially account for this pattern.

² Sessions undertaken by over 16 year-olds have been excluded here – see below.

³ The LeisureFlex system was not operational in Blackbird Leys until February and March 2007. Therefore only 275 of these swims have full membership details on LeisureFlex and only these are included in the subsequent analysis.

Who has used the free swimming scheme?

Number of members and children's swim sessions by membership details, 2006-07

	Members		Sessions	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
No details	--	--	17762	24%
0-16 years	8395	86%	53426	72%
17 years	287	3%	1128	2%
Over 17 years	1128	11%	1738	2%
Total number recorded	9810	100%	74054	100%

The table above shows that no membership details were recorded for one quarter of the children's swimming sessions. This suggests that children are being allowed to undertake free swimming without a membership card and therefore without proof of age. Leisure & Cultural Services are currently investigating this finding.

There were also a small number of over-age sessions, of which 17 year-olds account for half. This is probably in part a problem of poor recording e.g. an adult's Slice card being swiped instead of a child's card. This finding is also being investigated by Leisure & Cultural Services.

Children's swimming sessions by card type, gender and Oxford residence, 2006-07

Card type	Number of members		Number of sessions		Average number of sessions
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	
KIDS	6077	72.4%	40822	76.4%	6.7
Bonus	1598	19.0%	8580	16.1%	5.4
Staff	244	2.9%	1559	2.9%	6.4
Active	236	2.8%	1339	2.5%	5.7
Other	240	2.9%	1126	2.1%	4.7
Total	8395	100%	53426	100%	6.4
Gender					
Female	4311	51.4%	27206	50.9%	6.3
Male	4070	48.5%	26177	49.0%	6.4
Not known	14	0.2%	43	0.1%	3.1
Total	8395	100%	53426	100%	6.4
Address					
Oxford postcode	7058	84.1%	47593	89.1%	6.7
Non Oxford postcode	1337	15.9%	5833	10.9%	4.4
Total	8395	100%	53426	100%	6.4

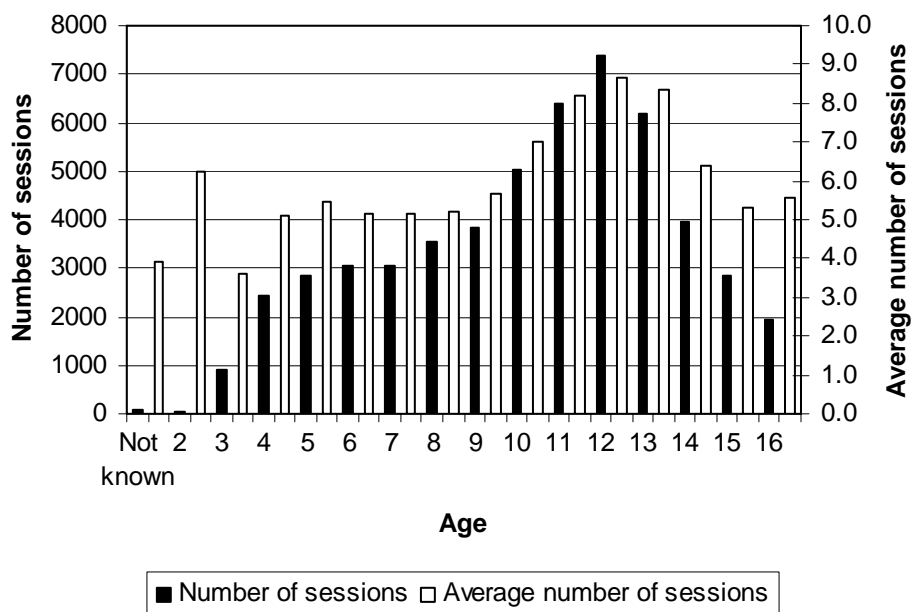
The table above analyses data about children aged 0-16 years who took the 53,426 swimming sessions for which we have membership details.

Most sessions were undertaken by children with a KIDS Slice card, and a significant number with a Bonus Slice card. It is interesting to note that Bonus Slice card users – who are likely to be living in low income families – undertook fewer sessions than those children using a KIDS Slice card.

There were slightly more female than male users of the free swimming scheme. Ethnicity data was only recorded on 35% of member's records and was declared as 'white' in 83% of cases. However the data is not complete enough for robust analysis. As part of the Council's duty to promote race equality we should be monitoring usage of our services by different ethnic groups. Leisure & Cultural Services are considering how to encourage more frequent completion of this data.

The table above also shows that 16% of card members were children living outside Oxford city. Most of these children lived in villages surrounding the city e.g. Wheatley, Garsington, Kidlington, Yarnton, South Hinksey and Kennington. These children accounted for 11% of the swimming sessions – a lower percentage because children living outside the city undertook less sessions on average than children living in the city.

Number and average number of children's swimming sessions by age, 2006-07

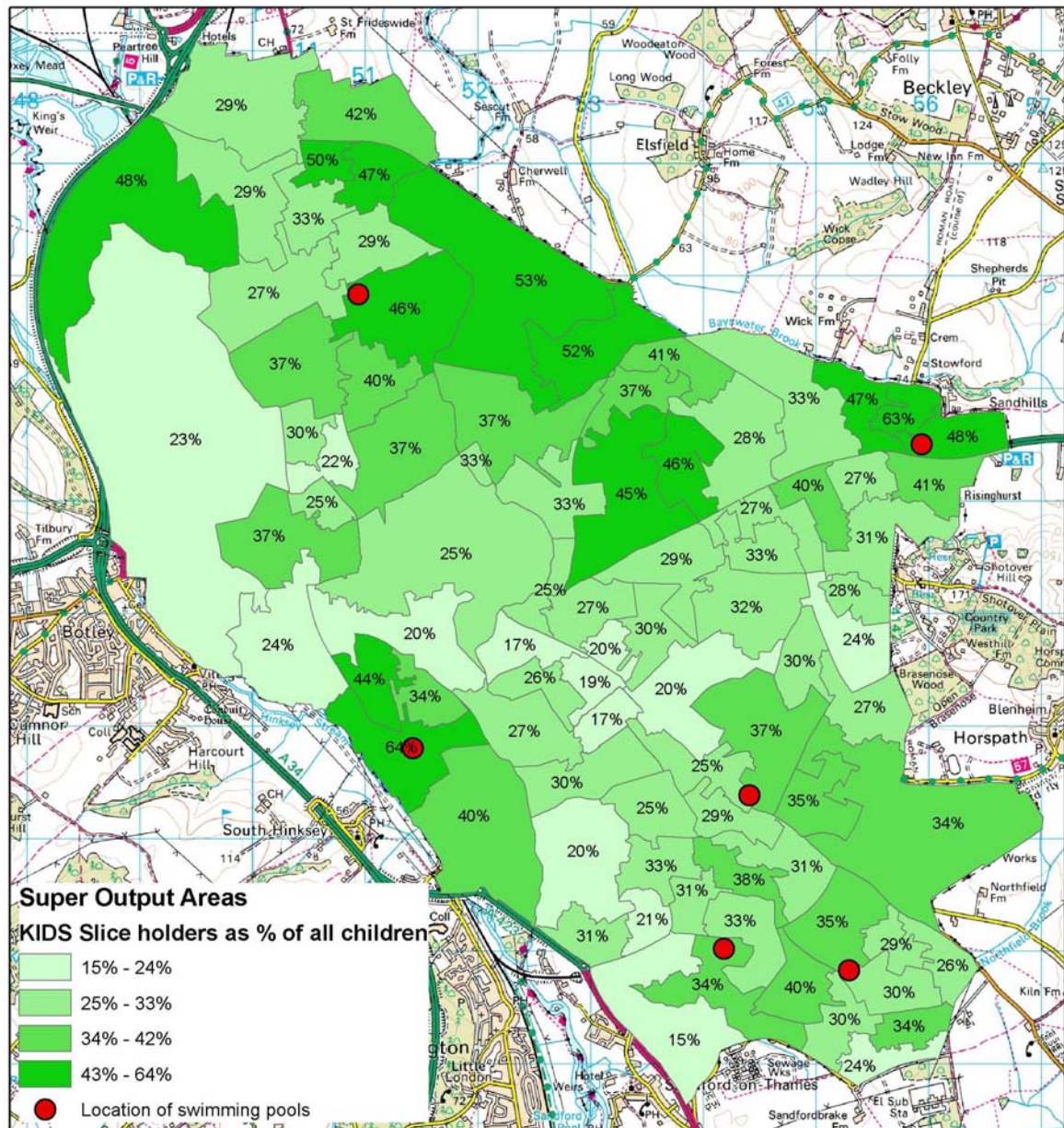


The peak age of children using the free swimming scheme was between 10 and 13 years. The average number of sessions undertaken was also higher in this age range. The number of sessions undertaken tails off very quickly at age 14 years and above.

How does take-up vary in different parts of Oxford?

Using the address data provided when applying for Slice card membership, it is possible to map the users of the free swimming scheme across the city⁴. Using child benefit data to indicate the number of children in different areas of the city, we can estimate the percentage of children taking up the scheme in each of Oxford's 85 Super Output Areas.

Take-up of the KIDS Slice card by Oxford Super Output Area



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(A colour copy of this map will be provided at the meeting)

⁴ This was done using the Council's ArcGIS mapping software. The addresses provided in the membership details were not all complete – however 6959 (99%) of the addresses were geocoded (i.e. matched to a point on a map) successfully.

Take-up of the free swimming scheme varies enormously across the city. It is as low as 15% in the southernmost part of Littlemore and as high as 64% in the area immediately surrounding Hinksey Pool.

The areas of particularly high take-up are all relatively close to a Council swimming pool:

- Barton and Risinghurst – close to Barton Pool
- The area immediately surrounding Hinksey Pool
- Cutteslowe, Summertown and Marston – close to Ferry Sports Centre

Of these areas, households in Barton & Risinghurst and Cutteslowe experience high levels of child poverty. There is also high take-up in an area around Headington Hill, despite not being in close proximity to a pool – though there are good transport links to both Ferry and Barton pools.

The areas of particularly low take-up are:

- West of the city centre, including Botley Road and Osney
- Areas adjacent to Cowley Road
- Parts of Littlemore and Rose Hill
- Part of Wood Farm
- Greater Leys

The majority of these areas are not close to a Council swimming pool. Some of these areas – Rose Hill, Wood Farm and around Cowley Road – also have high levels of child poverty.

These findings suggest a relationship between proximity to a Council swimming pool and take-up of the free swimming scheme. This relationship is complicated however, as some areas which are relatively close to pools do not have particularly high take-up.

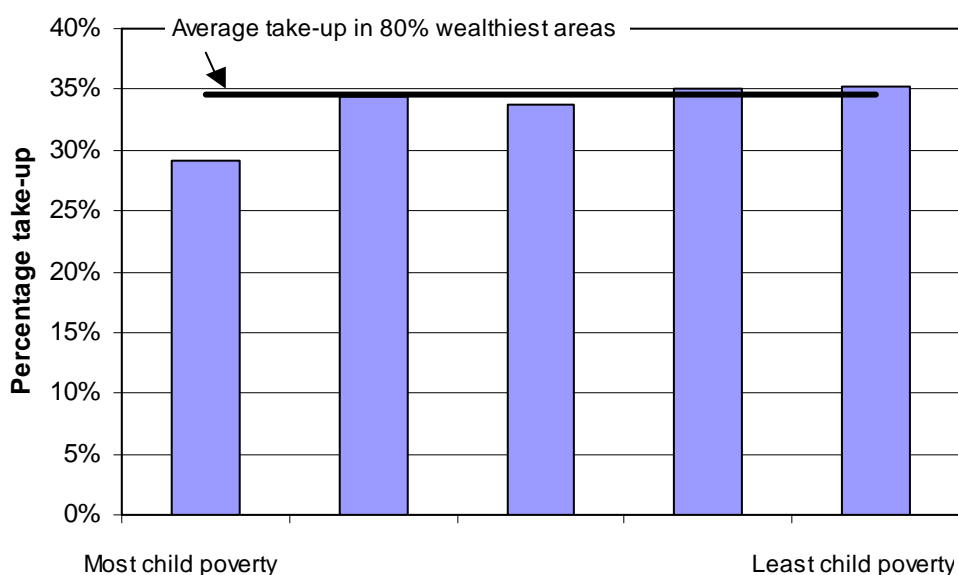
It is also possible to analyse the average number of swimming sessions taken by each member. The average for the city is 6.7, and analysis shows that this does not vary enormously across different Super Output Areas. The notable exception is Barton & Sandhills, where the average number of sessions taken by each member is 16.

Taken with the high level of take-up this means that children in Barton & Sandhills Ward, whilst accounting for only around 7% of children in Oxford, have undertaken 21% of all free swimming sessions by Oxford children. Clearly children in the ward have benefited considerably from having a pool in close proximity. This is to be welcomed given that Barton is an area of high multiple deprivation.

Has the scheme been taken up by children living in low income households?

Using the variation in take-up across the city by Super Output Area, it is possible to estimate whether children experiencing poverty are more or less likely to use the free swimming scheme. This can be done by using the child poverty index from the Indices of Deprivation 2004.

Take-up of free swimming scheme from poorest 20% of areas to wealthiest 20%



The graph above shows that in the poorest fifth of areas in Oxford, children are less likely – by around 5% - to use the free swimming scheme than children in other areas. There is little difference in the rate of take-up in the other four-fifths of areas. This mirrors the earlier finding that children using Bonus Slice cards used the free swimming scheme less than children using other cards.

This is not a surprising finding – in general schemes like the KIDS Slice card which are open to all tend to be better accessed by people with better resources, financial and otherwise, to do so. This same pattern has been described in the NHS and in the national evaluation of Sure Start.

It should be noted however that there is no data available to show what take-up of swimming was like before the free swimming scheme was introduced. It may be that before April 2006 the gap in take-up of swimming between the poorest areas and other areas was much greater, and that free swimming has reduced this gap. Unfortunately the data to show whether this is the case does not exist.

There is considerable variation within this poorest fifth of areas. Take-up varies between 17% in an area adjacent to Cowley Road up to 47% in a part of Barton. This variation exists partly because some areas of high child poverty – notably Cutteslowe and Barton – are close to Council pools and as a result have high take-up of the swimming scheme.

The areas which combine relatively low take-up (below 26%) and high child poverty include parts of:

- Jericho

- Areas adjacent to Cowley Road
- Rose Hill
- Wood Farm
- Blackbird and Greater Leys

In order to bring the take-up in the poorest fifth of areas up to that of the rest of Oxford, an additional 300 children from these areas would need to take up the free swimming scheme. Leisure & Cultural Services should consider how to raise the usage of the free swimming scheme in these priority areas.

What further investigation and action will be undertaken?

This report highlights some areas which need further investigation by Leisure & Cultural Services. It also indicates that take-up of the free swimming scheme is lower in areas of higher child poverty, and actions to address this gap in take-up need to be taken.

Leisure & Cultural Services are investigating the findings in this report so that immediate action can be taken to address them.

In addition, the Council is currently considering the purchase of a 'geo-demographic classification' database. These classification systems combine census data and survey data to characterise households at postcode level, which is a much finer level of geographical detail than we currently have access to. This data was initially considered for use in benefits take-up work but has wide applications, including planning communications strategies and policy evaluation.

If this data is purchased it would be possible to analyse the free swimming membership data to more finely detail the characteristics of the children who take up the scheme.

Data from the free swimming scheme should be analysed in future years to discover whether these patterns of usage are remaining the same or changing.