

Free Swimming in Lincolnshire

for children aged 16 and under | 2009 - 2011

Exploring the Impact of Pricing
On behalf of the Lincolnshire Swimming Steering Group

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Summary

Free Swimming was offered to all children in Lincolnshire aged 16 and under between April 2009 and July 2010. The purpose of this report is to explore any changes in swimming participation since the reintroduction of charging in August 2010. Although data collection methods have changed since the removal of the incentive, every district across the county has reported a reduction in swimming attendances. Many interdependent factors have contributed to this reduction, and have been explored in this report. Nevertheless, the findings from data collected between April 2009 and March 2011 clearly indicate that swimming is a price sensitive activity in Lincolnshire.

Actions Required

Lincolnshire Sports Partnership should continue to host the Steering Group meetings on a needs basis post April 2011, and these meetings should include participation of stakeholders from all districts across Lincolnshire.

The steering group has expressed the need to continue countywide consultation and development on issues such as club development, swimming lessons, staff training, incentivised swimming, pool timetabling, efficiencies, memberships and facility improvements. Market testing and price exploration is valuable in maintaining competitive pricing structures across the county.

Background

Free Swimming for children aged 16 and under was offered in all seven districts across Lincolnshire. It was funded by NHS Lincolnshire, the Health and Wellbeing Fund and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The purpose of this intervention was to encourage children and their families to start swimming and to swim more frequently, through an incentive programme involving the removal of price.

Input

A steering group was formed and included representation from the Amateur Swimming Association, District Councils, Lincolnshire Sports Partnership, NHS Lincolnshire, the Health and Wellbeing Fund and Sub contracted Leisure Providers. Nationally, free swimming was offered in most areas across the UK. Lincolnshire District Councils also offered free swimming to the Over 60's. The resources that were invested into the initiative allowed a hypothesis to be tested, and structures and processes were in place to ensure that districts were involved in the strategic direction of the initiative.

The total investment from NHS and the DCMS Lincolnshire is expressed below:

	NHS Lincs 09/10	NHS Lincs 10/11	DCMS 09/10	DCMS 10/11	Total cost
Boston	£22,887	£13,844	£32,390	£11,315	£80,436
City of Lincoln	£49,325	£17,215	£68,537	£23,964	£159,041
East Lindsey	£126,558	£61,448	£70,394	£23,464	£281,864
North Kesteven	£14,370	£9,861	£94,602	£39,468	£158,301
South Holland	£0.00	£0.00	£44,902	£15,922	£60,824
South Kesteven	£93,188	£41,444	£64,830	£27,047	£226,509
West Lindsey	£4,618	£4,388	£81,621	£28,558	£119,185
Total	£310,946	£148,203	457,276	169,738	£1,086,163

Although some of the funding was given to subsidise the cost of free swimming, other capital improvement grants and along with funding to contribute to the over 60s free swimming was also accessed. Each district received different amounts from the various sources as indicated below.

- South Holland did not access any funds directly from NHS Lincolnshire, but were successful in an application for a capital grant to modernise and improve facilities, which had positive impact on maintenance costs and efficiencies. The DCMS payment was initially £24,897 (capital payment received for delivering both programmes through Pots 1 & 2) with a £5,560 top up in February 2010. Pot 4 - A grant of £125,000 through Sport England was secured for a Pool Complex improvement scheme costing £280,175 in total.
- South Kesteven received a capital improvement grant of £47,406
- East Lindsey received a capital improvement grant of £41,974
- Lincoln received a capital improvement grant of £26,555
- North Kesteven received a capital improvement grant of £31,261

Output

The scheme was launched between April and June 2009 involving extensive media coverage, and momentum was supported by the national trend. Within the first few weeks, an enormous uptake of the programme was reported from all districts across Lincolnshire. Boston had 500 people sign up in the first 2 weeks, and North Kesteven reported a 70% increase in usage. A clear increase in swimming attendances were concurrent across the county, with many districts reporting through postcode mapping that families from deprived areas with three or more children had begun to use the facilities. People swam more often, and new participants made use of pools that hadn't previously attended. Families from deprived areas were attracted to the facilities, and reported health and social benefits of attending. Undoubtedly, the removal of price encouraged swimming.

The University of Lincoln produced a countywide evaluation to measure the impact of free swimming in its first year. They outlined numerous case studies where individuals had gained swimming skills, confidence, spent time with family and lost weight.

The conclusions of this report were;

- The removal of cost as a barrier increases participation
- The initiative has increased the desire to participate more frequently
- Social interaction has improved and social identities have been forged
- People have improved their health through weight loss and from increased aerobic capacity

June 2010

National Government announced in June 2010 that the funding for free swimming was to be discontinued and would finish in July 2010. National evaluation had indicated that people would continue to swim when pricing was reintroduced. These findings concurred with University of Lincoln's evaluation in which new swimmers claimed that, even if the funding were cut, they would continue to swim and would be willing to pay for it, though would perhaps attend less frequently.

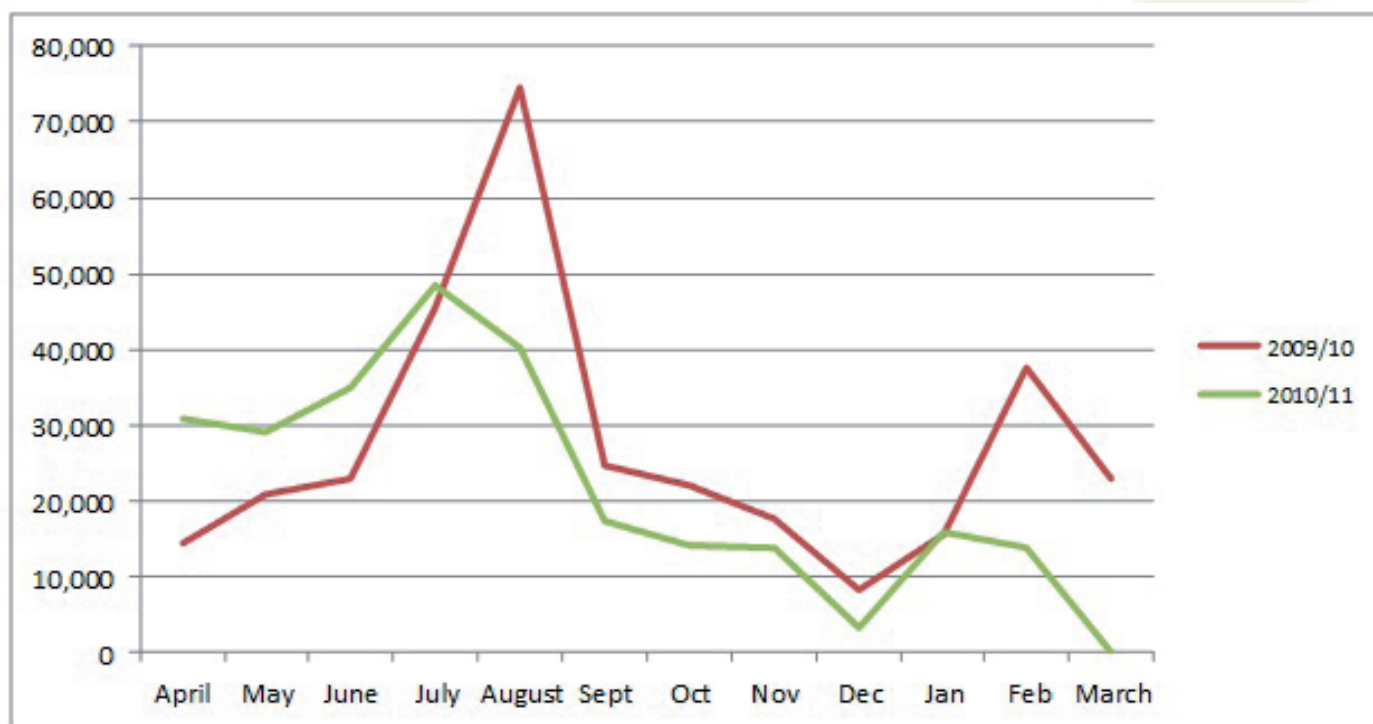
NHS Lincolnshire and the Health and Wellbeing Fund followed the national decision to discontinue free swimming from July 2010. The steering group anticipated that the reintroduction of cost would certainly cause a reduction in participation itself as well as frequency of visits. All seven districts agreed to continue collecting data so that changes in customer behaviour could be documented and mapped.

In the weeks that followed, districts communicated to their customers that the cut was coming, and free swimming finished on 31st July in North Kesteven, South Kesteven, Lincoln City, East Lindsey and Boston. South Holland and West Lindsey continued offering the service throughout August to cover the summer holiday period.

Numerous letters from the public were received by the Leisure Centres, Lincolnshire Sports Partnership and the press, complaining that the cuts would make it impossible for families to afford swimming. The incentive was also removed for the over 60s age group, so the effects were expected to impact not only the two age groups individually, but also the intergenerational activity between them.

During the free swimming period, children had to register with their centre, and received a card which gave them access to the pool. When prices were reintroduced, these cards were no longer used, but were replaced with family swim cards and kids membership packages. This has made measuring difficult. Districts have been unable to accurately count the quantity of swimmers, and without postcodes and frequency data, like-for-like comparisons have been inaccurate.

Nevertheless, all districts reported a marked reduction in attendances among young people since pricing was reintroduced. This was reflected both in the monthly data as well as feedback from the steering group, as outlined in the graph below.



Free swimming throughput by month. Note the withdrawal of free swimming in July 2010. Full data from February and March 2011 was not available.

The steering group continued to meet frequently and the Lincolnshire Sports Partnership collected data from April 2009 until March 2011. Whilst individual swimmers could not be counted, usage has been monitored using the registration cards given to those children who signed up to the scheme.

The following table overleaf indicates the cost per attendance and the value for money:

	Free Swims 09/10	Free Swims 10/11	Total Free Swims	Cost per attendance
Boston	26,418	11,390	37,808	£2.13
City of Lincoln	63,702	21,812	85,514	£1.86
East Lindsey	96,378	51,028	147,406	£1.91
North Kesteven	46,388	15,921	62,309	£2.54
South Holland	14,477	7,377	21,854	£2.78
South Kesteven	67,465	27,908	95,373	£2.37
West Lindsey	11,510	9,584	21,094	£5.65
Total	326,338	143,121	469,459	Average £2.31



Steering Group Findings

Whilst it is clear that reintroducing pricing has an impact on swimming trends, there are many wider issues to be considered. The recession has been a contributory factor in the reduction of swimming activity as less people are able to pay for casual swimming than during an economic growth period. Weather also has an impact on swimming behaviours. Of those who stop attending during a bad spell of cold or wet weather, many do not return.

Each district has responded to the cut by offering alternative packages and changing their timetables to maximise the chances of participation;

Boston reported that their facilities were 20% down on usage for Under 16s when compared to 09/10 figures in August and September. Adult usage was 17% down. Swimming among the Over 60s has also been affected, although this is not as great. Receptionists report that families with 3+ children (guessing from more deprived areas) who attended when swimming was free are no longer coming along. Boston introduced a membership package for children that increased by 11% since free swimming stopped. Vouchers were given out in December allowing 5 people to swim for £5.

West Lindsey reported that attendance came down immediately, reflecting the cuts. Their sub-contractor offered alternative membership schemes but these have not been very popular. Over 60s usage also dropped. Families now swipe in with a card, so total attendance cannot be counted in the same way. There is no way to overcome the system as clients won't be using the original cards so the system could be double counting or missing swimmers.

South Holland report that participation among young people has returned to levels comparable with pre free swimming. South Holland has always offered free swimming to under 5s, which encourages family swims and has maintained good retention rates. The pool has a reputation for being out dated and run down, but those who were drawn into swimming have kept using the centre, even if less frequently than when swimming was free.

Lincoln City has seen a big reduction in swimming participation and started to offer a £10 a month unlimited swim package for children, with some success. The free swimming initiative encouraged those swimmers already active to come more frequently, and did not necessarily get new people through the doors.

Leisure Connection, the sub-contractor who runs the pools in five districts, reported that lane swimming has increased adult admissions now that pool schedules have been changed. Leisure Connection are able to report, but have the same difficulty over counting individual attendances because of the introduction of family swims. The consensus, however, is the same across all their sites, that cost has caused a reduction in the people who visit, as well as the frequency of those visits.

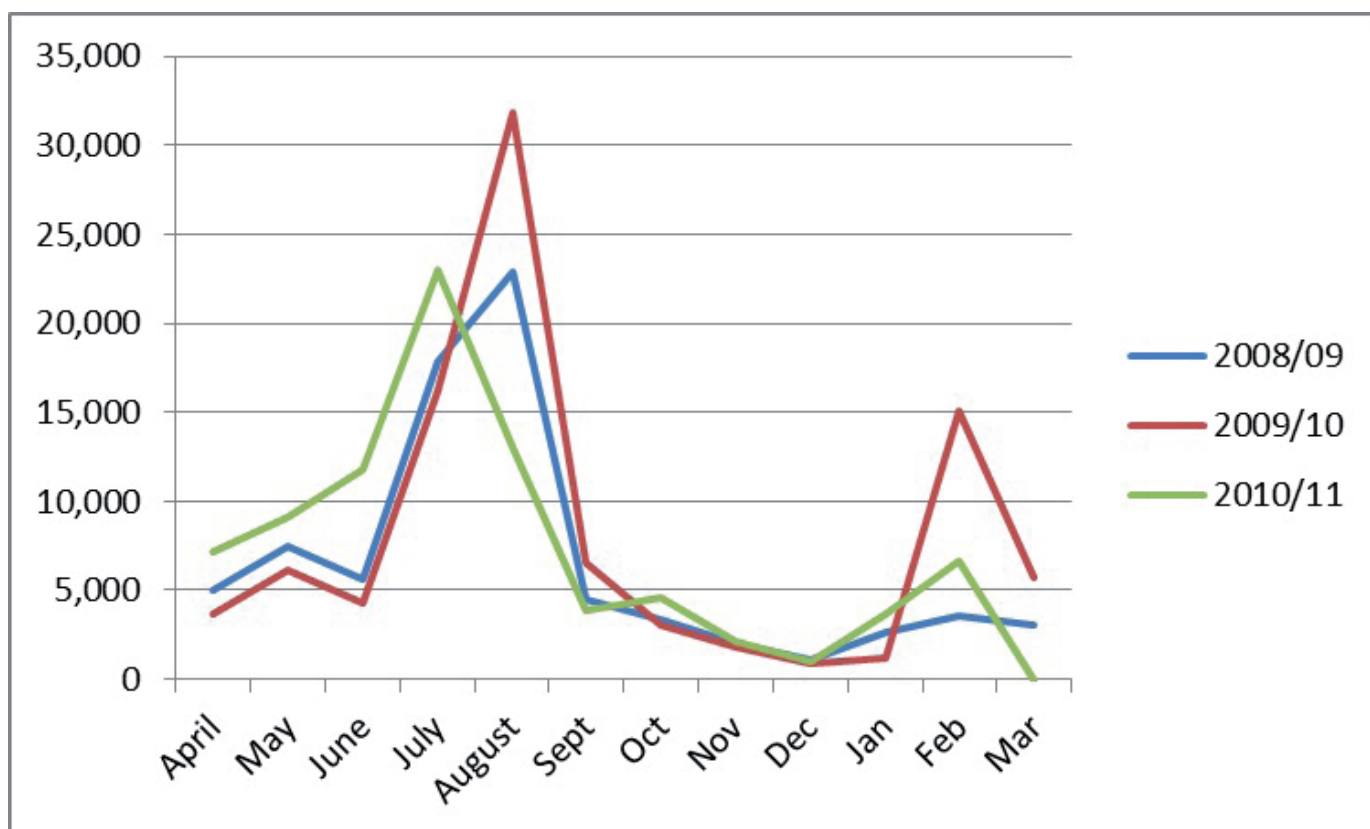
East Lindsey – Case study

Under 17 swim total attendances for 2008/09 were 78,909 (99,410 in 07/08) Therefore, 2009/10 saw a visit increase of 22% against the previous year with the introduction of the free swim scheme and of course (two months) part year influence of the new facility opening.

Total swimming participation for each year:

2008/09	78,909 no free swimming
2009/10	96,378 free swimming
2010/11	88,954 first quarter free swimming

The chart below indicates the trends in swimming over three years within East Lindsey;



East Lindsey reported a big surge in July 2010, as East Lindsey District Council advertised that the funding was being pulled, and encouraged families to make the most of it. East Lindsey had a new swimming pool that opened in 2010. The large facility proved very popular and had a significant impact on the figures. Without the new centre, swimming attendance would be 33% down for under 17s compared to last year.

ELDC has two outdoor swimming pools located in Woodhall Spa & Skegness. These pools are affected by



tourism and weather, having a strong seasonal influence on overall participation. Attendances in the district almost halved in August 2010, but the poor weather was a significant contribution to this.

April – July 2008 Inclusive = 35,933 (No free swimming)

April – July 2009 Inclusive = 30,219 (Free swimming offered)

April – July 2010 Inclusive = 51,028 (Intro of Meridian Leisure Centre, and free swimming offered)

August 2010 usage decrease 59% on 2009 U17 usage, following removal of the scheme.

September 2010 usage decrease 42% on 2009.

October 2010 usage increase 55% on 2009. (MLC factor half term hol)

November 2010 usage increase 17% on 2009.

December 2010 usage increase 12% on 2009.

Over 60s usage has increased by 49% since the removal of free swimming. This could be due to older swimmers returning now that family sessions have been reduced and more lane swimming is offered. Lane swimming is popular in East Lindsey and many adults chose not to swim when the pool was open for family sessions. For young people, the initiative was definitely price sensitive. Embassy pool is down by 39%. In response, a membership deal for £10 a month has been offered for 10-15 years olds which includes gym and swimming. This has had a good uptake.

Impact

The steering group value the opportunity for sharing ideas and comparing ways of working, reporting that meeting attendance has been very useful and an effective tool for better countywide working. There has been an impact on cultural perceptions (South Holland's new visitors have continued to come along and overcome their pre-conceptions of the pool). The initiative did have an impact on health inequalities. Swimming lessons offered by the ASA has further supported non swimmers, increased skill levels and provided social opportunities to mix with others. Links to other services such as GP Referral, Fit Kids and IFI, has enhanced other NHS services.

The Steering group provided an opportunity for the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) to meet with the leisure providers, enabling partnership working to take place. Free swimming lessons were delivered at sites. In 09/10 there were 214 free swimming lesson packages bringing in a total of £53,500 worth of funding into the county. Leisure Connection reported that this had a positive effect on non and weak swimmers, who learned new life skills and enjoyed the social element. Without the free swimming opportunity they would have been unlikely to join up for lessons. This offer encouraged people to develop some basic skills, and was appealing to those from areas of deprivation. The ASA has also provided support to the Leisure Centres in business planning and programming.

Lincolnshire Swimming Clubs perceived the initiative as having a negative effect on them. They reported no change in membership when the offer was launched, or following its removal. One club claimed to have lost members due to restricted pool time as timetables changed. Clubs thought that children were attending swimming but not necessarily learning to swim.

Below are some responses from swimming club committees in Boston, Grantham and Louth:

"The amount of children in the pool that were not part of the Club had a detrimental effect on the swimmers, because of the noise"

"People using the free swimming were not being taught and simply used it as an excuse to come to the pool and mess about very little constructive swimming was done"

"Most children were unsupervised by parents etc and just played about making it more difficult for those who actually wanted to swim"

"They exchanged the street corner for the swimming pool"

It is important to recognise that swimming clubs focus on developing skills and performance. The purpose of free swimming was to increase usage among young people who would be unlikely to join a structured club. Clubs were clearly not a potential exit route for most young free swimmers, as the pathway to excellence is a long haul from casual users to club level performer.

Despite these comments, Leisure Centres report that clubs and regular recreational swimmers were protected, and timetables were carefully planned. Some report they increased lane swimming to ensure satisfaction among regular customers.

Outcomes

The 2009/10 statistics for Lincolnshire indicate implementation of the programme led to a huge increase in the number of people who accessed local pools. Experiences were good and families continued attending. New skills have been learned, teenagers accessed the pools instead of spending time on the streets, leisure centres were busier and participants took up membership offers. Seeds have been planted for those who would never have swum without the provision of the free opportunity. Perceptions about facility quality have been overcome, social groups formed and enjoyment clearly had by those involved in the evaluations.

The new partnerships have worked, with stakeholders forming a steering group that has been valued by all, so much so that providers have continued to attend, feedback and report with no financial incentive. Swimming behaviours have reverted back to levels similar to 08/09 figures, which is a positive outcome given the recession and many months of bad weather affecting both summer and winter seasons.

Leisure Centres have responded to the lost incentive, by providing membership packages, vouchers and opportunities for continued attendance offering good value for regular attendees.

Other benefits include capital grants that have improved efficiencies (insulation) and increased the quality of the facilities (changing rooms). Bills and maintenance costs have been reduced as a result. This offset the greatly increased costs associated with maintenance during the free swimming period.





Conclusions

The local and national evidence stated that people would continue to swim if pricing were reintroduced. This is inconsistent with Lincolnshire behaviours, as participation and frequency have both decreased; indicating that price sensitivity is a significant factor in participation.

Enabling factors;

- Summer holidays and seasonal changes
- Private providers such as LA Fitness saw an increase in memberships when free swimming started, because people who could afford to go private chose to do so when more children were at public centres. Now these swimmers are coming back to public centres
- Those with preconceptions about the condition of pools with poorer reputations have continued to use centres, having been pleased with the facilities and service
- Increased usage during the incentivised programme
- Continued usage among over 60s following the removal of the programme

Disabling factors;

- Swimming is a price sensitive activity in Lincolnshire
- Poor weather for outdoor pool usage during summer
- Summer holidays and seasonal changes
- The economic climate, families that have experienced redundancies may not be able to afford to pay for children to swim
- Changes in benefits, for the same reasons as above
- Some adults are swimming less because they used to take children and are now choosing alternative activities