

## **Briefing Sheet – Government Initiative for Free Swimming for 60's and above and Under 17's**

### **Report of: Leisure Management Officer**

#### **Position Statement**

The Free Swimming Initiative report was considered by the Cabinet Member for Leisure & Culture and the following Decision was made on 05 September 2008

*That the resolution not to participate in the Govt initiative to provide free swims for those 60 and over and the under 17's be agreed.*

The main reason for Decision was on the revenue implication at a time when the Council is seeking to make substantial savings in the revenue budget for the provision of leisure and cultural services then to provide free swims would add to the burden and lead to reductions in other services.

This shortfall was assessed as:

60's and above	£79,000 p.a. for the next 2 years being an estimated cost of £123,000 less the Government grant of £44,000
17's and under	£295,000 p.a. for the next 2 years less the Government grant which has yet to be advised to us

The issues raised by Members in favour for supporting the initiative mentioned that:

*'The initiative presents an opportunity to vastly improve the service that we provide for our residents, particularly those in areas of deprivation or on fixed incomes. Free swimming would also marry up with the Council's priorities for improving health inequalities, life long learning and quality living. We would like to be certain that the detailed analysis referred to be the Cabinet Member fully explored options for funding the initiative. We would also like an explanation as to why the decision was taken at a point when meaningful scrutiny would be hampered'*

#### **Response**

Initially it should be noted that the Maidstone Leisure Centre is a very well used facility and especially for swimming where it offers a vast range of casual sessions for formal and informal swimming. That being the case, the initiative offered by the Government tends to penalise those facility providers that have

successful sites with large numbers of customers such as at Maidstone and our nearest competitor, Larkfield Leisure Centre, in Tonbridge & Malling B C.

The other concern with the overall scheme was the length of the Government financial support – being for just 2 years. This begs the question for the following period and the uncertainty for maintaining this initiative.

- *'an opportunity to vastly improve the service that we provide for our residents, particularly those in areas of deprivation or on fixed incomes'*

Unfortunately the initiative does not apply solely to those members of the community from particular backgrounds or social position – instead it was a blanket initiative and therefore applies to every current swimmer in the particular age group without exception. Consequently the current user base was relatively easy to identify and in addition to these figures the potential for growth in usage and the additional cost for staffing and chemicals/materials was also determined.

- *'Free swimming would also marry up with the Council's priorities for improving health inequalities, life long learning and quality living.'*

This statement is true and one which the Cabinet member would have been keen to support had it not been for the excessive financial impact on the revenue budget.

- *'We would like to be certain that the detailed analysis referred to by the Cabinet Member fully explored options for funding the initiative.'*

As mentioned above, there will be considerable pressure on the Leisure & Culture portfolio budget and without some other form of financial support to supplement the Government's grant then it would not be possible to sign up for this initiative. To do so would further extend the consideration for matching cuts from these services.

Enquiries were made to confirm the availability of the Government's grant due to the current Trust management status of the leisure centre and the DCMS confirmed that the funding would still be available.

An approach was made to the West Kent Primary Care Trust as the benefits from the initiative would also be supportive of the PCT's objectives. It had also been made known that East Kent PCT were looking to support the initiative in

conjunction with the local authorities in their area. The following reply was received.

The Public Health team here (West Kent) have looked at the East Kent approach and see if it works for us. Our own financial position, while significantly improved, doesn't allow us the same latitude as East Kent. Our own approach would suggest the need for targeted investment to reduce inequalities in areas of greatest need. I think it unlikely we would follow the East Kent model, but if the public health view of priorities points in a different way, we'll let you know.

- *We would also like an explanation as to why the decision was taken at a point when meaningful scrutiny would be hampered'*

The information was received by the Council on 31 July and was then circulated for officers to assess the likely impact. The investigations into the estimated costs were sought direct from the management at the leisure centre and various discussions then followed with them to clarify their methodology and assumptions for use.

An assessment of the likely grant to be provided by Government for the under 17's also followed – the grant Government were to provide for this target group was not known at the time as it was to be confirmed by the Government once the response to the initiative was known. Again, this was not an approach that allowed for total certainty and further increased the risk associated with signing up for the initiative.

In due course the report was prepared for the Cabinet Member in accordance to obtain a decision to achieve the short timescale that had been set by Government to reply, i.e. 15 September.

Officers did approach the DCMS to see if there was any opportunity for an extension to the reply date, but were advised that any authorities wanting to be considered must indicate by this date.