

IFRCS37 Fergus Feeney, Chief Executive Officer, Swim Wales

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, Cyfathrebu, y Gymraeg, Chwaraeon, a Chysylltiadau Rhyngwladol | Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee

Effaith Gostyngiadau Cyllid ar Ddiwylliant a Chwaraeon | Impact of Funding Reductions for Culture and Sport

Ymateb gan: Fergus Feeney, Prif Swyddog Gweithredol, Nofio Cymru | Evidence from: Fergus Feeney, Chief Executive Officer, Swim Wales

1. What impacts has reduced funding had on your organisation and sector so far?

Reduced funding into Swim Wales and the Welsh aquatics sector is negatively impacting the delivery of key Swim Wales initiatives and operations, but is ultimately affecting the health, wellbeing and safety of the nation.

Aquatic Estate (Swimming Pools)

- The condition of aquatics facilities in Wales has been in steady decline for a decade. - Recent insight taken from the 2024 Swim Wales Facility Audit shows Welsh leisure centers and pools are rapidly becoming unfit for purpose.

- 80% of swimming pools in Wales are over 20 years old. Average age of the estate:
 - 50 % were built prior to 1979
 - 20%: 1980-1989
 - 15%: 1990-1999
 - 12%: 2000
 - 2010 to now 3%
 - In the last 10 years, only 11 sites across all 22 local authorities in Wales have been refurbished or renovated.
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- 39 have made small upgrades to their facility and the remainder have had no refurbishments at all.
- Only 20% of responders to the 2024 Swim Wales Facility Audit noted that they had taken any sustainability measures, meaning swimming pool operators are facing huge challenges to contribute to the Welsh Government's net zero target for 2030.
- Lack of capital funds or available investment has resulted in higher maintenance and running costs.
- Swim Wales as the National Governing Body for aquatic activity and sports in Wales is extremely concerned about the efficiencies, sustainability and future of Welsh swimming pools over the next 10 years.

Accessibility

- Swimming lessons - Rising costs coupled with reduced investment are limiting children's opportunities to learn to swim across all of our delivery partners in Wales.
 - The average cost of a 30-minute swimming lesson in Wales is £7.66, an increase of 30% in the last three years.
 - This increase in cost means the price of a lesson is more than double the national average available spend on active sport* (£3.52)
 - The current demographic in swimming lessons is white middle-class, and any attempts from Swim Wales and its national partners to make swimming lessons accessible to all has been made extremely difficult due to reductions in funding and increased costs.
 - The Active Adults Survey (Sport Wales) 2022 suggests that 16% of adults want to do more fitness activities, with 218,000 adults currently aquatically active with 172,000 latent demand. Access to leisure swimming and/or fitness classes which will contribute significantly to the health of our nation is at severely threatened by the lack of funding and increased costs.
 - Free Swimming remains one of the positives in this picture as this funding (£1.5m) enables local authorities and operators to create accessible offers for the Welsh public.
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- School swimming is at its worst position for over a generation due to reduced funding and increased costs.
- As of August 2024, only 42% of children in Years 3-6 can swim in Wales. This means that 21,000 children will enter secondary education this September unable to swim and at greater risk of drowning in their teenage years.
- School Swimming is the only opportunity for ALL Welsh children regardless of background or class to learn this vital life skill - there are 182,178 children aged 7-11 years / Years 3-6 in Wales)
- Attempts by the national governing body and its national partners to increase accessibility in diverse and underserved communities have been met with barriers and concerns relating to costs and access.

Competitive Pathway & Performance

- At the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, Welsh swimmers won three medals in the pool (2 gold, 1 silver), which equated to 20% of the medals won by Team GB swimmers (despite making up 10% of the British team).
- Welsh athletes have consistently delivered world-class performances on the international stage in recent years (Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, World Championships & European Championships). However, this year has seen a 10% reduction in funding to the Swim Wales High Performance Programme, on top of redirected funding away from sport science.

2. What measures have you taken in light of it, such as changing what you do and how you do it?

Swim Wales has taken several measures to guard against reduced funding and enable our national partners to offer aquatic opportunities to the Welsh public.

Increased Partnerships

Swim Wales has placed a greater emphasis on partnerships in recent years to combat the effect of reduced funding into Swim Wales and wider aquatics.

Swansea University

- Swim Wales & Swansea University agreed a partnership in 2023 with the goal of to creating programs and pathways across the aquatic landscape, from supporting the world-class performance environment at Wales National Pool Swansea, to exploring collaboration opportunities that will allow us to push the boundaries of knowledge and innovation in our sports (Data, insight, placements and interns)
- Swansea University and Swim Wales have introduced PhD placements and opportunities in sports science and other areas with success.

Cardiff Met University & Cardiff Council

- Only 16% of children in Cardiff can swim, the lowest figures for any local authority in Wales, according to the latest data collected by Cardiff Metropolitan University and Swim Wales.
- Cardiff has one of the lowest levels of participation in swimming lessons in primary schools across all of Wales. Only 57% of primary schools in Cardiff in the academic year 2022/23 sent pupils to swimming lessons.
- In response to the figures, a group of organizations have joined together to tackle the low swimming participation figures in Cardiff, including Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff Met Sport, Swim Wales, Feathers Association, Sport Wales, Public Health Wales, GLL, Legacy Leisure, the Vale of Glamorgan Council, Cardiff Council and the Urdd. The partnership aims to raise awareness about the importance of making school swimming and water safety education a standard practice in Cardiff schools.
- The group suggests that the primary method to ensuring every child acquires essential swimming skills is through the implementation of annual School Swimming Lessons in all schools - with a new model proposed to facilitate this.

Other National Partners

- Swim Wales has partnered with national providers including Freedom Leisure, Parkwood Leisure and Byw'n Iach to ensure learners across Wales are receiving the best quality learn to swim experience.

Health

- Aquatics & Health are intrinsically linked, with aquatic activity proven to increase mental and physical wellbeing.
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- Swim Wales partnered with GoodBoost, a social enterprise that provides affordable and accessible therapeutic exercise programmes, through cutting-edge technology. The implementation of GoodBoost at Welsh leisure centres has been proven to boost recovery times, and ease the burden on the NHS through prehabilitation and rehabilitation.

Development Fund

- Thanks to Welsh Government & Sport Wales funding, Swim Wales launched the Swim Wales Aquatic Development Fund to help our member clubs become more sustainable and attractive to new and current members.

Cynnwys

- Swim Wales recently launched our Cynnwys DEI framework with the aim of making Welsh aquatics a safe, welcoming, inclusive and accessible space for all.
- A key project within Cynnwys will include a learning series to help educate partners on making aquatics accessible to every member of our communities.

Ein Clwb

- To ease the burden on Swim Wales member clubs, Swim Wales created Ein Clwb (Our Club) a bank of resources to help with the smooth running of an aquatic club.

3. To what extent will these impacts be irreversible (e.g. venues closing, or specialist skills being lost rather than a temporary restriction in activities)?

There have already been a number of irreversible effects of reduced funding across aquatics in Wales, including leisure centre closures, which will inevitably lead to a lost generation of learners and ultimately a higher risk of drowning fatalities.

Harlech Leisure Centre Closure (several north Wales at risk)

- The closure of Harlech Leisure Centre is a stark example of the irreversible impacts of reduced funding. This closure not only represents
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the loss of a vital community hub but also signifies the beginning of a broader trend where more leisure facilities could face a similar fate.

- These closures result in a permanent loss of access to swimming facilities, particularly in rural or economically disadvantaged areas where alternatives are limited or non-existent.
- Once a facility is closed, the cost of reopening or replacing it is often prohibitive, leading to a lasting reduction in community services. The risk of further closures across Wales threatens to dismantle the infrastructure needed to provide essential aquatic education and activities.
- Swim Wales estimates that 30% or up to 150 swimming pools are at risk of closure over the next 10 years if action is not taken by central and local governments.

Lost Generation of Learners

- The reduction in funding has already led to a significant decline in the number of children participating in school swimming programs. With only 41% of children in Years 3-6 able to swim 25 meters unaided as of the 2022/23 academic year, we are at risk of creating a "lost generation" of learners who are not equipped with the necessary skills to be safe in, on, or around water.
- If the current trend continues, over 21,000 children could leave primary school each year without achieving basic water competence.
- This generational gap in swimming education will have long-term consequences, not only for the individuals affected but also for public safety and health.
- The loss of early swimming education can lead to a decline in overall water safety knowledge, increasing the likelihood of water-related accidents and fatalities in the future

Ultimate Health and Safety Risk

- The ultimate and most serious consequence of reduced funding is the heightened health and safety risk. Drowning remains the second most common cause of non-intentional injury fatalities among children under 18 in Wales.
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- Without adequate swimming competency and water safety education, the risk of drowning incidents could rise.
- The presence of drugs or alcohol in nearly half of the fatalities in the 18-24 age group underscores the importance of early and continuous water safety education, which could mitigate such risks.
- The lack of access to swimming facilities and education exacerbates health inequalities, disproportionately affecting those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minorities who already face barriers to participation.
- The irreversible impact here is not just the loss of a skill but the potential for an increase in preventable deaths.

In summary, the impacts of reduced funding on Swim Wales and the aquatic sector are not only severe but also likely to be lasting. The closure of key facilities, the creation of a lost generation of non-swimmers, and the increased health and safety risks highlight the critical need for sustained investment and support to prevent these irreversible outcomes.

4. What interventions would you like to see from the Welsh Government, beyond increased funding?

To ensure the sustainability of aquatic facilities and programmes across Wales, Swim Wales advocates for several key interventions from the Welsh Government beyond merely increasing funding;

Protected Status for Swimming Pools & Leisure Centers

- One crucial intervention would be to grant aquatic facilities protected status, similar to how libraries are treated. This status would recognise swimming pools and leisure centres as essential community assets, safeguarding them from closure due to financial pressures. By ensuring that these facilities are legally protected, the Welsh Government would be acknowledging their vital role not just in promoting physical activity but also in providing life-saving education through swimming lessons and water safety programmes.
 - Given that these facilities are often the only local resources available for learning to swim, especially in rural or disadvantaged areas, this intervention would help prevent the irreversible loss of essential services.
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- The closure of such facilities would have a profound and lasting impact on public health and safety, particularly for future generations who would be deprived of the opportunity to develop essential life skills.

Aquatics in broader health strategies

- Swim Wales strongly believes that the scope of aquatic activities extends far beyond the realm of sport, encompassing significant public health benefits. Therefore, we urge the Welsh Government to integrate aquatics into broader health and wellbeing strategies.
- An integrated approach would involve recognizing swimming and other aquatic activities as key components of preventative healthcare, with direct benefits for mental and physical health. For example, swimming has been shown to improve cardiovascular health, reduce stress, and offer therapeutic benefits for individuals with chronic conditions such as arthritis.
- By positioning aquatics as a vital part of the healthcare system, the Welsh Government could facilitate cross-departmental collaboration, ensuring that public health initiatives include and promote access to swimming and water-based activities.
- This could be achieved through partnerships between health services, local authorities, and leisure providers, ensuring that aquatic programmes are supported not just as sports activities but as essential health services. This broader recognition would also help secure funding and resources from health budgets, further protecting and promoting access to aquatic activities.

Safeguarding School Swimming

- Another essential intervention is the safeguarding and promotion of school swimming as a core component of the curriculum. The Welsh Government should ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn to swim and develop water safety skills during their primary school years.
 - This could be achieved by reinstating a clear mandate within the Curriculum for Wales, ensuring that swimming and water safety education are prioritised across all schools.
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- Currently, there is significant variation in the availability of school swimming across different local authorities, with some areas, such as Merthyr Tydfil, having no schools participating in swimming programmes. This disparity puts many children at risk, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have access to private lessons.
- By making school swimming a non-negotiable part of the educational experience, the Welsh Government would help to level the playing field, ensuring that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have the opportunity to learn this critical life skill.
- Additionally, targeted support and resources should be provided to schools and local authorities to overcome logistical challenges, such as transportation and scheduling, which currently hinder access to swimming lessons. Promoting school swimming not only contributes to a healthier, more active population but also significantly reduces the risk of drowning incidents in the future.

5. To what extent do the impacts you describe fall differently on people with protected characteristics and people of a lower socioeconomic status?

Attempts by the national governing body and its national partners to increase accessibility in diverse and underserved communities have been met with barriers and concerns relating to costs and access. Affordability is a huge issue currently with the cost of entry not only to swimming lessons but general leisure services and swimming sessions prohibitive in many cases. This is directly related to reduced funding from within local government budgets compounded by the many of these pressures from increased costs.

6. Do you have any other points you wish to raise within the scope of this inquiry?

These points and others similar have been raised now by myself in 3 separate WG committees since COVID. There has not been much interest or movement of the back of these and as the Vice Chair of Welsh Sport Association I (and many others) fear that the requests for evidence and the good will in sports organizations is waning. I hope that this time the evidence and discussion is acted upon
