

Overview and Scrutiny Challenge Session Report

Swimming provision in the Borough



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Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present this challenge session report which focuses on the swimming provision in the borough.

The past 18 months compounded by Covid-19 has highlighted some of the real everyday challenges that our residents have and continue to face with accessing local swimming pools. The pandemic has also magnified local health inequalities with children in Tower Hamlets more likely to be overweight or obese at year 6 than in London or England¹. The challenges facing our borough over the health of our residents are becoming better understood and must be a great concern to us all. Some of these statistics may have worsened in having to comply with Covid-19 safety measures such as shielding or self-isolating, potentially leading to an increase in loneliness, sedentary lifestyles and a lack of regular physical activity and exercise.

Research from Swim England² has shown that a single 25 metre pool can generate £7.2 million in social value in community savings and also save the NHS and social care more than £1.2 million. Furthermore, Sport England³ have shown that for every £1 spent on community sport and physical activity, a return of £4 is delivered. Swim England has warned that nationally 90% of 7 to 11 year olds are failing to meet minimum standards that have been brought in for swimming lessons outside of school. The ability to swim, not just in Tower Hamlets but anywhere in the world, is an essential life skill that in extreme circumstances, can make the difference between life and death. Increasingly it is providing a means to rehabilitate people who have been injured aiding their recovery.

This challenge session provided the Overview and Scrutiny Committee the opportunity to scrutinise current and future swimming provision in Tower Hamlets. It is clear from the evidence heard at the session that swimming is a crucial part of maintaining physical and mental wellbeing of residents. These provisions are highly valued by residents and schools and ensuring local access is important for these stakeholders. The current reduction in provision is having a significant impact on access for residents, schools and other sports groups. It was noted capacity will increase in early 2022 following completion of refurbishment work on two centres.

The Committee has made seven recommendations (for the council to consider and work with our leisure provider and local stakeholders) which are focused on improving access and developing and maintain leisure centres which meet the needs of our growing borough. The Committee notes that there is very strong support from residents and cross party politicians to preserve St George's pool on site. The Committee hopes the Mayor and Cabinet take forward our recommendations and work with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to ensure we have excellent swimming provision for residents.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members, officers, external partners and residents who attended and supported the discussions, provided valuable insights and shaped the recommendations of this report.

Cllr Denise Jones **Overview and Scrutiny Committee Member**



¹ [Child Obesity Borough Profile](#)

² [Swimming Statistics and Findings | Swim England Insight](#)

³ [Why investing in physical activity is great for our health – and our nation | Sport England](#)

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1	That the Overview and Scrutiny be provided with the leisure centre review report and be engaged with the: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Next steps on leisure centre contract extension; and • Public consultation and procurement of new leisure contract
Recommendation 2	That the council examines and supports options for catch up swimming sessions for children who missed lessons because of lockdown and review viability of different swimming programmes offered and how these would be reinstated. That the Mayor should review the budget so that swimming provisions (pre Covid-19) can be reinstated
Recommendation 3	Greenwich Leisure Ltd and the council to explore promptly how to address the travel challenges faced by schools in the borough so that children can access swimming provision
Recommendation 4	The council to consider if covid funding or reserves can be used to support swimming provision
Recommendation 5	The council to examine the different options of keeping St Georges Pool on existing site, noting the strong lobby from residents and cross party support to keep the pool where it is. That details of financial planning for reopening St George's is shared transparently with the Committee
Recommendation 6	The council to develop a long-term capital investment strategy for leisure centres to ensure that they can be maintained to good standards including where needed major refurbishments. This should also include establishing a Lido and other new swimming provision in the borough. Leisure provision in Borough for the future should consider taking the projected rise in the population on board
Recommendation 7	GLL and council communications to assist with wider reach to parents, dispelling myths swimming in the winter season will cause colds and better visibility of consultations

Reason for Enquiry

- 1.1. Covid-19 Pandemic had a significant impact on residents health and wellbeing as noted [Understanding the impact of Covid-19](#) report. Currently St Georges, Tiller Road and York Hall pools are closed and there were petitions from users and local schools trying to establish funding to re-furbish and open the pools⁴.
- 1.2. With Tower Hamlets' high deprivation rate and 60% of its population residing within 30% of the most deprived parts of England⁵. Residents are more likely to use a local pool that is affordable and does not incur travel costs. Members engagement with residents have drawn out some of the following points for consideration:

⁴ Work is currently taking place to re-open Tiller Road and York Hall with expected completion date of Jan 22

⁵ [Deprivation Borough Profile](#)

- Swimming is an accessible form of exercise for older people and people with disabilities and health conditions;
 - Swimming can help with tackling the borough’s obesity issues;
 - Swimming and water safety has been a statutory element of the national curriculum since 1994. Every 11-year-old should be able to swim 25 metres by year 6. All primary schools must provide swimming and water safety lessons in either Key Stage 1 or 2;
 - The borough has canals, the river Thames and many docks. Swimming is a life skill and prevents possible drowning wherever people travel. It is imperative that children learn to swim potentially to save lives;
 - Municipal pools are cheaper and therefore more affordable than private pools;
 - Women only sessions, swimming lessons and spots for disability provision are restricted by too few pools;
 - Increasing the overall supply of publicly accessible sports hall swimming pools in Tower Hamlets – A key strategic objective of the ‘Indoor Sports Facilities Strategy’; and
 - By 2031, Tower Hamlets population is expected to rise to approximately 400,000 which will have a significant impact on existing leisure facilities, and it will be prudent to consider future leisure provision planning.
- 1.3. The council commissioned an independent review into leisure facilities in the borough which will inform future options for leisure provision including the recommissioning of current provision. The council will also be consulting local residents on the options and OSC is keen to be involved in this process. Furthermore, it is unclear what the short-term plans are for the borough’s swimming provision and how residents can engage in this process, which led to local campaigns on re-opening of swimming provision.

Methodology

- 2.1. This challenge session was chaired by Cllr Denise Jones (Overview and Scrutiny Committee Member) and took place on Monday 13th September 2021.
- 2.2. The Committee heard from the Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Sports supported by council officers responsible for the borough’s swimming provision, Greenwich Leisure Ltd (GLL), a local headteacher and a resident representative.
- 2.3. The scope of this challenge session sets out the following key questions:
- Are schools in the borough meeting their statutory duty in providing lessons in swimming and water safety to all primary school children?
 - What is the short-term plan (over next 12 months) to provide adequate, affordable and accessible swimming provision for residents (as part of the communities recovery from covid)?
 - How the long-term plan is being developed and what will be included in future provision?
 - What provisions have ceased since St Georges, Tiller and York Hall were closed? What plans are in place to replace these now?
 - What is the communication and engagement plan to inform residents about the short-term and long-term plans?
- 2.4. Members in attendance:

Councillor Denise Jones	Challenge session chair and OSC Member
Councillor Mohammed Pappu	OSC Chair
Councillor Faroque Ahmed	OSC Member

Councillor Andrew Wood	OSC Member
Councillor Marc Francis	OSC Member
Councillor Leema Qureshi	OSC Member
Councillor Ehtasham Haque	OSC Member
Halima Islam	Co-opted OSC Member
James Wilson	Co-opted OSC Member
Councillor Sabina Akhtar	Cabinet Member for Culture, Arts and Sports

Evidence heard from witnesses, guests and council officers:

Paul Lister	Head of Service Greenwich Leisure Ltd
Fanoula Smith	Head Teacher St Saviour's CE Primary School
Johanna Hall	Resident representative
James Thomas	Corporate Director Children & Culture
Judith St John	Director of Commissioning and Culture
Lisa Pottinger	Head of Sport and Physical Activity
Afazul Hoque	Head of Corporate Strategy and Policy
Filuck Miah	Corporate Strategy and Policy Officer

Key Findings and Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the Overview and Scrutiny be provided with the leisure centre review report and be engaged with the:

- Next steps on leisure centre contract extension; and
- Public consultation and procurement of new leisure contract

- 3.1. The Committee received a presentation from the Cabinet Member and council officers outlining the challenges and timescales for re-opening the borough's three closed swimming pools. It was noted that the council is undertaking a leisure centre review as part of the leisure procurement process as the leisure centre stock is old and in need of investment and that delivery of swimming will be key to the Leisure Management Contract 2024. The current leisure provision requires significant investment and to add, several of the leisure facilities are old including four of them being over 40 years old.
- 3.2. The review includes feasibility studies of John Orwell and St Georges Leisure Centre and also includes plans for Tiller Road. Condition surveys are being conducted for all centres to determine maintenance requirements and that £1.7 million of capital investment is being used for immediate repairs to Tiller Road and York Hall. The purpose of the feasibility studies is to help with future investment decision and support procurement of the next Leisure Management Contract 2024. The Committee were informed that the council's leisure centre review will conclude in October (2021).
- 3.3. The Committee felt that further scrutiny of the leisure centre review findings would help to provide the required critical friend support given that the additional information and insights will help the Committee to better understand the borough's swimming pools current position and what more needs to be done. In taking this forward, the Committee would like to be engaged on the extension of current leisure contract, review the public consultation process and be involved in the commissioning of the new contract.

Recommendation 2

That the council examines and supports options for catch up swimming sessions for children who missed lessons because of lockdown and review viability of different swimming programmes offered and how these would be reinstated. That the Mayor should review the budget so that swimming provisions (pre Covid-19) can be reinstated

- 4.1. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the council's leisure offer provided an extensive swimming provision including free swim on Friday and Saturday, targeted programmes for particular groups and concessionary rates. It was noted that majority of these programmes are not currently running and only two out of the five council managed pools are in operation, St Georges, Tiller Road and York Hall are closed thus leading to 60% reduction in capacity. These swimming programmes were funded by the leisure contract surplus. Conversely, the pandemic ended the leisure contract surplus, and began to operate in deficit thus impacting the financial viability of the swimming programmes. The financial viability also led the council to revise its approach to safe re-openings of leisure centres and the rationale for being in receipt of national relief fund money. The Committee further heard that GLL community sports team responsible for delivering the Aquatics Plan were also furloughed. The Resident representative highlighted the impact of the closures on key issues such as the cause and effect of obesity, mental health and fitness and that residents rely on pools being local and open.
- 4.2. It was noted that due to the on-going reductions in the council's budget, this has had an impact on Sports and Physical Activity Service which subsequently ceased some of the swimming programmes. Going forward, the Committee felt that the Mayor should review the budget so that swimming provisions (pre Covid-19) can be accommodated. The Committee noted that councils are enabled to provide but not statutorily required to provide swimming provision.
- 4.3. The Committee suggested that the council explores what support can be provided for catch up swimming lessons for children (moving to key stage three) who missed out because of the pandemic and remain unable to swim the required 25 metres. The Committee were informed that people with disabilities, injuries and pregnancies felt that they had been overlooked with the swimming provision since re-opening as they cannot engage with gym-based exercise and require non weight bearing exercise such as the swimming pools.

Recommendation 3

Greenwich Leisure Ltd and the council to explore promptly how to address the travel challenges faced by schools in the borough so that children can access swimming provision

- 5.1. A local Headteacher highlighted the barriers that local schools face in accessing swimming, with three of the pools closed, travelling to an alternative pool is costly and time consuming. It was noted that unless swimming pools are in close proximity, schools cannot justify 3 - 4 hours on sport within the curriculum as priority needs to be given to other areas of the core curriculum. The Committee noted that in ideal world all schools would have a pool within walking distance.
- 5.2. The Headteacher provided the example that a coach taking a class to swimming would cost in the region of £1,500 which the school does not have available within its budget and to add, it also requires a set number of adults to accompany the children. It was also pointed out that intensive lessons were not taken up by all school headteachers as it would take too much time out of the timetable. It is also believed that it created an unnecessary anxiety for children and that swimming should be developed by habit over a longer-term approach.

- 5.3. The Committee also noted that two out of five pools meant an oversubscription of school swimming and no slots for public use and that local residents having to take two or three buses to get to an alternative pool adding to their costs.
- 5.4. The Committee asked if transport were to be funded would this help with timing issues for schools to use pools that are not in their local area. The headteacher outlined that whilst it would help some schools, travelling in traffic can become an issue requiring an additional 30 minutes. Parents have also raised concern with schools about their children walking to the pools because of safety concerns issues in the borough.
- 5.5. GLL have suggested using some of the swimming pools on the edge on Tower Hamlets with neighbouring boroughs if it helps with travel times and this is something that they will consider. GLL have identified potentially 15 schools in the borough could be benefit from funding as it will help increase access and participation in schools swimming programme.

Recommendation 4

The council to consider if covid funding or reserves can be used to support swimming provision

- 6.1. A discussion took place about the use of private swimming pools in the area to help with access and capacity issues. It was noted this was not an option currently being pursued as with the refurbishment and opening of Tiller Road and York Hall capacity would significantly increase. However, if there is on-going issue with capacity this could be something that is pursued subject to availability and costs.
- 6.2. The Committee highlighted that the council closed the last financial year with an extra £13 million of Covid-19 grant (which was more than expected or is a surplus) and enquired if council considered using some of this money to fund this temporary use for the schools. It was confirmed this would be something that will need to be checked to see if covid funding can be used for swimming provision. The Committee were also informed that the council received over £800k (Leisure Relief Fund) which was passed on the GLL.
- 6.3. The Committee were informed GLL were working with London Sport Funding to lobby Sport England for funding for several London boroughs which includes a six-month free membership for local community groups and stakeholders to facilitate greater participation. Tower Hamlets and two other boroughs are also exploring the use of Long Covid Funding focussing on access and increasing participation.

Recommendation 5

The council to examine the different options of keeping St Georges Pool on existing site, noting the strong lobby from residents and cross-party support to keep the pool where it is. That details of financial planning for reopening St George's is shared transparently with the Committee.

- 7.1. Nationally, more than 60% of sports halls and swimming pools are more than 10 years old. Nearly a quarter of all sports halls and swimming pools have not been refurbished in more than 20 years. There is a campaign requesting the government to provide £700m through the National relief Fund to support the sector which has not been forthcoming.

- 7.2. The Committee heard that St Georges Leisure Centre needs significant investment, and a short-term solution is not viable. The estimated cost for repairing St Georges based on previous set of surveys would be around £10 million and this would only allow for replacement the mechanical and equipment vehicle and repair the fabric of the building, this would only enable the building to function safely. It does not address other issues including the aesthetics of the building. It was noted the Leisure Centre Review would provide details on refurbishment and rebuild on existing site. The resident representative highlighted the strong community feeling about re-opening St Georges Pool and maintain it on this site for several reasons including access and size which on any other site would not be comparable.
- 7.3. The Committee questioned if the costs has escalated because of lack of investment in refurbishment over the years. In response The Committee were informed that there has been incremental investment over the last decade but that the building is so old that it requires significant investment. The resident representative fed back that local residents impacted from the closures felt that pools are not properly managed or maintained such as temperature of pool, issues with cubicles, broken door locks and cleanliness. GLL indicated that they have funds for maintenance and will apply where it's required for the upkeep. The Committee noted that the council undertakes service audits to measure the performance of GLL managed leisure centres and has requested the service to provide the Committee with information on current levels performance.

Recommendation 6

The council to develop a long-term capital investment strategy for leisure centres to ensure that they can be maintained to good standards including where needed major refurbishments. This should also include establishing a Lido and other new swimming provision in the borough. Leisure provision in Borough for the future should consider taking the projected rise in the population on board.

- 8.1. The Committee heard concerns about the age of the leisure centres in the borough, and they felt from the discussion it was clear a capital investment strategy for leisure centres exists. This is particularly crucial knowing our stock condition, our growing population, deprivation and health inequalities.
- 8.2. The Committee noted the collaborative approach between GLL and Newcastle Council to match funding (capital) £3 million in order deliver some of the leisure improvements for the area. The Committee asked GLL (Tower Hamlets) if this is something that is being considered locally. The head of service for GLL indicated that he is not aware of the specific scheme and that he will investigate this and feedback to the Committee.
- 8.3. The Committee raised the point about the council's longer-term plan on swimming provision in the borough, given that there is a clear projection in population growth over the next decade, they suggested that council should review and see if the current five council managed swimming pools have sufficient capacity to accommodate a growing population.
- 8.4. The Committee also heard that residents want to see a range of swimming pools, including longer length, diving and distributed well around the borough and cited Shadwell as an area in need of a local swimming pool.

- 8.5. GLL informed the Committee that they have matched the support provision for local clubs such as Bethnal Green Sharks and there has been a growth in casual and fitness swimming at Mile End and Poplar Baths by 20-25% (higher than two years ago) compared to last four months of 2019 (pre-Covid-19).
- 8.6. The Committee cited that the Canal and River Trust are exploring ideas for the docks and perhaps to address the above there should be an outside swimming pool or lido as a sixth pool in the borough as part of the wider swimming provision.

Recommendation 7

GLL and council communications to assist with wider reach to parents, dispelling myths swimming in the winter season will cause colds and better visibility of consultations

- 9.1 The Committee heard that one of the challenges that schools face with swimming provision is that parents often believe that if their child goes swimming in the winter season, they will catch a cold. They have indicated that support is needed to dispel the myth and that swimming all season, helps your lungs to be healthier and fitter and not have the same vulnerability to viruses because of swimming.
- 9.2 The Committee heard that residents remain unclear as to what has been done since the 2017 strategy and felt that there has been a lack of follow up on having some many aged leisure centre buildings. They also questioned the timing of the public consultation, however the council officers explained that the reason for the consultation is because they will have to reprocure the leisure management contract and this requires to consult on the whole leisure portfolio not just St Georges Leisure Centre.
- 9.3 GLL informed the Committee that there has been good campaign from public health on better health as well as Swim England on hashtag love swimming alongside some national campaigns and the app and go discount offers offering a two for one swim for all sessions which can be obtained from certain products in supermarkets. GLL also informed that one of their open days for 'I am team GB' (part of the Olympics) they had 200 swimmers at Mile End of which 50% are new customers who continue to swim.

Conclusion

- 10.1 This challenge session provided the Overview and Scrutiny Committee the opportunity to scrutinise current and future swimming provision in Tower Hamlets. It is clear from the evidence heard at the session that swimming is a crucial part of maintaining physical and mental wellbeing of residents. These provisions are highly valued by residents and schools and ensuring local access is important for these stakeholders. It is evident that access to pools (within walking distance from schools) for swimming lessons is necessary in terms of fitting in to school timetables and high costs of transport. The current reduction in provision is having a significant impact on access for residents, schools and other sports groups. It was noted that capacity will increase in early 2022 following completion of refurbishment work on two centres.
- 10.2 The Committee has made seven recommendations (for the council to consider and work with our leisure provider and local stakeholders) which are focused on improving access and developing and maintain leisure centres which meet the needs of our growing borough. The Committee hopes the Mayor and Cabinet take forward our recommendations quickly and work with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to ensure we have excellent swimming provision for residents.