The health inequalities impact of reducing the cost of local authority leisure facilities in the North West

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“The total number of bathers at these various establishments is 1,235,215. The cost of management has been £10,033 and the receipts from the bathers £7,519 so that we have been losing about £2,500 a year on these public baths and wash-houses deliberately to encourage the people to make use of them…all this shows that we are anxious to contribute to the public health”

(Sir Thomas Hughes, 1900)
The Question

• Does reducing the cost of accessing local authority leisure facilities increase physical activity and does that differ by socioeconomic group?
Who was involved

- Researchers based at Liverpool & Lancaster Universities
- Seven north west local authorities (LA) involved in different components of the study
- In collaboration with
  - Public health and leisure teams in these areas
  - Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)
Key elements of the research

• **Mapping pricing policies**
  – Interviews with leisure and public health professionals
  – Information on subsidies / fees & charges

• **Extraction and analysis of leisure data – evaluating natural experiments.**
  – Transaction data from leisure management systems
  – Active People survey

• **Public experiences of leisure entrance charges**
  – Interviews and focus groups with members of public

Practitioner and public involvement in shaping priorities for, and recommendations from research
Price and participation – 3 natural experiments
1. Free Leisure Scheme – Blackburn with Darwen

- Large free offer – covering ~ 60% of activity for all people living and working in Blackburn with Darwen.
- Plus support for physical activity through a team of health trainers, dedicated instructors, community development officers and a network of volunteers.
- Marketing and promotional activity to raise awareness of the offer and to promote participation.
- Started in 2008
- NHS / public health budget contributed ~ £ 6 million between 2008-2014 on top of the core funding for leisure services provided by the council.
Method

• **Interrupted Time Series** analysis using leisure management data on the quarterly number of gym and swim attendances before and after the intervention.

• **Difference-in-Differences** Using Active Peoples’ Survey data to compare the change in % engaging in at least 30 minutes of gym or swimming activity in the past 4 weeks in Blackburn with Darwen to the change in this measure in the rest of England, before and after the intervention.
Introduction of re:fresh in Blackburn with Darwen.

- 49% increase in gym and swimming attendances (95%CI: 36% to 64%)
- 0.8 million additional swim and gym attendances in total 2008-2014
Introduction of re:fresh in Blackburn with Darwen.

- Additional 4% of the population at least 30 minute gym or swim session / month (95%CI 3.6 to 4.1).
- Additional 2% meeting 3x30 national indicator (NI8) (1.7 to 2.1)
Difference in effect by socioeconomic group.

1. Swim or Gym activity
   - Additional % participating
     *in moderate intensity swim or gym session at least once in last 4 weeks*

2. National Indicator
   - Additional % participating in physical activity,
     *for at least 30 minutes on at least 12 days out of the last 4 weeks*
2. Free holiday swimming for Children in Blackpool.

- Blackpool offers free swimming for all children (under 16 year olds).

- Method.
  - Compared swimming participation rates during holiday periods across age groups to similar local authority with no free offer for children.
• Additional 10% of children swimming at least once in the school holidays (95% CI 8 to 11%)
• 33 additional swimming attendances per 100 children (95% CI 28 to 38).
Effect of free swimming for children in Blackpool – greater for more deprived groups.
3. Concessions at older ages.

- 2 LAs – large concession at age 60
- 1 LA with low average price across age groups
How participation changes at age 60 – Active Peoples Survey

5 percentage point increase at age 60 of people swimming at least once in the past 4 weeks [95% CI 0.7 to 10].
Public perspectives on cost

- Group discussions and individual interviews
- 83 participants in 4 local authorities – fieldwork located in deprived areas
- Age range 18 to 75+ with 47% aged 45-64 years
- Mix of economically active/inactive, students and retired people
- More women were recruited than men

- Majority were regular users of centres – range of individual and group activities
- Also people who attended community based leisure
- Smaller number did not use centres or used them only infrequently
- Range of ways by which people paid for leisure (prepaid membership, free access, pay as you go)
Public perspectives on cost

- Most affected by price - those receiving welfare payments, low wage households and retired people
- For many existing users, price shaped influenced choices about how they participated in leisure (e.g. attending at off-peak times when charges lower)
- Free access highly valued by users and encouraged participation
- Pre-paid options reported to motivate more frequent participation for those who could afford them
- PAYG more financially manageable for people on low income though paradoxically are the most expensive option if using facilities frequently

We have a [free leisure] card... Used to go every week didn’t we and then stopped. Now I’ve got it redone so I will be going again (Female, community focus group)

I’m struggling with my work and only get a bits of work. So I have been going when it’s been free really. (Male leisure user)

The cost is a problem for me now I’m retired and I have less income so I’ve taken out the £15 a month but that restricts me; I’ve got to be between 9 and 4 o’clock so there are sessions in the evening that I would have to pay and that would be £5.50 a time. (Female leisure user)
Conclusions

• re:fresh – universal free offer - substantially increased participation in swim and gym activities – particularly in more disadvantaged groups.
• Relatively large effects of free holiday swimming for children – particularly those from more deprived areas.
• Concessions at 60 temporarily delay the decline in participation at older ages.
• More flexible prepaid options for people on low incomes may help increase participation.
Reflections from the frontline
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