



RBKC Women's only swimming project impact report

Project background

London Sport partnered with Karmabank, GLL, Perry Ellis, and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to develop a women's only swim pilot project on Friday afternoons over a period of five weeks from July 2023. The sessions utilised a time that was, during term time, usually protected for a local school to use.

Sessions targeted women from Kensington and Chelsea, particularly in the south of the borough, who didn't access swimming due to differing barriers, creating an environment where women felt safe to learn to swim.

The main aim of the sessions was to offer free women's only swim sessions with female lifeguards and instructors. The project also aimed to:

- Design a swimming project that measured health outcomes of participants.
- Explore if swimming sessions improve the participants' physical and mental wellbeing.
- Explore the feasibility of training female lifeguards & swim teachers from within the local community.
- If possible, provide participants with appropriate and inclusive swimwear and equipment.

Key findings

- Overall, the project engaged at least 45 women across five weeks of swimming sessions. 36% of the women attended at least three weeks of swimming sessions.
- On joining the programme, over two thirds of women were doing less than 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week and therefore not meeting Chief Medical Officer's guidelines.
 - At the final session, only two of the women (n=17) were considered 'inactive' (completing less than an average of 30 minutes of exercise a week).
- At the start of the programme, two of the women (n=22) had a high level of mental wellbeing.
 - At the final session, three women had a high level of mental wellbeing.
- Five women were identified as strong enough swimmers to take up lifeguarding course and certification.
- Perry Ellis were able to offer a range of swimming costumes, modest swimwear, hats, and goggles. Of the 13 women who said they received free swimwear, 12 said doing so had made it easier for them to take part in the sessions.
- Based on our participant feedback forms, we identified the following key themes:
 - Lack of women's only sessions and affordability of sessions were the main reasons participants signed up to these sessions.
 - The women's' relationship with physical activity changed due to attending the sessions.
 - Women would have like additional instructors to support all levels of swimming ability.

Conclusions

- The programme met all its intended outcomes, providing a safe and local space for women to learn to swim, whilst improving women's physical and mental health.
- The barriers that prevented local women accessing swimming were addressed by providing free, women's only sessions, and providing women with modest swimwear.
- This programme was truly collaborative with each partner bringing their own invaluable contribution.

Recommendations

- There is a need for women's only swimming sessions. Leisure providers should consider how they can increase their offer of women's only swimming sessions, enabling women to attend sessions in an environment they feel safe and comfortable to be active in.
- Deliverers should think about how they can design their sessions and/or adapt their spaces to be inclusive and make female participants feel comfortable and safe.



About London Sport

London Sport is a charity that exists to help all Londoners live longer, healthier and happier lives through being active. Our focus is on children and adults in the most deprived communities who face the greatest challenges of inequality.

With physical inactivity responsible for 1 in 6 premature deaths, we want to help every Londoner find their way to move more.

Supported by Sport England and the Mayor of London, we collaborate with London's local authorities and other organisations to provide better access to sport and physical activity across the capital.

Background

London Sport is focusing resources in identified local places where there is the greatest need but also the greatest opportunity to drive impact. Chelsea Riverside, within Kensington and Chelsea, has been identified as an area where there is the potential to work collaboratively with partners, taking a place-based approach to establish sustainable change in supporting Londoners to become more active.

Part of the early stages of our place-based work is understanding more about the area and lives of residents in Chelsea Riverside and how physical activity fits into their lives. In gathering insight from Community Champions in Chelsea Riverside who represent women from the local community, they shared that a barrier to physical activity was accessing local activities. The main concern raised was that some women in Chelsea Riverside were keen to swim, but the local Better Gym only provided a women's only swim session at 9pm on Tuesday evenings, which was not very accessible, especially for those with young children or who didn't want to go out late at night. Additionally, there is a lack of female lifeguards, therefore even if some women can attend the session, it can put them off if when they show up, there's a male lifeguard covering the session.

London Sport partnered with Karmabank, Perry Ellis (who have the distribution rights for Nike Swim in the UK), GLL, and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to develop a women's only swim project to run during the day. On liaising with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and GLL, an opportunity arose to offer free swimming sessions over the summer holidays, during a time that local schools would usually use the pool in term-time.

Sessions were targeted at women from Kensington and Chelsea, particularly women in the south of the borough, who didn't access swimming due to differing barriers. The aim of the sessions was to offer women only swim sessions with female lifeguards and a female instructor.

The project also wanted to:

- Offer the opportunity to attend a lesson or a free swimming session depending on ability.
- Design a swimming project that measured health outcomes of participants.
- Explore if swimming sessions improve the participants' physical and mental wellbeing.
- Explore if it is feasible to set up a programme to train female lifeguards & swim teachers from within the local community.
- If possible, provide participants with appropriate swimwear and equipment so that they feel included, prepared, and comfortable to learn to swim.

Karmabank are a locally trusted community organisation who, along with other community champions, were able to reach and engage women from the target audience.





To secure an appropriate time at Chelsea Sports Centre, London Sport worked the Leisure Team at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and GLL to confirm a daytime reservation of a women's only session.

To support the women with appropriate swimwear, London Sport reached out to Perry Ellis who have the distribution rights for Nike Swim in the UK. They were able to offer a range of swimming costumes, modest swimwear, hats, and goggles.

London Sport also led on the monitoring and evaluation of the project, creating surveys, collating partner feedback, and analysing all the results.

The pilot ran over a period of five weeks on Friday afternoons starting on the 28th July 2023 and finished on 25th August 2023.

Methodology

To get a better understanding of who participated in the sessions, and to identify whether project objectives were met, we used the following methods of data collection and feedback:

- Questionnaires - women were asked to complete a short questionnaire at the beginning and at the end of the programme delivery. We used the validated short 7-Item scale of the 'Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale' (WEMWBS) to measure participants mental wellbeing, as well as a Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) to rate on a scale of 1-10 'how they felt after their swim'. These health measures were chosen due to their ease of use, are validated for community wellbeing projects and can be easily replicated for future projects.
 - Please note, on completing the survey, we did not ask participants to provide their names or give them a unique identification number. Therefore, we are unable to make direct correlations for participants from the start of the programme to the end.
- Feedback forms - all women were asked to complete a form at the end of the programme to give their feedback on what they liked most about the sessions and their plans for ongoing participation.

Partner organisation feedback was also collected asking them their thoughts on the programme, if it met desired outcomes, and recommendations for future work.

Findings

This section presents participation data as well as findings from questionnaires, feedback forms and partner organisation feedback. We have broken down our findings into the following sections:

1. Summary of participation data
2. Feedback from participants on the sessions
3. Support from Perry Ellis with modest swimwear from Nike
4. Feedback from participants on potential future sessions
5. Costings



1. Summary of participation data:

Overall, the project engaged at least 45 women across five weeks of swimming sessions. 36% of the women attended at least three weeks of swimming sessions.

Key findings include:

- 85% of those who disclosed their ethnicity (n=41) were from ethnically diverse backgrounds
- On joining the programme, 8 women (n=22) were considered 'inactive' and 7 were considered 'fairly active' - meaning over two thirds of women who joined were doing less than 149 minutes of moderate exercise a week and therefore not meeting Chief Medical Officer's guidelines. At the final session, only two of the women (n=17) were considered 'inactive'.



- Participants were aged 20-73 years.
- 57% of women (n=35) who participated lived in Kensington and Chelsea
- At the start of the programme, two of the women (n=22) had a high level of mental wellbeing. At the final session, three women (n=17) had a high level of mental wellbeing.
- Using a visual analogue scale with the question, "How do you feel after you have been swimming?", the average score was 4.7 (out of 5, where 5 was excellent).
- Average NPS score ("How likely would you be to recommend this programme to a friend or colleague?") was 9.77
- Most women (15 out of 16) plan to continue regular physical activity now these sessions have finished. Most woman are interested in continuing to swim; other activities they are interested in doing are walking, tennis, and cycling.
- Five women were identified as strong enough swimmers to take up lifeguarding course and certification





Figure 1: Participant demographics - Ethnicity

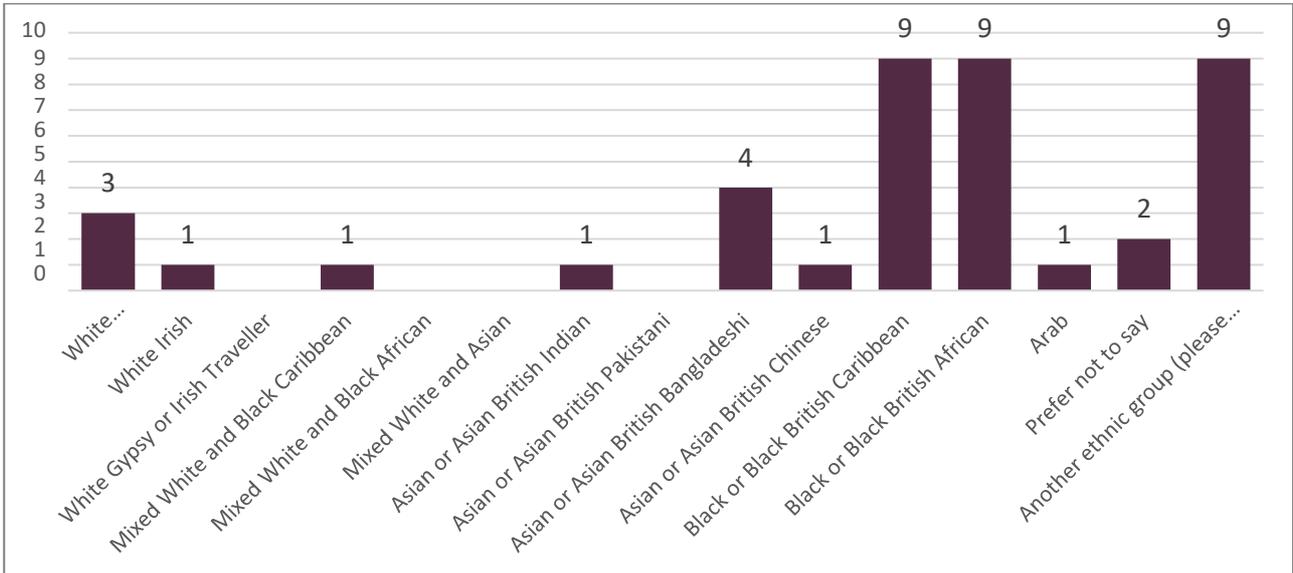


Figure 2: Activity levels of women before programme delivery

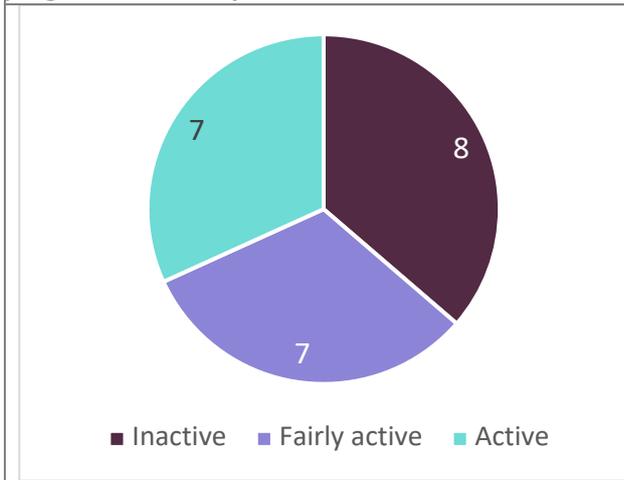


Figure 3: Activity levels of women at the final session

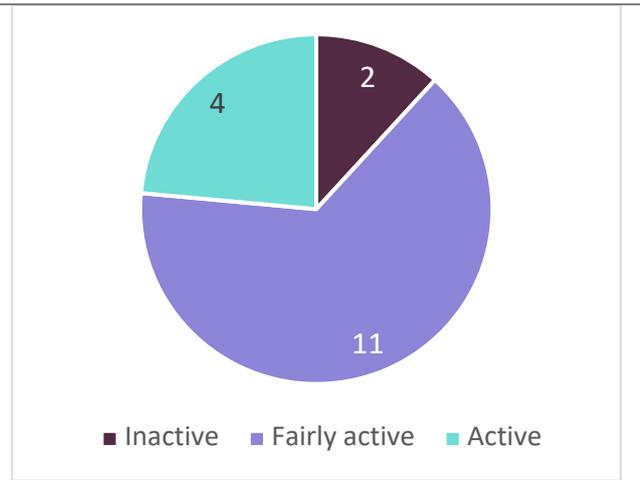


Figure 4: Participant demographics - Age

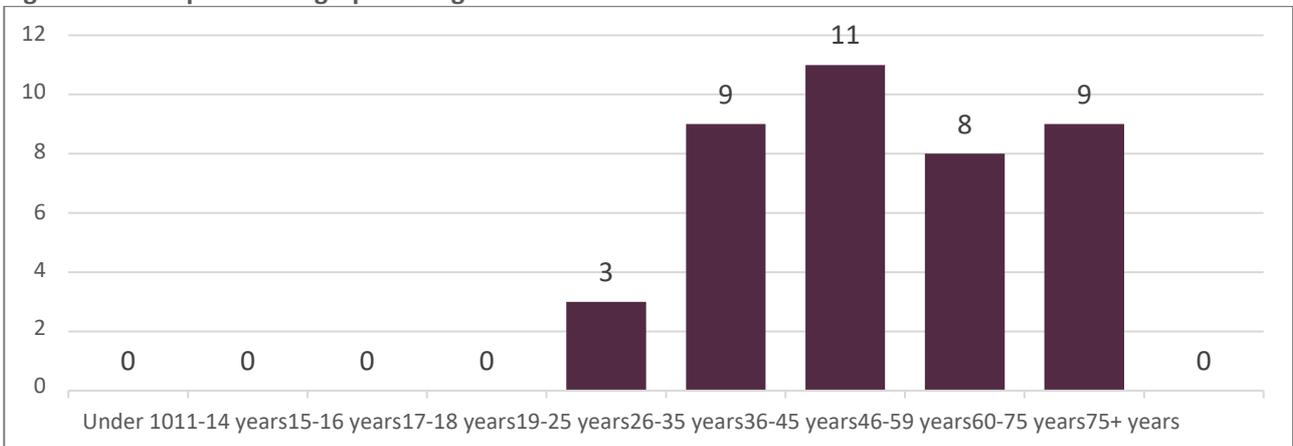


Figure 5: Proportion of women living in Kensington and Chelsea

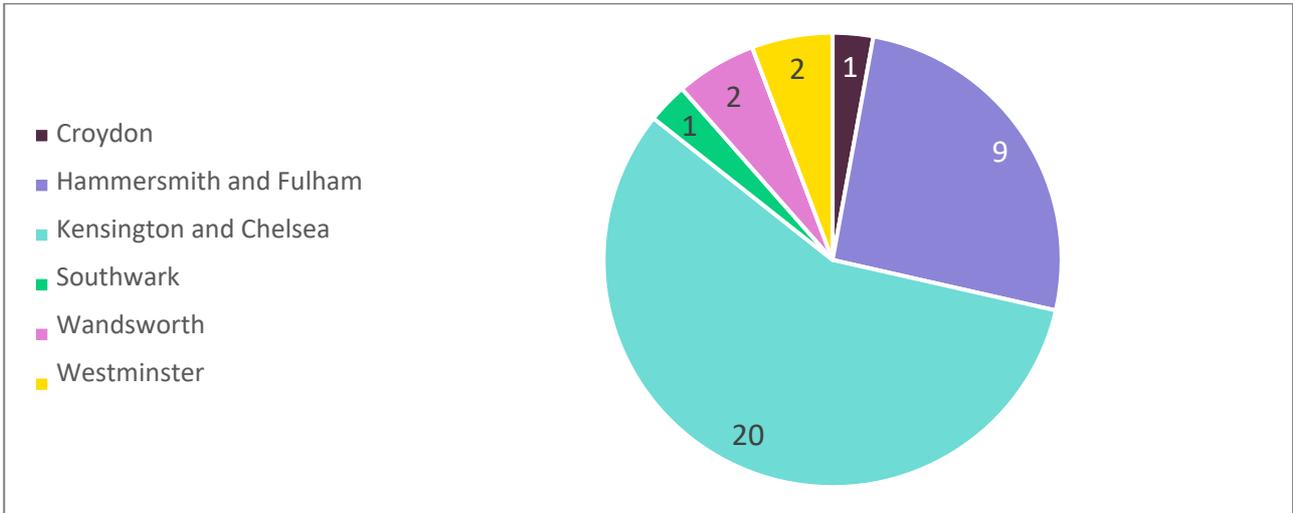


Figure 6: WEMWBS wellbeing score of women before programme delivery

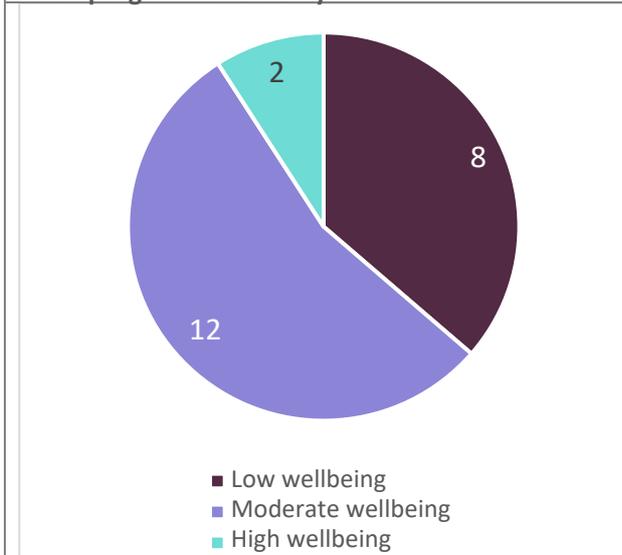
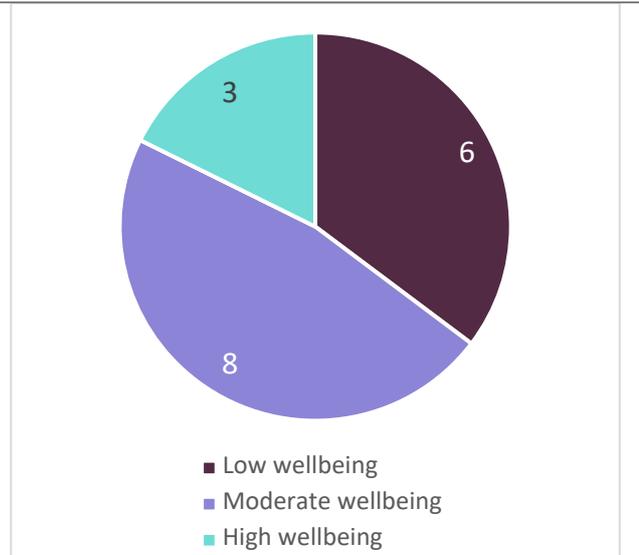


Figure 7: WEMWBS wellbeing score of women at the final session





2. Feedback from participants on the sessions

From the feedback forms, we consolidated some key themes which helped us understand more about the women who engaged with the sessions and what they enjoyed about participating in the activities.

- Lack of women's only sessions and affordability of sessions were the main reasons participants signed up to these sessions
- The women's relationship with physical activity changed due to attending the sessions
- Women would have liked additional instructors to support all levels of swimming ability

Lack of women's only sessions and affordability of sessions were the main reasons participants signed up to these sessions

Women really appreciated that there were women's only swimming sessions on offer, and mentioned there was a lack of these in the area. The fact that these were free, was a great appeal as well.



"I love swimming with woman only!! It is not enough Womens only sessions in Chelsea sport centre. I need them!!"

"The only place with women's only sessions"

"I decided to attend the swimming session mainly because they were free (as I have a shoestring finance) and women only. Plus, I really want to learn to swim properly as I have tried in the past without success and then loss interest."

"There are so many women who wants to learn to swim - I saw many Muslim women turning up for the sessions. One session a week is not enough"

In addition, family came up as a strong response, whether this was to be able to swim with their children or remembering swimming at Chelsea Sports Centre with their parents/grandparents when they were younger.



"It's close to me and I have a family history here. My grandma and I used to swim here every week."

"I wanted to be a model to my daughter and encourage her to swim also so that she will love it."

The women's relationship with physical activity changed due to attending the sessions

Over two thirds (15 out of 22 women, see figure 2) were considered 'inactive' or 'fairly active' on joining the programme.

There were a variety of reasons why women wanted to swim from improving their swimming ability and confidence, to improving their health and wellbeing (both physical and mental). Women were positive about the impact that the swimming sessions had on their lives, sharing that it improved their health, mood, and confidence.

"It's a great self-care activity, I also wanted to improve stamina and technique"

"It's the only one thing I can do. I have joint, lower back pain all in the neck, shoulder, and back. The only one thing I can do is swim. From swimming, I have been able to do other things like cycling and gym. For mental health, it's the only sport for me that helps."

Women said swimming improved their physical and mental health, making them feel relaxed, energised, and improved their confidence.



"I've learned a lot like (and) floating & different techniques on how to swim properly. More opportunity and programs for us woman to boosts our self-confidence & to be empowered to the community"

"Swimming is good, very easy (especially those with pain). Helps with mood, gives confidence. Water helps you to move [your] body. [I] had phobia of water...I never thought I would ever get in the water. Gives me a bit of confidence"

After the final session, most women (15 out of 16) said they planned to continue regular physical activity after these sessions ended. Most woman are interested in continuing to swim; other activities they are interested in doing are walking, tennis, and cycling.

Women would have like additional instructors to support all levels of swimming ability

Although women were overwhelmingly positive about the sessions on offer, the main suggestion for improving the session content was to have an additional instructor.

Women praised the instructors of the sessions, stating that their support and instructions was great for beginners and that they had a friendly approach. However, a few women shared that they would have liked an additional teacher to assist those that are more advanced in their swimming ability or, offer a beginner's class as well as an intermediate class.

"Class was mixed ability and instructor was rightly supporting the beginner's group but those of us who are able to swim but wished to improve would have benefited from an additional instructor to teach at intermediate level"

"There are some people who can swim a little but need to learn the proper techniques so they can get better. Therefore, the one teacher has to spread herself thin"

"Having two tutors to work across the ability levels would allow for more one on one instruction"

A positive outcome from the sessions were that five women were identified as strong enough swimmers to take up lifeguarding course and certification. This means that the women would be able to gain a National Pool Lifeguard Qualification (NPLQ) which could lead to paid employment. GLL shared that they have full-time and flexible worker contracts for lifeguards where they can earn up to £25,232 per annum on a full-time contract, or up to £13.57 per hour on a flexible contract.

3. Support from Perry Ellis with modest swimwear from Nike

To support the women with appropriate swimwear, London Sport reached out to Perry Ellis who have the distribution rights for Nike Swim in the UK. In total, Perry Ellis provided:

- 10 swimming costumes
- 11 pairs of goggles
- 13 long sleeve tops
- 15 trousers/leggings
- 12 hijabs



The total cost of this value in kind was £3,393.00

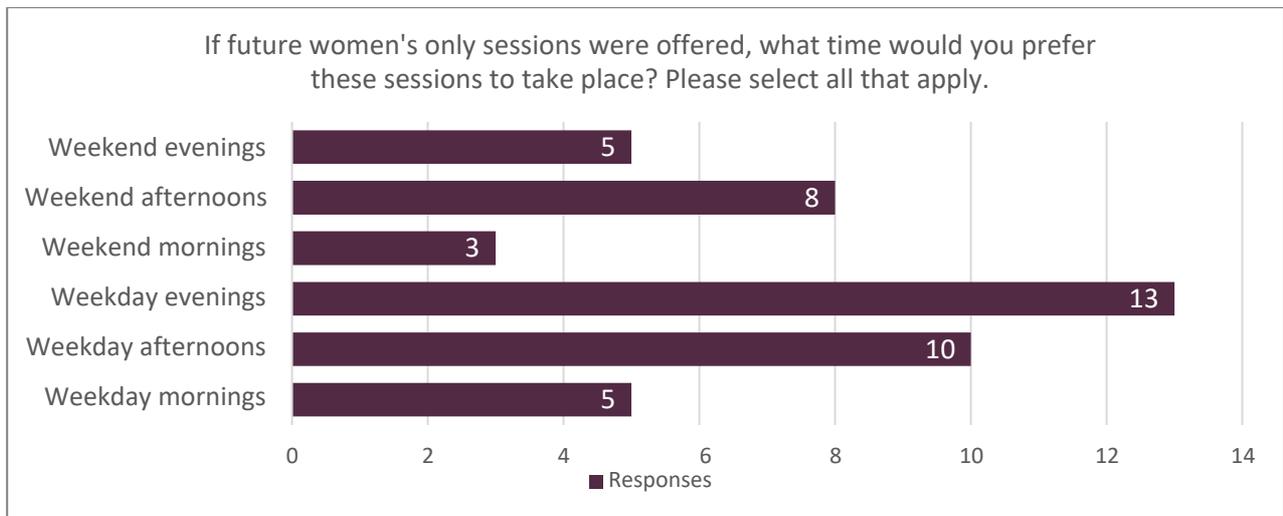


Women really appreciated the swimwear that Perry Ellis and Nike provided. Of the 13 women who said they received free swimwear, 12 said doing so had made it easier for them to take part in the sessions.

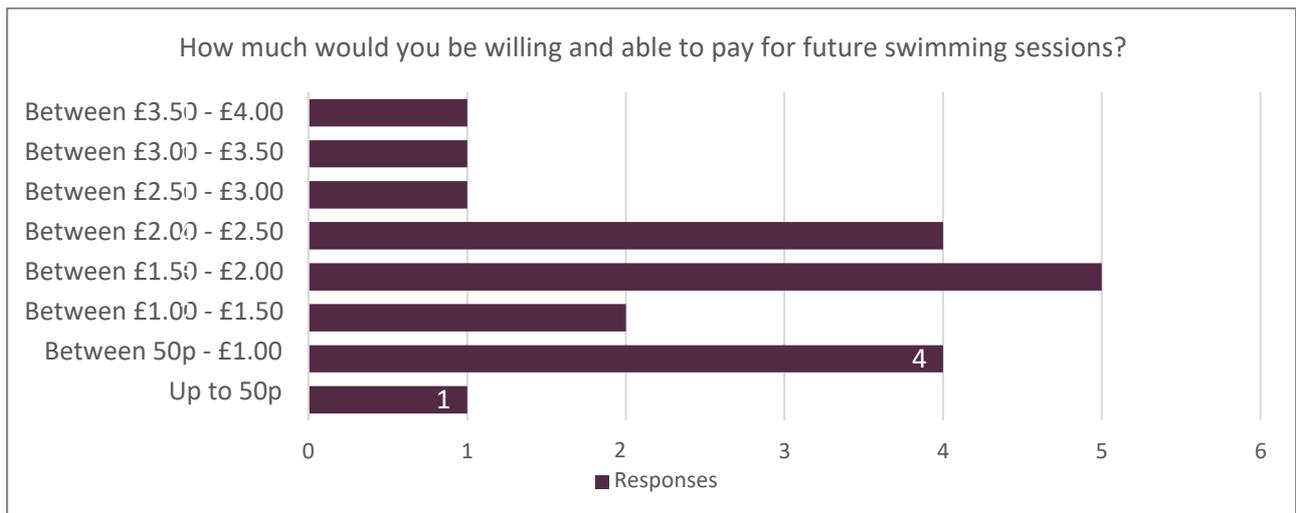
"I thought it was wonderful that Nike donated the conservative swimming costumes. I think that was a very big barrier. Providing the correct gear, that made it accessible"

4. Feedback from participants on potential future sessions

On the potential of future sessions, women shared that they would prefer sessions to take place on a weekday afternoon or a weekday evening.



When considering cost of future sessions there was a mixed response with most women saying they would be willing and able to pay between 50p - £2.50 per session. The modal value was between £1.50-£2.00.



5. Costings

To run a one-hour swimming session at Chelsea Sports Centre (including staff costs for a lifeguard and a swimming teacher, plus the loss of income based on 30 participants using the pool), it would cost approximately £200.00.



A full breakdown is as follows:

Detail	Cost
Lifeguards	£13.57 per hour
Swimming teacher	£16.94 per hour
Loss of income from public swimming sessions: (based on 30 swimmers paying £5.55 each)	£166.50
TOTAL	£183.44

For the 5-week swimming programme, the total cost was just under £1,000.

Conclusions

This programme was truly collaborative with each partner bringing their own invaluable contribution. Collaborating with community champions and Karmabank meant that the project was able to reach and engage women from the target audience. GLL and the Leisure Team at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea reserved a Friday afternoon session for of a women's only session, closing the pool to the public and ensuring female staff ran the sessions.

"Rhonda (Karmabank) and Mike (GLL) both brought great energy and expertise to the project and made it successful"
Nicky Barlow, London Sport

The programme met all its intended outcomes, providing a safe and local space for women to learn to swim, whilst improving women's physical and mental health. The barriers that prevented local women accessing swimming were addressed by providing free, women's only sessions, and providing women with modest swimwear. Some of the women were approached to take part in a lifeguarding course and certification and the hope is that they will then be able to support future women's only swimming sessions, creating a more sustainable legacy.

Most women said they were willing and able to pay up to £2.00 per session. With the swimming sessions engaging on average 20 participants per week, this generates an income of £40.00. With sessions costing around £200.00 to run, this results in a deficit of around £160.00 per session. If more participants took part in the sessions, and/or participants contribute more towards the sessions, the deficit would reduce.





Learnings and recommendations

Based on our findings and conclusions, we have sought to identify some key learnings from the project, and highlight opportunities for future planning and delivery:

- Local consultation identified that a barrier for women who wanted to swim was a lack of accessible swimming sessions (the local Better Gym only provided a women's only swim session at 9pm on Tuesday evenings) and a lack of female lifeguards. In addition, the project proved to be very popular, exceeding its expected number of participants.

Recommendation: As shown by the consultation and the interest in the project, there is clearly a need for women's only swimming sessions. Leisure providers should consider how they can increase their offer of women's only swimming sessions, enabling women to attend sessions in an environment they feel safe and comfortable to be active in.

- Participants appreciated the free sessions but when asked, were willing and able to pay up around £2.00 per session.

Recommendation: If deliverers are unable to offer free sessions, consider applying for funding to secure the additional amount needed to run women's only sessions.

- Having sessions as women's only, both in terms of other participants and also staff, was really important for participants. A lack of female workforce was also highlighted as an issue.

Recommendation: Deliverers should think about how they can design their sessions and/or adapt their spaces to be inclusive and make female participants feel comfortable, whether this is having a female workforce, closing facilities to the public, or blocking windows. Developing a pathway to identify female lifeguards and swim teachers and supporting women through this training should increase the female workforce.

- Some of the women heard about the sessions by word-of-mouth via community champions or Karmabank, whilst others saw it advertised through GLL at the sports centre when they were dropping their children off for swimming lessons.

Recommendation: When advertising sessions, consider where your target audience may hear about your sessions. There is no best "one size fits all" approach, but women did hear about the sessions through trusted sources, whether this was a person, organisation, or a facility known to them.

- Not having appropriate clothing was a major barrier to many of the women. Due to cultural, religious, or personal reasons, some women prefer to wear modest swimwear to take part in activities. However, modest swimwear is often expensive, and women do not feel they have the "right kit" when wearing alternatives such as leggings or long-sleeved t-shirts.

Recommendation: Encourage women to wear clothes they already own and feel comfortable in. Facilities should also sell modest swimwear (in addition existing ranges) or have an offer to order modest swimwear. Finally, the physical activity sector needs to find solutions to reduce the barriers/cost of modest swimwear.





For more on this report and the data:	
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