Introduction

Building on the insight collected from a previous dissertation project, this piece of research explores the feasibility and attractiveness of aquatic activity for Slimming World members. Essentially this report will provide evidence that will encourage Slimming World as an organisation not just to advocate ‘exercise’ but to specifically direct people towards the swimming pool. The ASA does, however realise that this is not without its issues, which will be explored throughout the report. The report also summarises the value of combined programming between Slimming World and leisure providers whereby leisure centre memberships can increase and provide opportunities to cross-sell leisure centre programmes.

Slimming World is the largest and most advanced slimming organisation in the UK. Margret Miles-Bramwell (OBE, FRSA) founded the company in 1969 and there are now around 7,750 groups held weekly nationwide via a network of 3,000 Slimming World trained consultants.

400,000 members attend Slimming World every week and achieve outstanding success

Slimming World pioneered referral schemes in the UK and actively support the building of partnerships with the NHS and local authorities to develop effective strategies to manage obesity and weight issues in the community.

Aim

- Explore what is happening on the ground in conjunction with Slimming World and other Slimming companies to establish best practice
- Evaluate barriers to swimming participation through Slimming World (or other similar companies such as Weight Watchers)
- Assess the benefits to Slimming World members as well as the return for swimming pools
- Conclude and make suggestions moving forward

Method

Semi structured interviews and literature reviews using the below user groups:

- Primary Care Trusts
- Slimming World websites, participants and group leaders
- Physical Activity coordinators
- Aquatic officers
- Regional Directors
- Masters students studying the impact of slimming world
- Gym and swim instructors
- Pool managers
Slimming Solutions Facts

Almost three quarters (73%) of women have admitted they dread the thought of wearing a swimming costume in public, suggesting that they dislike their bodies and would like to lose weight.

In a national survey (YouGov) on the behalf of Slimming World, showed that 85% of UK women said they are unhappy about their weight.

A parallel survey of 3,300 members of slimming clubs revealed that 62% dread wearing revealing clothes, with 39% feeling unable to go on a beach when on holiday.

35% were found to fear meeting new people, while 21% said they feared not being able to fit into tight airline seats.

Body Magic: Slimming World Initiative

- Encourages physical activity at whatever rate that may be. It is the next step after the food optimisation
- ‘Boost your weight loss and be fit for life’
- It tells you about exercise in terms of weight loss but also about the wider implications of your health.
- There are no strict rules on what you have to do- it’s just a case of getting more active
- The F.I.T principle is used to regulate weekly exercise
- There are success stories and case studies in the guide
- Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum physical activity aims
- Motivational tips, image therapy, a weekly diary, personal achievement targets- it is all very step by step (not sure if there is almost a bit too much going on)
- It could be linked to sins in terms of- swimming X amount of lengths means you can have an extra 5 sins
- Link to the British Swimming/ASA website and Swimfit as well as the ASA pool finder, so participates can find their local swimming pool
- Promotion of adult lessons

Slimming World's Quote:

"My children and I used to go swimming two at a time because I refused to go and their dad couldn’t take all four of them together. That all changed when my 9 year old son told me how unfair it was- and he was right! Inspired by Body Magic, I started to become gradually more active. My son helped me learn how to swim, and came with me- swimming alongside me and urging me to keep going. I now go swimming three times a week, and as well as contributing to my 7 stone weight loss, my relationship with my whole family benefitted from it. During our last holiday we all went to a water park together, and I wasn’t sitting on the waterslides!"
**Slimming World promotional tools**

An issue of a Slimming World magazine advocates swimming, addresses the common issues that Slimming World members are faced with, and provides suggestions on how to solve the problems. It says that swimming is one of the best forms of exercise that you can do especially if you are overweight as the water supports your body and puts less strain on your joints. It states that swimming is easier to stick to than other forms of exercise and helps to relieve stress thanks to its rhythmic quality. It lists where to find more information (ASA), what to wear, feel-good fixes, how to swim smarter, beating boredom and promoting aqua classes. It also includes some facts entitled ‘Swim ‘n’ tonic’.

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**Promotional messages found on existing relevant weight loss websites:**

- There is a reluctance to get in the pool if you have issues about your body and don't want to be seen in a swimming costume in the pool. Websites provide a few confidence boosting tips
- Promotion of how water can support the body and reduce joint stress.
- Swimming is described as ‘an easy sport to stick to as it boost mood and relieve stress due to its rhythmic qualities’
- Women-only sessions are highlighted frequently.
- Sites also provide advice on how to find a comfortable, confidence boosting costume and goggles.
- Emphasis that swimming is not just about front crawl: ‘If you don’t want to do front crawl, try breaststroke, or aqua classes’

Picking up on the emphasis towards women-only sessions, there appears to be scope to set up future female only swimming networks. Further research case studies will explore this concept. Initial ideas include:

- **Incentivize women to swim, challenge them to swim longer and reward them with a bespoke programme that is of distinct interest to women, and shopping vouchers relevant to the market segment.**
- **Offer women between 30 – 50 yrs the chance to participate in a 30 min swim challenge FREE at their local pool. To do this they must register to the women’s swimming network online, they’d select nearest pool and be sent a voucher to present at reception with Unique Reference Number to take part in the challenge.**
Working with Slimming World: Evidence of best practice in Leisure Centres

Everyday Swim Slimming World Pilot

**Background:** There was an identified need to diversify pool-based activities to attract new participants, as well as provide motivation for existing swimmers (adding value). In particular, there was a need to provide an opportunity for structured fitness sessions, and a 'gym' in the pool culture to engage those who were recommended to ‘Swim For Health’ sessions in a personalised manner.

**The Intervention:** Development of partnership working with Slimming World, Weightwatchers, A County Primary Care Trust health referral scheme, and the Physical Activity in the Workplace team. Weekly SwimFit instructor-led sessions aimed at adults, held at strategic times including after the Slimming World weekly meeting and on weekday lunch times to maximise attendance.

**Resources:** Training provision - Level 2 Award in Fitness Swimming / Pool space /Level 2 Teacher in Aquatics / SwimFit unit.

**Marketing:** The sessions were open to the general public, but marketed to target groups only. These included the coordinators of:
- Slimming World
- Weightwatchers
- Men at Work
- Physical Activity in the Workplace schemes
- County Durham Primary Care Trust’s Health Referral team

**Outcomes/ monitoring and evaluation**

- Diversification of the pool programme, by offering a new session, has added value for regular participants and also attracted new participants with the support of fitness staff to provide both wet and dry workout programmes for individuals.
- Attracted support from health groups including Slimming World & Weightwatchers who are now keen to signpost their clients to the pool.
- The swimming fitness sessions have been popular and have now expanded to a total of nine weekly sessions (weekend, early morning and evening sessions).
- Health benefits have been reported by some new participants, including weight loss and an increase in wellbeing.

**Additional interventions at Leisure Centres and their evaluation**

**Intervention:** 6 week training programme whereby the participant accesses programme evaluation and body measurements by a personal trainer to track progress at least 5 times. This programme was offered to Weight Watcher (WW) participants at a discounted price. (NB: Initially offered for free, but this actually lead to an expectation of a continued free service, rather than a one-off promotion). WW group leaders are offered the service free of charge to ensure their buy-in. To ensure that WW participants do not leave the WW programme having lost weight through exercise, the facility users must remain a WW participant in order to maintain their 6 weeks of discounted access.

**Outcome:** The project proved a success, with many WW participants taking up the 6 week offer. This was the case across 3 pilot sites (only 2 of which had WW groups that met weekly for weigh-ins at the centre). The project had the buy in of the WW area manager who worked hard to get the support of the WW local managers and group leaders.
Barriers and ideas of how to move forward

EDUCATION: More educational tools are needed from the ASA (benefits of swimming in clear, simple language). Promote the benefits of activity through a relevant language: For example, ‘30 min aqua Zumba = x amount of sirs or x amount of WW points’. ‘Muscle may be heavier – but you burn more fat calories’...
More information on how people can learn to swim. Try to get in touch with the regional slimming world group so that they can pre-warn local slimming world leaders that AOs will be getting in touch with their groups (avoid feeling of ‘cold calling’)

HUMAN RESOURCE: More encouragement for fitness instructors to transfer their knowledge onto poolside (embed swimming into personal fitness programmes). There is a need for more gym/ swim instructors attending the Weight Watchers classes as a way of establishing rapport and promoting the service. Explore qualifications – can we offer Slimming World leaders a bespoke qualification that allows them to lead on dry side and wet side activity at the leisure centre? Explore how Slimming World leaders could under-go aquatic champion training

ACTIVITY: Group activity is key – encouraging individuals to make their own way to the pool won’t work!
Offer the option of taking part in certain existing activities (classes mainly) that have a social element through ‘swim networks’. Encourage group activities as these are easier to fill with high numbers – and therefore the supporting leisure centre will be more inclined to keep the session running. Avoid directing WW members to the leisure centre’s generic Swimfit sessions- there has previously been a very low uptake. Body image and loneliness is a deterrent. Don’t set up the group swimming session on the same day as the ‘weighing-in’ day

PARTNERSHIPS: Encourage two-way promotion and partnerships – help Slimming World and leisure centres understand that they can monopolise on their relationship:
- Slimming world members join the gym
- Gym members join Slimming World
Consider how allowing Slimming World members to attend their meetings at the leisure centre, would increase the visibility and familiarity of the leisure centre’s activity. Apprehension (named barrier) will be overcome

EXTENSION OF PROGRAMME: How can we further enhance the social element? A nutritional session after the swim in the cafe? Family sessions?

Conclusions / lessons learnt from existing weight-focused swimming projects

- Buy-in from the group leader is essential
- Encourage group exercise
- Provide as much information, as well as success stories
- Make them feel comfortable in the environment
- Engage centre staff
- Provide other aqua activities, not just swimming to avoid fears around ability
- Offer membership as a way to make members commit but offer it at a discount price so it appears more attractive
- Need to really get into these people’s ways of thinking- what makes them tick, what will make them take the plunge?
- Provide advice around swimming costumes and extra ways to boost self confidence
Suggestions of how to move forward

Creating Persona’s around Slimming World customers is one idea that could be quite useful

Regarding Slimming World advocating swimming;

- Buy in from instructors is essential: tapping into the barriers and motivations of leaders is a useful starting point when accompanied with a free of charge activity offer.
- Take into account that behaviour change takes up to 12 months. 6 week programmes should be extended to cement behaviour and lead to membership transfers.
- Link in with women’s swimming networks to promote. Ladies between the ages of 30–50 years are a group of customers the ASA need engage with more, to increase participation and increase duration of swimming, to at least 30mins.
- Aqua classes, especially Aqua Zumba are really popular at the moment and might be an initial way to get Slimming World members into the pool, constructing a social activity in a group environment.
- Track someone’s progress, use them as a case study, and promote this to weight loss groups.
- Track memberships before a weight loss group has been established at a centre, and after.
- Look to set up swimming costume advice clinics at weight loss groups/women swim networks at the pool.
- Explore ways in which leisure centres can boost body image confidence. Allowing for robes to be hung-up on poolside is a frequently cited example.
- Develop CPD for swimming and centre staff around working with special user groups (including weight loss groups).