

Keep swimmers swimming The capacity of swimming clubs

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The capacity of swimming clubs

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Department of Culture Media and Sport has signed a Public Service Agreement (PSA) with Sport England with explicit targets to increase participation in sport and active recreation. Sport England is now directing funding towards organisations and programmes which help to meet the relevant PSA target. As a consequence, the asa has worked towards increasing the number who participate in active sports at least 12 times a year by 3 per cent, and increasing the number who engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity level sport, at least three times a week by 3 per cent. It is not anticipated that this PSA target will change significantly moving into the next funding agreement 2009 –13,
- 1.2 In addition, in June 2008 the government announced that over-60s were to be given free admission to public swimming pools. This is a £80 million government initiative and part of a bid to get more people involved in sport by 2012. Local authorities in England will not only receive £80 million next year to scrap over-60s' charges, but also will be given a further £60 million for refurbishing and maintaining pools. This initiative is part of an attempt to encourage two million more people to take part in some form of physical exercise by 2012.
- 1.3 These two factors are likely to have a significant future impact on the capacity of swimming pools and, in turn, affect the capacity of swimming clubs. Therefore it is important that the asa understands more about the capacity of its clubs and whether they are able to meet the demands being set.
- 1.4 In this context, capacity can be considered as a club's ability to deliver swimming services and capacity manifests itself in many ways including space, labour and equipment. Overall capacity is made up of three components:
- *Physical capacity* is where the services are delivered and for swimming clubs is primarily about space in pools.
 - *Operational capacity* is concerned within the availability of services to be delivered and for swimming clubs is primarily about coaches.
 - *Managerial capacity* is the management of the above and the ability of the service to operate effectively. In the context of swimming clubs, managerial capacity is to do with the management of the club and the relationship between the clubs and its key stakeholders.
- 1.5 An audit of existing and potential club capacity is required in order to establish whether the requirements of the PSA target can be delivered and to anticipate the demands of the *free swimming* initiative. As a consequence the asa considered it appropriate to commission an investigation into the capacity of swimming clubs in England. This report sets out this audit.

2. Methodology

2.1 The purpose of this research was to determine the current capacity of swimming clubs and to assess the effectiveness of the athlete pathway. As a consequence it had a number of objectives:

- To establish perceptions of the current capacity of swimming clubs
- To investigate whether club capacity could be increased
- To establish the barriers to increasing capacity
- To establish what might increase club capacity
- To investigate perceptions of the athlete pathway

2.2 In order to gain a detailed insight into club capacity, the research adopted a mixed method approach that triangulated using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research tools. The research was carried out in two phases:

- Questionnaire survey: An online questionnaire survey was made available to all swimming clubs via the asa website which provided clubs with the opportunity to identify, highlight and report capacity issues. Appendix one sets out the survey questions.
- In-depth interviews: The more detailed information needed for the research was obtained through semi-structured telephone interviews carried out with nominated clubs. In-depth interviews provided the flexibility required to elicit detailed and often complex material which more structured forms of data collection, such as questionnaire surveys, would be unable to capture.

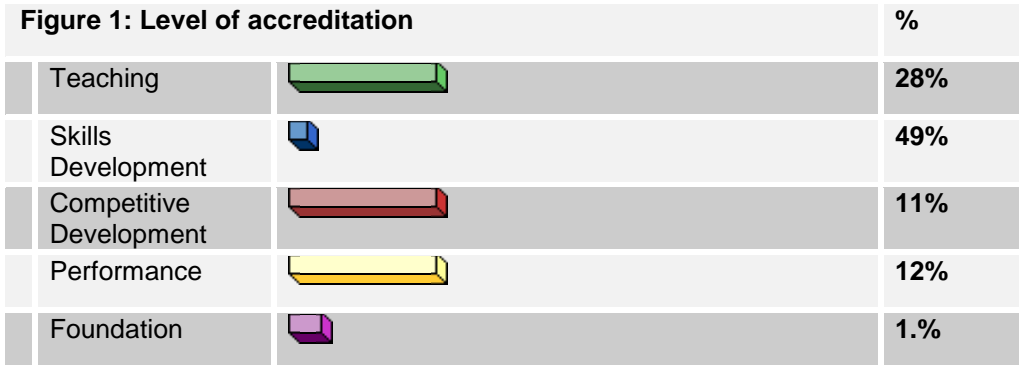
2.3 The following clubs were involved in the second phase of the research and appendix two sets out the research questions.

Region	Club
London	SEYMOUR SYNCHRO SCHOOLS WALTHAM FOREST DIVING CLUB CAMDEN SWISS COTTAGE SWIMMING CLUB
South East	HAMBLE AQUATICS BASINGSTOKE BLUEFINS BUCKS DISABILITY SWIMMING CLUB
East	CITY OF PETERBOROUGH BEAUMONT DIVING ACADEMY OF HATFIELD RUNNYMEDE
East Midlands	SWADLINCOTE SWIMMING CLUB HINCKLEY SWIMMING CLUB KIMBERLEY SWIMMING CLUB
West Midlands	WALSALL SYNCHRONISED SWIMMING CLUB COVENTRY SWIMMING CLUB PERRY BEECHES AND SUTTON SWIMMING CLUB
North East	SOUTH TYNESIDE NEW EARSWICK CHAPELTOWN
North West	TYLDESLEY SWIMMING AND WATERPOLO CLUB RUNCORN REPS SWIMMING CLUB GARSTON SWIMMING CLUB ATHERTON AND LEIGH SWIMMING CLUB

3. Results of phase one: the online questionnaire

3.1 Overall

3.1.1 The online survey was available to clubs for 3 months and received 135 responses. Of those responses, 90% were swimming clubs and 63% were Swim21 accredited. Figure 1 shows the levels at which respondents are accredited.



In terms of how they deliver their services, Table 1 shows that most swimming clubs use local authority facilities.

Table 1: Facility	%
Local authority	86%
School	38%
Commercially owned	14%
Other	11%

3.2 Capacity

Table 2 shows that the clubs that answered the questionnaire perceive that they have the capacity to increase membership.

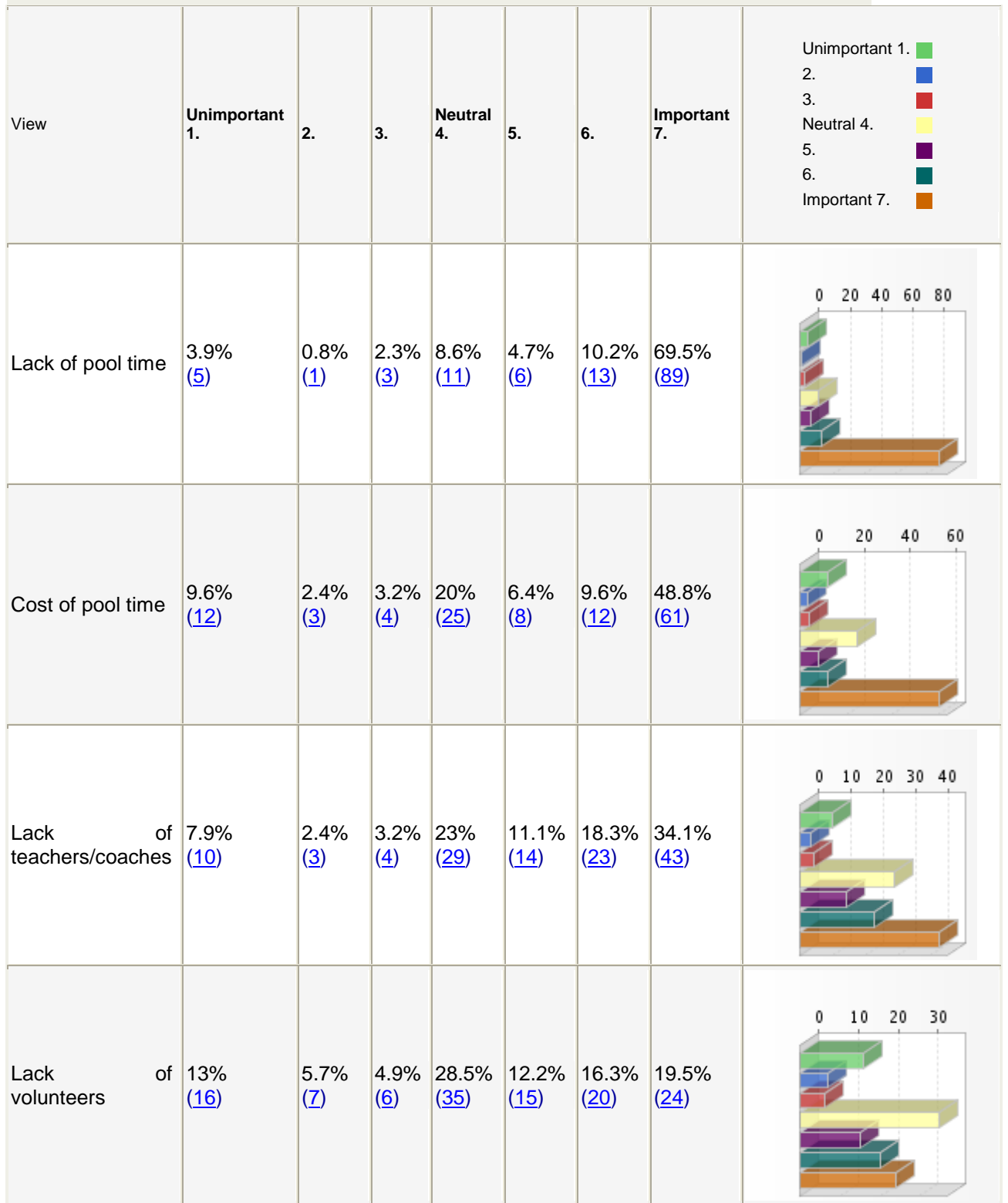
Table 2: Capacity	Yes
Members under 16	71%
Members over 16	72%

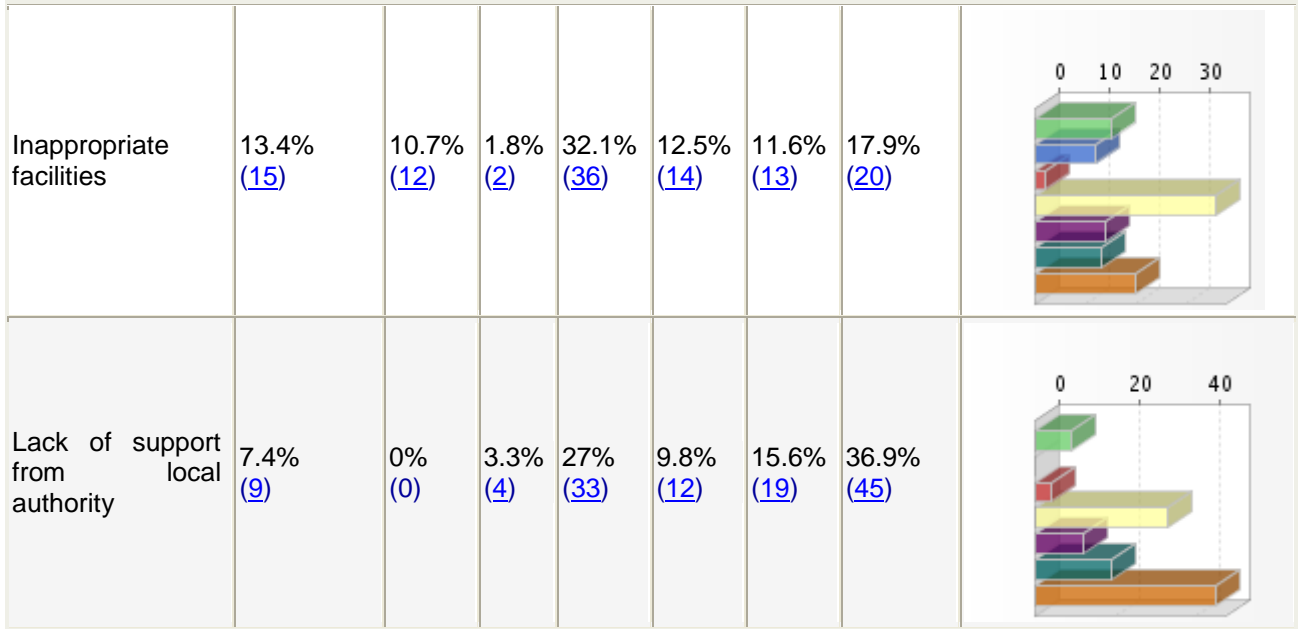
This is a positive finding in light of the expected future increases in future swimming and also suggests that the athlete development pathway is working effectively as there are no barriers to swimmers as they progress in age.

3.3 Constraints

- 3.3.1 In terms of constraints, Figure 2 sets out the constraints that swimming clubs feel prevent them from taking on new members. From this it can be seen that *lack of pool time*, *lack of support from local authority* and *cost of pool time* are considered to be the most important constraints to increased capacity. These were also the areas cited as the MAIN constraints affecting clubs. These findings are somewhat concerning as these are physical constraints over which swimming clubs have little control. The least important constraints are in *appropriate facilities* and *a lack of volunteers* – a mix of physical and management constraints.

Figure 2: Constraints to taking on new members

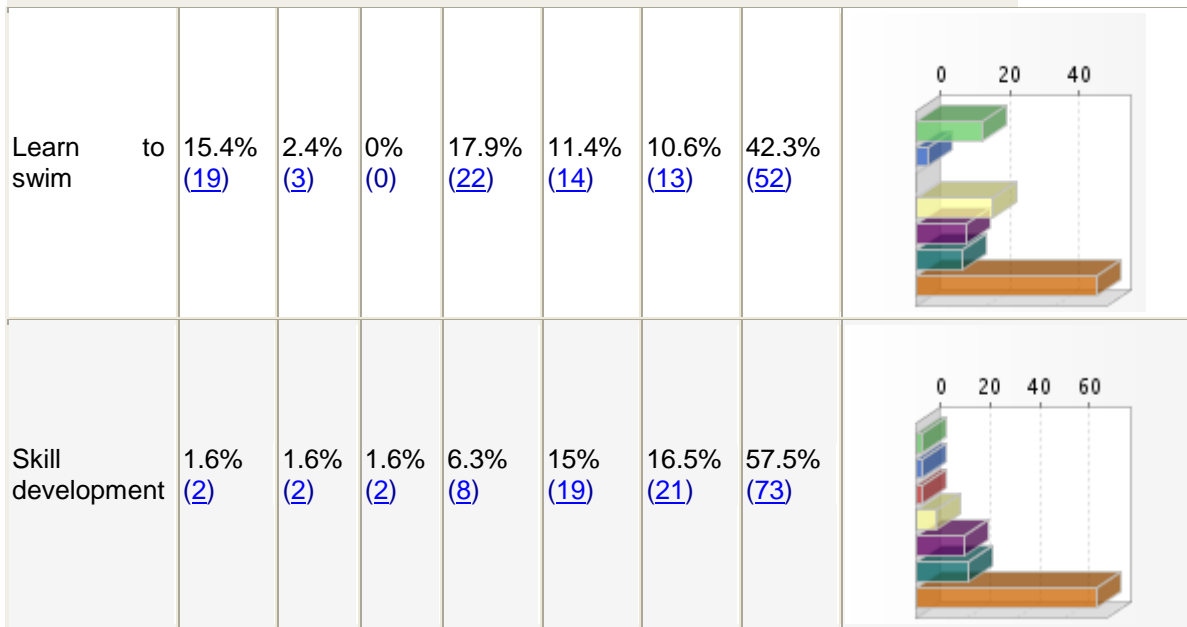




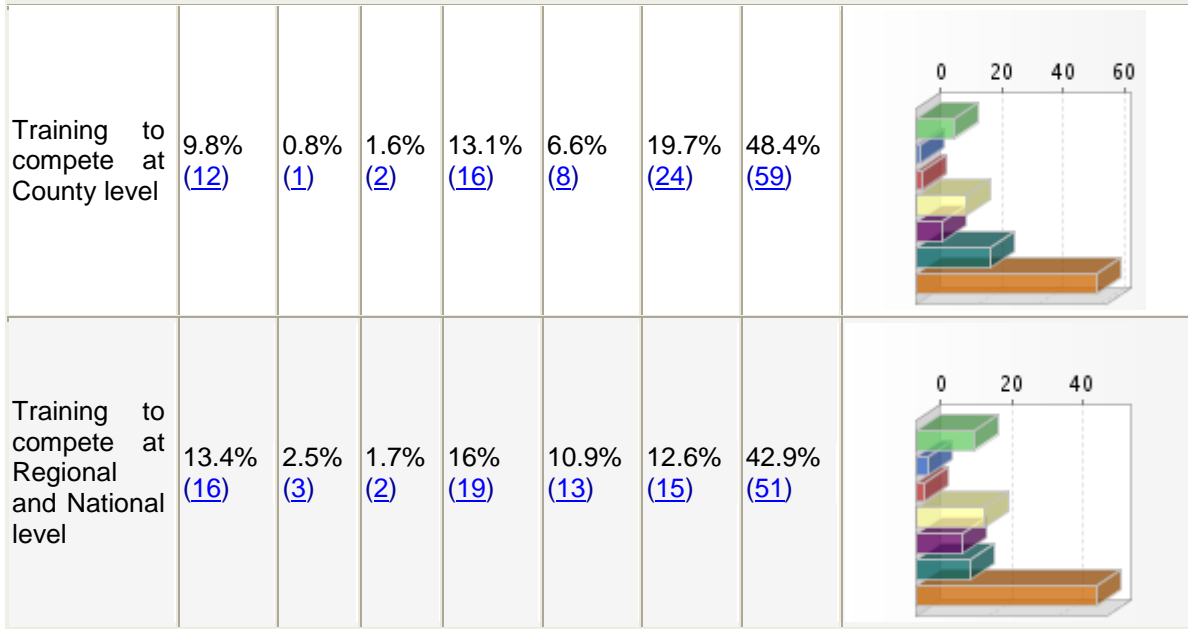
3.4 Overcoming constraints

3.4.1 The following figures set out respondent evaluations of how barriers might be overcome. Once again these were ranked 1 (unimportant) to 7 (important) with the diagrams starting with unimportant at the top, to important at the bottom.

Figure 3: Additional pool time for:-

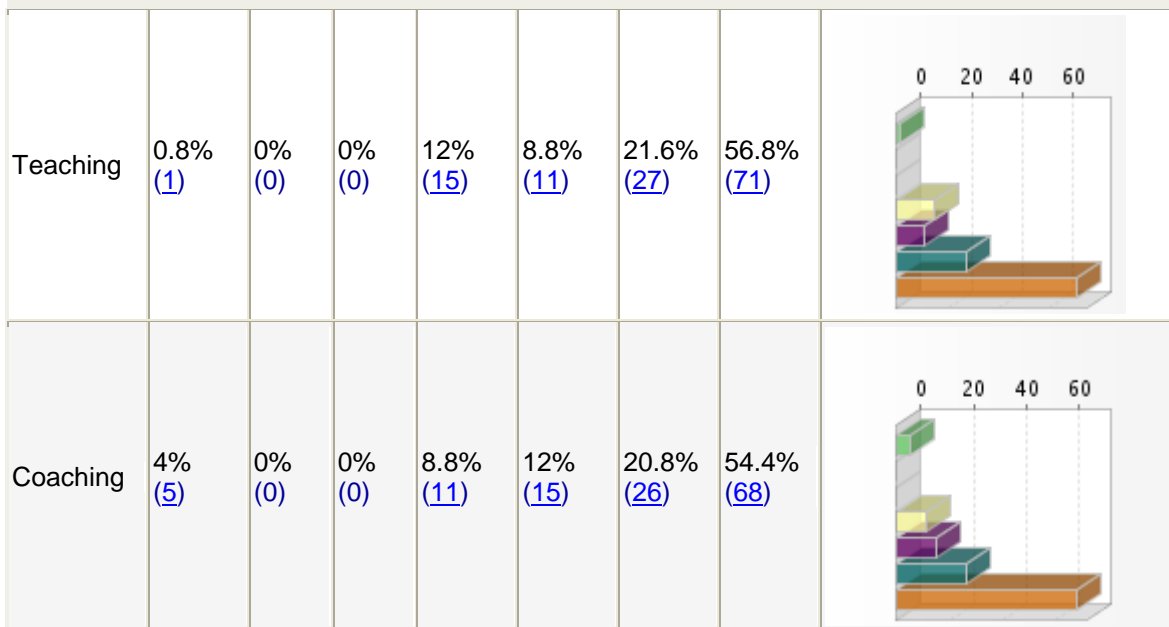


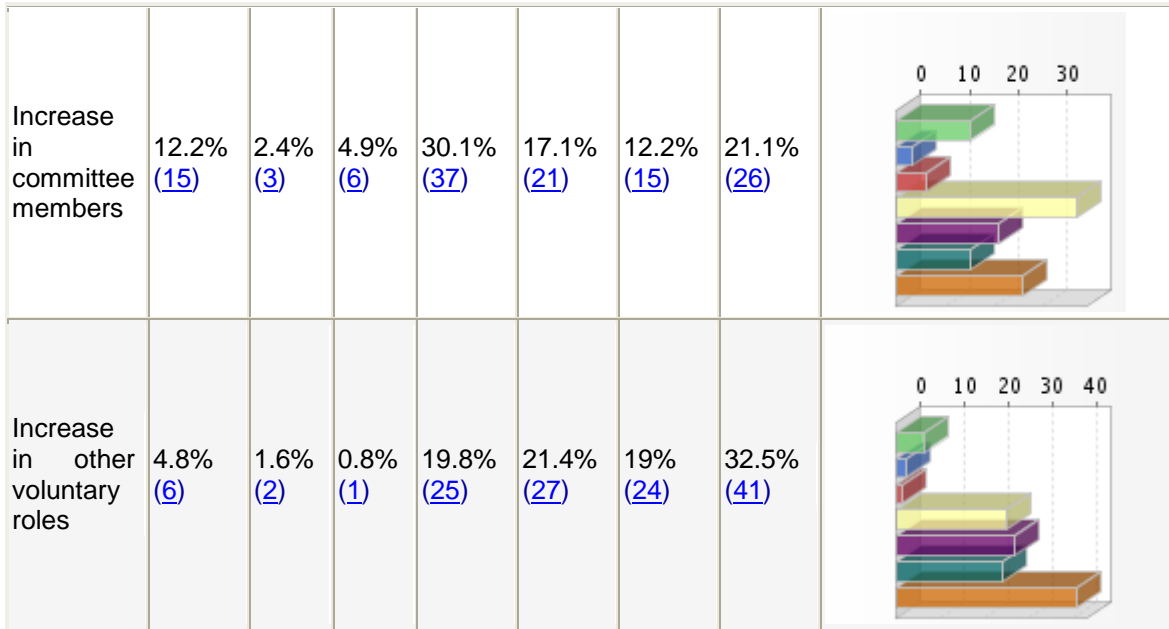
The capacity of swimming clubs



This shows that additional pool time is considered important for all levels of swimmer. This is not surprising given that this was considered to be the main constraint to the capacity of swimming clubs. In addition, the availability of pool time at the different levels of the athlete development pathway is important for it to function effectively.

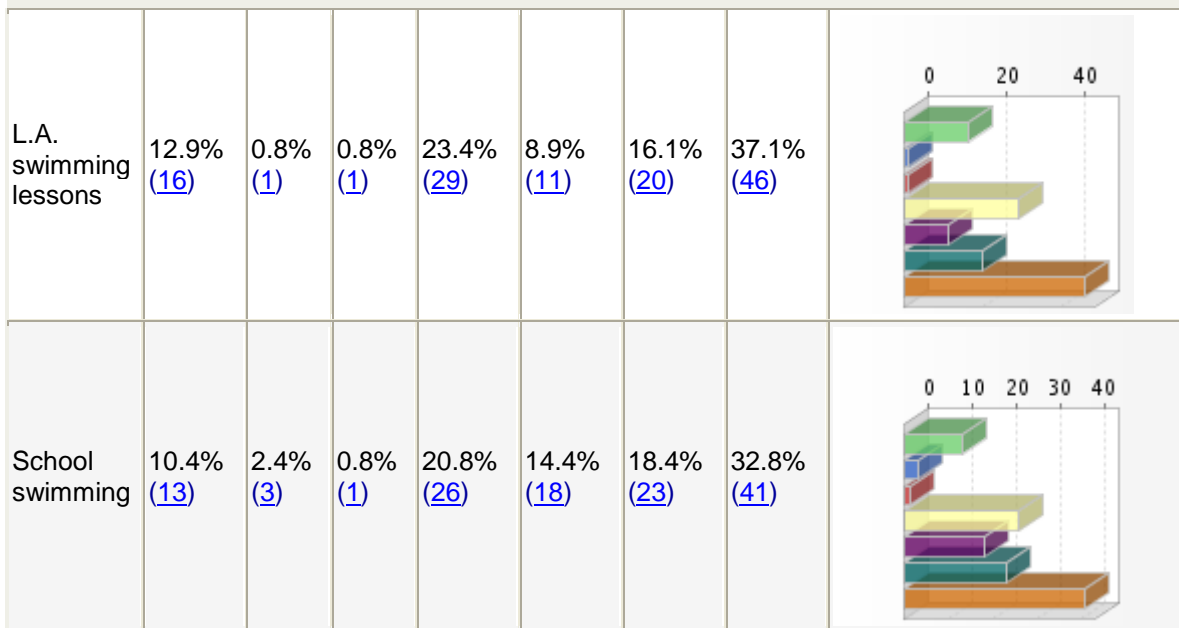
Figure 4: Additional staff at:-



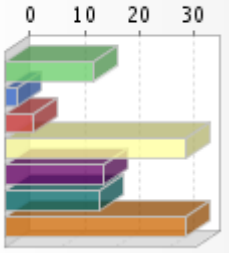
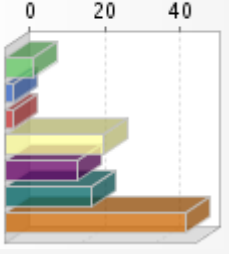


Respondents feel that additional teaching and coaching staff are important to overcoming the barrier they face. However, an increase in committee members was not considered to be overly important.

Figure 5: Improved links with:-

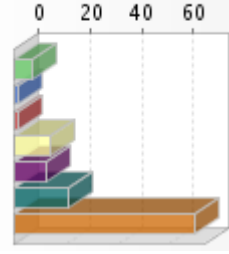
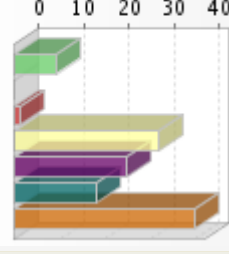


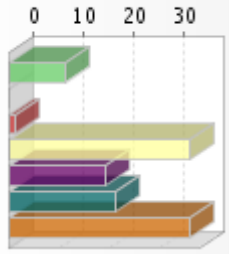
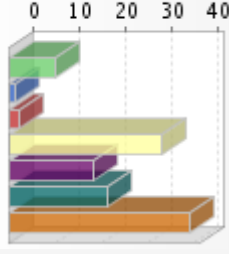
The capacity of swimming clubs

Private swim schools	12.9% (16)	1.6% (2)	4% (5)	26.6% (33)	14.5% (18)	13.7% (17)	26.6% (33)	
Local schools	5.5% (7)	1.6% (2)	1.6% (2)	20.5% (26)	15% (19)	18.1% (23)	37.8% (48)	

Respondents feel that links with agencies that allow them to access members are important in improving their club capacity. This suggests that clubs may have pool time available, but not have adequate swimmers to take advantage of this pool time.

Figure 6: More support from:-

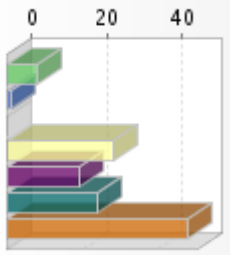
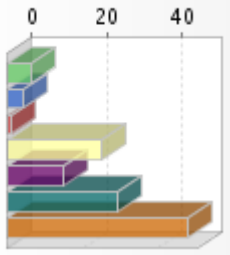
Local authority	5.6% (7)	0.8% (1)	0.8% (1)	11.1% (14)	9.5% (12)	16.7% (21)	55.6% (70)	
Regional Development Officer	7.2% (9)	0% (0)	0.8% (1)	25.6% (32)	20% (25)	14.4% (18)	32% (40)	

Regional Office	8.9% (11)	0% (0)	0.8% (1)	29% (36)	15.3% (19)	16.9% (21)	29% (36)	
the Office asa	8.1% (10)	0.8% (1)	1.6% (2)	26.6% (33)	14.5% (18)	16.9% (21)	31.5% (39)	

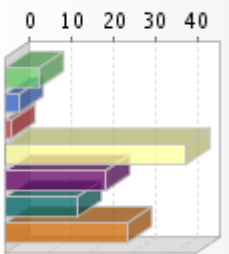
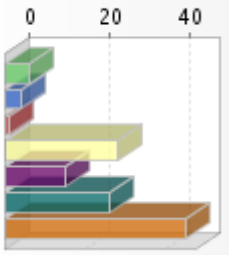
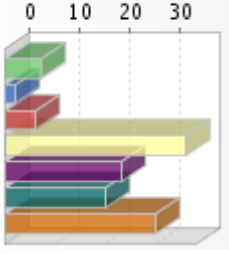
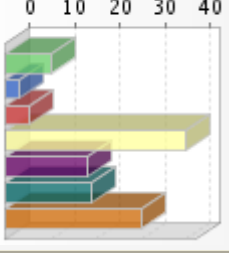
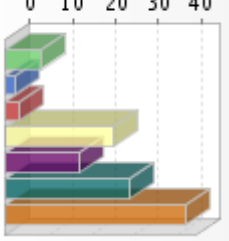
It appears that respondents simply want more support in order to deliver their swimming service. Having said this, a significant number of respondents were more neutral about the need for additional support from private swim schools and some aspects of the asa organisation. When asked what the asa could do to help increase capacity, most respondents identified a need for the organisation to lobby and negotiate for more pool and more appropriate pool time.

The emphasis on schools and school swimming suggests that clubs may perceive that they are not able to access adequate potential swimmers. Without this clubs will struggle to deliver key KPIs, or move swimmers up the athlete development pathway.

Figure 7: Improved marketing:-

At local pool facility	6.2% (8)	0.8% (1)	0% (0)	21.9% (28)	14.8% (19)	18.8% (24)	37.5% (48)	
Local schools	4.7% (6)	3.1% (4)	0.8% (1)	19.5% (25)	11.7% (15)	22.7% (29)	37.5% (48)	

The capacity of swimming clubs

Other sporting facilities	6.4% (8)	2.4% (3)	0.8% (1)	34.4% (43)	19.2% (24)	13.6% (17)	23.2% (29)	
Local press	4.8% (6)	3.2% (4)	0.8% (1)	22.4% (28)	12% (15)	20.8% (26)	36% (45)	
Better club literature	5.6% (7)	1.6% (2)	4.8% (6)	29% (36)	18.5% (23)	16.1% (20)	24.2% (30)	
Improved website	8% (10)	2.4% (3)	4% (5)	32% (40)	14.4% (18)	15.2% (19)	24% (30)	
Schools	6.3% (8)	1.6% (2)	2.4% (3)	19.8% (25)	13.5% (17)	23% (29)	33.3% (42)	

These findings show that clubs feel that improved publicity and marketing in their local area, and in organisations that have potential swimmers is important in order to increase capacity. As these are the most obvious places for attracting membership, it is not surprising that respondents felt this to be important.

Finally, Table 3 sets out the disciplines in which clubs feel they can increase membership.

Table 3: Discipline	% of yes
Water polo	22%
Synchronised swimming	6%
Diving	8%
Open Water	9%
Swimming for health and fitness	33%
Life saving	12%
Masters	70%

The results for Masters and swimming for health and fitness are particularly positive in the light of the *free swimming* initiative and the government's health agenda.

4. Results of phase two: interviews with clubs

4.1 Overall

4.1.1 Of the 21 clubs interviewed, 15 clubs were swimming clubs only and two were predominantly swimming clubs but also offered water polo as an option. The remaining four other clubs offered various other disciplines, two being diving clubs and the other two synchronised swimming clubs. Seventeen of the clubs were either Swim 21 accredited (mainly at teaching level), working towards their accreditation or had submitted their portfolio for accreditation. Figure 8 shows that, with the exception of one club, all have 70% or more of their swimmers being under sixteen.

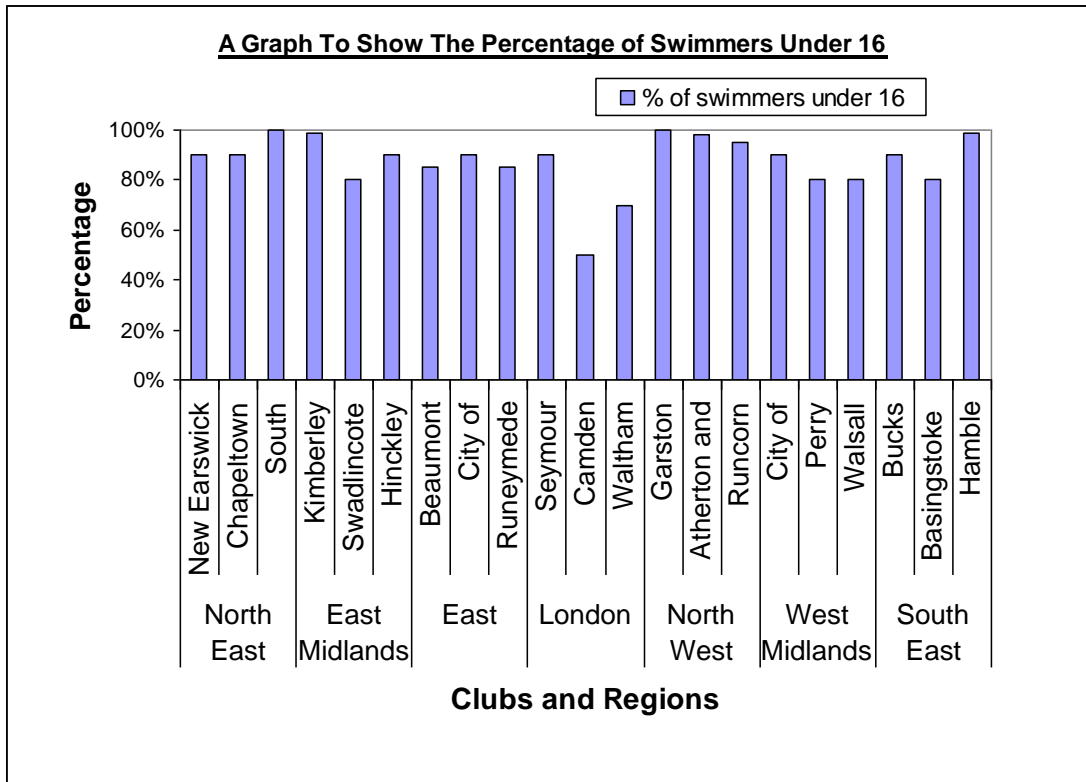


Figure 8- The percentage of swimmers under 16.

4.1.2 Figure 9 shows the variety of pools used by the clubs. Four clubs (the fewest amount) only use one pool, which is a local authority pool. The remaining 17 clubs use at least two facilities. This suggests that clubs are prepared to use a range of facilities in order to get adequate pool time.

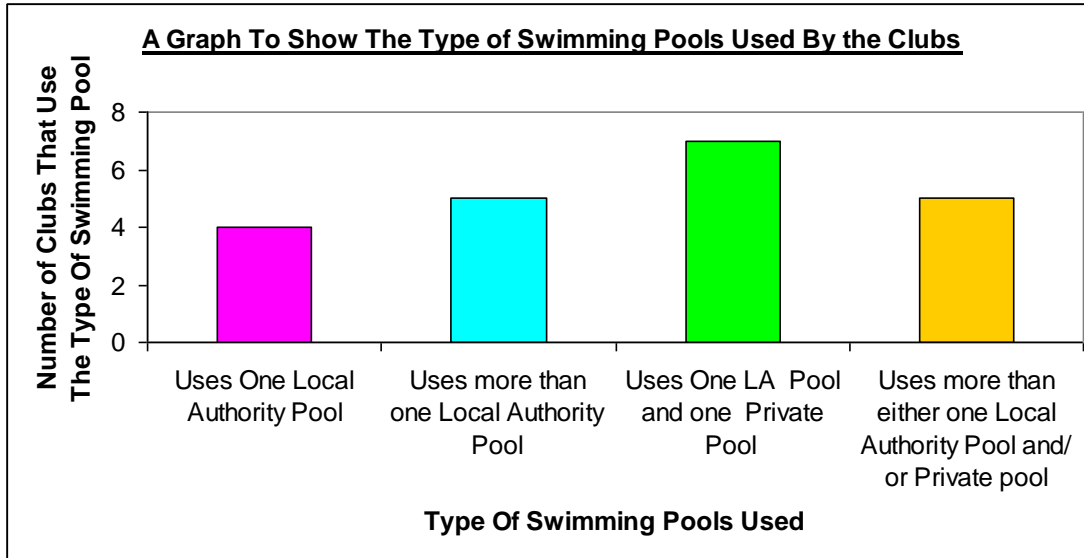


Figure 9: The type of swimming pools used by the clubs.

4.1.2 In terms of support from pool providers, 10 out of the 21 clubs do not receive any support from their pool provider. This was emphasised by a South-East respondent.

The pool provider none, local authority none. I have tried phoning up and speaking to the local authority, and they'll a bit like oh yeah, there is not really a lot we can do, kind of like that really.

4.1.3 However, 11 of the clubs feel they are supported in same way by their pool provider. Six of these clubs received some form of financial incentive, such as one session a week free. For example a club in the North-East region stated:

They give us a lot of support so when we want to host a competition, the council, the bookings they might have on that day, they give us a reduced hire charge because we hire the pool so often.

4.2 Club capacity

4.2.1 Increasing Membership

Sixteen out of the 21 clubs interviewed believe they would be able to accommodate more members in their clubs. However, the extent to which they could increase their capacity varied considerably from club to club in amount, level and ages. Six clubs feel they are able to cater for more competitive level members and four of these clubs are also able to increase their club in other membership group areas, generally beginners and one day a week swimmers. Eight clubs are able to accommodate additional members at all levels of swimming ability, and in two clubs beginner numbers had the potential to increase.

The number of additional members depends on the number of teachers and pool space available. A North-West respondent stated

I mean I guess we could increase our capacity to whatever, you know, I mean it's controlled by the number of teachers really, the number of qualified teachers we can actually do and the pool space we've got and it's a juggle between the two.

This research suggests that each club has individual and unique characteristics which affect their ability to increase capacity, such as the different numbers and types of facilities used, the numbers of existing members at different levels and ages. Thus, each club faces different constraints to increasing their capacity.

The remaining five clubs did not think they would be able to increase their membership numbers, without addressing the constraints of their individual clubs. One club stated that:

... we're cracking at the seams.....we've got a hundred membership, about 80 turn up. And that's a diving club. ... and we've got 200 on the waiting list that most probably we'll never see, and we never advertise because we won't be able to see them (East).

Two clubs were constrained due to lack of pool space, while two other clubs cited a lack and cost of coaching courses as their constraining factors.

4.4.2 Constraints affecting capacity

Figure 10 sets out the different constraints that were considered by interviewees to impact on their capacity for new members.

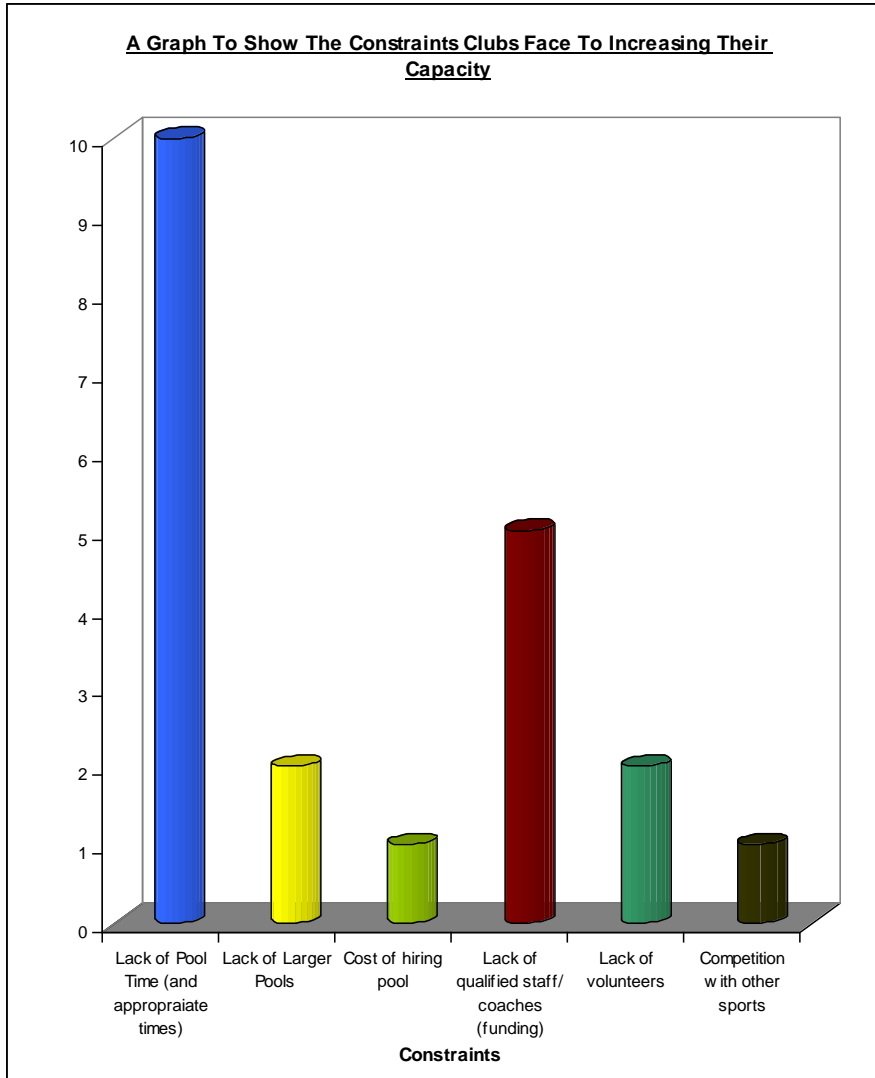


Figure 10: The constraints clubs face to increasing their capacity

4.4.3 Lack of pool time

As established by phase one of the research, the main constraint that clubs face is a lack of appropriate pool time. When commenting on this, a North-East interviewee stated that:

Obviously we would like to create some extra squads and things and being able to have extra training time but I think we're restricted by the local council not being able to give clubs time in pools because they are continuously closing pools in York. We can't get in the school pools because of private swim schools and things, the Learn to Swim programmes they're all getting in there as well. So I think it's just resources in the city really.

An East interviewee commented that:

Like most swimming clubs I suppose the amount of pool time we get is at the discretion of the Local Authority who have other needs to accommodate by government direction really that they must have it open for certain periods of time for public and that sort of thing. So we have to take what there is

available and what, and yeah, what we can get really. If we could get more pool time then we could take more swimmer.

Furthermore, a South-East interviewee described how pool time was not always appropriate say that:

Friday night we had our little ones swimming from half six to half 7, now we've been doing that for 10 years and because a water aerobic class came along they moved us to half seven till half eight. It doesn't sound very late but the children have got to be up in the morning and they're little.

4.4.4 Lack of qualified staff and coaches

The second largest constraint was a lack of qualified staff and coaches. This was also an issue of importance in the first phase of the research. This was perceived to be due to a lack of funding and accessibility of courses as highlighted by one North West interviewee who commented:

Main constraints are numbers of qualified teachers and to a certain extent the ability to raise those numbers, it sounds strange to do that. Hasn't got a lot to do with volunteers who are prepared to offer their time. It's got a lot to do with meeting, it's got more to do with meeting the financial constraints which these days are to do with obviously income for training courses, because we are a non-sponsored club although we've tried to obtain sponsorship at local level, it's not easy, and as such we rely totally on income from members and you know £300-400 per training course per teacher is not easy.

This point was also made by a London interviewee:

We need qualified people, everyone is a volunteer. So in order to do an extra class, if we wanted to do an extra class, somebody would have to give up time and at the moment that falls on very few people that have got Level 2 swimming teachers in the club at the moment. It's so expensive, Level 2. We've got people who are interested but we can't afford it because they're like £270 for Level 1 and Level 2 is like £670.

4.4.5 Size of swimming pools

The size of swimming pools was also a constraining factor as highlighted by the following two quotes:

We would like a 25 metre pool because we have to hire pools out for other galas, for club galas and things like that. Club championships - we have to hire pools out (East Midlands).

There are no constraints really simply because we have enough coaches, we have the pool time but the... unless we have a facility like Sheffield or Manchester or Leeds, like a huge great Olympic pool, then obviously we're at full capacity you see (East).

Finally, the cost of pool hire, lack of incentives for swimmers and the need for swimming to compete with other sports for participants were also highlighted by some clubs as constraining factors.

4.5 Overcoming capacity constraints

4.5.1 Throughout the interviews, the clubs suggested solutions and improvements to overcome the above constraints. In relation to pool time, the following were suggested:

- ❖ Working with other clubs, possibility of even merging clubs together.
- ❖ Using/ moving to different facilities where better pool times and availability are on offer.
- ❖ Extension of opening hours in morning and evenings by facilities.
- ❖ Negotiate with pool providers and local authorities to reduce cost of pool hire and review pool times.
- ❖ Hoping becoming Swim 21 accredited will be advantageous in gaining more pool time.

4.5.2 In relation to increasing the number of qualified teachers and coaches the following were suggested:

- ❖ Making coaching courses more accessible.
- ❖ Fund or make coaching courses more reasonably priced.
- ❖ Get parents involved with coaching
- ❖ Encourage staff to train to become qualified teachers/ coaches.

4.5.3 However, a swimming club representative from the East Region believes that capacity constraints were unsolvable.

You can come up with all sorts of imaginary answers like well we'd like another swimming pool so if we had another swimming pool there'd be more time. Yeah, the easy answer is to say well if we had another pool we'd get some more pool time and we'd be able to increase either the number of swimmers or the quality of training time that you can give them because the, there is another issue apart from, ... well the numbers that you have create another issue in that maybe you're using, or the pool time you've got, you've got too many swimmers in a lane for them to do themselves justice. So it's an almost chicken and an egg really.

4.5.4 Interviewees were asked how the asa could help to resolve constraints and increase capacity for the clubs. The majority of clubs feel support from the asa is crucial in further development of their clubs. Clubs believe that the asa has the authority to successfully negotiate with pool providers in order to gain additional and appropriate pool time at reasonable and affordable rates to the club. This was highlighted by an interviewee from the South-East region:

I would like the asa to have somebody that goes in and actually speaks to people, have a bit more authority, you know, what with, you know, people saying they want to make Olympic swimmers but as swim coaches we really have it tough. You know somebody designated from the asa will come in and will speak to us as coaches like right what do you need? Well I would like 3

more hours for my top squad at a reasonable rate and a reasonable time if possible, what can you do, where can you help? Even simple things like the pool on a Saturday morning. I mean we start at half eight on a Saturday at Hamble, is there nobody that could go in and negotiate with somebody can they not open up an hour earlier?

- 4.5.6 It was also felt that the asa could help arrange more training and coaching courses in accessible places and fund money to help build larger pools.

4.6 The athlete pathway

- 4.6.1 Findings show that there are differences in opinion about the effectiveness of the athlete pathway. Over half the clubs interviewed think the pathway is either reasonably effective or very effective: four clubs believe the athlete pathway is very effective and eight clubs find it to be reasonably effective. However, seven clubs do not think it is very effective, one club finds it difficult to commit to, whilst the remaining club does not use the pathway. Examples of the variety of interviewee responses can be seen below:

I think it's very important and it is effective (South-East).

I think there's a lot more could be done for it. Its not, it's not the best that it could be, but then again you talk to anybody about swimming in Leicestershire and you'll get the same I think (East Midlands).

Well, we have a firm pathway that's quite effective. It's not...it's fine. I don't agree with the way that the asa is going, but anyway, that's another issue (North-West).

- 4.6.2 The issues that an athlete may face in the pathway vary quite considerably from club to club (see quotes below). These include a lack of parental backing and commitment, lack of pool time and access to 50 metre pools, financial constraints e.g. cost of travel and entry to competitions, lack of funding for the swimmers, commitment from the swimmer, advice for swimmers and clubs not specific enough. However a lack of pool time and pool size seem to be the most frequently occurring issues.

We've got a couple of really good athletes and One of the problems is we ... because we've got so many in the club they haven't got their own training time so when they're training they're on the board and it's like 30 beginners around them. We haven't got this capacity so we can do the top squad night and then the intermediates night, that type of thing (London).

Because of the lack of the pool size, the 20 metre pool, for them that want to get on they tend to move to other clubs (East Midlands).

Problem is that because there are so few 50 metre pools, when it comes to long course meets they are so oversubscribed that it's very difficult to get into them, which limits our swimmers' opportunity to get their national qualifying times (East).

- 4.6.3 Respondents were asked to think of solutions and improvements to overcome the issues that an athlete may face. The most common suggestions were more pool time, better facilities i.e. the asa could sponsor the building of new pools, and clubs could work together to identify swimmers with potential as well as sharing and making the most of each others pool times. An East respondent explains the issues of gaining pool time, and

suggest that more pools need to be run by clubs or the asa as opposed to private companies:

We need more 50 metre pools in the South, definitely, which are run by clubs or the asa or something to do with swimming, not private enterprises that all they want to do is to make as much money as they can. There are people like ... all the David Lloyd Centres and the Virgin Centres, you know, there's lots of pools in our area but we just can't access them because they won't have anything to do with clubs (East).

- 4.6.4 One respondent suggested that the asa needs to focus on lower level clubs in the athlete pathway and expresses reasons for this statement.

the asa needs to value its low level clubs. The programme is all elitist and doesn't value the 99% of swimmers who are never going to be Olympic champions but still need a pathway to their own personal development. But they also need to have their, what shall we say, their needs, swimmers need other needs than just splashing up and down swimming pools. They actually need comradeship; they need social development that the club can bring. I'm not happy with the asa's solutions because I think it's...it is out, well, outlawing and well alienated is probably a better word, it has alienated its membership base (North-West).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

- 5.1 The research has highlighted a number of issues related to increasing capacity of swimming clubs. However, both phases of the research established that capacity can be increased in the majority of clubs involved in the research.
- 5.2 The research shows that physical constraints are the main barriers to increasing capacity in swimming clubs. A lack of pool time, or appropriate pool time, the cost of pool time and small pools are considered to be preventing clubs from achieving the capacity they feel they can. In addition, as more pool time is perceived to be necessary for all levels of the athlete pathway, these physical constraints may be making this pathway less effective.
- 5.3 Of concern is that the constraints appear to be out of the direct control of swimming clubs, although there is some evidence from previous research with Swim 21 and the second phase of this research, that a positive relationship with a pool provider can assist with this constraint.
- 5.4 In relation to this, the research raised the issue of the asa and advocacy, with those involved considering that the asa officers and staff could negotiate appropriate pool time at appropriate prices. It would be surprising if this is not already being carried out by the organisation, which suggests that communication about efforts in this area may be necessary for clubs. In addition, it was also suggested that the asa should manage or own swimming pools. Clearly, at this point, this is outside the remit of the governing body which again suggests an area for club education.
- 5.5 In terms of operational constraints, both phases of the research identified a perceived lack of teachers and coaches which was considered a barrier to increasing capacity. It was felt that this constraint has primarily come about because of a lack of affordable qualifications and a lack of necessary training courses. This is clearly an issue for further consideration as it seems pointless to overcome the physical barriers to capacity if services can not then operate because of a lack of appropriate staff.

- 5.6 There were few managerial constraints identified as clubs appear to have enough committee volunteers to run their activities. There was some evidence of poor, or even non-existent relationships with some pool providers which was perceived as a barrier to capacity. The research shows evidence to suggest that support from pool operators is important in overcoming the physical barriers to capacity.
- 5.7 In terms of the factors that would facilitate an increase in capacity, unsurprisingly additional pool time, support from pool providers and an increase in the number of teachers and coaches were considered to be key. Of interest is the finding that swimming clubs want improved links with organisations that work with swimmers at the start of the athlete pathway. Without these swimmers, the athlete pathway may fail to work effectively, and clubs will fail to use excess capacity.
- 5.8 The findings regarding the athlete pathway were mixed and require further, more detailed investigation. However, both phases of the research provided evidence of an ability to increase capacity across all ages, and associated with this, all stages of the athlete pathway. Although additional pool time was also considered to be important, these findings suggest that the athlete pathway is not facing any significant blockages.