

Appendix A: Review of Access to Leisure Scheme

Response of the Disability Equity Partnership (DEP) Review of the Access to Leisure Scheme

Consultation meeting date: 16 November 2016 (DEP meeting)
Response received: 7 February 2017

Aberdeen City Council has an important role in encouraging all its residents to participate in leisure, sport and cultural activities to help improve their physical and mental wellbeing.

There are strong links between regular exercise and participation in social activities and the improvement in the wellbeing of people with disabilities, mental health difficulties and other long term health conditions. These are positive benefits which go beyond just exercise and physical improvement.

The City Council has a responsibility to reduce health inequalities across the City. This requires specific action to ensure people with a disability or health problem are encouraged and helped to participate. The Council has a particular responsibility in helping to widen participation in leisure and sport activities to groups who find it difficult to take part in activities on the grounds of cost and/or difficulties with access.

For these reasons the Disability Equity Partnership believes that there should be a scheme in operation in Aberdeen which gives reduced rate access to people with a disability or a long term health problem to all sport, leisure and cultural activities provided by Aberdeen City Council and the ALEOs.

The existing Access to Leisure scheme seems very confusing and complicated so there is a need for any new scheme to be simpler to understand and easier to access. Many DEP members were not aware such a scheme existed and was part of the Accord card scheme. This suggests that that any new scheme needs to be better publicised and should be advertised more widely, particularly to members of the public who are likely to be entitled to benefit from the scheme.

It is very difficult to give a detailed response to the proposals in the Council's report as there are no figures on the take up of the Access to Leisure scheme by disabled residents. Indeed, many may not even realise they qualify for such a scheme. This means details such as costs to the Council each year per disabled resident accessing the scheme and the net benefits this could have on other services, and the disabled people themselves, is hard to quantify. Therefore, we are not in a position to judge how disabled residents would be affected by any specific proposal.

This response only deals with the parts of the report which affect Aberdeen residents who have a disability or identify as having health issue that has a significant impact on their daily lives. We believe it is out with our remit to make comments on the aspects of the report which affect families with young children, on low income and those over the age of 60 or in receipt of the State Pension. However, there are some

issues which should be considered by the Finance, Policy and Resource committee in reaching its final decision.

Things for the Council to consider in devising a new or replacement Access to Leisure scheme

- Robust and consistent impact assessments should be carried out for any changes decided to the scheme, including early engagement with the affected groups to ensure success and sustainability of the scheme.
- The Council should use the Access to Leisure scheme as another opportunity to promote the importance of exercise and social activities on mental health and wellbeing.
- Residents with a disability are likely to have a lower disposable income than the general population so are more likely to be dependent on the Council provision and provided by ALEOs (rather than the Private Sector) on the grounds of cost. A reduced rate is imperative.
- The application process should be as simple and straightforward as possible and if possible linked to other application processes such as the bus travel scheme and Blue Badge scheme, thus avoiding the need for multiple applications for different services.
- Decisions on eligibility for any reduced rate scheme for disabled people already in receipt of a recognised disability benefit should not require a separate test. Qualification should be automatic for such people.
- Eligibility criteria should be easy to understand and well communicated to the people who would qualify for a reduced rate.
- A safety net should be developed to ensure that there is a mechanism for those who don't qualify for the usual disability Benefits but can still qualify based on an evidence based health referral. Options could be from a physiotherapist; GP or job centre professional. Any such referrals would need to be consistent across the city.
- This could be a chance to build on the move towards 'Social Prescribing' practices in the medical community. Access to Leisure can provide another joint partnership to NHS Grampian via the emerging Community Link Workers based in GP practices across the city.
- The Council should ensure that there are facilities and services within the Access to Leisure scheme which are appropriate to those with disabilities, including trained support staff and swimming pools suitably equipped to aid those with the severest of disabilities.
- To increase and widen the provision of available facilities in the City it might be worth considering whether local private facilities could be approached to also participate in the Access to Leisure scheme as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility.

- Any new scheme being introduced should be widely publicised showing the benefits to those with a disability or health problem of engaging in a sport, leisure or cultural activity. Information should be sent to every household through Council Tax packs and via Corporate Comms messages.
- To encourage the widest participation, any scheme should be able to be used at any time of day, not just off-peak times. Disabled people are more likely to participate if they can go along at the same time as family and friends. The current system means there are no free or reduced fee access for this.
- Encouraging more uptakes to the scheme by addressing the root causes of barriers to participation for the disabled community. Such barriers include transport to leisure facilities, appropriate changing facilities and equipment. Many older disabled people simply don't know what is available and what could be possible for them.
- If devised properly such a scheme has the potential to mitigate further illness associated with a disability.