

Research into Young Women and Swimming



Prepared for
Women's Sports Foundation
and
Amateur Swimming Association
April 11th 2006



**Report on research into
Young Women
(aged 25-34 years)
and swimming
For
Women's Sport Foundation
and the
Amateur Swimming Association**



Contents



Page No

Introduction- the context	5
Methodology	7
Research objectives	9
Women and swimming- the recent history	10
Swimming at different life stages	11
The consumption of swimming	12
Buying behaviour of swimming	12
The findings:	13
The attitude towards swimming in general	13
How these attitudes have been shaped	
The attitude of women towards the swimming pool	14
What women like to experience in a pool	14
What they experience when they visit a pool	15
The comparison of swimming on holiday	15
What women want to experience when swimming	15
Why some women do not swim	17
Dislikes about swimming	18
Preconceptions of swimming pools	19

	Page No
Why other women do swim	19
Other forms of exercise	20
Cleanliness as an issue	20
Chlorine	20
Risk of infections	21
General hygiene	21
Inconvenience as an issue	22
Issues for minority groups	24
Body image issues	24
Views on swimwear	26
Swimwear on holiday	26
The choice of swimwear	27
The swimming 'occasion'	28
Swimming as a social activity	28
Swimming in private facilities	29
Outdoor swimming	29
Swimming in public facilities	29
Swimming on holiday	29
Spa swimming	31
Special pool programmes	31
Value of well structured lessons	32
Exercise while children swim	32
Attitudes to aquarobics	33
Reasons for taking swimming lessons	33
Swimming for health	33
Participation in National SwimFit as a fitness vehicle	34
Suggestions for National SwimFit	34
Swimming the sensory aspects	34
Sunbathing and swimming	34
Smells whilst swimming at the sea	35
Smells whilst swimming at the pool	35
Women only swimming	35
The importance of the size of the pool	35
Children and swimming	36

	Page No
View on the marketing of swimming	36
Branded pools	36
General Household Survey	38
Field work at swimming pools	43
Weekly behavioural patterns of female swimming	43
Pool pricing issues	52
Type of pool normally used	53
Facilities used at the pool	56
Getting to the pool	58
Other issues	60
Recommendations	68
Barriers to swimming	68
Observations	69
Future paths for research	70
Future challenges	70
Future policies	71
Recommendations	71



Harry Selfridge, who opened his famous store on Oxford Street in 1909, aimed 'to give the lady what she wants'. He studied ladies' clubs in order to better understand their tastes. He introduced his new store as a symbol of the emancipation of women. Selfridge's was not just a store; it was also a centre for women to read, eat, change foreign currency, book railway tickets, post letters and many other things. In general, it made women feel they were being pampered.

The store was fronted with huge iconic columns and an enormous clock incorporating an 11 foot figure of the Queen of Time. Architecturally it was quite different and women adored the sense of something for them. He took customer service to its maximum when he wanted to get the new *Two Pence Underground* (or the Central line) to rename Bond Street as Selfridges and to build a tunnel under Oxford Street to the store.

Initially there would seem to be little commonality between women and their wants and desires when swimming and the needs of customers at Selfridge's nearly a hundred year's ago but this research demonstrates that, in fact, there are many similarities and that whilst the habits of women as customers often change, the core needs that they have remain easy to identify but difficult to fulfil.

The notions of feeling valued, feeling pampered and undergoing a pleasurable experience were common to all the groups interviewed and formed an important backbone to the research.

The General Household Survey 2002, found that there is unspent demand for swimming across all age groups. Some 13% of the respondents who did not take part in sport stated that if given the opportunity they would choose to take part in swimming.

The *Survey* flagged some further important findings with regard to women and swimming. In the survey, 15% of women stated that they had been swimming in the four weeks before interview and 37% of women, a somewhat large proportion, stated that they had been swimming in the previous twelve months. Furthermore, swimming was the most popular participatory sport among women. Through its own surveys over 2 years, *HNI* has also found that the majority of swimmers are women. The breakdown in 2004 was 61% women, 39% men- quite the reverse of the majority of sporting activities. And yet, these findings do not tell us much about those women who choose not to swim, neither do they tell us much about the pattern of behaviour among those women who do swim. This research aims to highlight some of these patterns and some of the barriers to participation.

It was the business of this research, therefore, to consider women between the ages of 25 and 34 years and to digest and analyse the views of those women who both did and did not swim either on a regular or non-regular basis. In so doing, it hopes to provide all stakeholders with strategic information that can frame future approaches to encouraging all women in this age group to swim on a regular basis.

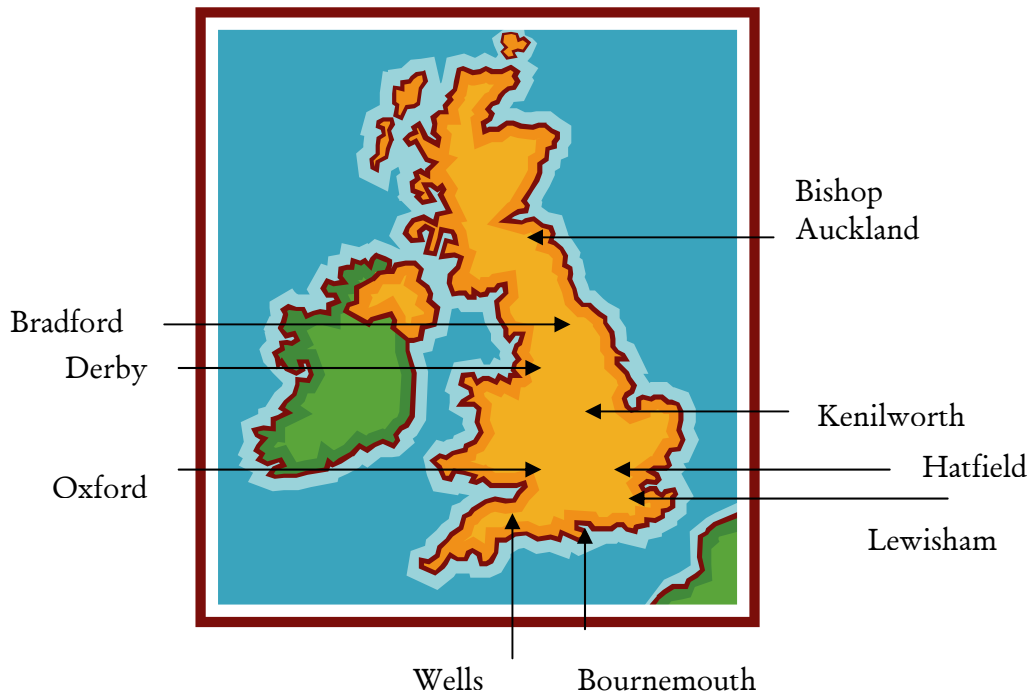
Methodology

Throughout this paper, HNI refers to 'women'. Within the context of this paper and the subject, HNI is referring to women between the ages of 25 and 34 years.

There were two main areas for research- qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative research took the form of focus groups conducted in the following areas:

Table 1

Group	Group Definition	Location	Venue
Women friendly group, Lewisham	Women friendly facility	Urban	Lewisham Town Hall, Lewisham
Minority group, Bradford	Ethnic minority	Urban	Carlisle Business Centre, Manningham, Bradford
Sure Start group, Wear Valley	Sure Start	Rural	St Helen Auckland Family Centre, Durham
Oxford Women's Swimming & Aqua Group	Regular swimmers	Suburban	Temple Cowley Pools, Cowley, Oxford
Kenilworth Health Club	Health club users	Suburban	Castle Farm Leisure Centre, Kenilworth
University of Hertfordshire	University staff	Suburban	University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, Herts
Derby City Council	Council employees	Urban	Queen's Leisure Centre, Derby
Littledown Health Club	Mothers group- local school & health club users	Urban	Littledown Leisure Centre, Bournemouth
Clark's Shoes	Combination of company employees and local teachers	Rural	Clark's Shoes, Wells



There were 9 focus groups in all with an average of 7 women attending each group. The participants were pre-screened so as to ensure that at least 2 group members took part in exercise but did not swim, the balance being comprised of participants who did not swim and did not take part in regular exercise. A control group of women who swim regularly, i.e. at least once a week, was set up in Oxford. Each session lasted between one and a quarter and one and three quarter hours.

4 of the groups were held in an urban, 2 in a rural and 3 in a suburban environment. Every effort was made to make the groups as diverse and socio-economically representative as possible with young mothers as well as single and married women being equally represented.


The report quotes typical comments from the focus groups in single quotation marks. Where the comments summarise a general feeling, they are attributed double quotation marks.

The second part of this paper considers the quantitative research. While the first part of the report provides the colour and the depth to build up a picture of women's attitudes, the quantitative section is the result of surveys conducted in 99 swimming pools- 50 pools in 2002 and 49 pools in 2004. The pools in 2002 were all in England while the pools in 2004 were situated in England, Scotland and Wales and included 2 private sector pools. On both occasions, the pools were situated in a wide range of demographic contexts ranging from university pools to urban and rural environments. They included pools that were both modern and old.

The total survey (men and women) consisted of 1701 people in 2002 and 1734 in 2004. Of these, in 2002, 1081 and in 2004, 1047 were women of all ages. Within the age group relating to this paper, i.e. 25-34 years, there were 163 in 2002 and 188 women in 2004. The survey findings contributed to the reports, the *Business of Swimming 2002 and 2004* but this report shows the extrapolated data for women for the first time.

Survey forms were provided to women using swimming pools. They were asked to complete the survey forms and to hand the forms back to HNI's representative at the pool. The survey was part supervised in that the representative was available at the pool for requests. Not all respondents answered every question.

The second part of this *Report* also highlights the findings about women and swimming in the General Household Survey 2002.



Research objectives

The main objectives for the research were as follows:

- To understand the gaps between women's perceptions and expectations and service delivery
- To understand why some women stop swimming
- To understand what might motivate these women to return
- To understand more fully the hierarchy of decision making factors
- To understand the order, priority and barriers to these decision making factors
- To understand why some women swim and why others do not swim



Women and swimming- the recent history

How did we get to where we are today? Sport in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was considered to be a male preserve and 'women in sport' was a social anomaly. Women's entry into sport was, however, seen as implicit in women's rights and swimming was one of the few sports that women could take part in. Public disapproval led to the suppression of mixed bathing at coastal resorts and other public sites.

Initially women were only spectators at male swimming events but from the 1860s onwards, working class women formed part of the professional era of swimming. The women who swam were often the daughters of professional 'watermen', i.e. men who raced and carried out public shows consisting of tricks for money. Despite both the social difficulties and the impossibility of easy movement in water given the swimwear women were required to wear, women continued to break down barriers. In 1899, the ASA revised the costume law to account for female swimmers.

Women's interest rose as the number of public swimming pools increased. In 1865, there were just 50 public pools. By 1915, this had risen to 342. In that year, there were approximately, 30% of baths exclusively for women and separate bathing remained prevalent until the early 1920's. Although women swam, there were many less participants than men- quite the reverse of today. In 1914, 23 women to every 100 men used public swimming pools in Birmingham. In Liverpool, the ratio was 10 to 100, in Manchester, 25 to 100, Sheffield, 22 to 100 and Bristol, 18 to 100.

By 1912, and despite the prevalence of heavy, woollen costumes and the requirement for British swimmers for four inch sleeves, women's swimming formed part of the Olympic programme for the first time. The First World War was really the catalyst for change and following the War, women increasingly came to wear what they chose when swimming. This attitude was directly related to the increase in sun bathing at the new lidos and pools built in the 1920's and 1930's and the introduction of aqua shows both on films and at seaside resorts which emphasised the female and male form and centred on fashion and design. These last two notions inevitably became closely associated with women and swimming and will be seen today in many of the attitudes emanating from this research.

Swimming at different life stages

Previous field work carried out by HNI in 2002 and 2004 showed that the majority of pool users were under 15 years of age. The proportion of people using pools then dropped between the ages of 15 and 24 years before picking up again in the 25-34 age group. This increase was likely to have been partly as a result of parents taking their children to the pool. There was then a second tailing off from 45 years onwards:

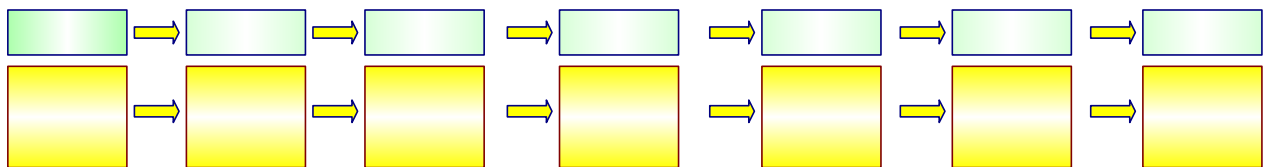
Table 2:

Age	2002	2002	2004	2004
Under 15	701	42%	507	29%
15-19	82	5%	89	5%
20-24	96	6%	90	5%
25-34	207	12%	279	16%
35-44	370	22%	357	21%
45-54	95	6%	151	9%
55-64	79	5%	114	7%
65+	59	3%	125	7%
No response	15	1%	22	1%
Total	1704		1734	

(Source: *Business of Swimming 2002 and 2004*)

Lifetime values of customers are important in all industries and swimming is an activity in which people can participate nearly all their lives. It has considerable advantages over other sports in this respect. The study showed that typical life usage of a swimming pool followed the pattern beneath:

The life usage pattern of the swimming customer



The consumption of swimming

Let us consider the ways in which products can be consumed. In considering the types of consumption that can be identified, there are a number of options available:

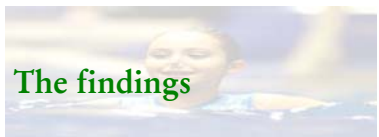
- Important purchases- these are normally underscored by facets such as infrequent and unusual, little experience on the part of the decision maker and a high involvement on the customer’s part in order to arrive at a decision. The research showed that women did not regard swimming as sufficiently important that they wanted to devote considerable time to determining where they wanted to swim, the type of pool and the swimwear they wore (unless it was when on holiday). They were all looking for certainty, reassurance and wished to devote little time to the purchase process.
- Repetitive consumption- swimming can be a repetitive buy which normally manifests itself in low involvement on the part of the consumer
- Involuntary consumption- here the action of the consumer is one where there are no alternatives but to purchase the product. There are very few women (25-34 years old)

that have no alternatives. In general, these are women that are taking part in swimming as part of an exercise referral programme as a result of long term illness or injury or for fitness.

- Group consumption- these are purchases made as a group rather than individually. Here the young woman with a family does have a role to play in deciding who goes swimming, when they go and how often they go.

Buying behaviour of swimming

- There are four main types of buying behaviour- complex, dissonance-reducing, habitual and variety seeking. The complexity of women and swimming is such that women display elements of at least three of these but that dissonance seeking can have the biggest long-term effect.
- The research showed that complex buying behaviour which is generally associated with expensive products and significant differences between brands did not apply.
- Habitual buyer behaviour was evident among those women who swim regularly. These women swam for exercise and were not seeking alternative forms of exercise on the occasion of the swim.
- Variety seeking behaviour did take place among occasional swimmers where they were encouraged by friends and peers to try alternative facilities.
- Dissonance-reducing behaviour was evident among all those participants who stated that they swam very rarely or hardly at all. This type of behaviour is based on the consumer's experiences during the process of consumption. This means that the participants swam but afterwards acquired new beliefs based on these attitudes. For pool operators this may be more problematical because consumers that appear to be satisfied at the time of their swim find that later the disquieting aspects of the experience discourage them from taking part again.



The attitude of women towards swimming in general

Swimming is an activity that is open to all and is, in theory, accessible to the majority of women but, when it comes to taking part in the activity, the focus groups demonstrated that attitudes are fairly entrenched. The women who swim regularly tended to be committed to regular participation and saw it as:

- Healthy
- Social if you wanted to be sociable
- Good for combating stress
- Good non-weight bearing exercise
- Something that everyone can take part in
- An activity which you can 'just get on with' (*professional woman, Leamington*)

But, given that most of the women who took part in the focus groups did not swim either occasionally or at all, there were alternative, very fixed views which saw swimming in a completely different light. These women saw swimming as:

- A time consuming activity
- A 'lot of hassle' (*administrative worker, Derby*)
- Not enjoyable and rather unpleasant
- A poor alternative given a choice
- Not "a cool thing to do"
- Unglamorous
- Not aspirational
- Not salient to their lives

There are, therefore, problems even in getting women to try swimming in the first place and, seemingly, the longer without swimming, the less likely women are to return to it. The exceptions to this are women with young children, who return to the swimming pool to ensure their children swim but do not swim themselves. Without exception, whether they had children or not, all the women surveyed stated that they would want their children to swim.

How these attitudes have been shaped

Asked as to why they had formed these opinions, the women who chose not to swim stated that these views had been shaped by their early experiences when first learning. The key determinants were:

- Poor learning experiences
- Lack of enjoyment with the experience in the early years

Specifically under poor learning experiences, comments often made separately from the focus group sessions, included:

- “The pool was always crowded”
- “Too many people trying to learn at the same time”
- ‘I was pushed in’. This comment may be an interpretation of the stressful experience of learning in that any physical impact by a second party is interpreted as ‘pushing in’ (swimming is one of the few sports in which learning can be life threatening)(*junior manager, Hatfield*)
- ‘There was too much splashing’(*administrative employee, Lewisham*)
- ‘It was so noisy’(*homemaker, Bournemouth*)
- “I was asked to put my face under and I couldn’t stand it”

The attitude of women towards the swimming pool

Respondent views with regard to swimming pools were at one, whether the participants were regular swimmers or infrequent swimmers.

What women like to experience in a pool

These wants should be considered in two ways- those that are external and connected with the facility offered and those are internalised and have to do with aspirations. The external factors were:

- Plenty of ‘personal’ space in a pool- HNI interpreted this as both sessions that weren’t too crowded and pools that were sensitively programmed to meet their needs
- Pools that are not too big- if they swam for fitness, they wanted the challenge of swimming a length which they considered to be attainable
- Few young children swimming at the same time- in particular, those respondents who were not mothers prefer to avoid children in pools. These two customer groups could almost be considered to be mutually exclusive as often young people taking part in unstructured swimming sessions prefer to do so without young women being present
- A considerable amount of ambient light
- A non-rectangular pool
- Cleanliness in changing rooms, toilets and all areas
- Generic fitness programmes offered at the pool to swimmers
- Minority groups want swimming sessions and lessons without men being present
- Music, which may intensify a workout or make a swim feel tranquil or relaxing. In other words, music was thought to have a major impact on behaviour in a pool. Music was also thought to take the focus away from the swimmer as an individual which would impact on the issue of body exposure
- Hot showers after a swim
- Outdoor swimming – this was a generality that will be expanded on later in this report

Among the factors that are not generally available in most pool facilities:

- The equivalent of a hair drier that would instantly dry the whole body
- Fibre optic lights that change colours within a pool from time to time. Lights create a mood
- Palm trees, plants and cocktails, greater sense of hedonism and mineral water/coffee as part of the admission price

The internal factors were:

- The capacity to dive in, glide through the water and swim effortlessly – seen as being hard to attain
- Swimming sessions for people who hold similar values and attitudes
- Greater respect for their individuality

What they experience when they visit a pool

Again, the following opinions were common to all groups of respondents:

- Too much noise and pool surrounds that amplify noise
- A feeling of blandness and dullness
- Nothing but blank walls and a lack of light
- Lack of identification and diminution of individuality- ‘everyone at the pool is faceless’
- The smell of chlorine- this was one of the biggest single deterrents to swimming at pools
- Lack of personal cleanliness among some customers- ‘I look at some of the people swimming and I think “I wouldn’t share my bath with you so why would I want to swim with you” (*clerical employee, Derby*)
- Boredom (in the case of the non-pool users)

The comparison of swimming on holiday

Women’s attitudes to swimming when on holiday were very different. Swimming was not seen as a chore but as a treat. Much more time was given to selecting a costume and equipment for the holiday. In short, it was seen as ‘an occasion’ and an occasion to look forward to. Respondents stressed that swimming was:

- Part of chilling out
- Complemented the important past-time of sunbathing
- Seen as a contributing factor to re-energizing the body and looking good on returning home
- The smells of the sea were seen as being much healthier than that of swimming in a pool. The smell of salt and sand contributed to the feeling of health

What women want to experience in swimming in general

Most of the focus group participants were like-minded in stating that swimming should be a special experience. They expected to experience post-modernistic, almost hedonistic outcomes.

The table beneath matches the main characteristics of post modernism to that of the respondents and the attitudes conveyed during the focus groups with regard to swimming:

Table 3:

Post modernism	Focus group attitudes towards swimming
Popular	
Consumerism	√
Flexibility	√
Choice	√
Openness	
Opportunity	√
Commodification of leisure & culture	
Irreverent pastiche	√
Contrived	
Lack of depth	√
Playfulness/laid back	√
Hedonism	√
Relatively	
Indeterminacy	√
Contingency	
Fragments of being	
Decentring	√
Individualism	√
Experimentation	√
Pragmatism	
Hetrogenity	
Signifier	
Scepticism	
Deconstruction	√
Discursive reality	

Many of the women stated that they would prefer to swim in heated water outdoors. The main reason stated for this was:

- A feeling of freedom- 'being free' was associated with enjoyable swimming
- The sense of space and the lack of boundaries
- 'The fun of having the sky above you'
- The smell of freshness and fresh air
- The countryside was near and it felt natural- generally it was thought to be closer to nature
- 'We would even prefer to skinny dip if men weren't there' (*professional employee, Wells*)

Swimming without boundaries was therefore a key issue for women of this age.

These attitudes throw up two questions:

- Why women prefer not to swim at all rather than to take up ‘boundary-less’ swimming?
- Why outdoor pools and lidos are closing due to lack of demand?

Initially, the reason appears to be perfectly straightforward. The British climate is a barrier to this form of swimming. But this does not square with the fact that there is a demand to swim all the year round in the open air heated pool at the Oasis at Holborn and why a former lido pool now run as a private company operates a heated pool all the year round and has considerable demand for its use. We also know that outdoor heated pools are well used during inclement weather in northern European countries where the weather can be considerably colder than that of Britain.

Why is it that open air pools have declined in numbers from over 300 in the 1930’s to approximately 100 pools now? The introduction of the ‘all in one’ sports centre undoubtedly has had something to do with this. Most local authorities have found open air pools too expensive to run and that they have, all too often, been empty for most days of the year, sometimes, even on warm summer days. From the customer’s perspective, they are not warm enough throughout the whole year.

The two main reasons would appear to be that people in general, including the age group researched, think and act quite differently. First, the respondents had an ideal in mind that can only be guaranteed when abroad in warmer climates or in expensive private facilities and secondly, where these conditions exist in Britain, often the offering has been presented in a way which is unappealing and of little interest to them.

Swimming needs to become a product offering that is appealing if those women currently not swimming are to be engaged in the process of participating.

Why some women do not swim

The explanations can be considered in three main categories- internalised, those based on personal experience and external factors (other than personal experience). First, external:

- The inconvenience of pool and gym on different sites – one or the other. Swimming and the gym were often seen as a package of linked activity
- Lack of flexibility in pool timetables was cited – particularly for young mothers and working women
- Lack of single sex swimming classes – this can effect “hard to get to” minority groups
- Cost and transport are also issues in some places, especially among those with less disposable income

- Often lack of alternative transport to a pool meant no use of the swimming pool at all. Poor access was coupled with an inability to move to an alternative pool due to family arrangements such as dealing with the family's school needs at the same time or financial barriers
- Access to pools is a barrier – 'I pay a membership and can't just go whenever I want' (*administrative employee, Derby*)

Secondly, those based on experience:

- The local pool is too cold – only one person mentioned that a pool was too hot or that the water temperature was adequate
- The unpleasantness of getting in
- Swimming is too boring
- The barriers too great in the first place – e.g. Asian girls are often not encouraged to go during the onset of puberty
- Mothers found there was less time to swim oneself because of taking young children
- Unpleasant experiences whilst first learning or improving
- Breathing difficulties under water was also cited
- Hassle over kit – carrying wet kit bags, getting dry, too time consuming
- Ruining one's hair
- Not being welcomed or understood was a common complaint among those who do not swim regularly
- Swimming is a "high maintenance" sport – the thought and cost of preparing one's body, shaving and waxing

Thirdly, the internalised attitudes based on thoughts and beliefs:

- The thought of removing clothing and getting into a cold pool, particularly in winter
- Lack of cleanliness of the pools
- Swimming was seen as too individual – almost anodyne – 'you don't meet anyone at the pool' (*administrative employee, Wells*)
- Amongst the more active women, a belief that you can't sweat enough while swimming and that makes you feel that the exercise is less beneficial than dry land activity
- Overcoming inertia- with customers who have not exercised for a long period, the thought of going through a pain threshold after such a long time without exercise was also a problem
- Swimming pools are seen as being sterile
- With some women, puberty was considered to act as a break at a key time
- Dark nights were also quoted
- The feeling that it was difficult to share the experience with a partner
- Non-regular swimmers associate swimming with going on holiday and not going to the local pool.

Dislikes about swimming

Further discussion led to more detailed 'dislikes' about swimming among those who do not swim. These included:

- The water is cold and when you first get in it is a shock- the level of pool heating and cold showers in the winter
- Buses run less frequently at night meaning standing about in the cold, i.e. swimming as a product is not linked to public transport making the experience less convenient
- Among those who swam regularly, ill disciplined lane swimming; people in the wrong lanes and inconsiderate lane swimmers
- Chlorine which was considered to cause itchy skin, flaking skin, a runny nose and sore eyes. The lingering smell of chlorine was universally disliked
- Dangers when accompanying own children to both mothers and children, such as slippery floors
- Noise, echo and lack of ambient light
- Those who swam stated there was a lack of educative support during unstructured swimming times and a lack of fitness targets
- Changing cubicles, where they existed, were considered not to be big enough
- Mothers that are accompanied in female changing rooms by boys that were considered to be too old to be in female changing areas
- Lack of cleanliness in changing rooms, showers and toilets
- A certain lack of self confidence was displayed in that lifeguards were thought to be insensitive by some respondents. They thought lifeguards would laugh at the lack of competence in their swimming. This was exacerbated if the respondent knew the lifeguard.
- A lack of a sense of achievement at the end of and during a swimming session
- Pressure to keep up in lengths and lane swimming
- Children and young people- among those women who were not mothers
- 'Swimming is very uniforming and makes everyone invisible' (*secretarial employee, Derby*)

Preconceptions of swimming pools

Asked what their pre-conceptions of a swimming pool was, the respondents often painted negative images encapsulated by the typical comments beneath:

- Cold
- Often dirty – “hair everywhere”
- Chlorine – effects on skin and hair – takes a long time to eradicate
- Purveyors of verrucas, dry skin and sore eyes
- Noisy – ‘a cavernous box, with sharp lights’ (*administrative employee, Derby*)

Why other women swim

There were numerous positive comments, generally from those respondents who swam regularly. The reasons given for swimming were:

- When pregnant as a sensible alternative to using the gym. Unfortunately, when a baby is born, the swimming is curtailed and a gap is created before women return to exercise. They often return to the gym and not the pool

- For leisure
- Swimming is good non weight bearing exercise
- For the psychological benefits. Swimming creates a positive frame of mind.

Swimming v other forms of exercise

The nature of the overall swimming market-place is changing. As a mature industry, the activity of swimming is diversifying. There are now more and more people using health club and university swimming pools, more people swimming on regular, low cost holidays and less people using public pools. The trend is only slightly down in public pools but down it is. Some people are also taking the option of using the gym or fitness suite rather than the swimming pool. But, why do women, in particular, take that option? Respondents informed us, they liked:

- To workout in the gym because they could talk to their friends if they chose. In swimming the respondents felt they could not swim side by side in lanes and talk
- Badminton, saroque, walking, aerobics, circuits, steps, power walking, some running and body conscious classes, and toning. You do not need to shave and wax the body for these pursuits to the same extent as swimming.
- Sports where men were not present. Men were felt to be competitive and intimidating when women were in close proximity
- Mixed participation, including swimming, can lead to apprehension or an increased lack of confidence in women
- Cycling to work was also popular with some women

Cleanliness as an issue

Chlorine

The smell of a pool was a concern and was a major contributory reason to how women who do not swim felt about the cleanliness of pools. Instead of the smell of chlorine suggesting cleanliness, it had the reverse effect. Instead of heightening feelings of security with regard to health, it increased anxieties. Chlorine is seen to impact on body odours after the swim, changing a person's appearance, which contributes to swimming being seen as 'uncool', being bad for the skin and hair and making a swimming occasion longer than it needs to be because of attempting to rid the body of the smell.

Typical comments were as follows:

- 'Chlorine, really concentrated chlorine goes up your nose and effects your head' (*skilled, manual employee, Bournemouth*)
- 'Apparently you get chlorine dandruff in your hair and it does take a while to wash out. My hairdresser told me' (*administrative employee, Bournemouth*)
- 'A swimming bath just smells of chlorine doesn't it. That's what it smells of.' (*mother and home maker, Bishop Auckland*)

- ‘You would assume the sea is a lot cleaner because when you get out of the pool, you absolutely wreek of chlorine. And you have a quick shower because of the queue. I am just going to struggle to get the smell out of my hair’ (*secretarial employee, Bradford*)
- A lot of my friends don’t go swimming because we have highlighted hair and the chlorine damages it’ (*professional employee, Kenilworth*)
- ‘It’s not good for you chlorine. It is bad for your skin. Swimming in the sea is good for your skin. OK it is a bit dry but it is nice.’ (*skilled manual employee, Lewisham*)
- ‘I was reading an article that you find so much urine in public swimming pools and as soon as I get in to a public swimming pool I think they are masking the other smells with chlorine. It’s dirty.’(*semi skilled manual employee, Lewisham*)
- ‘The horrible chlorine smell lingers for a good day even after you have had a good shower.’(*managerial, Oxford*)

The smell of a pool is the third big issue. The cost of appropriate, alternative disinfectants leads to many operators using chlorine.

Chlorine was also seen to:

- Make the eyes smart
- Create the necessity to wear goggles
- Irritate skin that is more sensitive to chemicals

Chlorine is therefore seen as being uncomfortable. An analogy could be drawn with the lack of comfort in a long distance plane flight except that with the plane flight, it is viewed as ‘something to put up with’. In the case of chlorine, many women exercise their choice and decide that they will not ‘put up with it’. If a solution could be found it would have a considerable impact on the rate of female swimming admissions. Although women understand the purpose of chlorine, they do see it as a disinfectant and prefer not to swim in it.

Risk of infections

The likely risk of picking up an infection was also sited:

- The possibility of getting verrucas was mentioned
- Ear infections was another area of concern
- There was a general view that pools harboured a range of other minor viruses

General hygiene

Women also had very definite views about hygiene in swimming pools. The standards in swimming pools did not meet their expectations and managing these expectations remains an issue for pool operators. Part of the problem appears to be that of making pool users understand that they are part of the process in maintaining standards in pools. Respondents stated:

- There was a general feeling that changing rooms are neglected and “put you off”.
- Other people’s (but not one’s own) personal hygiene can be a problem – e.g. ‘I’ve been there when there have been shavings where someone has been shaving their legs’

- or nappies left or they will put the nappy in the bin but there have been bits left on the side' (*professional employee, Wells*)
- Other typical experiences – 'In one pool, I heard one mother telling her child to pee in the shower. That was vile' (*administrative employee, Wells*)
 - Women feel that they have paid their money and they are entitled to a certain level of cleanliness. This level varies from individual to individual (*student, Kenilworth*)
 - 'It's not nice to go to the toilets and change' (*regular swimmer, semi skilled employee, Lewisham*)
 - Typical female behaviour patterns can be analogised with that of their experience when driving on a motorway. In the same way as a woman will endure discomfort to avoid stopping at the toilets in a garage because they feel that the toilets are unpleasant to use, some women will avoid using pools for similar reasons
 - Footbaths were seen as unhygienic and often had bits floating in them. They came in for criticism even though pools have often now dispensed with pre-filled footbaths. It was part of a perception on hygiene
 - These views were not just limited to non-pool users; regular swimmers also had unpleasant anecdotal experiences to recount
 - It was felt that the pool foyer and kiosk may look good but they did not necessarily reflect the state of cleanliness elsewhere

Inconvenience as an issue

Recent research by TARP on behalf of Deloitte's (*Health of the Nation Survey, March 2006*) has pointed to the fact that out of a survey of 10,000 people 75% of respondents stated that it wasn't lack of facilities that was to blame for their inactivity. 60% reported that work and other commitments were the main barriers to exercising. For a woman in the 25-34 year age group, there are many extra barriers and inconvenience is high on the list when it comes to swimming.

The apparent barriers to women, i.e. those identified by the *Women's Sport Foundation*, which can also be found in this age group in relation to swimming include:

- Inappropriate and unsuitable transport
- Little consideration for women with children and lack of childcare
- Lack of money and available time
- Body image and consciousness
- Lack of an appropriate venue given disposable income
- Insufficient opportunities due to ethnic beliefs
- Programmes orientated towards men, families etc.
- Unfavourable pool programming
- Low self esteem and self consciousness
- Homophobia

Swimming is more favourable to women in some aspects. There is no male dominated culture in the activity, no activity stereotyping and more opportunities for the disabled than in many activities.

The respondents emphasised the following, less apparent barriers:

- Swimming was considered to be quite stressful for a mother with 2 or more children, especially if one of the children was a baby
- Shaving/waxing legs and body hair, washing and drying the hair, carrying bags of make up were all considered to be ‘extra hassle’ not experienced in other activities
- Swimming was considered to be a big commitment in terms of time. The one hour swim could easily double or treble when preparation and travel were included.
- Having long hair was seen as a further barrier
- Descriptions such as “high maintenance” were used when referring to washing hair after a swim, showering before and after at the pool and shaving legs before

The issue is made more complex by the fact that there are different barriers for different cultural and socio-demographic groups. For example, the recent *Swimming for Health* Project introduced into Hull by the *Amateur Swimming Association* with funding provided by the *Department of Health* is working with local Sure Start groups. The following needs were identified for Sure Start mothers:

- Warm water
- Female lifeguards
- Crèche facilities
- Encouraging, reassuring staff
- Clear progression for non swimmers

Prior to the ASA’s project, Sure Start paid for private provision for swimming with each parent contributing £2 per session and the sessions proved very popular. Cost is therefore not the biggest barrier. This private project met the group’s needs and expectations and mothers were willing to pay to participate. The important point was that the project engaged with mothers at an individual level whilst influencing at a strategic level. The deployment of crèche facilities was thought to be germane to the success of the scheme.

The introduction of *free swimming* within many areas has been an important initiative for swimming. Many local authorities found that once the price barriers had been reduced, a greater number of people were willing to take part but this has not happened in the case of every *free swimming* initiative. Unsuccessful *free swimming* initiatives have been attributed to lack of lead timing, planning and lack of an integrated and strategic approach but there are other barriers, particularly where women are concerned and the focus groups highlighted a number of those that are less apparent inconveniences.

The fourth big issue for swimming is to look at how some of these less obvious barriers can be reduced. Possibly they could be part addressed by existing pool suppliers.

Issues for minority groups

Minority group issues are often associated with religious and cultural considerations. These considerations can be varied. In the case of religious considerations, this often means that the greater the level of orthodoxy, the greater the considerations.

Typical issues are:

- Mixed bathing not being permitted within a religion or culture
- The degree of female body exposure
- Verbal contact with members of the opposite sex
- Lack of a female lifeguard or a lifeguard of a similar religion or culture
- Lack of a female swimming teacher or a teacher of a similar religion or culture
- Pools that are not screened off
- Transport being inadequate for local needs to transport people from these groups to the nearest and/or most appropriate pool. Often the requirement is that transport be provided by someone from a similar religious or cultural group

These may not be new issues as is commonly thought but are issues that have emerged under a different set of circumstances. Throughout the last century and the period through to the mid 1920's, there were issues with regard to female body exposure with white British females. In the past, this has not just been an aspect associated with minority groups. It is a British phenomenon in which different cultural groups of females are able to accept different standards of dress and societal behaviour at a given point in their history and it needs to be considered in this light.

In the past, women frequently had their own swimming session (and still do) and sometimes had their own separate swimming pool. Women were often seen as secondary in consideration when it came to swimming.

Today the reality is that most women from most social groups, unless they are very orthodox, will be able to take part in swimming. The very orthodox will often decide that they can only swim with their own kind. The ability of pools to handle this situation may be predicated on a pool's location. Pools situated in a local community where a cultural or religious minority actually forms a local majority (or sizeable proportion of the population) should and normally will be able to cater for these customers.

The respondents from minority groups stated that if general swimming was provided in a sensitive way, i.e. by making all groups welcome and maximising accessibility, then swimming should be accessible to their groups.

Body image issues

Body image and levels of consciousness in swimming were among the most important issues. The pressure to look good was so strong that it influenced a decision **whether to swim or not to swim**. Respondents views were as follows:

- Swimming is a sport where you usually reveal the greater part of your body. This presents difficulties for some women from ethnic minorities and for many other women
- Anonymity is very important when it comes to body exposure. The fact that a woman might see someone she knew at the pool and who she didn't want to see in her costume was a barrier
- Body image was less important when on holiday not only because respondents didn't know the other people and were never going to see them again but, in general, women take more trouble over holiday preparations and swimwear
- The social concerns can have third party implications. Wearing a swimsuit in front of people you don't know but who might comment to a third party who you did know was also a barrier
- In a gym, it was considered not so challenging because less of the body was exposed – “you feel more comfortable”
- Body exposure was definitely less of a concern where the woman was fitter and slimmer
- Pregnant women were happy to swim either with older people or people who are also pregnant
- These body issues were seen as being similar for men but there was a general feeling that men ‘handle them’ better
- Respondents were also concerned about being seen and looking good in front of other women. This was just as important as being seen by men
- There was a feeling that not only were you stripped because of lack of body cover but this was exacerbated because you were already “performing”, sometimes not very competently, in front of others
- Swimming backstroke in front of male lifeguards was sometimes considered an unpleasant experience
- The perception of the general swimmer was that when they visit the pool they will be intimidated by pools full of toned bodies
- Body image issues also related to how the body changes. It was felt that if a woman put weight on, they were less likely to want to swim. If they lost weight, they were more inclined to put a swimsuit on and to feel more comfortable swimming. The resulting behaviour is therefore likely to be the opposite to the intended outcomes of health professionals and pool operators. If a woman feels less happy with her body the respondents felt they would be less comfortable and less likely to swim
- Some women were more concerned than other respondents with how they look. With regular swimmers who swam to get fit, it was seemingly not important as they considered that they were only in the pool for a short period of time and were therefore not too concerned about their appearance
- ‘My children often ask when I am coming swimming with them and my husband. Then I have to explain to them that I don't want to get undressed in front of strangers, but I would love to go with them’ (*administrative/professional ethnic employee, Bradford*)
- Women are as much concerned about how they appear at a pool in front of other women as much as the impression they make on men – ‘it does put you off if you are not one of those dead skinny people’ (*mother and homemaker, Bishop Auckland*)
- ‘Being stripped bare’ (*professional employee, Derby*)

Views on swimwear

Women are offered a wide range of swimwear particularly in the summer but respondents indicated that, even though they were young, they still found it difficult to find costumes that really suited their needs:

- The attitudes of women differed according to their body type and size. Greater cover was sought by the larger women
- “Modesty” skirts to hide the upper legs and crotch were popular among less active women as were boy shorts
- Respondents considered it important to wear a dark or black costume in a public pool i.e. swimwear which is seen as being ‘similar’ to that of others so that they would not stand out. Being on holiday was a different situation. Pretty colours, bikinis and sarongs were much more acceptable. Again, the feeling was that holidays were for relaxation and enjoyment
- Traditional swimwear is insufficient for women from an Asian background, particularly older women. They prefer baggier costumes and leggings
- Swimwear designs needed to offer plenty of support whilst also offering the maximum flexibility, particularly in the upper body and chest areas so that “nothing pokes out”
- It was suggested that swimwear manufacturers could take the technology utilised in sports bras and build it into the fabric used in swimming costumes
- Purchasing a costume, for use in a pool, from a store was considered a chore with scant attention paid to the process. Women did not want to repeatedly get completely undressed in shops and preferred to buy ‘on spec’ and to return the costume to the shop if it did not fit. Changing rooms were considered to be uncomfortable and often poorly lit.
- Respondents tended to buy the same make, style and size of costume that they have had before because they knew it fitted rather than to go to the trouble of trying on alternatives. Accurate information to aid the buying process is therefore a priority. Observationally, this type of buying behaviour makes retailers less inclined to keep wide stocks of swimwear.
- Trying on swimwear with a plastic protection piece over the crotch was felt to be an unpleasant experience
- The following words and expressions were associated with swimwear for pools – simple, easy to wear, draws less attention to the body, not cut too low at the front or high at the thighs, comfortable straps that don’t slip down
- Costumes were thought to perish due to chlorine, colours tended to fade and parts of the costume became thinner, almost transparent. Comments were made that the straps stretched and the costumes lost their shape but longevity was not a big issue
- Tankinis, boy shorts and all in one swim suits were popular styles. Bikinis were considered to be for holiday wear only and the respondents were willing to spend more time and more money for holiday swim wear
- ‘You can cover almost any part of the body in other sports but in swimming you don’t really get that option’ (*secretarial employee and mother, Bournemouth*)
- ‘It would be good to have someone to give you their opinion as to what would suit your body type in a way that was not intimidating, to help you find a costume that makes you look your best’ (*administrative employee, Bournemouth*)

- A decision about what costume to wear is a matter of situation and attitude. ‘When I put my Speedo costume on I think, right, now I am going to swim’ but when I go swimming with my son I put my mumsy costume on because I think I am with my son’ (*homemaker and mother, Bournemouth*)

Swimwear on holiday

- Respondents felt that the ability to be anonymous on holiday was an important part of wearing a swimming costume
- Having a swimming costume which could stand being in and out of the water was considered beneficial. Although the costume needs to look good, it has to be capable of withstanding 2 weeks or possibly 4 weeks (if 2 holidays were taken) of being in and out of the water
- ‘Strangers can look at me all they like and I can look at them all I like but you don’t want to be in a swimming costume in front of people you know’ (*administrative employee, Bradford*). There was a sense that being in a swimming costume was equivalent to being naked.
- The functional nature of costumes for swimming pools was often mentioned. ‘I think a swimming costume for going to a pool is functional whereas swimwear for holiday is different. You live in it, don’t you’ (*administrator, Hatfield*)
- Say with a bikini, you know what you are going to get with the product, sunshine and all that, whereas swimming on a day to day basis with functional swimwear, it is not the same. There is a goal in site for you’ (*secretarial employee, Hatfield*)

Choice of swimwear

Holiday swimming was the only swimming that most group members took part in during the average year and therefore more care and time was given to purchasing a costume for holiday occasions:

- Respondents did not enjoy the experience of looking for swimwear in retail shops. Therefore, information seeking through catalogues and on-line searches was a common practice in order to avoid trying on costumes in shops
- Black was the most popular costume colour for the larger woman swimming in public pools
- Wearing “racing type” swimwear was avoided because it made women feel that they were expected to be good swimmers on entering a pool.
- There was thought to be a poor selection of swimwear in the shops during the autumn and winter months
- Low cut chest and high cut legs were unpopular
- There were criticisms from larger women that there was not enough choice for women of their body type. It was thought that manufacturers only make up to size 14 and finding sizes for women beyond this was difficult. ‘I’m only young still, I am only 33. I am a plus size but I still like to be stylish’ (*mother from Oxford*)
- Buying a costume was not thought to be fun, not an enjoyable experience. ‘I just pick the first one up’ (*office manager, Hatfield*)

The swimming 'occasion'

Swimming as a social activity

There were mixed views on the societal nature of swimming. It is generally recognised that swimming has an important part to play in society in terms of leisure, health and safety. It has a particularly important role in current health agendas as well as the capability to help people with a range of other difficulties.

The social role of swimming is less clear, particularly where women are concerned. Respondents with families tended to give greater weight to swimming as a social facilitator, particularly when swimming together as a family. With other respondents, the picture was more mixed:

- Respondents felt that they would be more inclined to get fit and enjoy swimming with a friend. Non regular swimmers felt that going with a friend was both motivational and helped to overcome boredom whilst regular swimmers were not so concerned about swimming with friends. They often had a routine that they wanted to get straight into. Broadly, regular swimmers prefer to swim more seriously for fitness and on their own
- For mothers, family swimming with the children was an important driver of pool use
- 'I don't do the swimming for myself. It is more for the children and to interact with the children' (*semi skilled employee and mother, Bournemouth*)
- But, not all women preferred to go with a friend. Other respondents stated that if they weren't a strong swimmer they might hold friends back. Some were concerned they might be going swimming with people who weren't of the same ability.
- The more serious swimmers found it frustrating to swim behind a slow swimmer in a lane
- The *Plymouth Local Exercise Action Pilot Scheme* reported that young people between the ages of 12 and 16 years definitely wanted to go the pool and to swim together to mix.. Often it was considered to be an activity that girls could take part in and were less embarrassed about. By the age of 25–34 years, going to swim to meet a member of the opposite sex was no longer important. In Plymouth they also found that when they stopped advertising specific skill sessions and advertised general activities, more young people took part whereas the 25-34 group had indicated they were more likely to participate more strongly in specific programmes (*see Special Pool Programmes*). There was one commonality with the research findings in this *Report*. Both groups considered personal space to be important in a pool.
- Being in a class was thought to be a good way of being sociable and mixing without necessarily being to the detriment of taking part

There was a sense that this group did not see swimming as a sport nor wanted to see swimming as a sport. Swimming providers should always view provision from the stand point that women in this age group see swimming as a past-time and a leisure activity. To this group, sport suggests competition and rivalry.

Swimming in private facilities

- Some stated that they found it too expensive at more than £5 per swim
- Nevertheless, the distance of the pool from home or work was a factor. Private facilities were more inclined to be used if they were closer at hand.
- Private facilities were generally perceived to be better facilities with more natural light and windows and a wider range of accompanying facilities. They were seen as having a calmer ambience with opportunities to swim at all levels. They were also perceived as being less crowded and cleaner. In general, swimming in these facilities was something that everyone aspired to, whatever their social group. This was redolent of brand seeking behaviour in which people from E and D social groups are found to be just as enthusiastic as A and B social groups to wear expensive branded clothing
- Private facilities were also thought to have better ventilation reducing the effects of chlorine, more staff, tranquil music and plants around the pool – in short, a better ambience

Outdoor swimming

The notion of outdoor swimming was popular because it was thought to be healthier and cleaner.

- It was suggested that a solution might be to build warm, indoor changing facilities with the first part of the pool undercover and then a short tunnelled area to an outdoor pool
- 'It makes you feel really special. The idea that you are outside but the water is warm. You feel at one with nature' (*professional employee, Wells*)
- 'It felt like a real treat. We were in the fading light with the stars above us' (*professional employee, Wells*)

Swimming in public facilities

- Public facilities were considered to be too full of people, too noisy and with too much splashing
- Whilst it was recognised that most people were not dirty, there was a general feeling that too many people led to dirty pools
- Respondents stated that they did not enjoy disrobing to get into a 'cold' pool even though this was often not the case
- The echo and noise in public pools was found to be depressing. Echo carries and children, who frequented public pools, were considered to be too noisy
- Almost without exception, the first thought about public pools was "chlorine" which was universally unpopular. Other facilities did not engender thoughts of chlorine to the same degree

Swimming on holiday

- Whilst the perceptions of indoor pools were that they were often dirty, beaches were not subjected to similar scrutiny

- Words and phrases that were associated with holiday swimming were “lovely”, “tranquil”, “relaxing”, “looking at the good things around”, “more space”, “cooling down”.
- Swimming on holiday encouraged more varied activities such as scuba diving.
- Swimming abroad in the sea where it is warm was seen as a treat
- Although a lot of pollutants and waste goes into the sea, this was not considered to be a problem because there was plenty of space
- Again the value of anonymity when swimming on holiday was important – ‘You don’t know anyone when you are on holiday. You are never going to see those people again’ (*skilled, manual employee, Derby*)
- The issue of having sufficient time for the whole process of going swimming was also raised. It was felt that, on holiday, there was more time
- Centre Parcs and similar organisations were also viewed favourably. Despite having noisy children, they evoked similar feelings and emotions to being at the sea, largely because respondents were able to swim outside
- The convenience of not having to dry and dress and having a hotel pool or the sea close at hand was also an incentive to swim whilst on holiday
- Every group member went swimming whilst on holiday. Therefore, given the right occasion, every respondent was willing to swim. Elsewhere they were not tempted to the fold.
- Freedom and choice was again an issue – ‘You can choose to do it; you do not feel like you have to do it and you do not feel guilty’ (*skilled, manual employee, Lewisham*). Having more space and not having to swim up and down in a traditional manner were part of this paradigm
- Group members did not choose their holiday destinations based around where they could swim. It was not that important even though it was important enough to devote time to buying swimwear
- There was thought to be less pressure to “keep up” while on holiday, as though it was not “proper” swimming
- Holiday swimming was seen as a luxury
- It was also considered to be much more convenient. Getting changed, having a shower, and driving to the pool all amounted to being a chore. None of them were considered as pleasurable experiences at a public pool by non-regular swimmers
- When you go on holiday you take the best of everything with you, including swimwear. This is because you are rewarding yourself for working hard the rest of the year round and this is a treat
- Very little swimming actually takes place. The important factor is to be close to water, often taking part in a number of water based activities

Getting fitter and “in shape” in order to go on holiday was important. The holiday occasion is therefore an important potential focus for encouraging women to re-start swimming

Spa swimming

- All respondents stated that they would like to visit a spa but only some women had actually had the experience. They considered it to also be a real treat. There was a general sense of being pampered
- The high cost of using spas was a barrier
- Those women who had experienced a spa felt that it offered a completely different experience to that of a pool
- Jacuzzis were considered to be unhealthy
- Spas were felt to be more of a “package” whereby a customer could lay around a pool. It was seen as less serious, espousing holiday values and relaxing. Sometimes spas had been visited whilst individuals were abroad on holiday
- The ultimate experience for women would be to have spa facilities available at affordable prices as a public sector facility
- A visit to a spa was not seen as connected with swimming

Special pool programmes

- Respondents felt that special programmes drive involvement but were insufficiently interesting to tempt many women
- These programmes were better for getting a good workout because instructors tell customers what to do and there was a structure to the pool visit
- There were thought to be stronger factors in play, including the deterrents of a lack of a crèche at the right time for swimming, pool cleanliness, lack of an accessible timetable and crowded pools. Special programmes were thought to either encourage pools to be more crowded or were often held at crowded pool times
- Special programmes sometimes highlight inadequacies in performance and were unsympathetic, thereby heightening feelings of inadequacy and insecurity.
- It was recognised that SwimFit, National Swimathon, aqua circuits and other programmes will help but these did not move people to take part
- Respondents were concerned that swimming related medics, doctors and pool operators fail to make comparisons with alternative exercise such as using the gym. Without hard evidence that swimming has greater advantage, many women will take, for example, the gym as a stronger option for getting fit
- There were comments that, at a gym, there was someone on hand to correct your mistakes. This was not the situation at a pool. Gyms also had cards with information on techniques and programmes which you did not get at pools. Interaction with a trainer and goals and targets as at a gym would encourage the more “sporty”, non regular swimmers
- Swimming activity tends to be straight up and down in boring straight lines.
- Some, but not all, women stressed the need for women’s only sessions and the lack of provision for this
- ‘I think swimming needs a big input, something new and exciting something other than swimming or aquarobics’ (*secretarial employee, Lewisham*)
- Special programmes are insufficiently individual – ‘For me, I would go swimming more if it was more personal to you’ (*professional employee, Wells*)

- In a swimming pool situation it was difficult to ask “am I doing this right?” even in organised groups
- Lanes that were completely sealed off from school children would make lengths swimming better for the fitness swimmers
- Waterproof headphones might make swimming more interesting and many women want to swim without noisy children

HNI understands the *Women’s Sports Foundation* is already working with the *Women into Coaching- London project* to improve the qualifications in swimming teaching and coaching for 18 women. Supported by funding from the European Social Fund, women will be given the opportunity to progress to NGB Level 2 from Level 1, based on the Sportscoach UK Courses. Although no mention was made by any respondent that a female swimming teacher or coach would be preferred, this should aid the increase of special pool programmes within the area.

Value of well structured sessions

- Mothers felt that it was important to have structured sessions so that swimming could be a family occasion and everyone can get something out of it
- There was an evident lack of trust on the part of mothers in third parties of any type when young children were near water
- Age was the key determinant to the degree to which children can be left
- A child crèche was thought to be essential if mothers are to have the freedom to swim
- Timetabling issues were highlighted – e.g. too many aquarobic sessions in the morning, not enough lane swimming opportunities after work
- Women’s swimming sessions that are programmed at the same time as dry side activities for school children were unpopular because children tend to monopolise the changing facilities
- Fitness swimmers tended to prefer early morning sessions because pools were quieter and calmer and, at that time, have very few young people to interrupt lengths swimming

Exercise while children swim

- ISRM have recently updated their policies on child safety and the recommended limitation of the number of young children per accompanying adult but there was a perception that it was still felt that this is making the process more difficult for young women
- There was a feeling that mothers need some time to themselves away from the children. They would not want to swim at the same time
- It was felt that exercise while young children are swimming is difficult because it is difficult to relax. There was no sense of escapism
- Respondents felt that there were better exercise alternatives while children were in a crèche. This was probably to do with the “hassle factor” in swimming
- Lessons for mothers whilst their children swim might be too short to be worthwhile as parents would need to be ready and available to change their children at the end of their session

Attitudes to aquarobics

- Many respondents stated that they had tried it but did not continue
- Often classes are too big and /or the pool was too small
- It was considered that there was a lack of benefit. They preferred to do a gym workout as respondents felt they would get more out of it
- There were comments that there was insufficient privacy for the classes and that men could see what was going on – ‘we were deliberately leached at and they were just there to watch us’ (*professional employee, Derby*)
- It was also stated that many classes were held during the morning, an inconvenient time for this age group
- Some respondents, particularly non-regular pool users, felt that they would sooner do aquarobics than swimming because it “sounded better”. Unlike swimming, most respondents had not actually experienced aquarobics and they could therefore only imagine the experience
- One or two who had taken part in aquarobics recommended deep water aquarobics as being better cardio vascular exercise

Reasons for taking swimming lessons

A number of respondents had had swimming lessons in the past. The main reasons given for this were:

- Parents didn’t swim and so the individual lacked confidence
- To prepare for holidays
- To learn skills not learnt when younger

Swimming for health

- Swimming was seen as a solution during pregnancy. It was not seen as a health solution outside of pregnancy
- There was a recognition that swimming tends to be used as a tool for health when people are obese or ill. Some felt that swimming should be introduced whilst women are healthy
- Fees paid in advance or in bulk, tend to encourage more disciplined attendance and have greater potential to achieve more regular attendance and hence higher levels of fitness
- Swimming was seen as good for injuries and rehabilitation due to weight bearing properties
- Some saw it as good for toning
- In general, there was low engagement between women and swimming as a health solution
- Gyms were more social. You acknowledge people. Pools were not so social. You avoided eye contact
- Private pools are seen as cleaner, better and more customer friendly – but not in all cases

Swimming needs to consider how it can promote itself as an activity that will support good health to non regular female swimmers in this age group who normally prefer other activities for purposes of maintaining a healthy life style.

Participation in National SwimFit as a fitness vehicle

Respondents were shown literature and information concerning the ASA's *National SwimFit Campaign*. They were asked to comment on whether they felt the project would appeal to them and how it could be improved, if at all.

- SwimFit as a concept was thought to be good but the publicity leaflets gave an impression of competitive swimming rather than the general swimmer getting fitter. The key fact was target setting as a form of encouragement
- SwimFit would be better if it was coupled with the help of an instructor.
- A number of women were not aware of the existence of SwimFit and felt that they could benefit from it. They expected to see the leaflets displayed in such places as supermarkets, libraries and health centres as well as pools
- Doctors should “push” the idea and have leaflets in their surgeries. They were thought to have these leaflets in their surgeries very rarely

Suggestions for SwimFit

- The photograph proved to be intimidating to respondents as it depicted an accomplished swimmer. Respondents commented on first seeing the leaflet “It’s a man”
- Most respondents were not sure how to use the leaflet and asked if it was for information only or whether it was to be used in the pool as part of a swimming programme
- Respondents also felt the typeface should be larger and clearer
- The programme should also embrace the lower standard swimmer. There should be a clear pathway of graduation with targets that are attainable even for the beginner
- SwimFit could be accompanied by equipment such as a wristband that will provide performance information such as how many lengths have been completed, calories burnt, heart rate etc.

Swimming- the sensory aspects

The visual impact, the noise and the smell of the swimming venue played a large part in the decision making process. The senses had a greater part to play than in most other physical activities. The views beneath demonstrate the degree to which this part is played:

Sunbathing and swimming

- Holiday swimming was seen as an accompaniment to sunbathing, i.e. sunbathing was the primary and swimming the secondary activity when on holiday

- Holiday swimming was seen as a way of cooling off and was psychologically associated with heat rather than cold
- The use of the pool was more about cooling off than swimming
- Despite the longer term nature of the exposure, body exposure was regarded quite differently by British white females who, despite the permanence of the exposure, found it less intimidating than the short term exposure in pools

Smells whilst swimming at the sea

- Typical smells were related as being sun tan lotion, coconut, pineapple, trees, flowers, salt, seaweed, Malibu, smell of the outdoors
- 'The senses do a lot before you even make your mind up, what you smell is what you get' (*skilled employee, Bradford*)

Smells whilst at the indoor pool

- Typical smells were regarded as being chlorine and bleach, dirty changing rooms, toilets, sweat, smelly socks
- These smells were as much about perception as the reality. The swimming pool industry has these perception problems to overcome

Women only swimming

- Respondents realised that women are very aware of their own image at a pool and that they bestow more agency on this feeling than is likely to be bestowed by other pool users but this doesn't prevent them having these feelings. Some respondents were concerned about other people's attitudes towards them
- Provision needs to be made for women only swimming (supported by women only teachers and lifeguards) in local areas with large Asian and Jewish communities among other religions and cultural groups
- It was felt that there were considerable cultural barriers to some groups before they could even enter a pool
- These barriers were felt to be insufficiently addressed in a school swimming and learning situation which put some women at a disadvantage
- Some respondents said that women should be able to exercise choice. It should be an individual decision and that often insufficient choice was available to them
- Equally, some women were not concerned at all – in fact, one or two alluded to the fact that they liked to admire fit men's bodies at the pool themselves, thereby reversing the stereotype

The importance of the size of the pool

- There was a general preference for smaller pools. Long pools were thought to be too daunting and it was often a long way to go to touch the side.

- It was stated that you do not need big pools to be able to carry out fitness training
- For a few mothers, it was also felt that it was easier to “keep an eye” on the children if you were swimming independently at the same time. This contrasted with other mothers who found the whole experience of taking the children for a lesson so daunting the there was little opportunity for them to swim themselves
- Rectangular, functional pools tend to be the norm for local pools but “holiday pools” tend to be different, less functional shapes and are more interesting

Children and swimming

- All women, whether mothers or not, felt that safety and learning to swim for children was paramount and a life skill
- Those women who did not have children preferred to avoid them at a swimming pool but recognised that they should have the opportunity to swim.
- It was more difficult for the more active swimmers to find “good” water time during the school holidays.
- Mothers who had had poor learn to swim experiences themselves preferred a third party to teach their children as they did not want them to have similar experiences. They were too anxious in a swimming situation to take their children themselves

Views on the marketing of swimming

- There was a feeling that adult women’s classes could be promoted more strongly within local authorities and pools- e.g., when women were accompanying their children then power point slides, displays or the tannoy could be better utilised to promote parallel classes
- Sponsorship was generally well received if it was going to help to fund and improve the overall offering from a pool. It was important that the sponsor had a good image and that the sponsor’s product was commensurate with health and swimming
- A branded chain of swimming pools was more likely to help to reassure customers.
- Admission prices can be a deterrent, particularly to young women with a family. Respondents considered that whilst pools now have to produce a financial return, promotional and other pricing mechanisms should be used to encourage women to take part

Branded pools

- Women are more likely to support branded pools if the brand is sympathetic to the venue, e.g. sporty or healthy products
- Fast food sponsors were thought to be a particularly bad idea as such brands are not associated with health and fitness. It was thought that mothers would be put under pressure to feed their children at a sponsor’s sales point following a swim which could be unhealthy

- Subject to the type of sponsor, branded pools were thought to be a good idea where sponsorship would bring more revenue to the pool and would benefit the community through price reductions and improved facilities
- Branded pools were also more likely to bring sponsors that demand higher standards from facility providers which would be a benefit to customers

Swimming as an activity is likely to be more popular with women if it is not regarded as a sport but as either a leisure activity or a 'gateway' to other leisure pursuits.

General Household Survey

The 2002 General Household Survey (GHS) showed that swimming was the second most popular participatory physical activity after walking. Even outdoor swimming which is available to most of the public for only a limited period of the year, had been participated in by 12.% of the population in the 12 months preceding interview:

Table 4:

Participation rates	in the twelve months before interview(%)	
	in the twelve months before interview(%)	in the four weeks before interview(%)
Walking	45.9	34.9
Any swimming	34.8	13.8
Indoor swimming	30.3	12.0
Outdoor swimming	12.5	2.8
Keep fit/yoga	21.5	12.0
Cycling	19.1	9
Snooker/pool/billiards	16.9	9.2
Ten pin bowls/skittles	15.3	3.3
Golf	12.1	4.8
Weight training	9.6	5.8
Any soccer	9.1	4.9

Source: National Statistics © Crown Copyright 2002

This was the first time that the GHS figures for women have been fully reported and the survey found that there was a bias towards women in both the case of those people that had been interviewed in the four weeks and the twelve months prior to interview. The exception to this was outdoor swimming where the preponderance was towards men. Whilst this bias towards men in outdoor swimming may not be wholly significant, it should be noted that the focus groups had often stated that they preferred outdoor swimming and wished to see more outdoor swimming opportunities but that less women are swimming outdoors than both men and those that swim indoors by some considerable margin. Potentially this shows a gap between what women state they want and how they act:

Table 5:

Participation rates by sex						
	In the four weeks before interview(%)			In the twelve months before interview(%)		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Any swimming	12	15	14	33	37	35
Indoor swimming	10	14	12	28	33	30
Outdoor swimming	3	3	3	14	11	12

Source: National Statistics © Crown Copyright 2002

This research has focused on women between the ages of 25 and 34 years and the GHS embraces this group in two sections, that of 25-29 years and 30-44 years. A higher percentage of people in these two age groups were found to have swum in the previous four weeks than almost any other age group. Moreover, there was a bigger gap between men's participation- 14 to 20% in the 25 to 29 year group than at any other time in the life cycle.

This data reflects the level of participation in swimming at this age and demonstrates that despite many of the negative comments in the focus groups made by women who did not swim regularly, there are a significant number of women of this age who do choose to swim. The high percentage of people who swim in this age group may reflect both a need to use a pool during this life phase and it may also reflect a higher level of satisfaction with swimming providers and provision than the focus groups, with its slight bias towards non-regular users, had so far indicated:

Table 6:

Participation rates by age and sex in the four weeks before interview(%)			
	Any swimming	Swimming- men	Swimming-women
16-19 years	19	17	21
20-24 years	17	15	19
25-29 years	17	14	20
30-44 years	20	18	22
45-59 years	13	11	14
60-69 years	7	6	9
70+	3	3	3
Total	14	12	15

Source:National Statistics ©Crown Copyright 2002

Of greater concern is the decline in women's swimming. This decline can be identified in every single age group except one, that of the 45-49 group, although the extrapolated data from the *Business of Swimming* data which follows shows that there are less people swimming in the 45-54 age group than any of the other age groups.

The decline in the age groups under review is 4.3 and 2.0% respectively, the 25-29 group declining at a much faster rate than any other group:

Table 7:

Female participation rates by age in the four weeks before interview(%)			
	1996	2002	% decline
16-19 years	22.8	21.3	1.5
20-24 years	21.2	18.6	2.5
25-29 years	24.2	19.9	4.3
30-44 years	24.2	22.1	2.0
45-59 years	13.8	14.3	-0.5
60-69 years	10.1	8.6	1.5
70+	3.3	2.7	0.6
Total	16.5	15.1	1.4

Source:National Statistics ©Crown Copyright 2002

When participation was considered over the 12 months prior to interview, the decline was equally concerning. The 25-29 group showed an 8.7% decline and the 30-44 group, 7.0%. Over a six year period, this is significant because it reflects the whole population and includes private and public use swimmers as well as those not swimming at all:

Table 8:

Female participation rates by age in the twelve months before interview(%)			
	1996	2002	% decline
16-19 years	64.7	47.3	17.4
20-24 years	61.9	50.0	11.9
25-29 years	63.7	55.0	8.7
30-44 years	57.3	50.3	7.0
45-59 years	36.1	35.4	0.7
60-69 years	22.0	20.7	1.3
70+	7.1	7.1	0.0
Total	41.4	36.6	4.8

Source: National Statistics © Crown Copyright 2002

The overall position for women’s swimming shows that the number of women taking part in swimming rose slightly from 15% in 1990 through the period to 1996 and has since declined to its 1990 level. More specifically, the percentage of men swimming indoors has remained at a similar level since 1987 whilst women’s indoor swimming has increased by 3%:

Table 9:

Trends in participation in 4 weeks before interview-participation rates by years(%)					
	1987	1990	1993	1996	2002
Any swimming- men		14	15	13	12
Any swimming women-		15	16	17	15
Indoor swimming- men	10	11	12	11	10
Indoor swimming- women	11	13	14	15	14
Outdoor swimming-men	4	4	4	3	3
Outdoor swimming-women	3	4	3	3	3

Source: National Statistics © Crown Copyright 2002

A breakdown of socio-economic groups shows that 61% of people swimming are in the professional and managerial classes. This is thought to be due to a basket of factors such as the rising cost of swimming, the need for and cost of personal transport rather than public transport to get to many pools and a higher awareness of the health and physical benefits among the professional and managerial classes. Business encouragement and support for employees could therefore be an important factor in encouraging adult swimming:

Table 10:

Participation rates in swimming in the four weeks before interview by socio-economic classification of household reference person (%)	
Large employers & higher managerial	24
Higher professional	20
Lower managerial & professional	17
Intermediate	13
Small employers & own account	12
Lower supervisory & technical	11
Semi-routine	9
Routine	8
Never worked & long-term unemployed	8

Source: National Statistics © Crown Copyright 2002

Swimming for women (as well as for all swimmers) is at its most popular in the south east, south west and London and at its least popular in Yorkshire and Humberside:

Table 11:

Participatory rate in the four weeks before interview by Government region(%)	In 12 months before interview (%)		
	All	Women Only	Women Only
North East	12	13.7	35.0
North West	13	15.3	34.2
Yorkshire & Humberside	13	12.7	32.7
East Midlands	12	14.0	35.1
West Midlands	11	13.2	33.5
East of England	13	13.7	36.2
London	14	15.4	37.1
South East	15	17.3	41.4
South West	18	19.7	45.5
England	14		
Wales	13	15.5	38.0
Scotland	14	14.0	31.3
Great Britain	14	15.1	36.6

Source: National Statistics © Crown Copyright 2002

In 2002, more white females were swimming than other groups- 15.5% in the four weeks before interview:

Table 12:

Any swimming in 12 months prior to interview	
	%
BEM Female	23.3
White Female	37.6
All women	36.6
Any swimming in 4 weeks before interview	
	%
BEM Female	9.3
White women	15.5
All women	15.1

Source: National Statistics © Crown Copyright 2002

13% of people stated that the sport they would like to take part in if give the chance to do so would be swimming. With the exception of keep fit/aerobics, this was more than double any other sporting activity and this telling statistic suggests both that there is unmet demand and that the swimming industry is not maximising opportunity. Although this is an overall statistic, it is likely to include a significant number of women of all ages and partly reflects the focus groups findings in that some women stated that the pool they would really choose to swim at was too far away or where public transport was too expensive or arduous for them to go swimming:

Table 13:

Top 15 sports, games and physical activities people do not take part in but would like to do	
Sports/activities	% who would like to take part
Swimming	13
Keep fit/yoga/aerobics/dance	12
Golf	5
Skiing/snowboarding	5
Horse riding	5
Tennis	4
Self defence/martial arts/boxing	4
Badminton	4
Walking	4
Soccer	3
Other water sports	3
Cycling	3
Sailing	3
Motor sports	3
Bowls	3

Source: National Statistics © Crown Copyright 2002

Survey work in pools

The GHS considered the population as a whole. It is also important to examine the views of pool users. HNI carried out field work for reports into swimming in 2002 and 2004 and these findings have already been published in two reports. This *Report* examines the findings on women for the first time from this field work.

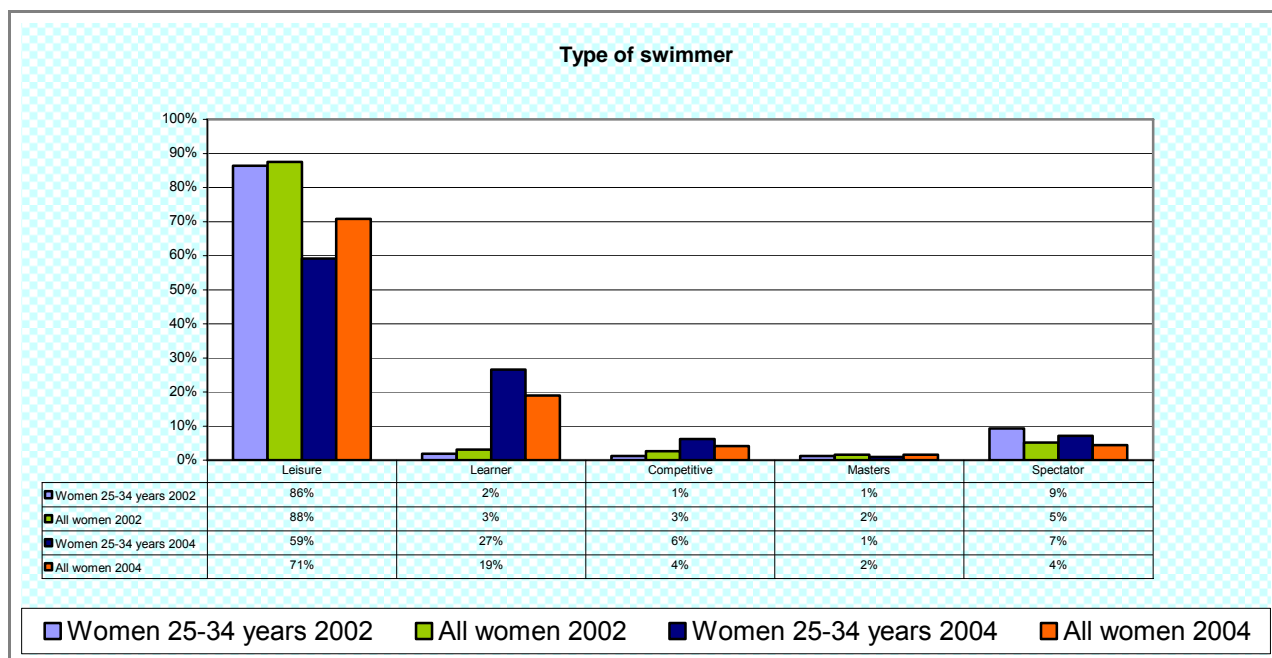
In all, 1,701 people participated in the survey in 2002 and 1,734 in 2004. Of the population surveyed, 1,081 and 1,047 respectively were women of any age. This *Report* focuses on women between the ages of 25 and 34 years and therefore 163 and 188 women were of specific interest. In order to provide context, each of the graphs beneath contains the responses from women of any age and women 25-34 years. (*All data and figures beneath have been subjected to rounding.*)

Weekly behavioural pattern of female swimming

Respondents were asked what type of pool user they considered themselves to be. The vast majority thought of themselves as leisure swimmers. As many as 27% of women in 2004, aged 25-34 years, considered themselves to be attending a pool as a learner:

Table 14:

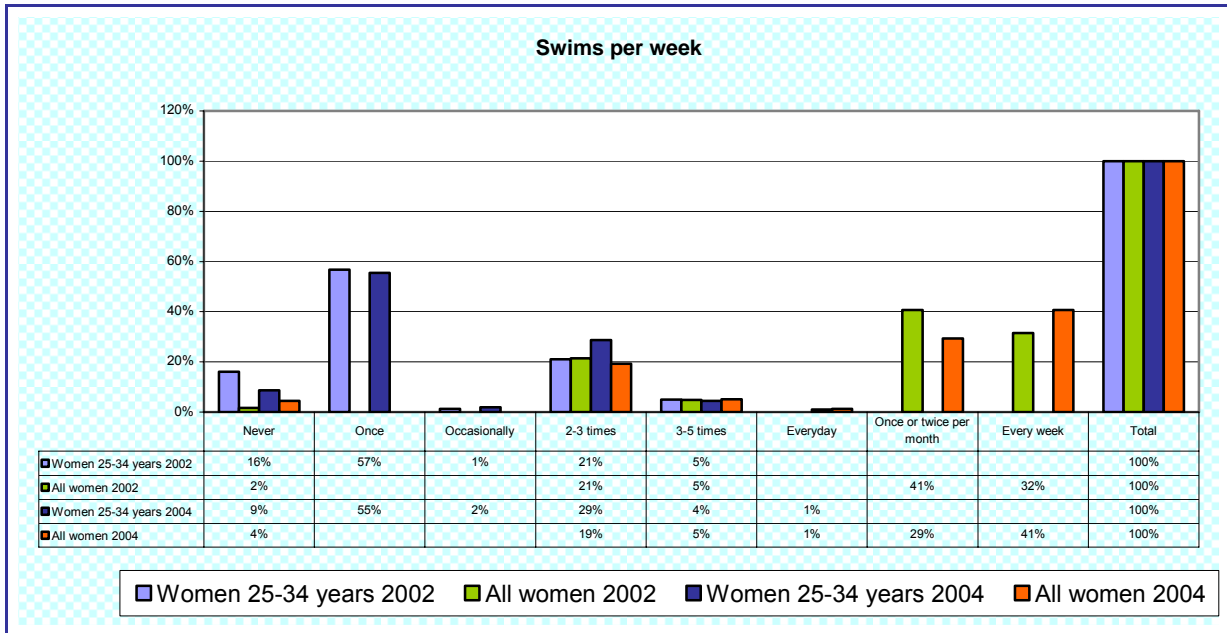
Type of pool user



Respondents were asked how many times a week they swam. Direct comparison between 2002 and 2004 was not possible because the options available in response to the question changed in 2004. The percentage of women, aged 25-34 years, who swam once a week remained much the same- 55 and 57%:

Table 15:

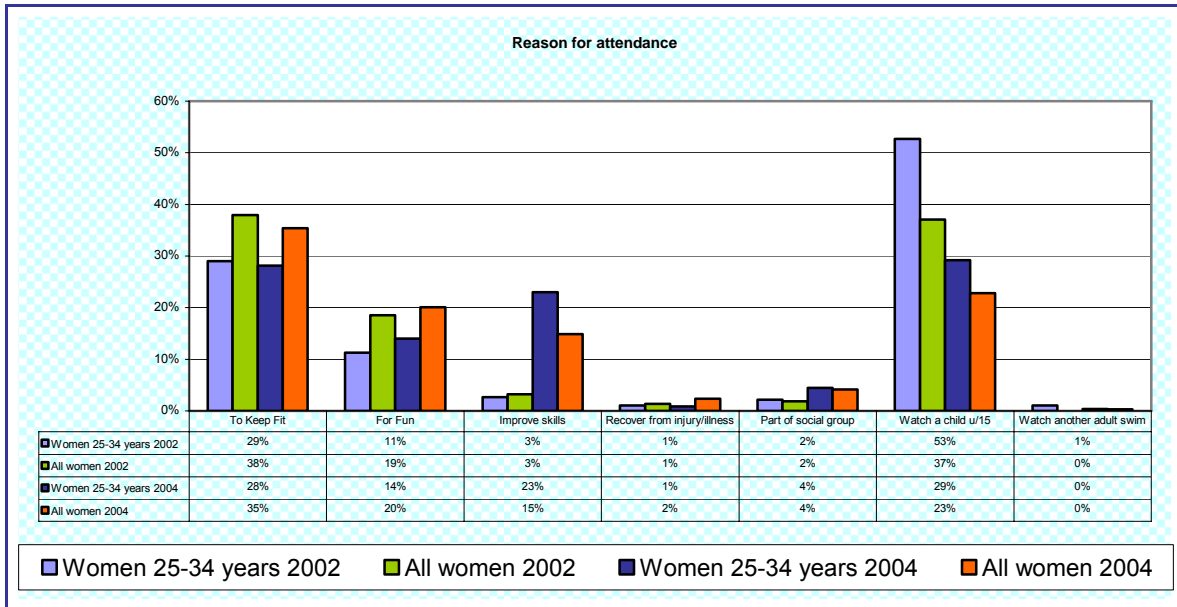
On average, how many times a week do you swim?



The main motivation given for attendance at the pool was either *to keep fit* (28%, 2004), *to watch a child swim* (29%, 2004) or *to improve skills* (23%, 2004). Only 14% visited a pool for fun which supports the attitudinal responses within the focus groups whereby swimming in indoor pools was not particularly regarded as a fun experience by this age group:

Table 16:

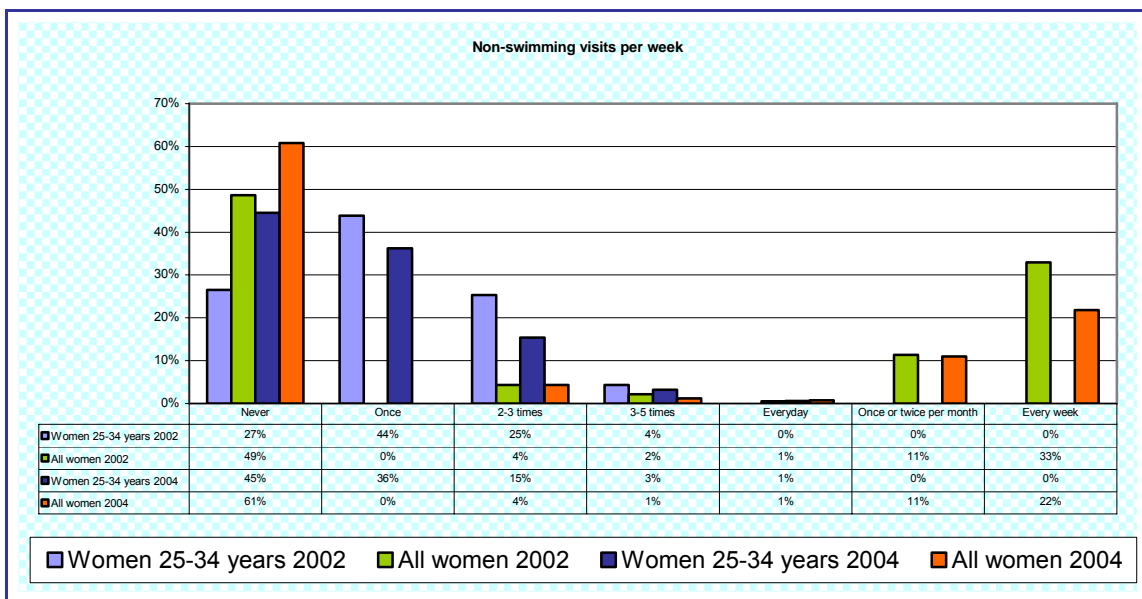
What is the main reason for your attendance today?



The question was also asked as to how many times the swimming pool was visited as a spectator rather than a swimmer. Over a third of women, aged 25-34 years, visit a pool once a week but do not swim and as many as 15% on 2-3 occasions:

Table 17:

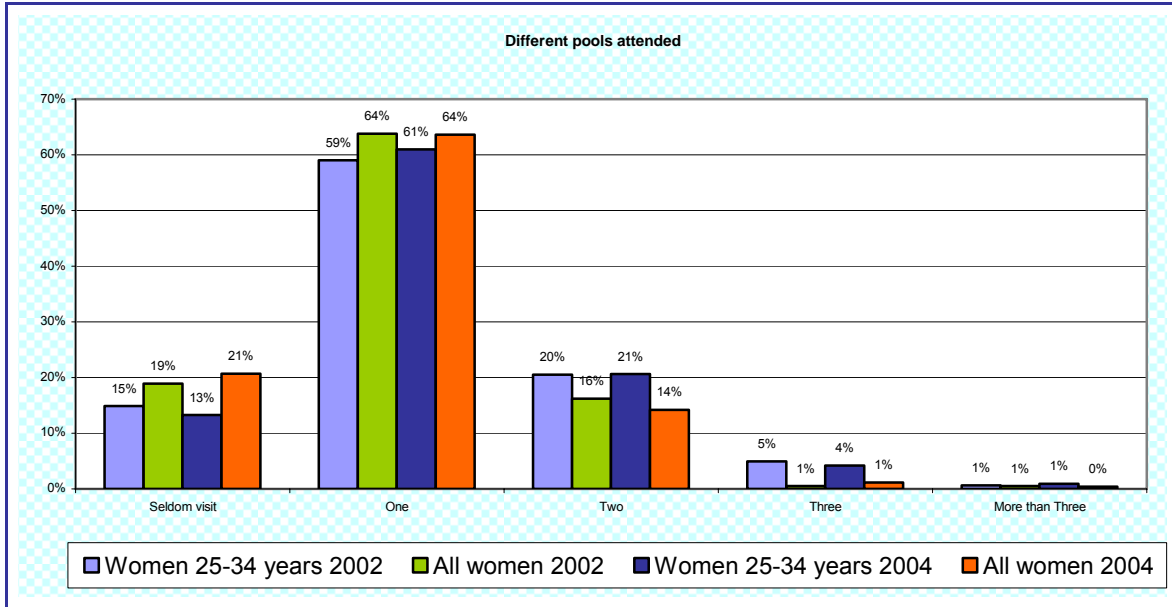
How many times a week do you visit the pool but not swim?



Most women attended a limited number of pools per week- just one or two:

Table 18:

How many different pools do you choose to attend each week?



In 2004, the landscape was one in which women, aged 25-34 years, stated that they mostly swam on weekdays. There was a marked drop out at weekends which began on a Friday. As many women worked, 4-10 p.m. was the most regularly used time for the swim:

Table 19:

What day do you normally swim on?

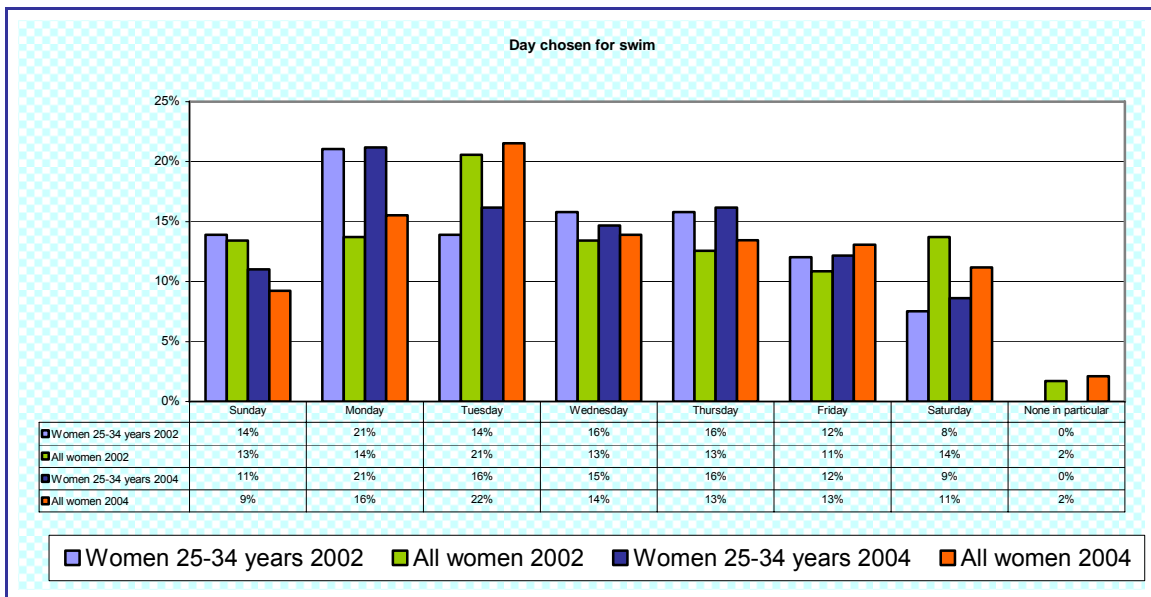
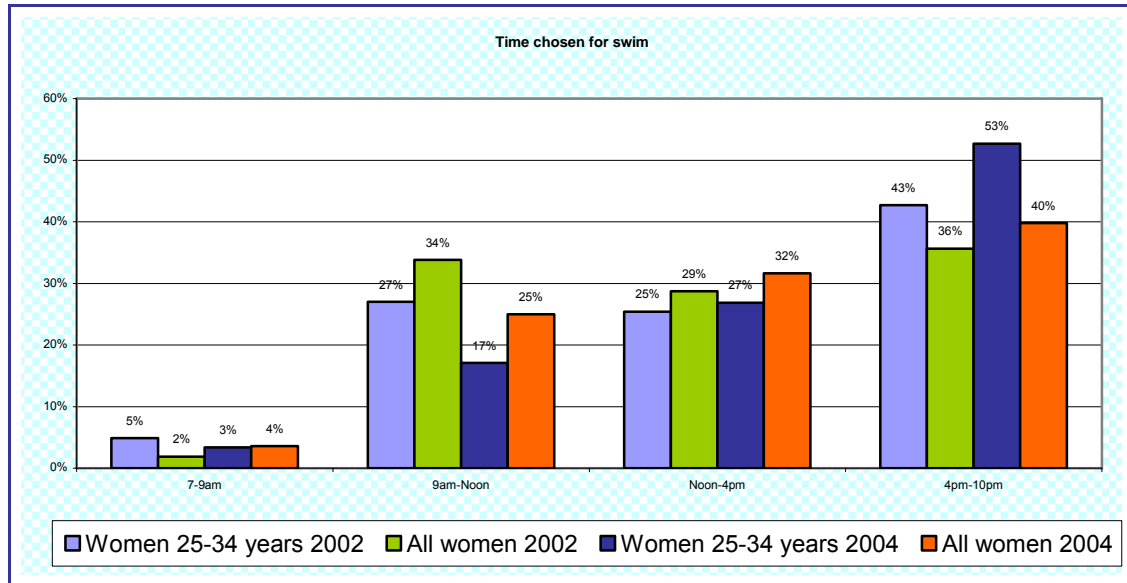


Table 20:

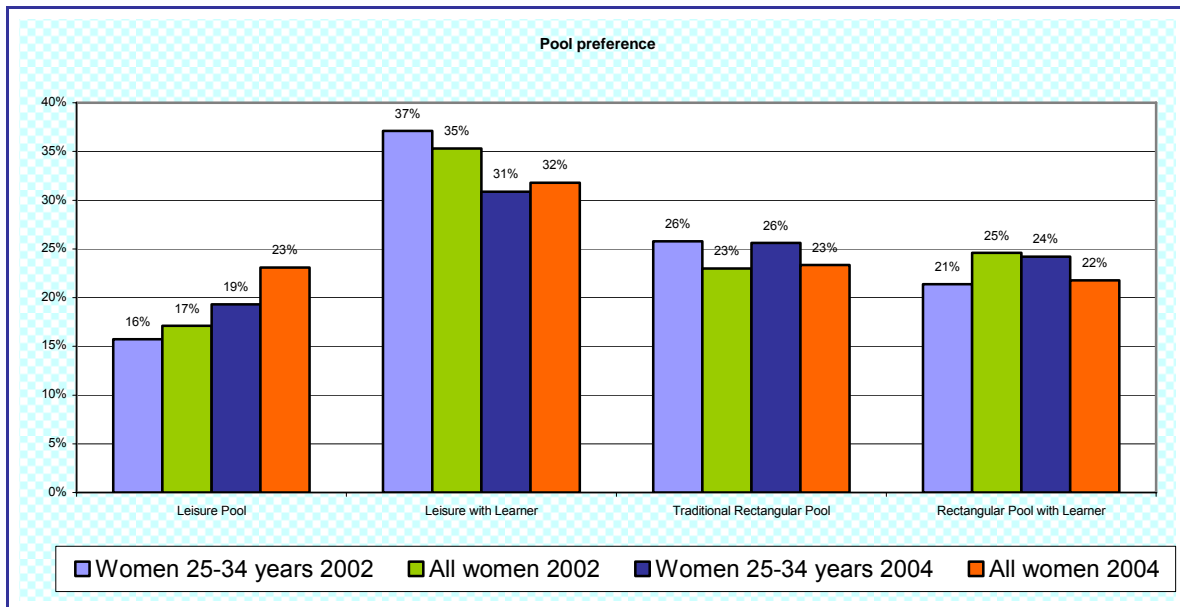
At what time of day do you normally swim?



More women of any age and women, aged 25-34 years, preferred a leisure pool with a learner pool. One reason for this could be that this would give them the opportunity to swim while their children had lessons in the learner pool:

Table 21:

Would you prefer your swim to be at a:



The concept of a quick swim (including changing) which last for an hour has been the staple diet of adults for many years. The norm is for an average distance of 200 to 1500 metres:

Table 22:

How long do you swim for on average at each visit?

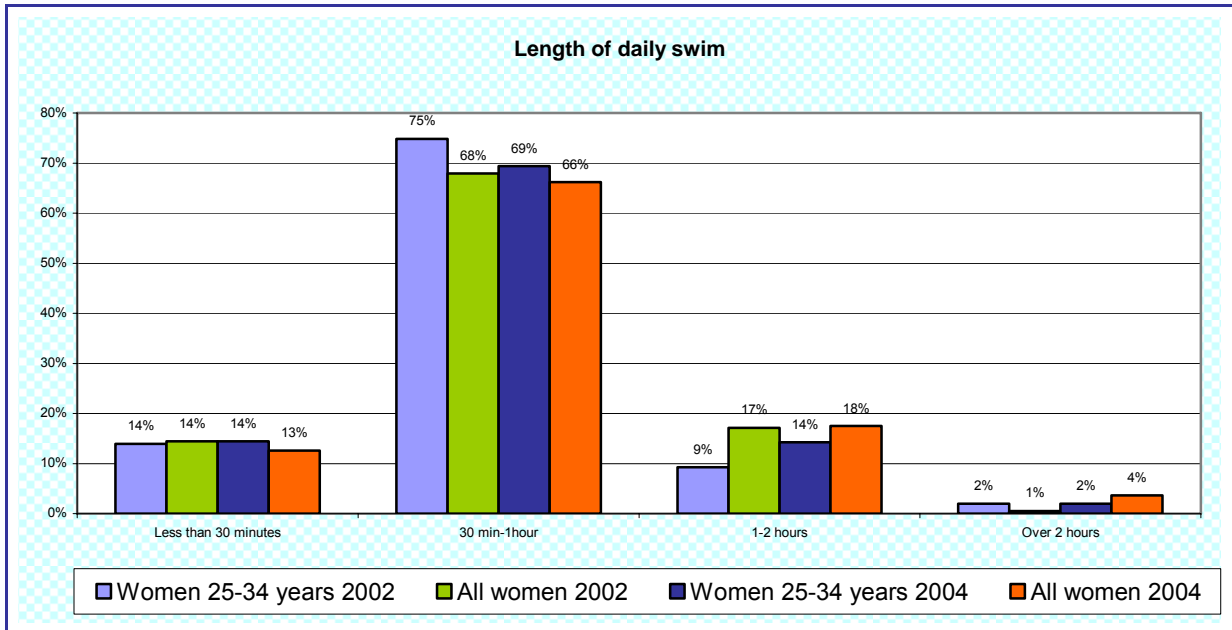
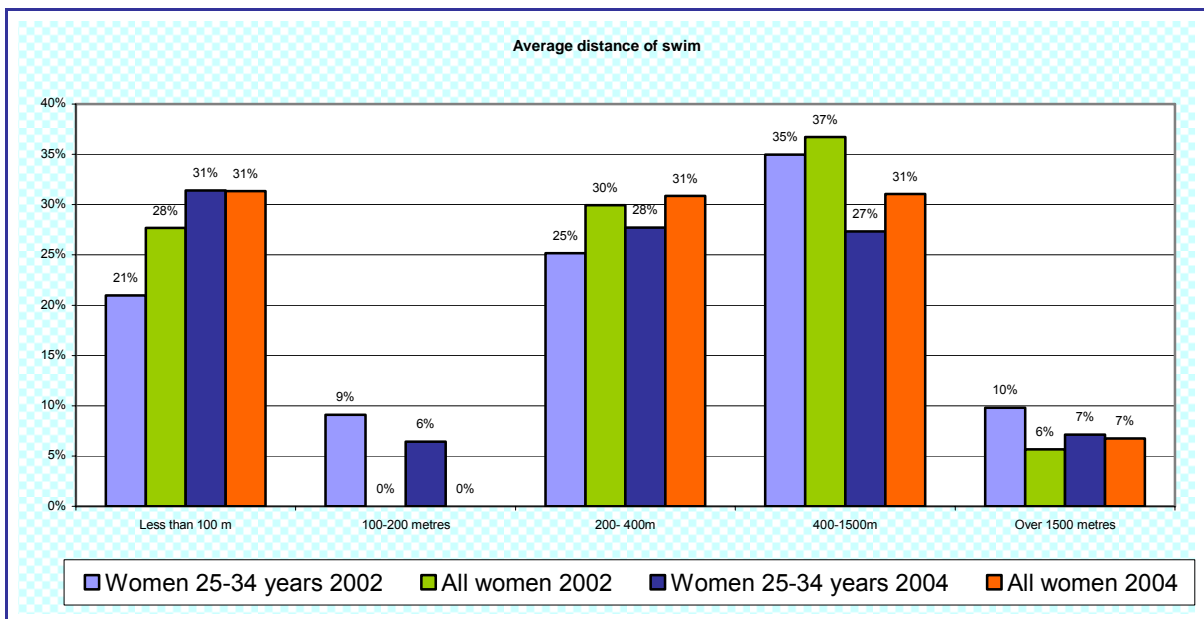


Table 23:

What distance do you swim on average?

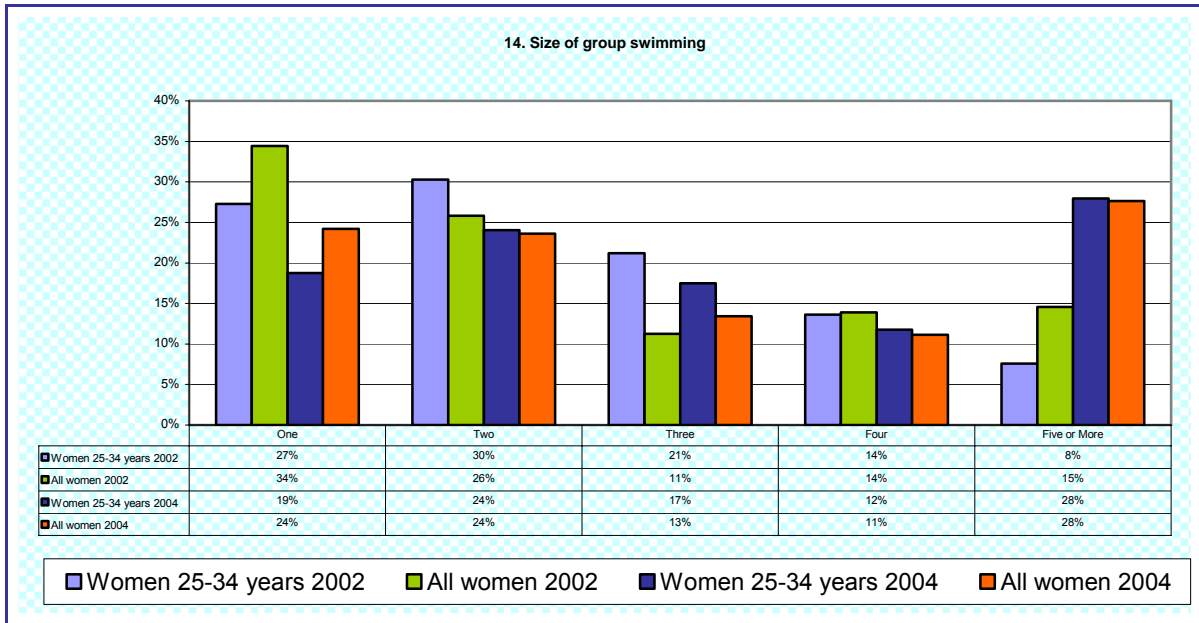


Given the focus groups' views that swimming was not a very sociable activity, it is interesting to note that the wider survey showed that less than 20% of women, aged 25-34 years, attended a pool on their own in 2004. One possible explanation for this dichotomy is that whilst not

necessarily seeing swimming as a sociable activity, women prefer to attend a pool with members of their own family group:

Table 24:

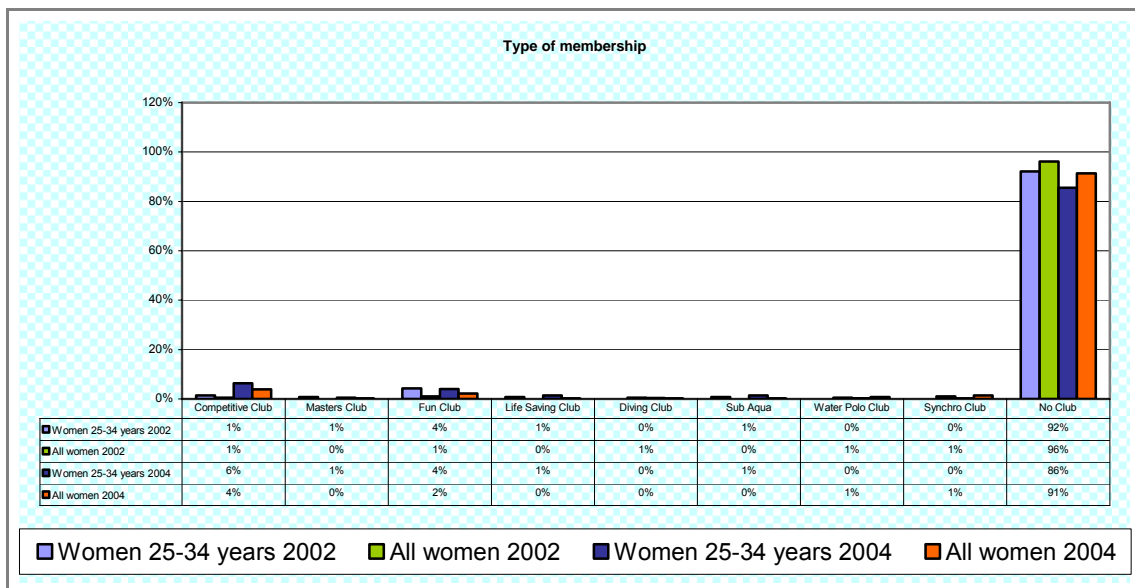
If you swim as a group, how many people do you attend with?



Very few women, aged 25-34 years, were members of a swimming club:

Table 25:

Are you a member of a swimming club? If so, what type of club?



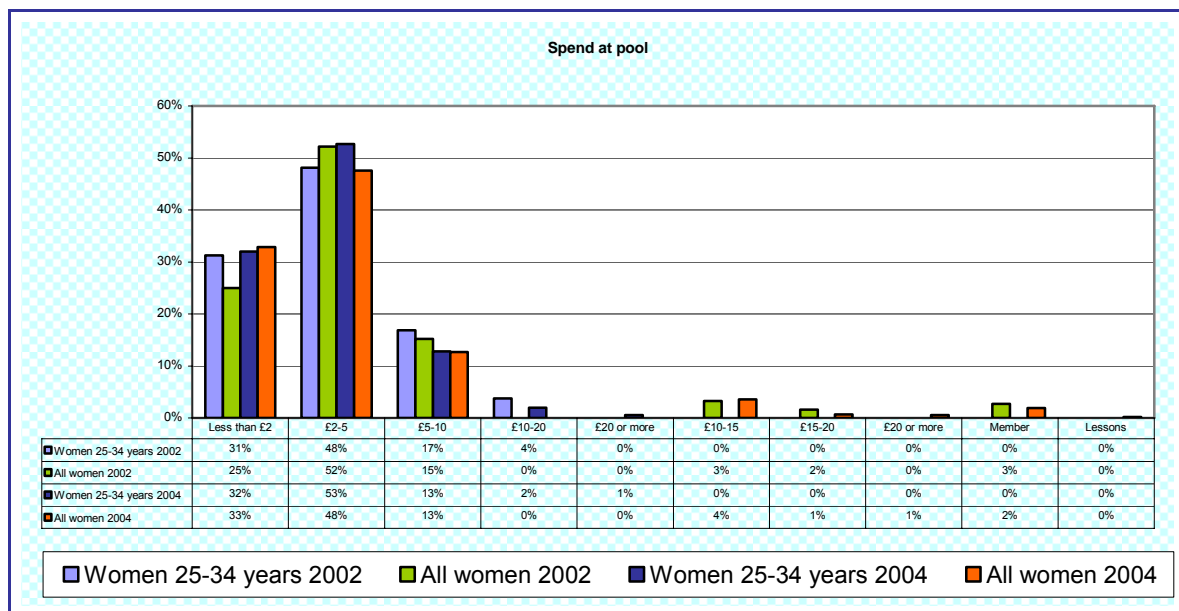
Pool pricing issues

Adult swimming prices are increasing year on year. As an example, in regular shaped pools, in London, the average admission charge in 2003/4 was £2.66, an increase of 5% over the previous year, the average price in the metropolitan districts was £2.40, an increase of 3%, in unitary authorities, it was up by 9% to £2.40, in non-metropolitan districts, it was £2.43, up by 12% and in Wales, up by 7% to £2.17.

48% of women, 25-34 years, spent between £2 and £5 in total including the admission charge in 2004 but as high as 32% were probably limiting their spend to just a swim as they were spending less than £2 in total:

Table 26

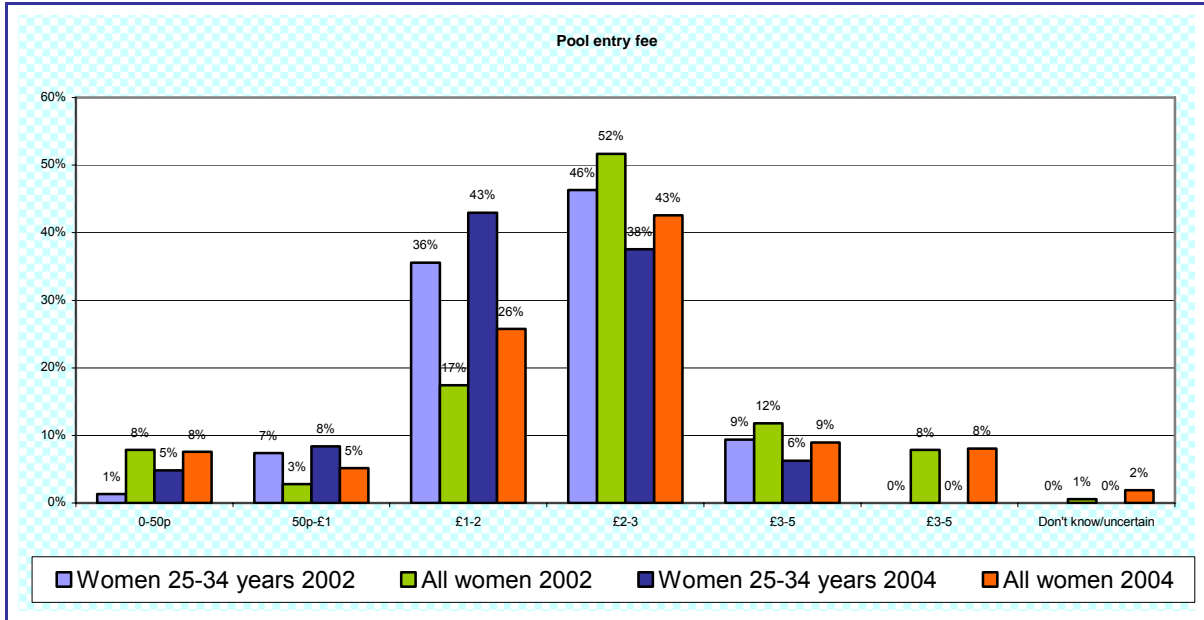
On average, how much money do you spend every time you visit the pool?



If we isolate the admission charge, women, aged 25-34 years, were paying very close to average prices in 2004. Occasionally there are special prices for pregnant women or there are short term price campaigns or even free swimming, so these may have had an impact on the findings:

Table 27:

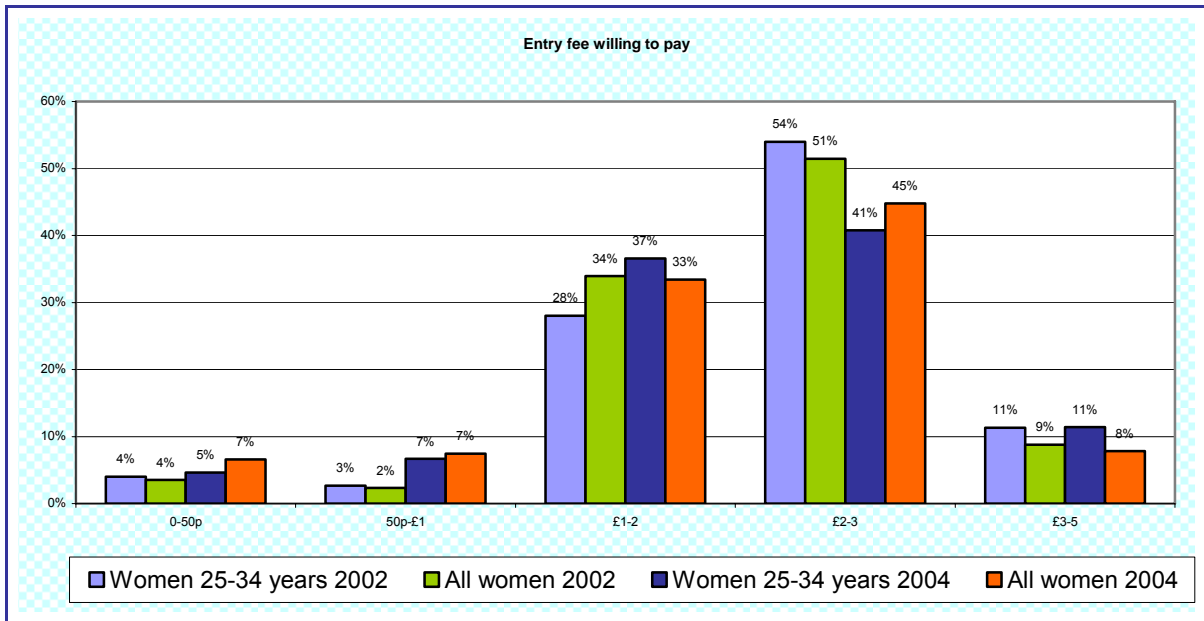
How much do you normally pay for pool entrance?



It was useful to look at price elasticity. How much more would customers be willing to pay for their swim before they turned to an alternative activity? We asked respondents to project, the price at which this might happen. This proved to be a difficult question. Many respondents felt that the pool admission price they paid was getting close to that point and found it difficult to envisage a situation in which they would continue to swim if there were price increases:

Table 28:

How much would you be willing to pay for your pool admission?



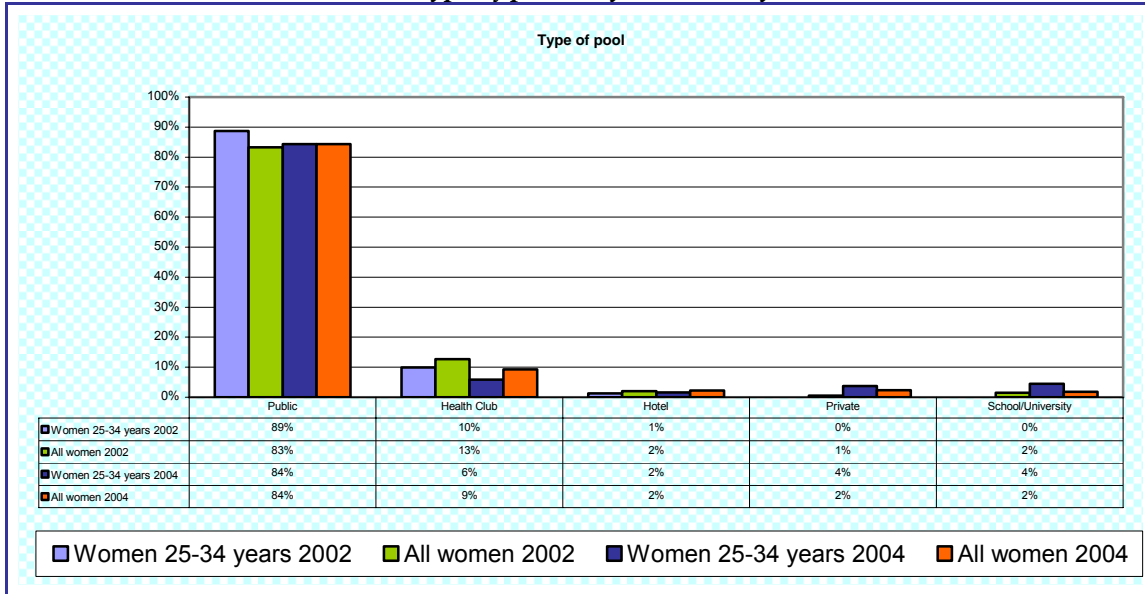
Type of pool normally used

All but two of the surveys were carried out at publicly accessible pools but not all respondents used only the pool at which they took part in the survey. They were asked which type of pool they normally used.

Over 80% used public pools but a number of respondents used alternative pools:

Table 29:

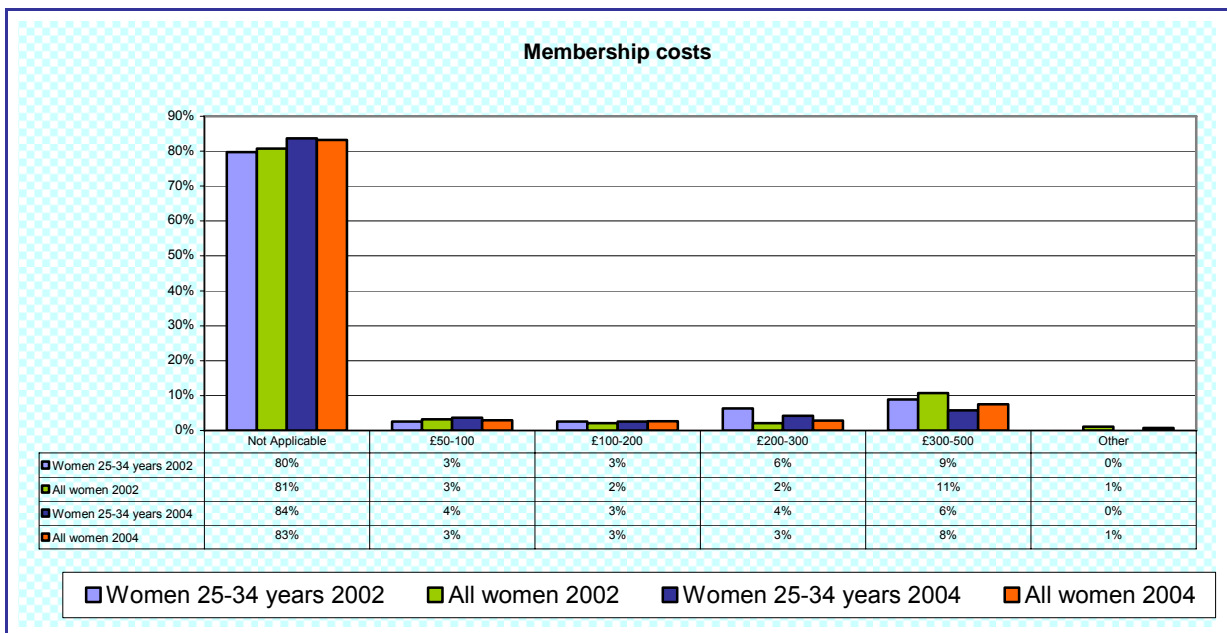
Which type of pool do you normally use?



Given that 97 out of the 99 pools surveyed were in the public sector, the number of women who were members of private health clubs was inevitably small. Some women chose to take their children for learn-to-swim sessions within the public sector but swam themselves in private facilities:

Table 30:

If a member of a health, hotel or private club, how much does your membership cost per year?

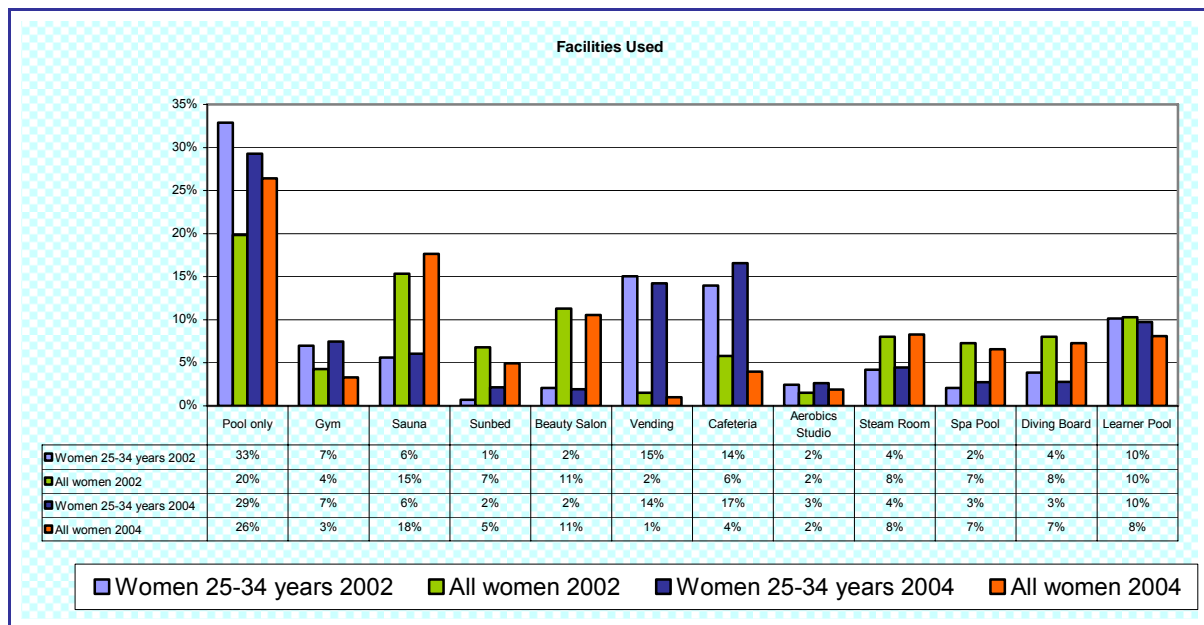


Facilities used at the pool

29% of women, aged 25-34 years, stated that they used the pool only, whilst a further 17% stated that they used the cafeteria and 14%, vending. Whilst it should also be borne in mind that the introduction and presence of facilities are generally a response to customer needs and wants, the number of women using other facilities would have been heavily dependent on which facilities were available at each of the pools and given the random sample of pools, there may have been more of one facility than another:

Table 31:

When at the swimming pool, what other facilities do you use?

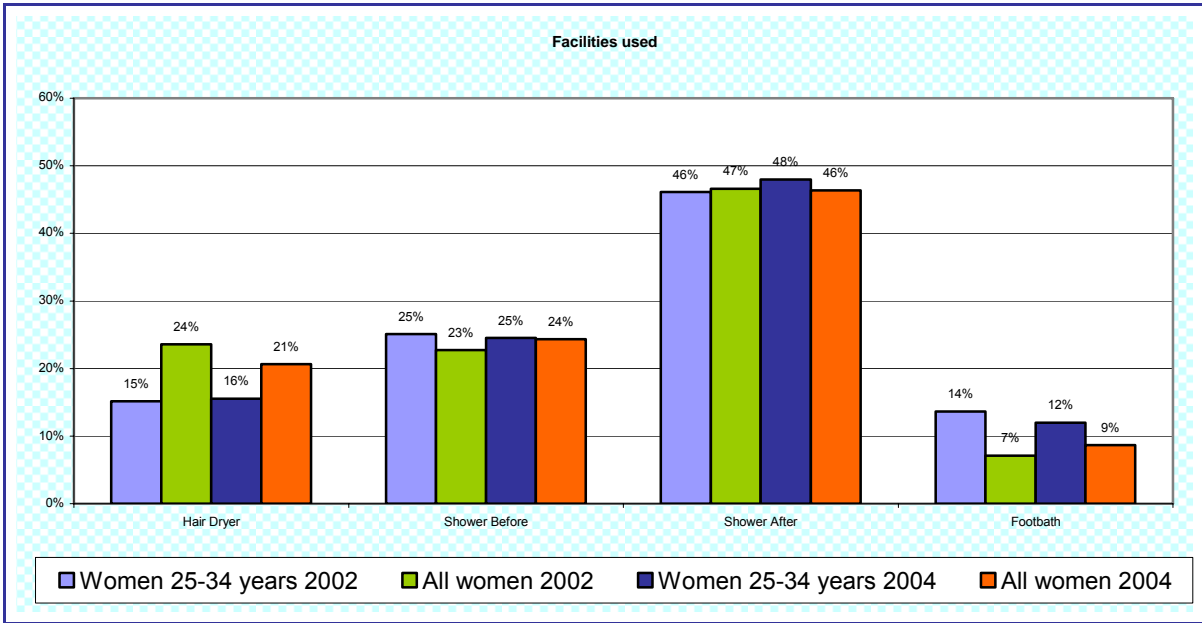


Respondents were also asked which of the facilities associated with personal hygiene they used when at the pool. The high percentage of women of all ages who use a shower after a swim again reflects the comments made during the focus groups in which focus group respondents stated that removal of chlorine and smells from hair and the body was important.

Whilst nearly half of all women showered afterwards as a response to these feelings, only a quarter of women showered before. This may be part of the paradigm seen in the focus groups whereby they stated that getting into the water was uncomfortable. The possibility exists that showering before a swim may be perceived as adding to this discomfort. As showers are available at all pools, almost tantalisingly, it may reflect the view that many women do not see themselves as part of the process in terms of maintaining overall hygiene in a pool. This strategic gap between a desire for greater hygiene on the one part and a need to recognise that an individual is part of the process of maintaining that hygiene is a problem to operators. The possible extension of this thought process is that hygiene is considered to be personal, almost internalised, but not part of a common consideration:

Table 32:

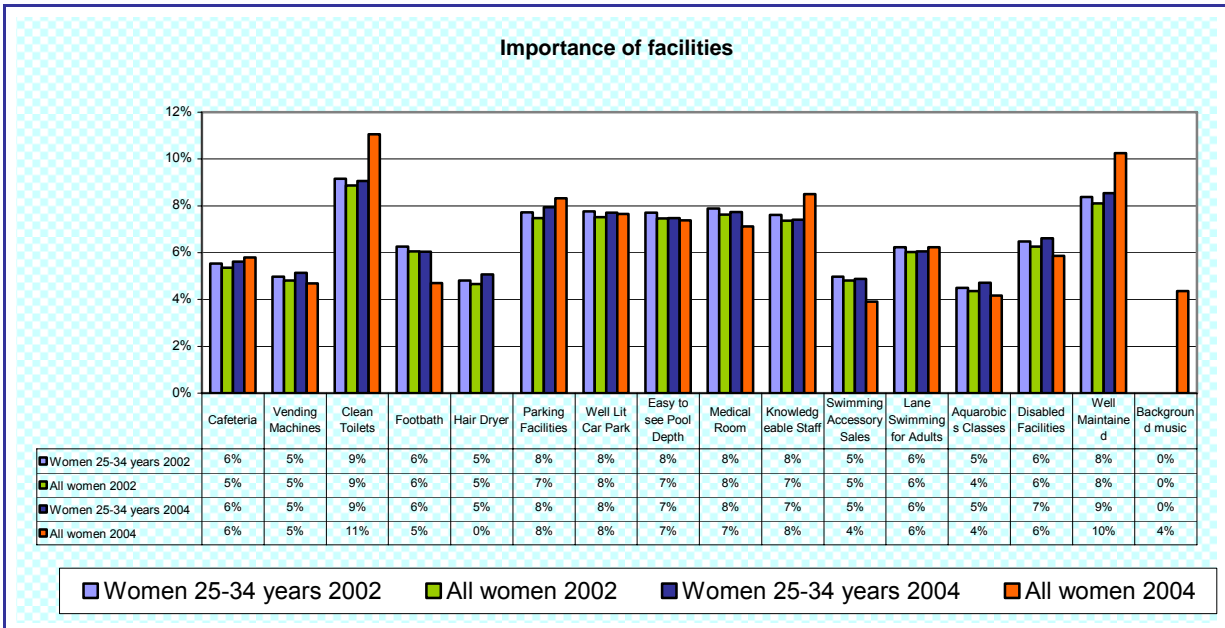
Which of these facilities do you use?



Respondents felt that *well maintained facilities* and *clean facilities* were important, and, partly as a reflection of the number *travelling by car*, parking facilities:

Table 33:

Which of these is important to you at a swimming pool?

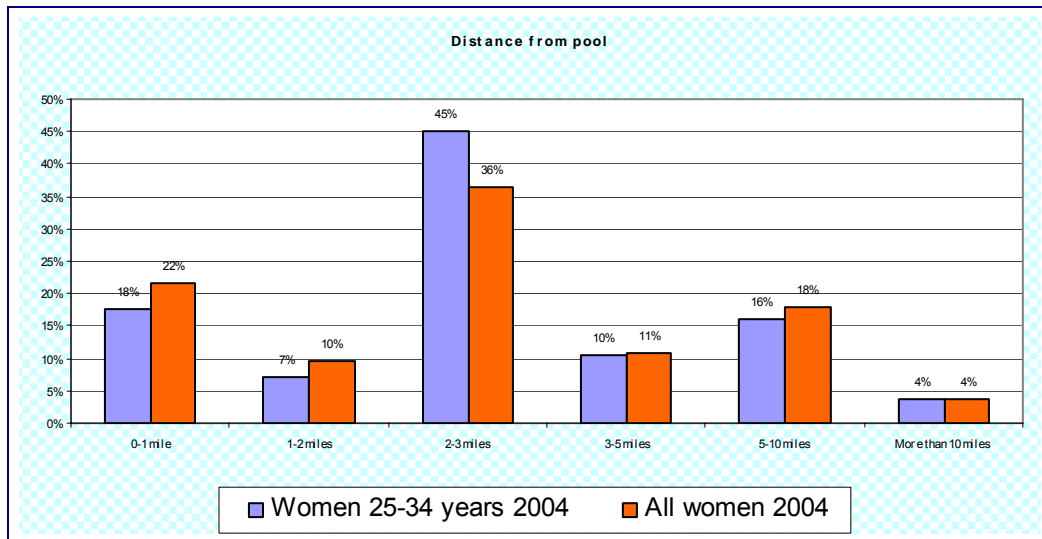


Getting to the pool

The following four questions formed part of the 2004 survey only. Nearly half of respondents lived within two to three miles of a pool with 80% being within 5 miles:

Table 34:

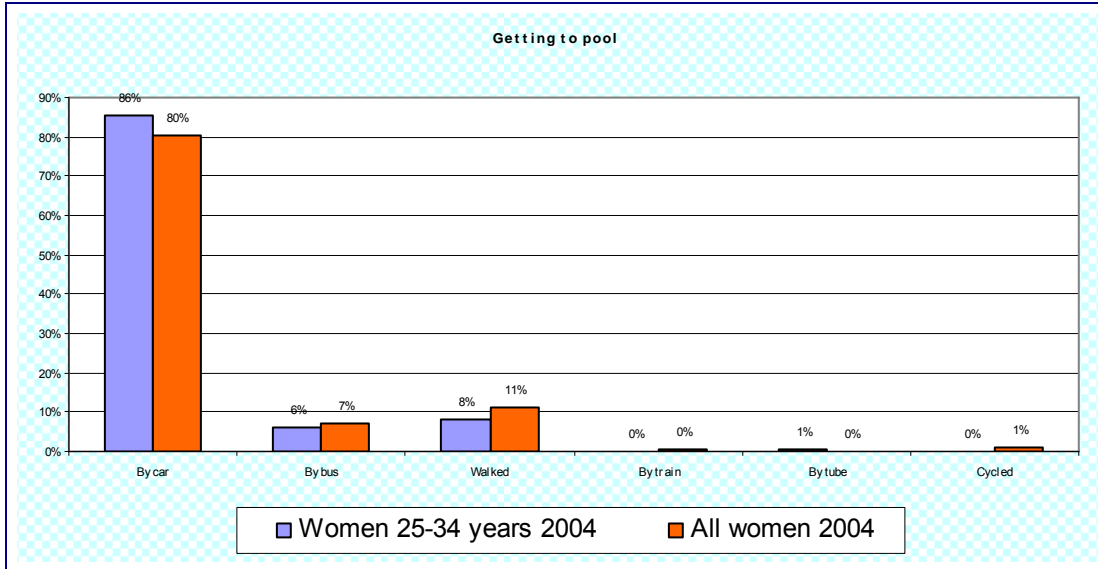
How far do you live from the pool?



53% of women, aged 25-34 years, stated they normally swam between 4 and 10 p.m. in the evening. Safety is therefore likely to be a factor in travelling to the pool, particularly if accompanied by children. Allied with the perception that cars are more convenient and personal, this may well be reflected in the high percentage of car users:

Table 35:

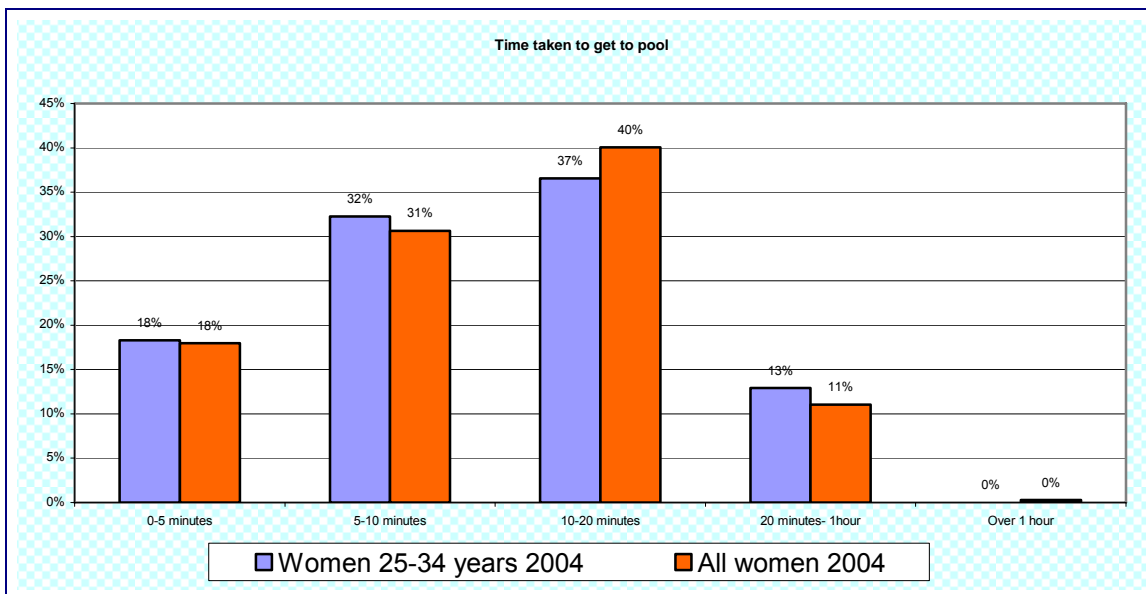
How did you get to the pool today?



All but 14% of women, aged 25-34 years, travel by car and the times beneath mostly reflect car journey times:

Table 36:

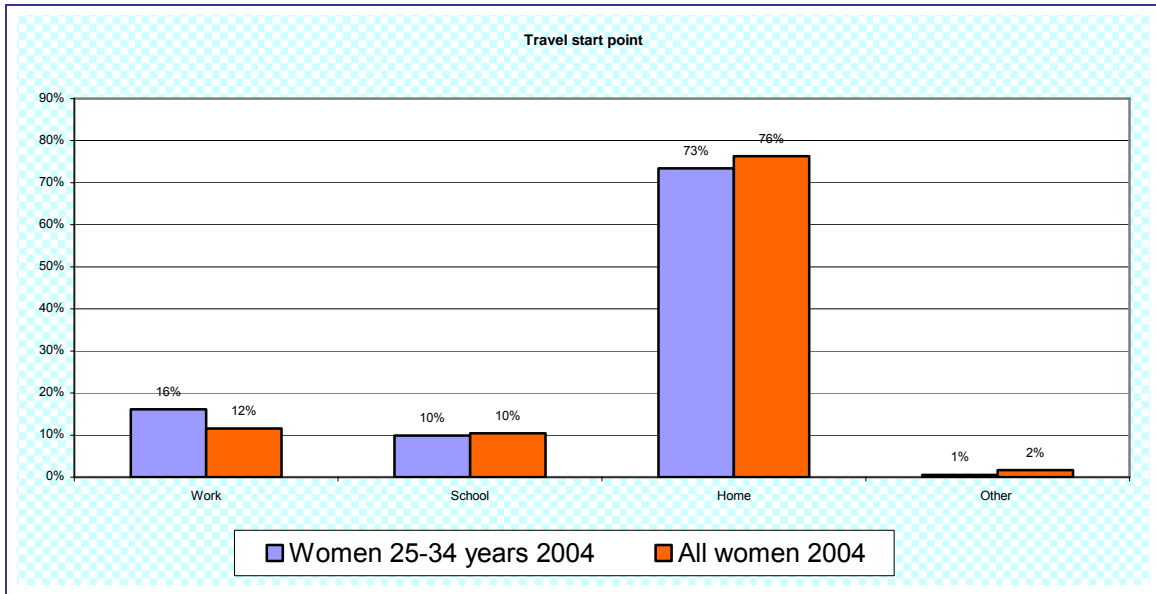
How long did it take you to get to the pool today?



The home was the principal start point:

Table 37:

Where did you start your journey from today?

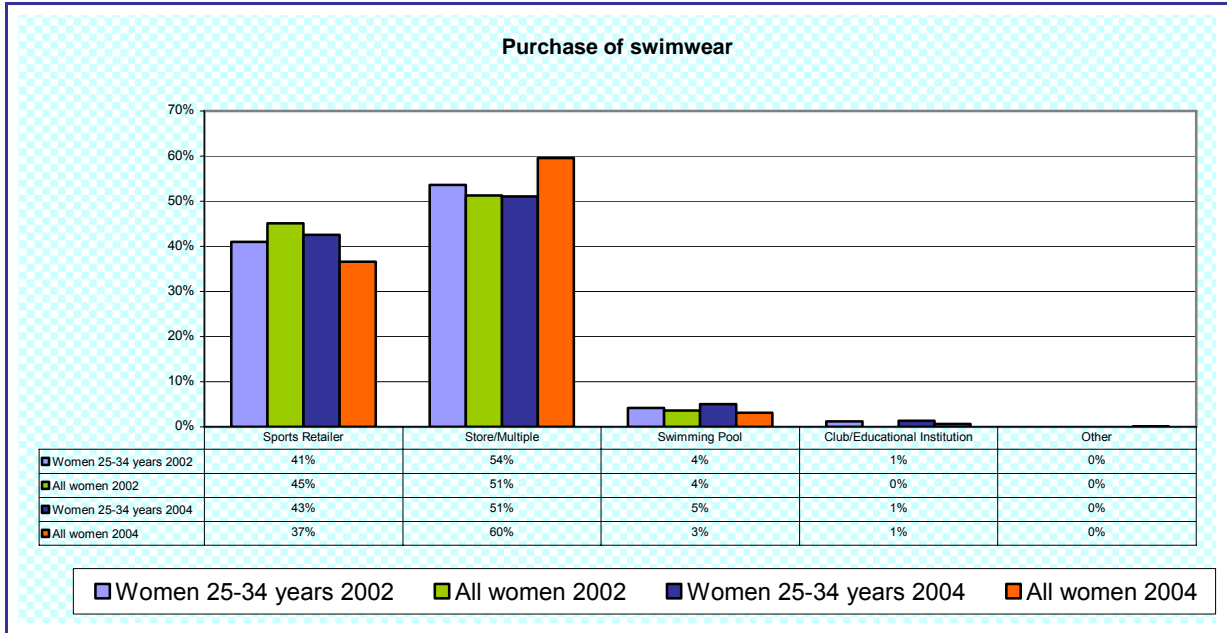


Other issues

Despite the reservations during the focus group sessions about buying swimwear in stores, 94% of women, aged 25-34 years, still purchased through retail outlets. The conclusion is that women purchased through retail because it was necessary and convenient rather than particularly enjoyable:

Table 38:

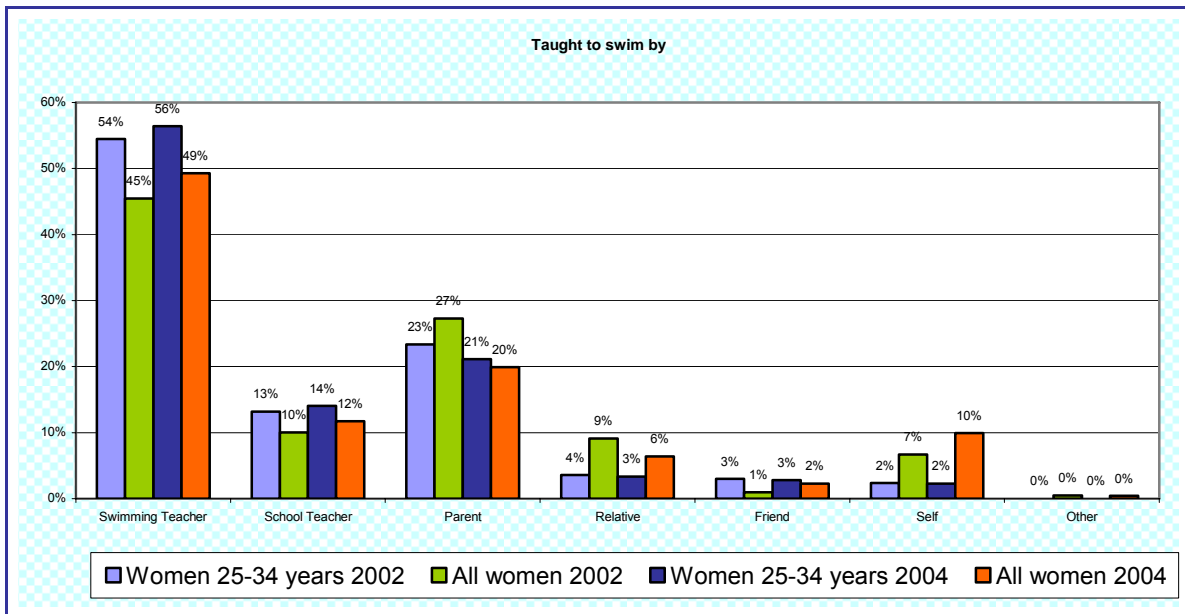
Where do you normally purchase your swimwear?



Swimming teachers still have an important role to play in the learning processes. They shape the very important, initial experiences and, based on these experiences, play a key part in determining the veracity of future involvement with swimming:

Table 39:

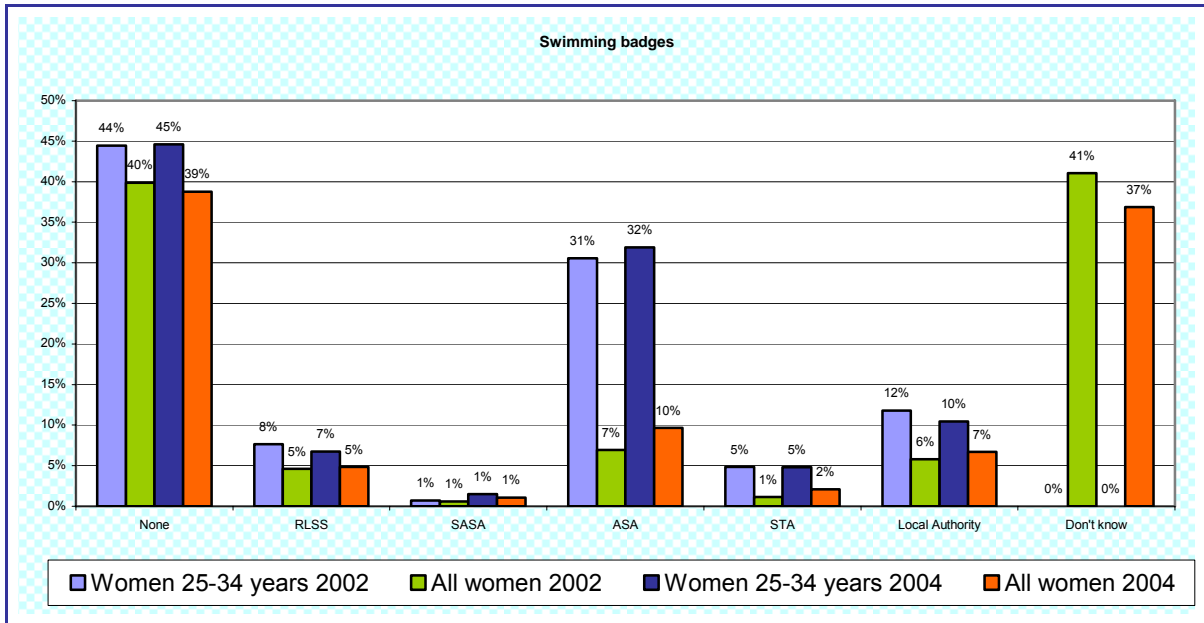
Who taught you to swim?



The survey also determined whether pool users had ever won a swimming badge:

Table 40:

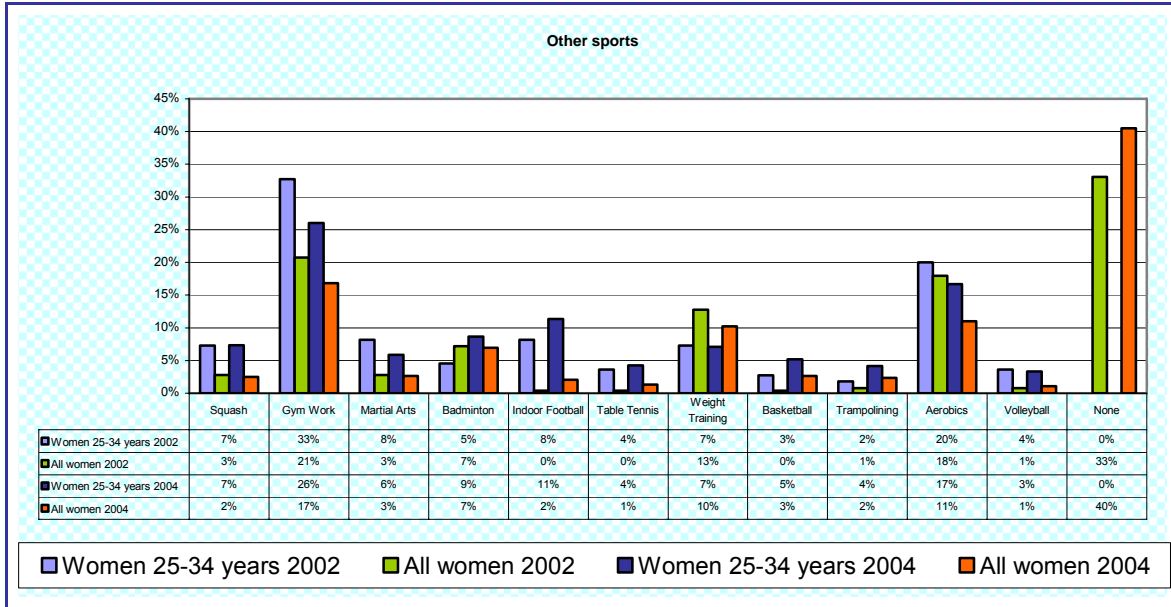
Have you ever taken a swimming badge. If so, what type of badge?



The survey also sought to determine whether women using pools were also likely to take part in other sports. Every respondent between the ages of 25-34 years took part in an additional activity, the most popular of these being gym work, 33%. The survey did not determine whether swimming was seen as the principal sport and vice versa. The conclusion is that women of this age who take part in swimming are also more than likely to take part in a dry side activity as well:

Table 41:

Do you take part in any of these indoor sports?

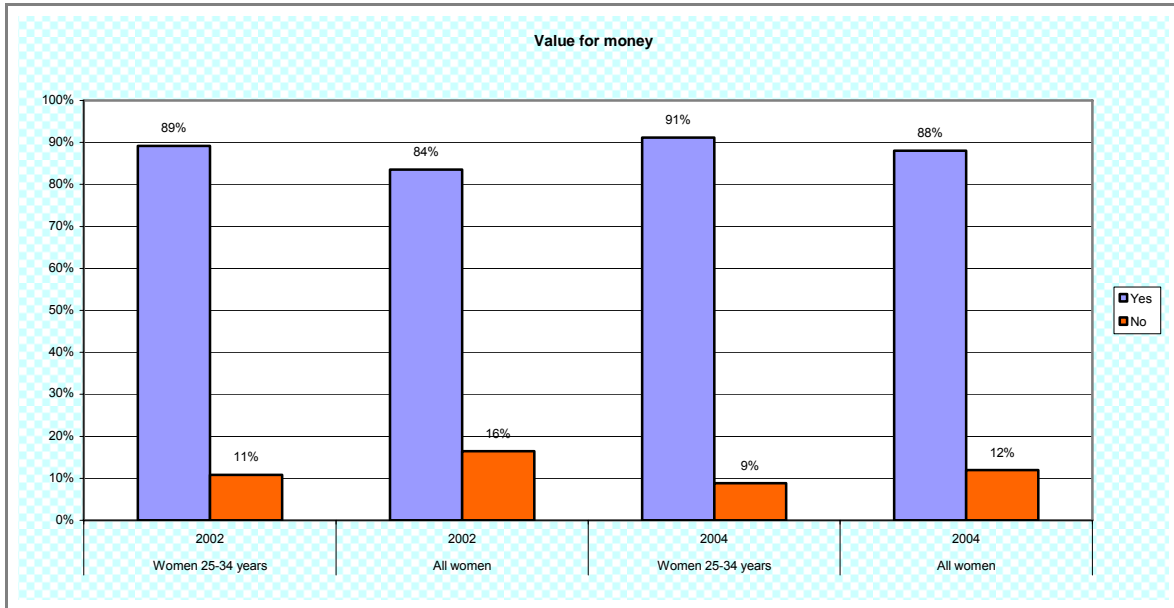


Linked gym, swimming and sauna programmes could increase female swimming admissions as the interest in taking part in the gym was greater and might encourage customers to swim at the same time

In the focus groups, HNI found that women, aged 25-34 years who regularly swam, felt they were receiving good value for their admission fee. This again was supported by the field work where there was a high level of approval among pool users. Clearly, the respondents in the focus groups who did not swim were not in a position to state either way:

Table 42:

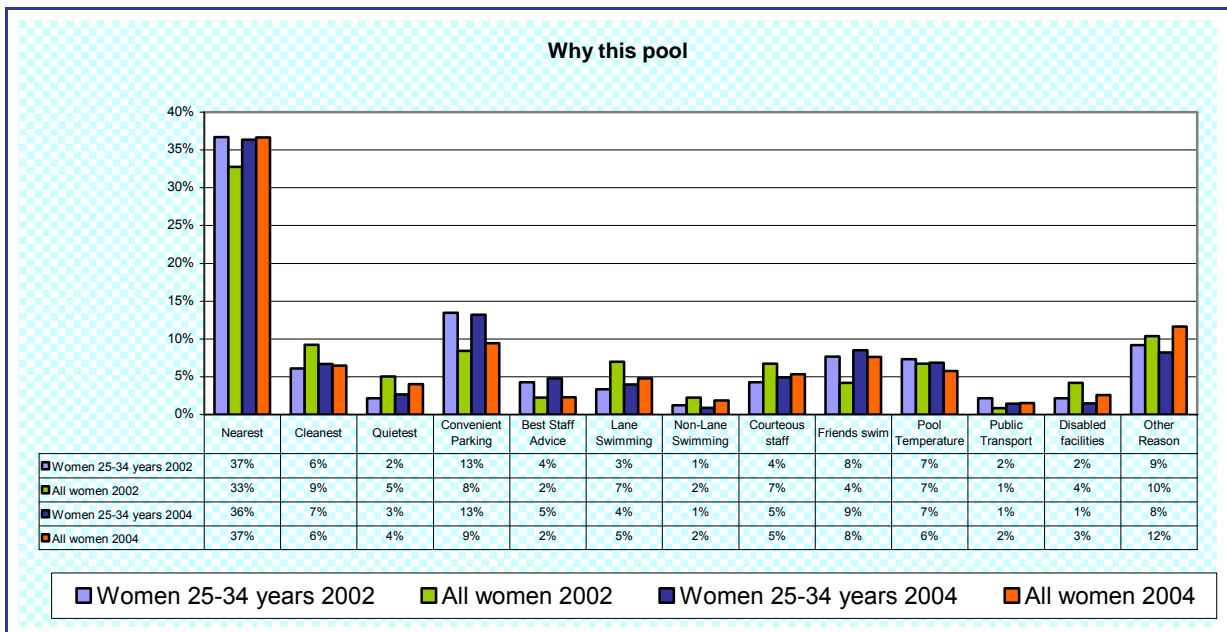
Overall, do you feel that you get good value for your admission fee?



Even though respondents felt that factors such as the cleanliness of the pool and car parking facilities were important to them, the main driver was convenience and the nearness of a pool:

Table 43:

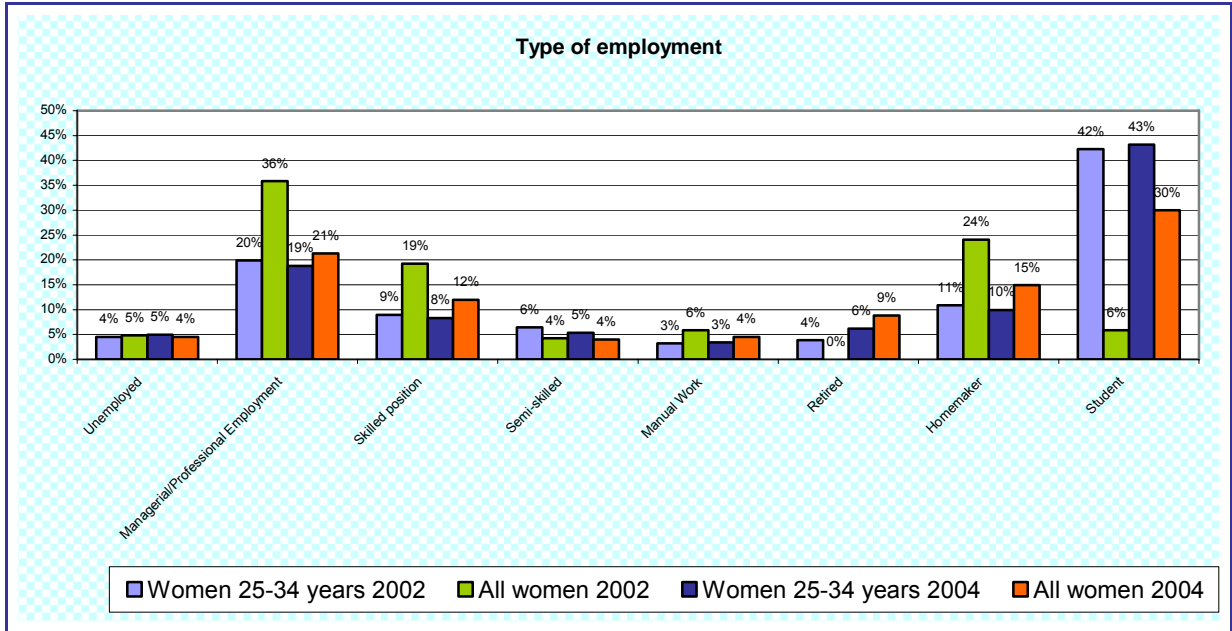
Why did you choose to attend this pool today?



A high percentage of students took part in both the 2002 and 2004 surveys:

Table 44:

Are you currently employed? If so, in what type of job?



Focus Group Participants		Frequency of swimming										Social group					
Number	Participated at	Never	Holiday	Around one or twice a year	Once or twice a month	Once a week	More than once per week	A	B	C1	C2	D	E	Homemaker	Unemployed	Student	Retired
1	Bradford						✓		✓								
2	Bradford		✓								✓						
3	Bradford	✓								✓							
4	Bradford		✓							✓							
5	Bradford					✓				✓							
6	Bradford			✓						✓							
7	Bradford			✓						✓							
8	Bradford				✓					✓				✓			
9	Bradford	✓												✓			
10	Bradford					✓										✓	
	Bishop																
1	Auckland			✓											✓		
1	Lewisham										✓						
2	Lewisham			✓							✓						
3	Lewisham	✓							✓								
4	Lewisham	✓									✓						
5	Lewisham			✓							✓						
6	Lewisham						✓				✓						
7	Lewisham	✓									✓						
8	Lewisham				✓						✓			✓			
9	Lewisham	✓									✓						
10	Lewisham	✓												✓			
1	Oxford						✓			✓							
2	Oxford						✓		✓								
3	Oxford						✓		✓								
4	Oxford					✓									✓		
5	Oxford					✓										✓	
6	Oxford					✓								✓			
7	Oxford					✓				✓							
1	Leamington		✓													✓	
2	Leamington			✓						✓							
3	Leamington				✓					✓							
4	Leamington		✓						✓								
5	Leamington			✓					✓								
1	Hatfield		✓							✓							
2	Hatfield			✓						✓							
3	Hatfield		✓									✓					
4	Hatfield			✓								✓					
5	Hatfield		✓									✓					
6	Hatfield																
7	Hatfield		✓							✓							
8	Hatfield			✓								✓					
1	Derby		✓							✓							
2	Derby			✓						✓							
3	Derby		✓									✓					
4	Derby		✓									✓					
5	Derby			✓								✓					
7	Derby		✓							✓							
8	Derby		✓									✓					
9	Derby			✓								✓					
1	Bournemouth						✓			✓							
2	Bournemouth				✓						✓						
3	Bournemouth	✓								✓							
4	Bournemouth		✓							✓							
5	Bournemouth					✓								✓			
6	Bournemouth		✓											✓			
7	Bournemouth				✓									✓			
8	Bournemouth			✓						✓							
1	Street/Wells		✓						✓								
2	Street/Wells			✓						✓							
3	Street/Wells			✓						✓							
4	Street/Wells		✓							✓							
5	Street/Wells			✓							✓						
6	Street/Wells					✓				✓							
		8	17	17	5	8	6	0	7	23	20	0	0	8	2	3	0

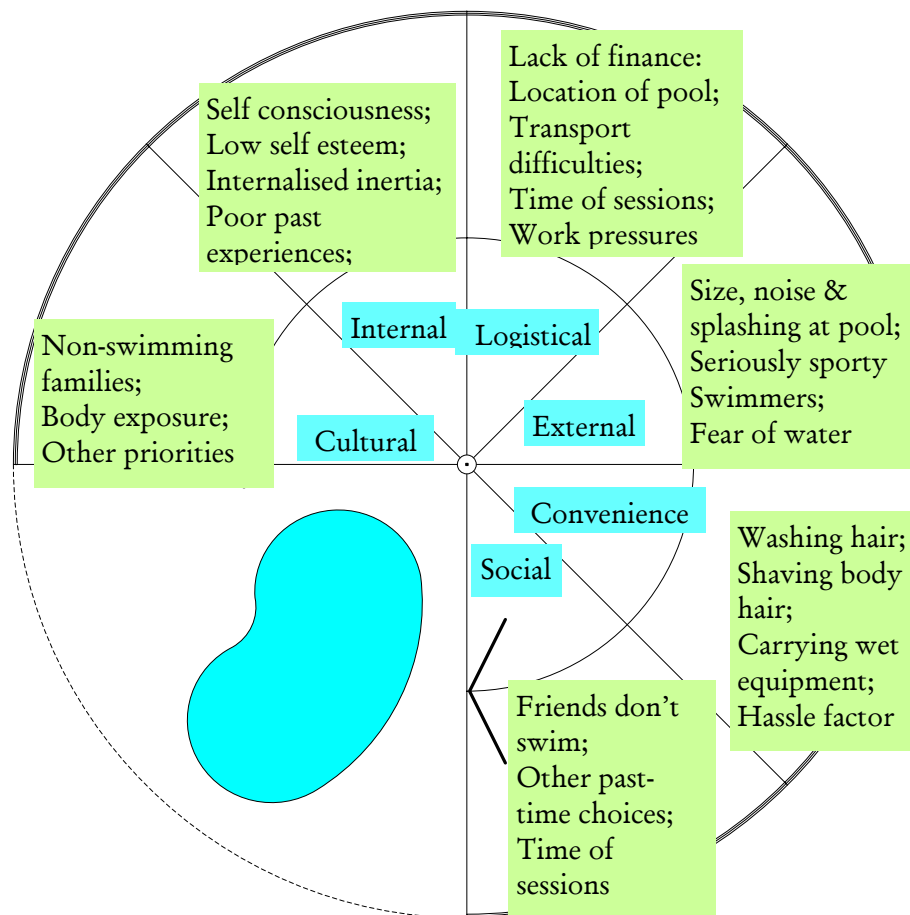
Number	Venue	Ethnic Origin																				
		White British	White Irish	Any other white	White & black	Caribbean	Black Caribbean	White & black African	White & Asian	Any other mixed background	Asian or Asian British	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Any other Asian background	Black or black British	Caribbean	African	Any other black background	Chinese or other ethnic group	Any other	
1	Bradford																					✓
2	Bradford																					
3	Bradford																					
4	Bradford																					
5	Bradford	✓																				
6	Bradford																					
7	Bradford	✓																				
8	Bradford																					
9	Bradford	✓																				
10	Bradford	✓																				
1	Bishop Auckland	✓																				
1	Lewisham	✓																				
2	Lewisham	✓																				
3	Lewisham																					
4	Lewisham	✓																				
5	Lewisham	✓																				
6	Lewisham	✓																				
7	Lewisham	✓																				
8	Lewisham	✓																				
9	Lewisham	✓																				
10	Lewisham	✓																				
1	Oxford	✓																				
2	Oxford	✓																				
3	Oxford	✓																				
4	Oxford	✓																				
5	Oxford	✓																				
6	Oxford	✓																				
7	Oxford	✓																				
1	Leamington	✓																				
2	Leamington	✓																				
3	Leamington	✓																				
4	Leamington	✓																				
5	Leamington	✓																				
1	Hatfield	✓																				
2	Hatfield	✓																				
3	Hatfield	✓																				
4	Hatfield	✓																				
5	Hatfield	✓																				
6	Hatfield	✓																				
7	Hatfield	✓																				
8	Hatfield	✓																				
1	Derby			✓																		
2	Derby			✓																		
3	Derby	✓																				
4	Derby	✓																				
5	Derby																					
7	Derby	✓																				
8	Derby	✓																				
9	Derby																					
1	Bournemouth	✓																				
2	Bournemouth	✓																				
3	Bournemouth	✓																				
4	Bournemouth	✓																				
5	Bournemouth	✓																				
6	Bournemouth	✓																				
7	Bournemouth	✓																				
8	Bournemouth	✓																				
1	Street/Wells	✓																				
2	Street/Wells																					
3	Street/Wells	✓																				
4	Street/Wells	✓																				
5	Street/Wells	✓																				
6	Street/Wells	✓																				
		47	0	2	0	1	1	2	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	



Barriers to swimming

The findings have shown that the main barriers to swimming for women can be divided into a number of key groups. These key groups form part of a decision making process and whilst, one or two of these decisions overlap both in their sequence and category, they all fall into the following groups:

The spiral staircase to women's swimming participation



The model above provides examples of the barriers facing women when considering their first swimming 'occasion' or at a time when they want to return to the pool. Many of these are salient even when women swim on a regular basis.

1. Cultural- the start point is the types of cultural decisions that reside within the individual. These cultural pressures often exist and remain both before and after any form of swimming experience. Given that the most influential point of customer reference is the family, the most difficult of these pressures are those within families that do not traditionally swim either as a family unit or as individuals within that family.
2. Internal- these are the internalised pre-dispositions that an individual has towards swimming and physical activity in general. They are based on either or both past experience or information seeking behaviour that internalises the opinions of others and information digested through all forms of communication and media.
3. Logistical- swimming is thought to be more difficult to access than other physical activities because of the need for a swimming facility. Many other sports require just grass or a ball or other 'on-the-spot' facilities. Swimming requires a mind-set that overcomes barriers in order to find the most appropriate facility.
4. External- having overcome the first 3 barriers, the next group is associated with the venue (it might not be a pool) or facility.
5. Convenience- the focus groups spoke of the inconveniences of dealing with the body and with equipment associated with the water. These factors become even more important after they have been experienced at a pool. On the first occasion, they have less importance but, once experienced, they become more important over a period of time.
6. Social- these are the more day to day social pressures associated with the decision making process- basically 'to swim or not swim'. There are other things to do. These types of barriers can bring about last minute changes to this decision.

Observations

- Swimming is seen as a 'necessary evil'. Women, aged 25-34 years, all want to be able to swim so as to be safe and, without exception, whether a parent or not, wanted children to learn to swim, but many women do not want to go swimming regularly. In these cases, this thought process, which understands the vital part played by swimming, does not extend to swimming for leisure or fitness.
- Among those women who do not swim, swimming for health and fitness was not sufficiently relevant. The notion of both keeping yourself fit and healthy and extending your life as a result of swimming was given little weight as people in this age group are more likely to enjoy good health than older age groups. Communicating a need to swim for these women is therefore a complex challenge.
- Intervention is an important approach. Without taster sessions, advertising directed towards those who do not take part and a 'seek out' approach, those women who do not take part are hardly ever likely to go to a pool. As the years go by, eventually the

purchasing and cost of a costume of a size to fit a naturally changing body becomes a further barrier.

- Many, more socially disadvantaged women related that there was a lack of control over their own lives. Those with children felt they were already trying to do too much and that swimming would be just too difficult to fit in to a busy life.
- With women in mind, the view of a 'pool user' is an outdated mindset and consumers in pools should be considered to be 'customers' and we refer here to our analogy with Selfridges in the *Introduction*.

Future paths for research

There are several important areas concerning women and swimming that may lead on from this research:

- One area is what can be learned from pool practice in other countries with regard to practices and policies to both encourage and make it easier for women to swim.
- More knowledge is needed with regard to women between 45 and 55 years. Why is it that so few women in this age group swim and how can they be encouraged to keep swimming?
- Moving to the age group above. Women over the age of 60 have become a particular target group for the *Department of Health* and swimming is one of the few activities in which many women in this age group can take part. More needs to be known about this group. Given that they have disposable time, how can this group be encouraged to swim?

Future challenges

Through the course of the research HNI has identified the following important challenges for swimming providers of all types. These challenges are hard to tackle and call for planning:

- Ways to make swimming easier for women need to be constantly sought. Providers need to start with the female swimming customer, see the process through their eyes and to then plan backwards.
- Swimming without boundaries was a key issue for women of this age.
- The smell of a pool is a third big issue. Lack of cost effective, appropriate disinfectants to chlorine is hampering progress.
- Swimming pools and swimming are seen as always being the same- somewhat monotonous and 'straight up and down'. For women who do not take part, ways need to be found to communicate that the swimming pool is a changing environment, 'that something new and different is going on here' and that the 'swimming pool has changed from how you remember it'.

Future policies

- Swimming as an activity is likely to be more popular with this age group if it is not regarded as a sport but as either a leisure activity or a 'gateway' to other leisure pursuits.
- It is preferable to offer changing facilities for both sexes as well as young children. These facilities offer parents the option of a mother or father swimming whilst the spouse helps with changing the children and vice versa. This will help to provide some quality swimming time for mothers.
- Care and thought should be given to the wearing of lightweight tops such as t-shirts. These can lead to safety concerns as the swimmer can be dragged down by cumbersome materials and are of concern to some pool operators. This situation could be avoided by offering session times when it is possible to wear these garments. Clearly these need to be low usage times, restricted to safe parts of the pool but this type of flexibility will encourage some larger women to take part.
- Personalisation of swimming is key to future success. By this, HNI is referring to personal swimming programmes, teachers on hand to assist and offer tips, plenty of personal space and a well thought through and appropriate timetable.
- Opportunities to swim need to be maximised at a local level as women are unlikely to travel for more than 10 to 15 minutes. Pool closures and openings are important because facilities need to present appropriate opportunities at the right time of day. New pools are only of benefit if they offer women these opportunities.
- In areas with large minority groups, mixed changing facilities can be a problem and should be regarded as a barrier to be addressed.
- The main target area should be women who do not swim. Initially, they should be reached through just a few points of maximum influence. Friends, relatives and the like are unlikely to bring sufficient influence. Swimming has to be made salient to their lives. At first, the best routes could be via groups such as Sure Start, local imams and temples, weight watchers and the play school network.
- In general, pools should look to provide an accessible timetable of both programmed and unstructured swimming that embraces all social and cultural groups and gives everyone the opportunity to take part at an appropriate time of day given that many women in this age group will have family considerations. In short, the maxim should be, 'making it easy'

Recommendations

- Lifeguards should be given diversity training so that they know how to work with minority groups.
- Given the difficulty of communicating in swimming pools, it is even more desirable that an interpreter be present in minority group areas.
- Alternatively, as it is difficult for swimming teachers to be heard in the swimming pool environment, it would be an asset with minority groups if teachers have a knowledge of the minority language as well as English.

- Women only sessions need to be sensitively constructed. For example, excluding spectators from all or immediate viewing areas and for the 'more concerned' women, the employment of female teachers and lifeguards.
- Free swimming campaigns should include specific offerings for women and, in order to encourage women to take part, these offerings should account for women's sensitivities in the pool changing area.
- Respondents were asked to comment on prospective role models. Well known names are unlikely to encourage those who do not take part to get involved. Essentially, such names were thought to be too challenging. Those who do not take part are more likely to respond to local role models who are 'just like them'. None of the women interviewed were looking for role models.
- Communications have a large part to play. Circumstances may mean that some women need or want to go to a pool on their own. Communications should demonstrate that this is possible and that there will be other women at the pool in a similar situation.
- For potential new swimmers, these communications need to be clear- what to do next, how to do it, how small steps can bring about gradual change, when sessions are available, how women can be helped with some of the practical problems- all in easy to understand language.
- Many women are now attending the gym and fitness clubs. Swimming should be advertised at gyms along the lines of the linked benefits of both dry and wet activity.



The Amateur Swimming Association acknowledges and wishes to thank Swpix for the photographs in this report

The logo for hni, featuring the lowercase letters 'hni' in a green, sans-serif font with a green underline.

The logo for womensports foundation uk. It features a stylized orange wave icon to the left of the word 'womensports' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below 'womensports' is the text 'foundation uk' in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.