

WOMEN TAKE THE PLUNGE!

FUNDED BY: Greets Green Partnership initially funded the Social Swimmers project for 10 weeks in 2005 as part of its Community Empowerment Theme. Following its success, Sandwell Primary Care Trusts provided additional funding in January 2006 to develop the project further.

PROJECT BACKGROUND: When Greets Green Partnership's Community Development Workers discussed which types of activities local women would like to get involved in, they found that there was a lack of culturally sensitive opportunities available in the local area, in particular, swimming. Feedback from a diverse range of communities revealed that due to cultural and religious barriers, women were not using local community facilities, such as local gyms or swimming pools.

July 2006



In September 2005, Acting Diversity Officer, Sam Watts and Health Development Facilitator, Sally Sandel (with support from partners) put together a pilot project designed to address these issues. The Social Swimmers Project was developed to enable local women to gain confidence in a swimming pool without feeling uncomfortable.

PROJECT IN ACTION: All the local community groups in Greet's Green were asked if their female members would like to go swimming and many came back with a definite 'yes'. However, some women had never dipped their toe in a community swimming pool in their lives while others hadn't been swimming for years.

Several, for religious and cultural reasons, wanted reassurance that there would be no men at the pool while they were there. A programme of women-only sessions was arranged at Tipton Swimming Pool in Autumn 2005 for 10 weeks, and 36 women in total took part from the Sikh, Muslim, Yemeni, Bangladeshi, African Caribbean and Hindu communities in Greet's Green.

The group met in Greet's Green each week and were taken to and from Tipton Swimming Pool by coach, giving the women a chance to make new friends from different communities. Sam or Sally were always present at the sessions to offer support.

Greet's Green Partnership arranged for the women to have the pool completely to themselves with blacked out windows and female staff and lifeguards. All the public entrances were shut to prevent men from entering, enabling the women to feel secure.

During these initial weekly classes the women were encouraged to simply have a splash around with floats to gain their confidence and take part in gentle aqua aerobics led by a female instructor.

Sam said: "Initially, we felt that the women needed fun, informal sessions to gain their confidence in the water, as none of them had been in a pool in years. We also wanted to find out their level of ability in the water.

"I went in the pool with the ladies and realised that about 80 per cent of them couldn't swim. I asked them if they'd like me to set up swimming lessons if I could find the funding and they were really enthusiastic."



Greets Green Partnership secured further funding from Sandwell Primary Care Trusts' Active Sandwell Project to extend and develop the Social Swimmers project in 2006, as in addition to the social benefits, health benefits had also been recognised.

Starting in January 2006, 14 women enjoyed the swimming lessons at Tipton Swimming Pool for five weeks. At the end of that course, a further 14 women started lessons. While the swimmers were in the pool, other members of the group took part in Extend, a gentle exercise class.

ACHIEVEMENTS: Women who previously had no confidence to set foot inside a swimming pool, learnt to swim in just five weeks through the Social Swimmers project. By removing the barriers to learning to swim, such as ensuring all the staff were female and blacking out the windows to prevent people watching them in the pool, Greets Green Partnership enabled the women to learn and enjoy an activity they had never been able to participate in before.

Sam said: "Once we helped the women overcome their initial concerns, they really enjoyed the swimming sessions. The project has also given those who could already swim, a chance to improve their technique in an environment they feel safe in."

All the women have also enjoyed health benefits in terms of exercise and relaxation and have been able to build their confidence in their own abilities. Social Swimmers has enabled them to meet other local women from many different communities and learn a new life-saving skill together.

The women have gained so much from the project that they have asked for the swimming sessions to continue. Greets Green Partnership is currently exploring community cohesion funding to continue and build upon the success of this project.

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**Sam Watts, Acting Diversity Officer,
Greets Green Partnership**





Splashing Out

Hazel, a 67 year old grandmother has shown that you're never too old to jump in at the deep end and learn a new activity! She said: "I always wanted to swim. Then this opportunity came along and so I went with it.

"I've really enjoyed the sessions and the company of the other women who've been taking part. It's been fun."

Surrinder, aged 65, who is also a grandmother, added: "I've enjoyed it too and it's good exercise. Having the group provided a good opportunity to go swimming. I can swim a little but I'm improving my technique. It's nice that it's women only."



For more information about the Social Swimmers project call Greets Green Partnership on freephone 0800 953 0215.

Greets Green Partnership was awarded £56 million in 2000 to deliver a 10 year regeneration programme under the Government's New Deal for Communities (NDC) initiative. It is currently funding more than 100 projects throughout the area, covering community empowerment, crime and community safety, education and lifelong learning, health, housing and urban form, and jobs and enterprise. The Partnership area, which is adjacent to West Bromwich Town Centre, is home to just over 12,400 residents living in 4,900 households.

To find out more, call Greets Green Partnership on freephone 0800 953 0215.

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