The Governing body for aquatic activity in the UK (the ASA) has initiated a number of health initiatives during the past two years. These initiatives are in response to modern health problems, including rising levels of obesity. Regular aquatic activity offers significant potential to reduce the prevalence of obesity, as it is affordable and widely available. ‘Swim for Health’ is a multi-agency partnership in two local authority districts in the North of England. It aims to decrease health inequalities in four key groups; pre-school children and their families, people in full time employment, people with a range of health needs, including obesity, and people aged over 50 years. The principal aim of this study was to evaluate the success of the ‘Swim for Health’ initiative in achieving its stated aims.

Methods were based upon a programme theory evaluation model. Attendance figures were analysed by session and by local authority. 82 Semi-structured interviews were completed with organisers, participants and non-participants. 269 Questionnaires were completed to augment interview data.

‘Swim for Health’ has increased aquatic participation in specific groups. Participants belonged to the intended groups, suggesting target populations utilised services as intended. Participants were largely female. Self-reported physical activity levels were higher in participants than non-participants. Perceptions of risk and of participants’ bodies were key barriers to participation.

‘Swim for Health’ is meeting many of its aims, including increasing participation and offering a range of aquatic services. However, a number of weaknesses remain, particularly a failure to engage with male participants.

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