

# **Tees Active Safeguarding Policy – Access for unaccompanied children**

## **1. Why does TAL have an 8 year benchmark for access?**

1.1 Tees Active currently attracts over 550,000 junior visits to Stockton facilities per annum. Our definition of junior is under 16. The current position is that we do not allow unaccompanied access for children under 8 years of age and after 8.00pm that threshold rises to 12 years of age. The policy has evolved from long standing industry guidelines on safety in swimming pools that set the threshold for access to unaccompanied children at 8 years old. This is applied to almost every public swimming pool in the country. In our case, in order to have a robust and consistent approach to general access, we also have applied the same age threshold for access to facilities in general since it was consistent with an already known and accepted threshold. Some other companies/authorities do likewise while many do not have an official access policy beyond the swimming pool. So, whilst there is a patchy approach to general access nationally, there is a widespread, national understanding and expectation amongst the public that the 8 year threshold applies to swimming pool access. In Stockton Borough customers accept that the 8 year rule also applies to general access.

1.2 It is worth noting that our policy had been agreed by Stockton Council officers responsible for safeguarding issues. In 2009 we also sought advice from the NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU). At the time, the CPSU was reluctant to give detailed advice on the grounds that we were not a 'partner organisation'. However, they did confirm that our policy covered all the necessary aspects and did not suggest a change to our current threshold of 8 years.

## **2. How does TAL inform customers of their responsibilities?**

We have a clear and concise statement on our website and the same notice is on public display in our facilities.

## **3. The SBC change in policy**

3.1 We became aware of the SBC decision to review their policy in 2012 following an incident in a community facility. However, we were concerned that the process of developing and amending the policy may have inadvertently overlooked some of the issues that apply particularly to Tees Active and access to large leisure facilities with high user numbers and a wide variety of activities. The fact that there is no specific reference to leisure facilities in the guidance whereas other services are highlighted suggests there may have been an oversight. However, I must stress that there was still a robust, well-reasoned, practical and recently endorsed policy in place.

3.2 We now find ourselves at odds with council guidance but if we change we will be at odds with national practice in leisure facilities and we will be changing a policy that has served us well. However, there is no legal imperative to have the same threshold for all services – there must, however, be a robust and practical policy and processes to enforce that policy.

## **4. What would be the implications of changing our policy?**

4.1 In practical terms a change in policy would mean that we would have to turn away unaccompanied children aged 8 and 9 who currently are allowed to use our facilities. This will mainly affect swimming and ice skating, which are 'walk up' activities. However, it will also affect all coached or taught sessions such as swimming lessons or sports coaching courses. It will also affect holiday activities and the operation of clubs who are based on our sites. By way of example, one of our swimming clubs reported that 25% 8 – 10 year olds are not accompanied when they attend club sessions. It may also affect school swimming lessons particularly in respect of changing and visits to the toilet.

4.2 We conducted a quick survey of customers over the week ending 26<sup>th</sup> of August 2013 to assess how many people this may affect. The survey took place at Splash and Billingham Forum. Of the people we surveyed there were 230 children between the ages of 8 and 10 who were unaccompanied and who would be excluded if the new policy guideline were adopted. We estimate that over a year across all facilities there could be 15,000 exclusions.

4.3 One of the suggested ways of dealing with children under the appropriate age is to effectively hold them in the venue and try to contact their parents. Whilst we can see how this might work in a small community facility or perhaps a library, this is not a practical solution given the high numbers involved and our experience is that this might be met by short shrift from some of the children involved. This is particularly interesting because the evidence is that current instances of under 8s turning up unaccompanied are unusual and staff do not perceive it as being a particular problem. Numbers are such that they can be dealt with on an individual basis according to different circumstances. Sometimes the child will go home, sometimes the child will stay with an older child and sometimes a phone call will be made. Moving the threshold to 10 will suddenly cause significant problems with high numbers of children involved.

4.4 it could be argued that after a settling in period, children and families will get used to any new threshold – even if reluctantly. However, the irony of such a change of policy is that we may well be turning children away to a less safe environment. What will those children do and where will they go if, as we suspect, many parents will not choose to accompany them and will simply allow/encourage them to go somewhere else? That somewhere could be a public park, a river bank, a shopping centre or a housing estate – settings that may be more dangerous for a variety of reasons but impossible to police in terms of this policy. Or perhaps they will continue to use independent, voluntary clubs based elsewhere but not

subject to this guidance. What is more, they may also be deterred from taking part in sport and physical activity, which is, after all our key mission. We have real concerns.

## **5. How safe are children in Tees Active facilities?**

5.1 There is clearly a perception amongst parents that a leisure centre is a safe environment where their children are involved in positive activity. Stockton Leisure Centres are very well staffed, have high levels of supervision, extensive CCTV coverage and the benefit of high throughput offering a level of self regulation.

We fully understand the difficulties of maintaining safe environments for children and the dilemmas faced when formulating policy to protect them. The truth is that there is no policy that can absolutely guarantee child safety. However, it is worth considering the merits of the current situation. TAL has been operating since May 2004. Without wishing to tempt providence, in over ten years there has not been a single reported incident involving children under the age of 10. There has been a small number of reported incidents but they have involved teenagers and adults as victims that clearly would not have been avoided by the proposed change in the age threshold. This positive statistic could also be linked to the fact that the awareness of safeguarding issues in TAL is very high and taken very seriously. To date, 415 employees, that is almost 97% of the workforce, have been trained in safeguarding and CRB checks are rigorously applied. One of the consequences of the training is that TAL staff have, over time, reported numerous cases to the safeguarding team first contact point. Staff in swimming pools are ideally located to see suspicious marks/bruises etc and new cases have been brought to the attention of the safeguarding team that would have been missed had the age threshold been 10 years rather than 8. In fact since March 2011 we have reported 7 cases of children aged 8-10 years to the safeguarding team. There is a feeling that, although not 100% safe, children are actually in a safer environment in our venues than in many alternative locations.

## **6. What is the Tees Active view?**

6.1 We are far from complacent and would much prefer that certain parents took greater responsibility for the care and safety of their children. However, at the age of 8 or 9 it is not uncommon for parents to believe genuinely that they have no need to accompany them everywhere. Our worry is that some children will be placed at greater risk by lifting this age threshold.

6.2 The statistics suggest that there is no need to change our current policy. To do so would appear also to be at odds with practice throughout the country and we have not been shown any evidence that to raise the threshold would make those affected children safer. Our view is that the opposite could be true. Perceived problems will be pushed away from council venues but may well increase elsewhere. We have now debated the matter at our board, which includes council members and there is considerable disquiet about changing the current threshold.

6.3 In addition we have sought further guidance from the CSPU to ensure that our advice is up to date. They were not prepared to give definitive advice on what the level should be. However, they have confirmed (verbally given the short notice) that our current policy is perfectly robust and that it would require good reason to change it. We were frank with them about the reasons for the enquiry and the proposal to move to 10. Their response was that any change should be proportionate to the incident that prompted the review. They were concerned about not fulfilling a duty of care if we began to turn away large numbers of children under 10 and felt the national commonality of the under 8 threshold – albeit based on the safety in swimming pools guidelines – was a strong element of our policy.

6.4 We would suggest that access to leisure facilities has facets that do not apply to other public venues such as libraries and community centres. We obviously wish to operate an access policy that has broad approval but believe the Council should consider whether or not the most appropriate

way forward for our venues is to retain the current thresholds. In addition we should continue to roll out and strengthen where possible, safeguarding training and emphasise to parents that they are responsible for the safety of their children through notices within facilities, on our website and attached to our booking conditions. Perhaps there is a way in which we can strengthen that wording whilst not changing the actual threshold. We certainly don't want to discourage children in any way from taking part in sport and physical activity in what we describe in our own mission as a "...safe, attractive, welcoming, and encouraging environment..."

Steve Chaytor, MD Tees Active.

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