

**S C O T T I S H** *swimming*  
everyone can swim!

## South Aberdeenshire Swimming

Review

June 2014

## Performance Development Partnership Review



**In Partnership with:**

**Aberdeenshire**  
COUNCIL



June 2014

# **A Review of South Aberdeenshire Swimming (SAS)**

## ***An ongoing & living story of rural swimming clubs working together....***

### **1.0 Introduction**

As part of the on-going development of investing resources and support into performance development programmes, Scottish Swimming decided to explore issues encountered in establishing sustainable local performance development programmes. In 2012, Scottish Swimming started to carry out reviews into Performance Development Partnerships to assess whether they were value for money and achieving their original aims and objectives.

An additional objective of the review was to build upon previous case studies to help inform both the wider swimming community and potential partners of the benefits of, and the committing required for, working in partnership with clubs and of other similar partnerships between clubs.

Charlie Raeburn<sup>1</sup> was commissioned by Scottish Swimming to examine all aspects of SAS. His scope covered the programme's inception through to the current day some 14 years later, and outlines key lessons learned. Charlie was supported by Scottish Swimming Club Development Manager Sarah Pryde-Smith, and Sean Dawson Grampian Regional Swimming Development Manager.

Following the review process, the SAS story attempts to outline some of the history, process and dynamics of establishing a sustainable swimming development pathway in a local area. The review includes references and examples of the principles, challenges and solutions associated with the process of developing SAS including researching the relationship with the local swimming clubs, Aberdeenshire Council, and Scottish Swimming.

### **2.0 National Background & Local Landscape**

The original aim for Scottish Swimming's investment in performance development programmes was to activate one of their core strategic governing body aims – quality teaching and coaching. The aim was to appoint a full-time coach to provide leadership to a collection of clubs from the same area and to run a training programme that enabled swimmers from the area to undertake 16-20 hours of training per week, in line with Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) guidance.

One of the objectives of this initiative was to encourage and empower local clubs to come up with solutions as to how they could work together toward a common performance goal. It was not for Scottish Swimming to impose a “one-size fits all” solution! The journey was as important as were the outcomes.

The investment model was relatively simple. Scottish Swimming would invest up to £10k per year for a maximum of 3 years, subject to the following conditions:

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Raeburn taught PE for a number of years before becoming a PE adviser for Lothian Regional Council. Appointed as Sport and Recreation Manager for West Lothian Council in 1996 (until retirement in 2008, Charlie served on a number of national organisations and held a number of national posts – including twice Chair of the Scottish Schools Swimming Association, Chair of Scottish School Sport Federation (1988-2006) and Chair of the Scottish Local Authority PE Network. A life member of Warrender Baths SC, Charlie has held various coaching and advisory positions within the club.

- The local authority and/or leisure trust investing £10k per year and the clubs in the area collectively investing £10k per year to make a total funding pot of £30k per year for 3 years.
- A performance development coach was appointed following an open recruitment process.
- The performance development programme was sustainable, without Scottish Swimming funding, beyond the 3-year period of funding.

### **3.0 The birth of SAS and the formation of 'The Clan'**

Inter club cooperation goes back to the early 1990s, when individual clubs in Aberdeenshire started competing at national level competitions. As each individual club had limited capacity to provide a coaching pathway at the level of training required, discussions took place to form SAS with the aim of providing joint training sessions and competing as a composite team at national level. SAS is currently made up of four clubs; Banchory Beavers, Upper Deeside, Stonehaven and Westhill District (all these clubs continue to be operated, managed and coached by volunteers). Originally Garioch ASC was also a member club.

SAS formally affiliated to SASA in February 1997, a year later the committee was joined by Martyn Woodroffe, SASA National Director of Swimming, who encouraged and supported their efforts to work towards a closer relationship with Aberdeenshire Council and to realise their ambition to appoint a full-time professional Head Coach to lead the SAS programme.

In January 2000, in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council, SAS successfully recruited a Chief Coach to lead the programme. The following November, Aberdeenshire Council implemented a swimming development plan providing South Aberdeenshire with a framework for sound foundations in the teaching of swimming and other aquatic disciplines to allow participants to move seamlessly along pathways towards achieving their potential. Scottish Swimming has continued to support the programme and provide development opportunities for the chief coach in addition to financial support from 2004 onwards.

The financial model of SAS is fairly unique and is highlighted as a model for good practice. SAS contribute annually to a fund with the remainder of costs provided from a 20 pence levy on local authority swimming lessons. This very successful funding mechanism remains in place today with 40p levied from swimming lessons to support a swimming development officer for the Local Authority and a Chief Coach for the SAS programme. Clubs continue to pay for their pool time and other resources whilst making a small financial contribution to support the SAS structure. Each of the swimming clubs along with the overall SAS programme has achieved swiMark as part of Scottish Swimming's quality assurance programme.

### **4.0 The Review Process**

A large part of the review process included visiting all of the partners. Key areas of discussion included the impact SAS has had on the sporting infrastructure in the local area and across Scotland.

A questionnaire was devised for club visits with areas of discussion around SAS structure; communication; value for money and social aspects. Clubs were encouraged to be open

and honest to allow the review to be accurate and relevant. In addition to club visits and partners meetings with Scottish Swimming and Aberdeenshire Council, key documents relating to the SAS were studied for background information. Meetings were also held with Alford Otters – a club established in 2005 that sits out with the scheme; and with Garioch ASC that had originally been part of SAS.

The review process was met positively by all partners, facilitating club meetings etc.

## **5.0 Key findings from SAS Review**

The following are the main findings from the SAS review:

### *5.1 Vision, Structure & Culture*

- SAS seen as a successful sports development model by the Council
- Team Dynamics - strong relationships between clubs and when SAS competes as a team
- There is a clear gap between club gold squad and SAS Top Squad & while clubs are committed to the overall structure they are unable to deliver the full programme due to pool time and voluntary coaching
- Challenges with the transition from platinum to top squad – transition appears to be poorly managed
- Significant (and more apparent than other Performance Development programmes) drop out of swimmers from the traditionally difficult stage in performance development “platinum” & “top” elite squad. Indeed most of the SAS clubs have no “platinum” squad in practice, and no swimmers in the elite squad. Swimmers are not progressing to SAS Top Squad therefore leaving the sport entirely or staying within the club structure, straining resources.
- Appears to be no current Development plans or KPI's
- Perception that SAS is an additional layer of bureaucracy, allied with SAS having a small elite squad.
- Club vs SAS – challenge to balance both identities. Essentially home clubs come first but there needs to be ambition & a more holistic approach to SAS.
- Swimmer Performance & Management Database is helpful but may require further development
- There appears to be a lack of open and transparent entry criteria for squads. This seems to exist but is not published, communicated with clubs/ athletes/ parents/ coaches effectively.
- Not all South Aberdeenshire clubs involved in the programme with 2 clubs sitting out with; Garioch ASC & Alford Otters ASC. At present the clubs not involved are open to joining the overall structure and in general are supportive of SAS, however they feel finance and the lack of clear development plan prohibits joining.

### *5.2 Communication/Interface*

- The leadership of the programme is what makes the difference with all partners noting an appreciation of excellent coaching in the elite squad
- As part of a pilot project, the current temporary role as a P/T SAS mentoring coach has been widely welcomed by the clubs & seen as a tangible benefit of the programme. The role has given SAS visibility in the day-to-day work of the swimming clubs.
- SAS committee lacking volunteers to deliver and manage programme. Strain on volunteers to commit to their own committee let alone SAS.

- The coach cannot be expected to do everything. However, it is important that there is a leadership and management of the capacity development of all the clubs and SAS operations.
- Each club has a different view on roles and responsibilities of their head coach
- SAS Coach recognized nationally as a quality coach
- Lack of clarity about the role of the SAS coaches (viz. job description/role centrally & within member clubs)
- Coaches meetings between Head Coach & club coaches are seen as success however lack of evidence that items discussed are fed back to coaches within individual clubs
- Communication featured, as a major concern by clubs - has been variable quality and quantity; feelings of Westhill centric administration.
- Lack of evidence of efficient ways of working together as individual clubs and as a collective. An example of this is the vacant roles on the SAS committee. Lack of support from SAS to clubs, need to share resources for coach/volunteering/club development

### *5.3 Sustainability*

- Current structure is not sustainable – clubs unable to deliver all levels within structure. There is simply not enough pool time or voluntary coaching resource to cover this.
- Lack of 'Plan B' if Council reduce or stop financial support to SAS

### *5.4 Stakeholders*

- Aberdeenshire Council and Scottish Swimming supportive of SAS and recognise the standard of swimming and coaching as quality.
- No Aberdeenshire Council rep on SAS committee meetings
- No formal 'partners' meetings
- Lack of promotion to stakeholders e.g. SAS need to demonstrate & celebrate progression & vision

## **6.0 Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the review, the following areas of recommendations should be considered. These should reflect the collective ideas and views emanating from the consultation. Real care should be taken to ensure everyone is part of the process and consider setting a short life working group to take forward and implement the following recommendations.

### *6.1 Vision, Structure & Culture*

- There should be a 4 year development plan in place that articulates a clear vision for the future with KPIs that can be monitored and evaluated on a continuous monthly basis. This needs to be communicated widely and agreed with the clubs, all coaches and supporting officials in the programme. These plans need to take account of the various elements required both by the performance squad of SAS, and also the needs of the clubs. Needs to work all ways.
- Planning workshop to be facilitated by Scottish Swimming.
- A SAS branding working group might be established drawing some of its expertise and energy from the swimmers themselves
- The maintenance of strong local identities is important. South Aberdeenshire Swimming and the constituent clubs are advised to develop together "in tandem"
- To close the identified gap between club squads and SAS top squad, consider establishing a performance development/transitional squad which are led by a professional coach, but which operates flexibly across the four clubs. Real care has

to be taken about such a development about the actual appointment, the programming and the "buy in" of swimmers and their families.

- Entry criteria for clubs need to be continually clarified. If possible, establish local involvement with the LTS coordinators to facilitate an improved relationship and assist in improving local quality experiences
- Develop a Retention Strategy with potential to expand to include other aquatic disciplines. Consideration of exit reviews on each swimmer that opts to leave SAS squads to inform the clubs and SAS management about protocols
- Review on why clubs are not producing swimmers into the SAS top squad
- Consideration of the scope and defining the role of SAS e.g. Performance/Performance Development/Age Group/Senior – what can and should be delivered.
- Explore with Aberdeenshire Council the whole of Aberdeenshire being involved through extending the current programme. Invite all Aberdeenshire clubs to be involved in meetings to look at landscape etc.
- Total operation and management (including planning and reporting) needs to be seen as the major role of the SAS Committee. Management of Professional Staff – needs agreement around day to day management of Chief Coach with quarterly management meetings to include Council, SAS Committee Chair & Scottish Swimming.
- SAS should aspire to a Board Set up. Currently the SAS executive is without either a secretary or a Team Manager. The committee needs to be strengthened to assist SAS in:
  - developing with all partners a collaborative vision of SAS and its members
  - putting in place a "professional approach" to the management of the whole SAS structure/systems (This to include the use of appropriate IT software, coach mentoring; monitoring of performance and attendance)
  - Identifying, selecting and managing relationships to all SAS stakeholders. It may be that new "board members" be recruited from out with the swimming clubs.

## 6.2 Communication/Interface

- Open communication is critical, particularly within and between the clubs and the coach/performance development programme. Informal coms between clubs, relationships down to structure
- It should be expected that the structure and interface between the clubs and top squad within SAS will change and adapt over time, but this needs to be managed professionally and carefully. The role and position of the performance development programme needs to be clearly defined.
- SAS Executive Committee to be more visible. It has a very good website that could be further developed and used to communicate attendances, swimmer rankings etc. including the database.
- Each office bearer has a position within clubs and in the SAS – remit to be outlined and published to ensure better internal communications & external links
- Regular formal and informal meetings between ALL club coaches and SAS coaches
- SAS clubs could encompass their own information on the SAS website.
- Regular club visits by the Performance swimming coach to the leagues and development meets
- Media/Promotion – consideration to appoint a media officer – to relay information to media and to coordinate media relationships
- Produce a short annual report that features the outcomes from the previous year's plan. Publish report & submit to key partners.

- Consider the establishment of Finance forum of treasurers from each member club and SAS
- Consider the establishment of an Administrators forum
- There would be real merit in offering some centralized training and coaching opportunities on regular basis. These opportunities might provide coach education opportunities, technical officials training, and club management mentoring/ generic skills development across the clubs.

### 6.3 Sustainability

- Scoping exercise with Council to safeguard & clarify funding from the Council.
- Formal meetings with Aberdeenshire Council officials with any agreements need to be reviewed on an annual basis.
- Re-structure across the pathway providing a better balance of numbers and progression

### 6.4 Stakeholders

- Aberdeenshire Council to develop an Aquatic Strategy
- A Partnership Agreement is required between SAS (on behalf of member clubs), the Council and Scottish Swimming to outline aims and objectives as well as roles and responsibilities and any financial or human resource commitment.
- There is a real need to share the successes and the challenges that the clubs and SAS have with the major stakeholders – the swimmers and their families; the clubs and their officials; Aberdeenshire Council officers and elected members; and Scottish Swimming.
- A collective stakeholders meeting be held at least annually to report on success, challenges and developments

### 6.5 Facilities

- Water Management Plan for Aberdeenshire to allow for the best use of water space while balancing an inclusive pool programme
- Consideration of the Scottish Swimming Facility Strategy – Regional training and competition facility 8 lane x 25m pool in the area and the need for access at the right time and right cost for athletes
- Consideration of developing a scenario where clubs could self-manage the pools when and if required ensuring the pools are open for business effectively around the clock
- Consider the establishment of a Facilities Forum.
- Standard access agreements for all clubs/pools

## **7.0 Conclusion**

There is now more awareness of the benefits achieved through bringing together clubs and other partners to share challenges and opportunities in developing swimming in a local area. These partnerships are essential for taking forward swimming, making better use of limited water and bringing together strong swimmers in a training unit supported by a full time paid coach.

Big challenges lie ahead in building on the good experiences and foundations built up since SAS was established. It is now important to ensure that the aspirations of all stakeholders are met going forward to this next stage of evolution. To lead the thinking, a Short Life Working Group (SLWG) should be appointed by the SAS Executive, comprising of non-executive members, both from the member clubs but also from non-SAS clubs, the

Council, **sport**scotland, Scottish Swimming and other relevant partners. The SLWG would be charged with producing a phased development plan.

Initially SAS committee should take time to meet the principal stakeholders, Aberdeenshire Council and Scottish Swimming and the clubs to discuss the scoping. In particular the possibilities of the current programme as it stands, SAS plus non-member clubs and Aberdeenshire Swimming as a holistic concept. One of the most important decisions and discussions should be around the performance pathways for swimmers in Aberdeenshire. The Review shows significant problem of swimmers retiring from the sport, at a young age and a small pool of talent at the top end. There is a major challenge in building up a culture where the swimmers are keen to participate in the sport – at least throughout their secondary schooling years.

During these early stages of discussion, there could be some opportunity to discuss other issues with the major stakeholders. The development of an overarching aquatic strategy for Aberdeenshire, that encompasses the various disciplines; current and proposed swimming facilities (consideration in Inverurie); pool programming; access arrangements; possibilities for clubs to self-manage their access; Learn to Swim Scheme and the interface with the swimming clubs. Time must also be allowed to explore links to other sports development strategies and social policies, for example Community Sports Hubs, Active Schools Network and Positive Coaching Scotland. Engaging with the Corporate Sector could provide opportunities for companies to link their own staff professional development to swimming programmes (through support of generic issues of finance management, HR, IT, communications etc).

The other 'conversation' is about the scope and vision of SAS. Can Aberdeenshire sustain a performance squad or should it aspire to performance development, whatever that means. What is vital is that all stakeholders must want to create a sustainable, rewarding, progressive programme. It is crucial to recognise that not all clubs would want to join with a centralised scheme, but it might be helpful to leave the 'door open" for clubs to join.

SAS has evolved over the last 14 years with changes and re-structures. However what must be sustained is the core value and vision, with strong leadership and the right people and partnerships in place. There is a need to recognise that it is people, the right people, who make things happen. There is a need for fundamental importance of strong leadership and real commitment of the volunteers from the member swimming clubs. Success will depend ultimately on the real feelings of ownership and belonging of all the stakeholders. There is awareness that the challenges are considerable, but perhaps with some support with the facilitation of meetings, the future for Aberdeenshire Swimming can be brighter still.

SAS is clearly a success story, most recently with the confirmation of Rachel Masson as a member of the Scottish Swimming 2014 Commonwealth Games team, which is a fantastic achievement. However SAS has the potential to further develop. It would be sensible to pause, reflect, consult and build for an even more successful and sustainable future.