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Today's Government pledge to fund free swimming is a major turning point... but money must be invested in training pool managers and employees, says leading sports institute.

The Institute of Sport and Recreation Management (ISRM) has welcomed today's announcement by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport that funding is to be made available to allow free access to swimming pools for the over 60s from April 2009, with the aim of 'free swimming for all' by 2012.

Ralph Riley, ISRM chief executive, said: "This is one of the most exciting and forward-thinking moves to affect swimming for many years. It comes at a time when it's more apparent than ever that we need positive action to encourage more people to become active for their health's sake.

"This should be seen for what it is – a turning point in the recognition that improving public health in the 21st century starts at the doors of a swimming pool or sports centre, rather than at the doors of a hospital."

However, the Institute, which trains and qualifies sports centre and swimming pool managers in the UK and sets many of the standards for our public pools, is warning that the initiative brings with it as many challenges as it does opportunities.

In terms of facilities, Riley said: "We need to make sure we have enough pools that are truly accessible to people who want to use them. That means having pools located in the heart of communities within easy travel distance. And the pools themselves must meet the high standards that modern consumers deserve and expect - with clean, hygienic changing rooms, and sparkling, high-quality pool water."

Riley called for a greater commitment to training and developing people who work in the nation's swimming pools. "We must ensure that every pool manager is qualified, every pool technician knowledgeable and every pool lifeguard motivated. The ISRM and its partners have programmes to meet this demand but there has to be the incentive for pools to make use of them."

He argued there will be many operational challenges accompanying a national free swimming programme. "It is not just as simple as opening the doors. If we do only that, the scheme will fail. We need to learn from the experiences of pools that have been operating free swimming for certain age groups for some time and also from museums and galleries that have been working within a free access model since 2001."

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Notes to editors:

1. ISRM is the only national professional body for those involved exclusively in providing, managing, operating and developing sport and recreation services in the United Kingdom.
2. ISRM provides three leading qualifications focussed on the effective management and operation of swimming pools in the UK.
 - The nationally recognised ISRM/City and Guilds Higher Professional Diploma qualifies entrants to become full members of the ISRM and meets the needs of swimming pool managers to become highly skilled, capable professionals
 - ISRM's Pool Plant Operators Training Certificate is the national benchmark qualification for swimming pool technical staff – a prerequisite in ensuring safe, healthy pools
 - The National Pool Lifeguard Qualification is a world-renowned lifeguard qualification and training programme that the ISRM develops and delivers with the Royal Life Saving Society. It is the essential lifeguard qualification for all swimming pools.

Ralph Riley is available for interview. Please contact - The Institute of Sport and Recreation Management – telephone 01509 226474, 07774 771315 or email info@isrm.co.uk