

PE2018/K: Recognise the value of swimming pools and provide financial relief to help keep pools open

COSLA written submission, 27 February 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information on this petition from the unique and vital perspective of local government. Operating swimming pools poses several unique pressures for local authorities and leisure trusts across Scotland, as highlighted in our response. These unique pressures are exacerbated in the wider fiscal landscape in which local authorities are operating.

Local Government has faced years of real terms cuts to core funding and increasingly directed funding from Scottish Government (SG), at the same time as facing rising costs (including energy), inflationary pressures, increased demand, recovery from Covid, and the UK's exit from the European Union. This has led to councils having to make increasingly difficult decisions in order to balance budgets.

The 2025/26 Local Government Settlement is a step in the right direction and provides a small amount of uncommitted funding. However, this is unlikely to reverse planned cuts across vital services. The uncommitted £289m revenue will not cover all known pressures, including pay, inflation, increased demand and changes to Employer National Insurance Contributions (ENIC) – which UK Government is still to announce additional resource for. SG is providing £144m to councils towards direct staffing costs resulting from these changes. This still leaves a £96m gap for direct staffing costs and no funding has been provided for commissioned services (including ALEOs). Councils therefore face a funding gap that will need to be met by further cuts in services in order to balance budgets.

Councils are also facing significant pressures in capital budgets. In 2025/26, councils are being provided with £777m capital to support £55bn worth of assets. After restoring last year's cut to capital, councils have only received an additional £11m in 2025/26. Councils are increasingly struggling to meet ongoing costs associated with maintaining existing assets.

With real terms cuts to councils' core revenue and capital funding and increasingly directed SG funding, cuts have fallen disproportionately on non-statutory services, including swimming pools and wider culture and leisure services. The specific and unique challenges faced by councils in operating swimming pools, as set out below, add to these existing pressures. Councils require fair and flexible funding in order to protect these vital community services and facilities.

The information outlined has been gathered directly from local authorities and leisure trusts and has been summarised across four key themes.

Direct and Operating Costs:

- Energy costs have increased dramatically, with some areas experiencing over a 100% rise in the last five years. This is primarily due to the need to maintain water and air temperatures, run filtration systems, and provide lighting.

Scottish Swimming calculated that, in 2023, the cost to power Scotland's public pools was £68m¹.

- Pools require 24-hour operation to ensure water quality and temperature, even though public access is limited to 12-14 hours per day.
- Maintaining the chemical balance of pool water is crucial for swimmer safety, involving regular dosing of chlorine, pH adjusters, algaecides, and shock treatments and the cost of pool chemicals has increased in correlation with energy prices.
- The cost per person to provide swimming pool services is significantly higher than the income received, leading to heavy subsidies to operate and deliver service. This is resulting in inevitable discussions about potential closures across the country.

Workforce Requirements:

- Adequate staffing, including lifeguards and swimming teachers, is essential for safe and efficient operation. Lifeguards must be continuously trained and certified and the costs of training and maintaining qualified swimming teachers is high. One authority reports that staff costs for lifeguards and swimming teachers alone was in excess of £1.5m for the last financial year.
- Staffing costs, including wages and National Insurance, have risen, adding to the financial burden; pressures from changes to ENIC, as already outlined, are adding significant additional burdens.

Maintenance and Sustainability:

- There is an aging infrastructure: many pools are in older facilities, leading to rising maintenance costs and the need for significant capital investment to maintain the existing building stock.
- This alongside the capital investment needed to replace aging pools across country and to seek alternatives to support net zero ambitions to ensure continued provision.
- Continuous Repairs: Regular maintenance is required to ensure health and safety compliance, which can be prohibitively expensive.

Environmental Impact:

- Implementing sustainable practices requires substantial investment in new technologies and infrastructure as we strive to net zero ambitions. Local authorities are investing in new lower energy and emissions solutions, whilst Perth and Kinross Council have invested in the first Passivhaus leisure centre due to open in Blairgowrie this year.

¹ [Future-of-Swimming-Facilities-in-Scotland-November-2023.pdf](#)

- Whilst there are many examples of local authorities innovating in new technologies and solutions, these come in the backdrop of the funding landscape outlined above.

Swimming pools are an invaluable community asset that provide numerous benefits to individuals and communities, as the Committee has heard from Members and supporters of this petition. However, as this response has outlined, operating swimming pools provide a challenge to local authorities facing severe budget pressures. COSLA would welcome the opportunity to participate in further discussions around the value of swimming pools, the pressures they face and how local government can contribute to solutions.