

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

Petitioner written submission, 9 April 2025

In Scotland there are 164 public swimming pools across 122 sites which are over 38 years old¹. Without investment to build, maintain and renovate pools, we risk losing community assets which are critical for the safety and health of the nation.

Pools are closing despite swimming being one of the highest participation sports, with 13% of adults regularly participating in swimming according to the 2023 Scottish Household Survey. The same survey shows that for women, swimming is the highest participation sport (14% participation), along with keep fit/aerobics, and for those with a disability, it is the highest participation sport (9% participation). The demand is clear.

In 2023 Scottish Swimming recognised that simply to maintain the current level of pool provision, 5 public swimming pools at 4 sites would have to be built every year at a conservative estimate of £40.5 million a year. This is on top of investment to renovate and maintain existing swimming pools.

In the document [Strategic Vision for Aquatics Facilities from 2025](#) Scottish Swimming outlines the strategic vision and priorities for new build swimming pools for the safety and health of the population as well as the sustainability and growth of aquatic sports in Scotland.

Swimming is Scotland's most successful sport at a Commonwealth level – only possible because of athletes' ability to learn, train and compete within Scotland and begin that essential journey at a grassroots level. Some of our most successful athletes - Katie Shanahan and Dean Fearn swam in over 10 pools on their athlete journey. Scotland's most decorated Olympic athlete, Duncan Scott OBE learned to swim in a community pool. Not everyone can be the next Olympic swimmer, but everyone can learn to swim as long as pools are affordable, accessible, and available to do so.

In terms of affordability, the cost of participation in swimming is increasing. According to a review: [Charges of Sports Facilities 2023/2024 by sportscotland](#), the cost of community swimming lessons saw the largest real terms increase (53%) over the last 5 years of any physical activity. The high operational cost of swimming pools has seen pool operators pass on costs to consumers making swimming a less affordable activity. We know from research in the UK and Netherlands that children from lower social economic backgrounds are less likely to be able to swim. Access to free swimming lessons through school swimming therefore becomes even more critical if we are to close the poverty gap.

An analysis of the current provision of school swimming in Scotland reveals significant challenges as it is not delivered nationally and there is no requirement to deliver or report a child's swimming ability in the current education system. Although

¹ According to a Swim England study 38 years is the average lifespan of a pool however with investment in regular maintenance and renovation they can last for 60 years.

we cannot currently provide an accurate figure on the swimming ability of primary aged pupils, sample data suggests that overall swimming ability is low and the need for intervention is now. For many children, this may be their only chance to engage with swimming and our leisure facilities are vital in delivering this essential life skill.

If pools are not closing they are in some cases becoming less accessible due to reduced operating hours. High energy prices and increasing staffing costs are adversely and disproportionately affecting swimming pools. Retro fitting new sustainable technologies can reduce energy bills however, some pool operators are reducing opening hours to save costs. Squeezed council budgets mean that some providers have passed on costs to clubs and other user groups of pools simply to balance budgets. This has created accessibility and affordability issues for both recreational swimmers and key user groups.

Availability of swimming pools is crucial to maintaining the physical and mental health of the population. Regular swimming has been shown to reduce GP visits, to improve mental and physical health and wellbeing, to improve life satisfaction and aid recovery from a variety of health conditions and trauma. Swimming plays a major role in both the prevention and management of a number of health conditions including obesity, diabetes, dementia, depression, cancer, strokes and heart disease. In so doing, swimming creates huge NHS savings in terms of cost and resource. Social value savings in 2022 from swimming were estimated at £2.4 billion across the UK. If swimming pools become less available, the risks and associated health burden will skyrocket.

Physical inactivity has a large detrimental impact on healthcare services, which are already stretched by the increasing burden of non-communicable diseases (Bull et al., 2022). The predicted annual cost for treating non-communicable diseases attributable to physical inactivity globally is US\$27 billion (Bull et al., 2022).

According to the Department for Health of England and Wales, physical inactivity is associated with 1 in 6 deaths in the UK and costs the NHS £0.9 billion annually (and £7.2 billion to the UK economy) (Department for Health and Social Care, 2022).

Despite this, one third of adults in the UK fail to meet the Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines (Bull, 2016), resulting in huge detrimental implications on an already stretched health service.

The risks are clear. Having available, accessible and affordable pools is critical to ensure the physical and mental health of current and future generations.