

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 23 April 2025
7th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

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

Introduction

Petitioner Helen Plank on behalf of Scottish Swimming

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to help keep our swimming pools and leisure centres open by providing financial investment for pools.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2018>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 22 January 2025.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to hold a roundtable evidence session at a future meeting. The Committee also agreed to write to COSLA, Dundee City Council, and Inverclyde Council.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from COSLA, Dundee City Council, Tim Eagle MSP, the Petitioner, and Beatrice Wishart MSP, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial position on this petition on 12 May 2023.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 10,145 signatures have been received on this petition.

Today's Meeting

8. At today's meeting the Committee will hear evidence from –

- John Lunn, Chief Executive, Scottish Swimming
- Derek McGown, Coach, East Kilbride Swimming Club
- Duncan Scott OBE, Olympic Athlete
- Abi Thomson, Young Volunteer Programme Champion

And then from –

- Dianne Breen, Coached Programmes Manager, Sport Aberdeen
- Kirsty Doig, Director, The Darcey Sunshine Project
- Jillian Gibson, Policy Manager for Sport and Physical Activity, COSLA
- Ben Lamb, Chief Executive, West Lothian Leisure (Xcite)

Action

9. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
April 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

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

Petitioner

Helen Plank on behalf of Scottish Swimming

Date Lodged

12 April 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to help keep our swimming pools and leisure centres open by providing financial investment for pools

Previous action

We have the support of Fulton MacGregor MSP in relation to this matter who has confirmed his support for swimming, swimming pools and this petition.

We are in dialogue with sportscotland, Community Leisure Scotland and local authority and Leisure Trust partners who have made us aware of the increased energy costs and issues affecting pools specifically.

At a parliamentary reception on 29 March 2023, we highlighted the value of swimming pools and the importance of pools for safety, for communities and for the mental and physical health of Scotland's population.

Background information

Swimming pools and leisure centres are under threat of closure. They are vital community hubs for the population of Scotland, not only as 'water safety classrooms' teaching children to swim, but for improving mental and physical wellbeing for all ages, abilities and backgrounds.

They support one of Scotland's most successful sports and, pre-pandemic, one of the nation's highest participation sports with 17% of the population swimming regularly in 2019.

Swimming pools host lessons for more than 100,000 children each week, as well as a variety of aquatic sports and water-based activities, all of which help keep the nation fit, healthy and active – an essential part of the nation's post-pandemic recovery.

A November 2022 [report by Community Leisure Scotland](#) found that an alarming 95% of their members are at financial risk with 63% in discussions and planning around the impact of facility closures. While this is across all facilities, pools are among those with highest operating costs and are especially vulnerable.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2018 on 22 January 2025

The Convener: PE2018, on recognising the value of swimming pools and providing financial relief to help keep pools open, has been lodged by Helen Plank on behalf of Scottish Swimming. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to keep our swimming pools and leisure centres open by providing financial investment for pools.

We have been joined for our consideration of the petition by our MSP colleagues Neil Bibby and Fulton MacGregor, both of whom I welcome to the meeting. I am familiar with the fact that this item had some airtime in the chamber last week, with considerable widespread cross-party support underpinning the matter.

When we previously considered the petition, in March last year, we agreed to write to the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport. The minister now tells us in her response that she has met Scottish Swimming to discuss its report, “The Future of Swimming Facilities in Scotland”, and she says that, although the Scottish Government recognises the financial challenges that are faced by local government, it remains of the view that it is for locally elected representatives to make decisions on how best to deliver services to their communities, including the provision of leisure facilities—although some of us might say that these are life-saving, never mind leisure, facilities.

We have received a submission from the petitioner highlighting Dundee City Council’s plans to close five school swimming pools, which she has used as a further example of the budgetary pressures that are facing councils across Scotland and which are putting public pools at risk of closure. The submission also summarises opinion polling on the benefits of swimming pools, showing 88 per cent of responses agreeing that pools are important for communities, and indeed often act as community hubs. They are also important because they teach people how to save their own and, perhaps, other people’s lives in extremis.

We have also received correspondence from our colleague Liz Smith reiterating her support for the petition.

Before I invite comments from the committee, I invite Neil Bibby and Fulton MacGregor to contribute to our discussion. I will bring them in alphabetically, so we will start with Mr Bibby.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, convener and the committee. Thank you for allowing me to join you this morning.

I am sure that, as you have said, convener, we all appreciate the life-saving skill of swimming and the importance of our swimming pools and the health benefits that they can provide to people of all ages.

In the brief time that I have, though, I want to concentrate my remarks on the impact on children and young people of having the opportunity to learn the basics of water safety and having the ability to swim. According to Scottish Swimming analysis from

quite some time ago, 40 per cent of primary school-age children were leaving school without the ability to swim. That shocking statistic should deeply concern all of us.

As you said, convener, I raised the issue of the provision of school swimming, in particular, at last week's general question time, and there was cross-party support for that. I recognise, too, the cross-party support for this petition. I have to say that I was not particularly encouraged by the minister's response, and that is why I am here today. When I asked for the latest statistics on the number of children and young people across Scotland who were leaving school without the ability to swim, the minister was unable to give them to me. We should at the very least be able to quantify the problem, with the latest statistics. I was also disappointed by the lack of detail from the minister when I asked about the Government's plan to ensure that every child and young person had the opportunity to learn the skills that I mentioned.

What we do know—because Scottish Swimming has told us this—is that since the pandemic the demand for swimming lessons has never been higher. I know that from my own children and, indeed, the backlog in swimming lessons. However, community access to pools is being reduced not just by pool closures but by the significant reduction in the opening hours of existing pools across Scotland. Costs are rising for families, too, as was evidenced on Saturday by an article in *The Herald* by Andrew Learmonth that set out information showing that the cost of juvenile swimming lessons and sessions had risen by 30 per cent over the past six years.

There are also proposals to close swimming pools. There is the example of the five in Dundee, but I know that Dundee City Council is not alone in facing these problems. I appreciate that not every school and not every community has a swimming pool, but, to put it simply, I believe that the current picture is making it harder for young people to learn the life-saving skill of swimming, whether in or out of school.

The petition urges the Scottish Government to help keep our swimming pools and leisure centres open by providing financial investment for pools, and it would be remiss of me not to mention that, a couple of years ago, the Scottish Government received £6 million of Barnett consequentials from the then United Kingdom Government's swimming pool support fund. I, along with a number of colleagues, urged the Scottish Government, on a cross-party basis, to pass that money on to local councils and leisure trusts. Sadly, that did not happen.

We recognise that swimming pools are expensive to run, particularly given the energy costs, but we also have to recognise that we have had swimming pools for decades and they have survived past energy crises. We also need to plan now for energy prices reducing, as we hope they will do, in the years to come.

I ask the committee to consider, in addition to what is set out in the petition, my view that the status quo is not good enough. It would, of course, be welcome if the Scottish Government were to do what Scottish Swimming was calling for—who would not agree with that? However, if it does not, the question is what the Government and Parliament will do to ensure that the provision that we have is properly utilised, to identify the current extent of the problem of young people leaving school without the ability to swim, and how the Government plans to address it.

I hope that members of the committee will consider those points and raise those questions with the Scottish Government.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I broadly agree with Mr Bibby. As he has, I have long been advocating on this issue in the Parliament. Indeed, I have lodged two motions in this parliamentary session alone, on the publication of the “National Primary School Swimming Framework” and on the role of swimming pools, and both achieved cross-party support. That support, which you mentioned at the start, convener, is important. Moreover, back in March 2023, I held a successful garden lobby event entitled, “Everyone Can Swim—Save Our Pools”, so there is a bit of history to this issue.

Like Neil Bibby, I do not have the time to express fully my views on the petition, but I point to the many benefits of swimming—mental health, physical health, community cohesion, social and safety skills—and all the things that can be improved by swimming. Scottish Swimming has cited research that the social value of swimming in the UK is almost £2.5 billion. A small investment in protecting pools now will provide exponential returns for society in the future.

As the convener indicated in his opening remarks—I think that this got broad agreement—I strongly believe that we need to move away from the notion of swimming being just another hobby or sport. Of course, it can be argued that any sport brings benefits similar to those that I just cited, but we need to go back to considering swimming as a vital skill or, at the very least, an important life skill.

I do not know about other members, but that was definitely the case when I was growing up in Coatbridge. We used to go to the Coatbridge baths as part of our curriculum at primary school and high school, and everyone was given the opportunity to learn to swim. It was embedded in us that swimming was a life skill. Now, it is more down to whether families across the country have the finances to do it—I am fortunate enough to be able to send my children to swimming lessons—and whether it is a priority on a family’s radar.

We need to move back to swimming being more of a life skill and that is never more important than now, as we are all seeking more outdoor activities, which has perhaps been boosted by the pandemic. I cannot be the only one whose Facebook feed is filled with people going wild swimming or dooking. I have tried it myself. It is very good and it is quite right that people should be accessing our lovely seas and lochs, which are some of the cleanest in the UK, if not in Europe and the world. People should be accessing that, but it needs to be safe.

I have said previously that it could be a perfect storm if we have the smallest number of people able to swim than perhaps we have ever had, combined with more folk accessing outdoor swimming. We need to take the opportunity to see swimming as a life skill again.

I would go further than the petition, because I would fully support any attempts to introduce statutory swimming lessons. I know that there are difficulties with that in the school curriculum. I have had discussions about that with ministers over the years, but I would welcome any attempts that could be made to introduce lessons being a statutory requirement.

I appreciate that I am probably running out of time, so I will end by giving my full support to the petition. I have deliberately not touched on the pool closures in Dundee and other places, because they are not in my constituency, but any pool closures across the country are concerning. Mr Bibby touched on some of the issues around that; some are for the Scottish Government, but some are for the UK Government, such as the high energy costs. I wonder whether the UK Government could look at exemptions for swimming pools. I know that there has also been a shortage of chlorine at points, which has affected pools in North Lanarkshire. There are various factors that affect the issue, some of which are global, some of which are UK and some of which are Scottish. However, we need to find an approach in which we all work together to make sure that swimming pools are vibrant into the future, and that as many young people and adults as possible learn to swim.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr MacGregor. I will bring in colleagues in a second but, unusually, I would like to take the initiative here. The Scottish Government's response is a cop-out, and I think that it is a dangerous cop-out. I will spare Mr Torrance, but I did not realise that Mr Ewing and I grew up in a golden age of public availability of swimming. I can recall swimming pools in communities everywhere back in those days, as well as outdoor pools. It is a great shame to revisit some of the places that used to have outdoor pools to find that they are now car parks or something completely different.

Touching on Mr MacGregor's point about learning how to swim at primary school, I particularly remember that quite a lot of my classmates were terrified, but they were learning to swim together at an age when they could overcome that fear and learn how to swim. If you do not do it then, the peer-group pressure that builds up on you as an older person having to admit that you cannot swim or trying to learn to swim at a much later date is probably an obstacle to a number of people seeking to learn how to swim.

We are an island nation. We are surrounded by water, and people should have the ability to swim for their own self-preservation and because it might be vital in the saving of somebody else's life—simply not having a fear of the water might mean that they could be moved to assist.

I am interested to hear colleagues' contributions, but I am minded to keep the petition open and, potentially, to convene a round table on the subject at hand, to include Scottish Swimming. It would be helpful to have such a meeting, and I would be grateful for some suggestions from Mr Bibby and Mr MacGregor of others that we might think to include.

It would also be useful to have some idea from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities of the pressures that councils feel are uniquely associated with swimming pools and the costs associated with that, because there will be a balance between long-established and newer facilities and those that are in schools.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I want to draw the committee's attention to the fact that the very first time that I had to face the committee was to support a petition about swimming and to talk about why swimming is important. I had to face you all at that time and I raised quite a lot of points about why it is so important. It is also a health issue.

Sadly, that petition was closed. I can get in touch with the campaign group that lodged it and ask if it has any other suggestions. At the same time, I agree that it is important to hear from Scottish Swimming on what Neil Bibby and Fulton MacGregor said, as well as on the Scottish Government's responses. I fully support the petition.

Fergus Ewing: I was impressed by Mr Bibby and Mr MacGregor's arguments, and by the range of support across political parties for ensuring that, in Scotland, we go back to the golden age that we enjoyed in our boyhood, convener—I thought that I had pulled rank in you in terms of age, but hey ho. As one moves gently towards the other end of life, nearer the crematorium stage, and as one suffers more from things such as arthritis and so on, and cannot do load-bearing exercise, an awful lot of people whose exercise consists of swimming cannot do other forms. The issue is not only about children and life-saving; it is beneficial in other ways.

I was also struck by Mr MacGregor's point that all sports are beneficial if we take part in them. They are good for mental health, physical health, wellbeing, endorphins and all the rest of it. Believe it or not, I used to be quite active on that front myself. However, he made the salient point that swimming is different. It has far more benefits and a broader range of benefits than just life-saving and so on. Your comments are also entirely endorsed, convener, so I do not think that we should close the petition at all.

Moreover, towards the next election, I would not be surprised if the issue finds its way into the manifestos, certainly of the main parties. We have to make choices, and local authorities are the ones who have to make provision, but the passing of the buck by the Scottish Government to local authorities is not acceptable, really. It is just not on. You cannot pass the buck if you are in charge.

If the Government wants suggestions about saving money, I would ask why we do not have full swimming pools instead of empty cycle lanes all over the place? The Government seems to have unlimited funds to construct cycle lanes, which, as far as I can see, remain empty from dawn to dusk, not least because they are on steep hills, which nobody except Olympian cyclists can actually navigate. That is just one suggestion. I could come up with five or six others quite easily, but I will spare the committee that.

Holding a round-table discussion is the very least that we can do. I wonder whether we could pause and think about what else we might do, because, unlike so many other topics that are plainly the responsibility of local authorities, such as refuse collection, which are vital functions in themselves, swimming has a far broader range of benefits. We cannot just say that it is a matter for local authorities.

The Convener: I very much agree because, given that some pools are now under active threat of closure, the baby could go out with the bath water, if that is not the wrong metaphor. We could lose a resource and it will be far harder to do anything about that if it is gone than to maintain and preserve the resource that is currently there.

Do any other members have comments?

David Torrance: I am glad that the convener had the luxury of being able to swim in outdoor pools when he was younger. Our swimming club was in Kirkcaldy harbour until we built a pool. I still have nightmares about that.

Perhaps the committee could write to Dundee City Council. The five pool closures that are mentioned are all in schools. I wonder if the council could give some detail about the reasons for those closures. Many school pools were built a number of years ago, so the infrastructure will now be deteriorating and will be costly to replace, which may be one reason for the closures. I would like to know what will be put in to replace those.

The Convener: We want to be informed about those matters, but I am unsure whether we would take the view that that is a national issue.

Maurice Golden: Mr Torrance has highlighted Dundee, but it would be useful to know the overall picture in every council area in Scotland because we would then be better able to ascertain where the pinch points might be.

The Convener: That is partly why I thought that we should also approach the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

I know that our colleagues are not here to give evidence but, having heard their submissions, I wonder whether they think that there are any organisations that we might want to include in any round-table discussion, beyond those that we have already mentioned.

Neil Bibby: I will reflect on that and get back to you. Scottish Swimming might have some suggestions. It might be worth looking at Inverclyde Council as an example of local authority good practice because, despite financial challenges, it has done a lot of positive work to provide free swimming for local schoolchildren and an eight-week programme of swimming lessons for primary 5 pupils.

The Convener: We could give some additional thought to others that we might contact.

Fergus Ewing: I know that other members have taken an acute interest in this and we could ask for their views about who to invite to a round-table discussion so that we do not exclude anyone. Liz Smith would be one example.

The Convener: That is a thought. We could look at who participated in the exchange in the chamber last week.

Fulton MacGregor: When I set up the event that I referred to earlier, Scottish Swimming was really good at bringing major stakeholders together from across Scotland and would be a good source of information about who to invite to a round-table discussion.

The Convener: We can certainly do that. Scottish Swimming is underwriting the petition.

On a point that Mr Bibby made in his advice, the clerks inform me that, in its response to the petition, the Scottish Government told us that the Barnett

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consequentials were spent on a range of measures, including local government pay offers, additional costs relating to the resettlement of Ukrainians and additional capital funding for the national health service.

I gather that we are all content with those actions.

Annexe C: Written submissions

COSLA written submission, 27 February 2025

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

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.

Dundee City Council written submission, 24 March 2025

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

I refer to your recent correspondence in relation to the above and can advise that Dundee City Council consulted with the public on a range of savings options ahead of the budget for 2025/26 being set by elected members in late February 2025.

One of the options put forward was that the Council could close, some, or all, of the swimming pools in; Baldragon Academy, Grove Academy, Harris Academy, St John's RC High School and St Paul's RC High School from August 2025. Swimming provision in the city would be delivered through Lochee and Olympia Leisure Centres.

The results of the consultation on that option are summarised below:

1. Of the 3263 who gave a response to a question about the level of support for pool closures, 68% felt that no pools should be closed, 28% some pools and 4% all pools.
2. Respondents were also asked about the impact on them if individual pools closed, with 1 being not at all and 5 being severely impacted. The highest average rating was for St Paul's RC High School at 2.73, followed by Grove Academy 2.72, Harris Academy 2.64, St John's RC High School 2.56 and Baldragon 2.36.
3. 1691 people gave more detail on the impact they felt it would have, and responses from these covered themes such as affordable access to swimming, the importance of teaching swimming as a life skill, mental health impacts and detriment to competitive swimming.
4. Suggestions for alternative solutions ranged from increasing public access to school pools and combining use of facilities to promoting their use and exploring alternate funding options.

A report on the consultation, detailing the above, was shared with all Dundee City Council elected members ahead of political budget proposals being put forward and the budget being set at a special meeting of the City Governance Committee.

Arriving at budget decisions is for political groups to decide. Dundee City Council set its 2025/26 Budget on 27 February 2025 and no savings or reductions relating to schools swimming formed part of the agreed budget.

Yours sincerely

GREGORY COLGAN
Chief Executive

Tim Eagle MSP written submission, 7 April 2025

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

It remains clear to me that swimming pools like all sports and leisure facilities are a vital part of our communities. Scotland is fortunate to have a stunning array of beautiful beaches and lochs that local people enjoy throughout the year. Ensuring there are opportunities to learn to swim and enjoy a range of water-based activities is for me an essential.

It pained me during my time as a Councillor that sport and leisure was often seen as a way to save money, yet correctly funded and promoted it has the potential to be a great deliverer of change. Swimming is a low impact sport which can help build muscle and repair joint injuries. It helps with fitness, reducing weight and even small sessions can help reduce blood pressure.

Sport and leisure, which very much includes swimming pools can be an enabler if correctly resourced, taking pressure of our NHS, promoting teamwork and community resilience.

I was delighted to hear for myself the chatter amongst young people following the Scottish National & Open Age Group Swimming Championships (SNAGS) in Aberdeen 5-9th April 2025 and my congratulations to all those who took part. Swimming pools across Scotland welcome amateur swim clubs many times each week, often coached by parents, where our young people work hard to compete in meets across the country culminating in the SNAGS event. So many young people having worked so hard and many who will through their successes go on to represent Scotland in the UK.

Yet these groups deliver so much more, in some pools like the community of Buckie, the swimming club also run a weekly training club to help others learn to swim. Every week secondary school aged children volunteer to help support swimming classes for the youngest in our society. Those experiences, that voluntary work is amazing to see.

From parent and baby classes to fitness classes for the elderly, our swimming pools have much to offer, a saving on a budget line is not one of them!

The petition 'PE2018: Recognise the value of swimming pools and provide financial relief to help keep pools open' has my full and unwavering support. We must come

to realise more the value sport and leisure can offer our society and us as individuals; our swimming pools are a vital part of this offer.

Petitioner written submission, 9 April 2025

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

In Scotland there are 164 public swimming pools across 122 sites which are over 38 years old². 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.

² 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.

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 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.

Beatrice Wishart MSP written submission, 9 April 2025

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

I would be most grateful if you would consider this as a submission to support Petition PE2018: Recognise the value of swimming pools and provide financial relief to help keep pools open.

Scotland is surrounded not just by coastal waters but inland too, lochs and rivers, in urban and rural areas. We know there are financial restraints impacting the continued availability of swimming pools across the country. The value of swimming pools, and the lessons taught to Scotland's young people, I would argue, cannot be measured purely in financial terms but in the physical and mental wellbeing of a life skill. Marine activities involving leisure pursuits on the water like sailing, kayaking and paddleboarding, as well as livelihoods earned at sea, are part of island life.

I learnt to swim before the era of swimming pools, in the cold North Sea, and I am glad that my children and their children had the opportunity to learn in swimming pools. My lessons came after I nearly drowned, having fallen in the Small Board Harbour in Lerwick as a young child and I would not have survived had it not been for a quick-thinking fisherman on a nearby vessel who pulled me out. My early experience lives with me all these years later and I consider it of utmost importance that all of Scotland's young people have access to swimming pools to learn this life skill.