

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2018](#): ‘Recognise the value of swimming pools and provide financial relief to help keep pools open’, lodged by Helen Plank on behalf of Scottish Swimming

[PE2018](#) calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to help keep Scotland’s swimming pools and leisure centres open by providing financial investment for pools.

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

Swimming in Scotland

Swimming is a popular form of physical activity in Scotland. More than [100,000 children attend swimming lessons](#) each week in Scotland. In addition to swimming, public swimming pools offer a range of [water-based fitness classes](#) for adults. The [Scottish Household Survey 2021](#) found that 11% of adults surveyed had been swimming at least once in the four weeks preceding the survey. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, swimming was one of the most common types of physical activity in Scotland; 17% of adults surveyed during the [Scottish Household Survey 2019](#) had participated in swimming in the previous four weeks.

Financial challenges facing swimming pools

PE2018 asks the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide funding to keep swimming pools open. The resource allocated to public swimming pools and leisure centres is determined at local authority level. However, local authorities [receive the majority of their funding](#) from the Scottish Government, through General Revenue Grants to support a local authority’s general expenditure, a proportional amount of Non-Domestic (Business) Rates, and Specific Revenue Grants, which are allocated in connection with specific policy initiatives and expectations. Local authorities also receive income from [service income and council tax](#).

A [recent SPICe briefing](#) compared provisional revenue allocations to local government from the Scottish Government between 2013-14 and 2023-24, and noted that the provisional revenue allocation has increased by 4% in real terms since 2013-14. However, the [Convention of Scottish Local Authorities \(COSLA\) contends](#) that additional funding provided to local government over this period has largely been ring-fenced, whilst “directed funding for core services and local priorities has stayed the same”. Though local authorities

can allocate funding at their discretion to some degree, they have legal obligations to [provide mandatory services](#) such as social care and education. In practice, this may lead to decreased spending on non-mandatory services including leisure facilities as the cost of delivering mandatory services increases.

The [National Benchmarking Overview Report 2021-22](#) showed that local authority expenditure on leisure and culture services, including swimming pools, decreased by 23.6% between 2010-11 and 2021-22. Local authority spending over this period increasingly focused on priority areas such as education and social care, in line with Scottish Government policy commitments.

According to a [2018 Audit Scotland report](#), 25 of Scotland's 32 local authorities deliver sport and leisure services through [Arm's Length External Organisations](#) (ALEOs), such as [Edinburgh Leisure](#) and [Sport Aberdeen](#). The delivery of services through ALEOs offers financial benefits to local authorities; Audit Scotland estimated that leisure and culture ALEOs generate around £61 million annually through donations, grants, fund-raising, investments, and other commercial activity.

Swimming pools have been negatively impacted by increasing energy bills and the cost-of-living crisis. A November 2022 [report by Community Leisure UK Scotland](#) found that 95% of Scotland's leisure facilities are at risk of closure, with 63% involved in active discussions and planning the impact of closures. Though Community Leisure UK Scotland's data includes other leisure facilities in addition to swimming pools, the energy usage associated with running swimming pools is higher than other leisure facilities, and the sector [may therefore face a greater risk of closure](#) due to increased energy costs. Increasing financial pressures have recently led to the closure of [three public swimming pools in West Lothian](#) and [Bucksburn swimming pool](#) in Aberdeen.

In the UK Government's [Spring Budget 2023](#), the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced £63 million of funding to support swimming pools in England. Though this funding does not apply to Scotland's swimming pools, the Scottish Government will receive a percentage of the funding allocated through [Barnett consequentials](#). Organisations including Scottish Swimming [have called on the Scottish Government](#) to use this funding to create an equivalent Scottish fund for swimming pools.

Potential implications of swimming pool closures

The closure of swimming pools carries several potential public health implications. [Scottish Swimming estimates](#) that the positive impact of swimming and other pool-based activities on physical and mental health saves UK health and social care services £357 million per year. Local authority swimming pools often [provide more affordable access to facilities](#) than their private counterparts, particularly in socioeconomically deprived areas, making swimming and other water-based physical activities more accessible to people experiencing socioeconomic deprivation.

Swimming is one of the most popular forms of physical activity undertaken by women; the [Scottish Household Survey 2021 reported](#) that 12% of female respondents had been swimming in the previous four weeks, compared to 10% of male respondents. The closure of swimming pools may therefore add to the challenges affecting [female participation in physical activity](#).

Swimming is a popular and beneficial activity [for disabled people](#), who may therefore also be disproportionately impacted by swimming pool closures. Some local authorities, including South Lanarkshire Leisure, [offer hydrotherapy pools](#) within their leisure centres for use by people living with chronic illnesses and those recovering from injuries.

Scotland's accidental drowning rate is [almost double the UK's average](#). Although the ability to swim does not entirely remove the risk of drowning, swimming skills are an important element of water safety. The closure of public swimming pools could limit opportunities to develop these skills. Scotland's [Drowning Prevention Strategy 2018-26](#), developed by [Water Safety Scotland](#) and partners, identified the promotion and development of swimming lessons and water safety education within early years, primary, and secondary schools as a key aim in reducing Scotland's accidental drowning rate by 50% by 2026. In July 2022, [Scottish Water and Scottish Swimming offered water safety lessons](#) to 70,000 children in swimming pools across Scotland as part of [Drowning Prevention Week](#).

Scottish Government actions

In response to question [S6O-02019](#), taken in the Chamber on 16 March 2023, the then-Minister for Social Security and Local Government, Ben Macpherson MSP, stated that the Scottish Government is examining what support can be provided to swimming pools in Scotland, following the UK Government's announcement of financial support for swimming pools in England. This position was reiterated by the then-Minister for Public Health, Women's Health, and Sport, Maree Todd MSP, on 25 March 2023 in response to written question [S6W-15997](#). In [its response to petition PE2018](#), dated 12 May 2023, the Scottish Government confirmed that it is still examining options for the provision of financial support to swimming pools.

Scottish Parliament actions

Several Members have recently submitted motions regarding this issue, though none have yet been debated in Parliament. On 19 April 2023, Fulton McGregor MSP lodged motion [S6M-08505](#) to call on the Scottish Government to provide funding to keep swimming pools open. This motion has achieved cross-party support. On 23 March 2023, Michael Marra MSP lodged motion [S6M-08334](#) to highlight the Save the Bucksburn Pool campaign, and to call on Aberdeen City Council to reconsider the pool's closure. Mercedes Villalba MSP lodged motion [S6M-08861](#) on 10 May 2023 regarding the same topic. These motions have yet to achieve cross-party support.

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The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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