

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

10th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
14 June 2023

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

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

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 12 April 2023.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition can collect signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 7,546 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.
6. A submission has been provided by the petitioner. This is included at **Annexe D**.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

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

The logo for SPICe (The Information Centre) is a purple rounded rectangle. The text 'SPICe' is in white, with 'The Information Centre' and 'An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh' in white text below it.

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

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.

Sarah Swift
Researcher
18 May 2023

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

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

Annexe C

Scottish Government submission of 12 May 2023

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

The Scottish Government places great importance on leisure facilities and believes everyone should have access to these important community hubs. Swimming can provide significant physical, social and mental health benefits and we believe that every child should be given the opportunity to learn to swim, it is a life skill that can save lives.

Energy costs are a significant issue facing swimming pools, largely due to the cost of living crisis and we have repeatedly called on the UK Government to use all the powers at its disposal to tackle this cost of living crisis and to provide appropriate energy bill relief to leisure facilities.

In the most challenging budget settlement since devolution, we are providing nearly £13.5 billion in the Local Government Settlement 2023/24. We are increasing the resources available to Local Government by over £793 million in 2023-24, a real terms increase of £376m or 3%, however, ultimately it is for locally elected representatives to make local decisions on how best to deliver services to their local communities.

We will continue to work in partnership with local government to ensure that the people of Scotland continue to receive the high quality public services that they expect and deserve.

Following the financial package announced by the UK Government to support swimming pools in England, HM Treasury has advised that consequential will be passed to the Scottish Government. As with any consequential these will be added to the Scottish block as a whole and Scottish Ministers will decide how best to allocate resources, as part of this process we will consider what support can be provided to the sport and leisure sector in Scotland.

We are currently working with sportscotland to examine the facilities estate in Scotland and sportscotland are supporting Scottish Swimming to deliver a Scottish Swimming Facilities Project. The project will provide an accurate understanding of the current pool provision, life cycle and predict the landscape in the short, medium and long term. This will likely be the first phase of a multi layered piece of work to fully appreciate the significance and lead into what, how and who will be required to safeguard and ensure future generations will have the opportunity to realise the benefits aquatics has for all.

We will continue to work with sportscotland, local authority partners and others across the sporting sector to understand the challenges facing the sector and any opportunities to provide support.

Annexe D

Petitioner submission of 30 May 2023

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

Changing Lives Saving Lives

Sport changes lives. It makes people fitter, healthier and socially active. Arguably, swimming is the only sport that directly saves lives.

With Scotland's accidental drowning rate the highest of UK nations, swimming pools are a vital national asset. Leisure trusts host potentially life-saving lessons for over 100,000 children each week. School swimming provides even more.

Every child needs access to a swimming pool now and in the future to create a fairer, more equal and inclusive society.

Pre-pandemic, swimming was Scotland's highest participation sport. It is now the fastest growing. Pools are used by all – from birth to old age and everyone in between. In Scottish Leisure Trust and Local Authority pools alone, adult participation in 2022 generated an estimated £55 million in Social Value – a combined measure of physical and mental health, subjective wellbeing, individual development and social and community development.

Swimming reaches under-represented groups.

Women, who typically do less sport, generate 60% of swimming's Social Value. Women in Sport is a key priority of the Health, Social Care and Sports Committee and pools, through swimming and water-based exercise, can address the gap in female participation.

For people with disabilities, swimming is the highest participation sport, alongside cycling. The weight bearing properties of water means swimming uniquely supports, not only those with disabilities, but those recovering from injury and the inactive.

Thirty per cent of the Social Value of swimming is generated by adults over 65. What is more, swimming can be enjoyed well above this age.

This not only supports Scotland's ageing population, but contributes enormously to health savings.

Saving swimming pools is critical. They are lifelines for communities, clubs, individuals and families who rely on them for physical and mental health and general wellbeing. Swimming is more than a sport. It is an opportunity to create a safer, healthier and active Scotland.

Our message is simple. Invest in swimming pools today for a better future tomorrow – to change lives, save lives and ensure Scotland thrives as a nation for generations to come.