

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee  
Wednesday 22 January 2025  
1st 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 20 March 2024.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport.
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 the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport, the Petitioner, and Liz Smith 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, 10,029 signatures have been received on this petition.

### Action

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

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**January 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 20 March 2024**

**The Deputy Convener:** Our next continued petition is PE2018, which was lodged by Helen Plank on behalf of Scottish Swimming, is on recognising the value of swimming pools and providing financial relief to help to keep pools open. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to help to keep our swimming pools and leisure centres open by providing financial investment for pools.

I welcome another colleague, Tim Eagle, to the committee. We are pleased to see him, as a new addition to the Parliament, take an interest in the public petitions process. Welcome, Mr Eagle.

**Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Thank you very much, convener. It is a pleasure to be here at the meeting—my first one—and I thank the clerks for helping me. I just wanted to speak to the petition. I thank Scottish Swimming, obviously, and Liz Smith, who has submitted a letter of support, too.

The issue of financial struggles for sport and health overall and in some councils came up during my time as a councillor, which is at the grass-roots level of politics in Scotland. The problem is that health and leisure facilities are not ring fenced, so their budgets are easy to cut when very important things such as education, adult health and social care have to be protected.

However, I was quite strong on the issue in the council, because we are an island nation with beautiful lochs and rivers throughout our country and swimming is an increasingly popular activity. We already have double the UK average number of deaths by accidental drowning, and that could go up if we shut more pools, particularly as we have many rural areas in the country. With limited bus routes, rural connectivity is not great and, if we start closing swimming pools, access to the remaining ones will get harder and harder.

I know that a lot of this is in the briefing but I want to commend these things. Swimming is invaluable as preventative medicine and, as we talk about health moving forward, we should discuss that more. We need to have a stronger discussion with the Scottish Government about how we can help councils to protect these very important facilities.

**The Deputy Convener:** Thank you, Mr Eagle. We last considered the petition at our meeting on 14 June 2023, when we agreed to write to the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport and to sportscotland. Sportscotland responded with further detail on the support that it is providing to the Scottish swimming facilities project that is being taken forward in three phases by Scottish Swimming, which lodged the petition.

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport confirmed that the Scottish Government received Barnett consequentials of £1.939 million in resource funding and £3.877 million in capital funding following the UK Government's announcement in spring 2023 of a swimming pool fund. As Barnett consequentials are not required to be allocated to the policy area that they have resulted from, and as the minister

has not offered any indication of where the money was allocated, it remains unclear whether that additional funding was, in fact, used to support swimming facilities in Scotland.

We have received a submission from the petitioner that includes a link to a report on the future of swimming facilities in Scotland and notes the number of pools that have closed since the petition was lodged and the impact of that on local communities.

Our colleague Liz Smith is unable to join us in person today but has provided a written statement in support of the petition, and Mr Eagle has already given his statement. Do members have any comments or recommendations?

**Foyso Choudhury:** Welcome, Tim. It is good to see you here. I, too, have been involved with the issue before, and I think that the presentation that our colleague gave was great.

We need to recognise that swimming pools are closing. In West Lothian, three swimming pools recently closed, and I have a lot of constituents who are asking what support the Government is providing. I think that we should write to the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport to seek the Scottish Government's response to "The Future of Swimming Facilities in Scotland" report and ask for further details on the financial support being provided for swimming facilities.

**Fergus Ewing:** I support what Mr Choudhury has recommended and highlight the fact that the petitioner's very recent submission of 7 March pointed out that, since the petition was lodged—in April last year, I think, which is a fairly short period of time, really—six swimming pools have closed, 147 swimming pools are now at risk and 95 per cent of the population in Scotland think that pools are important for safety.

There is that, there are the wide concerns from Liz Smith, Tess White and Fulton MacGregor—who did some work early on with the petitioner—and there is the fact that, apparently, the Scottish Government received Barnett consequential of nearly £2 million in resource and nearly £4 million in capital. People are entitled to know what has happened to that money. I understand that we do not have to use it for swimming pools but, if we do not, how many more swimming pools will close over the next year? We need some straight answers, and we did not get them from the minister's response, which was opaque in the extreme. As you can tell, convener, I am not entirely satisfied with the Scottish Government's approach in this case.

**The Deputy Convener:** Thank you, Mr Ewing. Are there further comments from members?

**Foyso Choudhury:** I asked a few questions on the issue, as well, and I agree with Fergus that we are not getting any straight answers from the Government. We should write.

**The Deputy Convener:** We will write to the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport to ask what additional funding is being given and to see whether the Barnett consequentials have been passed over for swimming pools. Do members agree?

CPPP/S6/25/1/6

Members *indicated agreement.*

## **Annexe C: Written submissions**

### **Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport written submission, 22 April 2024**

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

Thank you for your letter and request for further information regarding the above petition.

The Scottish Government is aware of the value of swimming and the important role it plays in our society. I recently met with Scottish Swimming to discuss the Future of Swimming Facilities in Scotland report.

Scottish Swimming's recently published documents: 'The Future of Swimming Facilities in Scotland' and 'A Sustainable Future: Enhancing Energy Efficiency in Scotland's Swimming Pools' have provided important information about swimming pools, highlighting the need for an accessible and sustainable estate that is focussed on the needs of communities.

I look forward to phase three of the project, when work with pilot local authority areas will take place to implement the guidance developed in the reports.

The outcome of the project will help to ensure that any investment, particularly at a time when public finances are under so much pressure, ensures sustainable facilities, in the right places, to serve their local communities' needs.

The Scottish Government is aware of the pool closures highlighted in the submission of 07 March 2024. I (and my officials) regularly engage with Community Leisure UK and sportscotland to discuss the local public facilities landscape.

The Scottish Government recognises the financial challenges that local government are currently facing and that difficult decisions were, and continue to be, required in all public services as a result of continued UK Government austerity measures. Despite a real terms cut in the Scottish Budget, the Local Government settlement's share of the discretionary Scottish Budget has increased, highlighting the importance the Scottish Government places on our local services.

The 2024-25 budget includes record funding of more than £14 billion for local government, a real-terms increase of 2.5% compared with 2023-24, including £147 million to enable local authorities to freeze Council Tax rates at their current levels.

With regard to the consequential received as part of the UK Government's Swimming Pool Fund, I can confirm that as per the parliamentary question you referenced, the funding received was included within the Scottish Government's Autumn Budget Revision published on 28 September 2023.

It also formed part of the consequential figures included in the Deputy First Minister's letter to the FPAC on 21 November, providing an update on the in-year budget changes.

This funding was utilised to support the range of measures outlined within the Autumn Budget Revision, including £264.5 million being provided to Local Government for pay offers, £30 million for additional costs relating to the Ukrainian Resettlement programme, and £50 million of additional capital funding being provided to the NHS.

As you have noted, it is for locally elected representatives to make decisions on how best to deliver services to their local communities, including how to allocate the total financial resources available to them, including on leisure facilities, on the basis of local needs and priorities.

Kind regards,

**MAREE TODD MSP**  
**Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport**

### **Petitioner written submission, 7 January 2025**

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

The battle to keep swimming pools open continues with the announcement last November that Dundee City Council are proposing to close five school pools. The five schools are Baldrigon Academy, Grove Academy, Harris Academy, St John's RC High School and St Paul's RC High School. These schools host vital swimming lessons, club training sessions, disability sessions and community swimming for the safety, health and wellbeing of the population. Some of the pools are in areas of deprivation where fair and equal access to swimming is vital to tackle child poverty and ensure every child can swim.

A public consultation with regard to council budgets opened on 29 November and ran until 29 December. These are the reasons Scottish Swimming believes are why these pools should remain open:

- Pools are costly to build. These pools are nowhere near the end of their lifecycle (as much as 60 years with correct maintenance). Baldrigon Academy is only 6 years old and Harris Academy, 8 years old. St Paul's, the oldest of the pools had a significant refurbishment in 2007
- Over 1000 children and adults benefit from using these pools every week for a variety of purposes from vital life-saving swimming lessons to club swimming, disability sessions and recreational public swimming
- More than 800 children a week learn to swim in these pools every week for safety
- St. Paul's RC High School and Grove Academy are already at full occupancy. Accommodating any potential displacement at other pools within Leisure and Culture Dundee's portfolio would be very challenging with current capacities.

- Swimming is the highest participation sport in Scotland for children and adults with additional support needs. The pools earmarked for closure host vital lessons and holiday camps for children with additional support needs some of whom attend schools in areas of deprivation (St Andrew's Primary School) and have never experienced a pool before
- 1 in 3 adults in the UK cannot swim. These pools have a thriving adult learn to swim programme with around 70 adults aged 20 to 70 using the pools to learn a vital life skill
- Baldragon Academy is in an area of deprivation and, as part of a successful school swimming pilot with **sportscotland** and school swimming, offered employability for local school children who would otherwise have left school
- 640 athletes, volunteers and coaches in 3 local aquatic clubs rely on these pools every week for fitness, fun and friendship to improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing
- The cost of closure and decommissioning would be significant, not to mention the disruption to schools.

The Dundee case is one example of pool closures in one area. The same budgetary constraints and financial pressures exist across councils in Scotland putting many more pools under threat. 56% of public pools are over 30 years old which puts them at risk of closure. At the same time there is wide public support for swimming pools as the general public see the value in keeping them open according to an opinion poll by JL Partners in February 2024. Scottish Swimming published on 19th December 2024, 'The Benefits of Swimming Pools' which summarises the benefits of pools from a safety, health, communities, social and sporting perspective. A summary is provided below.

95% of the Scottish population agree pools are important for safety. In fact, 1,533,744 children participated in swimming lessons in leisure trust facilities in 2023. Safety is especially important in Scotland where the drowning rate per head of population is more than double that of the UK. 47 people lost their lives through accidental drownings in 2023. We also have one of the longest coastlines in Europe at 11,800km and around 30,000 inland waters, so danger is never far away.

86% of the Scottish population agree swimming pools are important for health. Headline findings from the Scottish Health Survey in 2023 show that almost a third of adults (32%) were recorded as living with obesity, the highest level recorded in the survey since 2003. For children there is also a worrying trend. 30% of children aged 2 to 15 are at risk of combined obesity and overweight. Swimming is one of few activities accessible to all including those with fitness or mobility issues and so keeping pools open is vital for the ongoing health of the population.

91% of the Scottish population agree that pool closures are bad for communities. Swimming pools are the beating heart of many a community. From the first splashes of water on a baby's face to the regular routine of a recreational swim, swimming can be enjoyed by children, families, individuals and some 150 community clubs across Scotland supporting 23,000 members.

88% of the Scottish population agree that pools are important for communities. Swimming pools are part of the social fabric of society. They are somewhere to hang out with friends. They are community hubs – a hive of activity and positive energy with young and old enjoying the water and relaxing in the café for a drink afterwards. Time at the pool is a positive and productive way to spend time and swimming has been proven to generate social value savings (£2.4 billion in 2022 according to Swim England) including reduced crime and improved social and community development.

87% of the Scottish population agree swimming pools are important for our success as a sport. Pre-pandemic swimming was Scotland's highest participation sport. It is now the fastest growing according to the 2022 household survey. Swimming is also Scotland's most successful sport at an Olympic and Commonwealth Games level, with Duncan Scott OBE Scotland's most decorated Olympic and Team Scotland athlete ever.

Scottish Swimming is committed to keeping pools open and securing financial relief given the level of threat that closing swimming pools poses for the safety, health, and success of communities across Scotland. We also strongly advocate school swimming as a means to improving the water safety of children across Scotland and enhancing the occupancy of swimming pool during the school day to improve their overall efficiency.

## **Liz Smith MSP written submission, 7 January 2025**

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

Dear Mr Carlaw and Members of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

#### **Petition PE2018**

I am writing in support of Petition PE2018: Recognise the value of swimming pools and provide financial relief to help keep pools open, in my capacity as the Convenor of the Cross-Party Group on Sport.

The Committee will recognise the passion I have for sport and my determination to defend local sporting facilities from closure. As we have seen over the last few years, swimming pools have borne the brunt of tight council budgets and have subsequently been the first to be axed for short term savings. I believe this is short-sighted and is not considering the much longer-term economic and social benefits swimming pools provide.

Swimming pools, alongside other leisure facilities, are vital for physical and mental health and wellbeing. They assist in fostering a sense of community and are widely popular among all age groups and families. Closing pool facilities completely flies in the face of Scottish Government policy on improving health - especially at a time when a third of Scottish adults are obese and there is an ongoing crisis relating to the number of overweight children.

It should concern us all that one in every three UK adults cannot swim which is such a fundamental life skill. While it is welcome that more people are enjoying Scotland's Lochs and waterways, this has inevitably driven a grim increase in cases of drowning. Closing pools will only worsen this trend further if pools are not conveniently available for those wishing to learn.

The evidence the committee will have been provided for the benefits of community swimming pools is compelling. But even aside from the evidence on outcomes, the public overwhelmingly supports these facilities in numerous surveys. They recognise the importance pools have for health, community, and sporting attainment. Every MSP is here to stand up for the interests of their respective communities and on this issue the public has made its view abundantly clear.

I would therefore urge all members of the Committee to support petition PE2018.