

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

6th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 3
November 2021

PE1891: Make swimming lessons a statutory
requirement in the primary school curriculum

Note by the Clerk

Petitioner Lewis Alexander Condry

**Petition
summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that all children will have had the opportunity to learn to swim by making it a statutory requirement to provide lessons in the primary school curriculum.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1891>

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that has been under consideration since 16 September 2021.
2. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. While not a formal requirement, petitioners have the option to collect signatures on their petition. On this occasion, the petitioner elected to collect this information. 1554 signatures have been received.
4. 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 B** of this paper.
5. A submission has been provided by the petitioner. This is included at **Annexe C**.

Background Information

6. The petitioner notes that in 2017 it was estimated that 40% of children left primary school unable to swim. He points out that there is currently no statutory requirement for local authorities to provide school swimming lessons in Scotland.
7. The petitioner wants to make it a statutory requirement to provide swimming lessons in the primary school curriculum so that all children have the opportunity to learn to swim.

SPICe Briefing

8. The SPICe briefing accompanying this petition highlights that whilst local authorities have a statutory duty to secure an adequate and efficient education for children of school age in their area, exactly what this education should entail is not set out in legislation and very little of the school curriculum in Scotland is statutory.
9. To support the Curriculum for Excellence, Education Scotland sets out Experiences and Outcomes (Es and Os) and Benchmarks. These Es and Os are statements about children's learning and progression and Benchmarks are intended to set out national standards expected within each curriculum area at each level. The briefing states that the Es and Os covering physical education are broadly drafted and there is no mention of specific activities.
10. The briefing notes that in addition to curriculum guidance, the Scottish Government does have some levers to encourage local authorities and schools to cover certain issues within the curriculum. This includes bringing together stakeholders and potential providing specific funding.
11. SPICe contacted the Scottish Government regarding the provision of swimming lessons and received a response stating 'We do not hold information on which Local Authorities provide swimming lessons to schools. We do know, however, that eleven Local Authorities provide swimming opportunities through the Active Schools Programme, which is a partnership with sportscotland'.
12. The Scottish Government goes on to say that 'Through sportscotland, we work with Scottish Swimming,' noting that it is a strategic priority for Scottish Swimming that every child learns to swim and noting that 'The Scottish Government are in discussions with Scottish Swimming on how to expand their programme.'

13. The SPICe briefing also notes the creation of a national Drowning Prevention Strategy by Water Safety Scotland, which was last reviewed in 2020.

Scottish Government Submission

14. The Scottish Government submission reiterates the fact that there is no mandatory curriculum in Scotland and that local authorities and individual schools have the flexibility to decide upon the content of their own lessons at a local level.
15. The Scottish Government acknowledges that some schools do already offer swimming lessons through the curriculum, whilst others are offer swimming lessons through their Active Schools programme.
16. The Scottish Government highlights the National Learn to Swim Framework, which aims to help children become safe, competent and confident swimmers. The Scottish Government also draws attention to work being done to mitigate the risks and to educate people about the danger of Scotland's coastal and inland waters, following a number of drowning tragedies involving children and adults earlier this year.

Petitioner Submission

17. The petitioner stresses in his response to the Scottish Government submission that his focus is on ensuring swimming lessons become mandatory in Scottish schools, as the evidence he has discovered suggests that when children are exposed to swimming lessons at an early age (i.e. through school) the chance of drowning decreases significantly.
18. The petitioner suggests that the current policy of allowing councils to choose whether to provide swimming lessons is unfair, leading to many children missing out or being forced to take private lessons, something which may be inaccessible to lower income families or those living in rural areas.
19. The petitioner believes that making swimming lessons in school a mandatory requirement will redress this inequality.
20. The petitioner points out that learning to swim is likely to benefit society, e.g. if someone can assist others if they get into difficulty in the water, as well as providing wider health benefits to individuals.

Action

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

Clerk to the Committee

PE1891: MAKE SWIMMING LESSONS A STATUTORY REQUIREMENT IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Petitioner

Lewis Alexander Condry

Date Lodged

16 September 2021

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that all children will have had the opportunity to learn to swim by making it a statutory requirement to provide lessons in the primary school curriculum.

Previous action

The action I have taken includes contacting all of my local MSPs to make them aware of this petition and why I think it is a good idea to do so.

One said they would write to the Cabinet Secretary; another has said they look forward to hearing it being debated in parliament.

As a result of still being a University Student I had actually did an assignment on this topic, which kind of piqued my interest in this policy area. The assignment was to write a policy brief to change or create a new policy. I am also a swimmer myself so I know the sport fairly well.

Background information

In 2017, it was estimated that, 40% of children left primary school not being able to swim. Then in 2018 a report by Water Safety Scotland, found that child water safety was poorer in Scotland than other EU nations.

These are disappointing figures given that Scotland has incredible outdoor spaces, many having huge bodies of water for use. For a nation that has plenty of outdoor spaces to explore, and has shown to be excellent in Swimming at the Elite level, the level of disregard for swimming lessons is disappointing.

Unlike England and Wales, it isn't a statutory requirement in Scotland to have swimming lessons. Swimming lessons are provided on a council to council basis which could mean that children miss out on this opportunity.

In 2010, the Scottish Government invested £800,000 into swimming lessons which is very little when compared to the UK Government, who invested £320 million (Department of Education, 2018).

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE1891](#): Make swimming lessons a statutory requirement in the primary school curriculum, lodged by Lewis Alexander Condy

Background

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

Local authorities have a statutory duty to secure an adequate and efficient education for children of school-age in their area; what this education should entail is not set out in legislation. In fact, very little of the school curriculum is statutory.

To support the Curriculum for Excellence, Education Scotland sets out Experiences and Outcomes (“Es and Os”) and Benchmarks. Es and Os are statements about children's learning and progression and Benchmarks are intended to set out national standards expected within each curriculum area at each level. The Es and Os covering physical education are found in the [Health and Wellbeing](#) curriculum area. However, these are broadly drafted and there are no mentions of specific activities.

In addition to the curriculum guidance, the Scottish Government does have levers to encourage local authorities and schools to cover certain issues within the curriculum. Normally this is through bringing together stakeholders and potentially providing specific funding. Examples include the [1+2 Languages policy](#) and [LGBTI inclusive education](#).

OECD Review

The [OECD published a review of CfE on 21 June 2021](#). The OECD discussed the busy landscape of policy initiatives and the impact on the system as a whole. It said:

“While the policy environment is crowded with multiple initiatives, gaps and misalignments remain – such as that in assessment, for example – and where new policies are introduced (or old ones revisited), alignment and coherence is an issue.” (p107)

The OECD recommends that Scotland move to planned systematic curriculum reviews within a regular cycle. The rationale for having a regular review included:

- reducing reliance on external independent reviews when controversies arise
- building internal capacity for curriculum monitoring
- reducing the need for ongoing guidance and clarifications and give the system greater stability overall
- redirecting the energy of leaders to focus on the implementation of CfE in their schools rather than responding to the most recent update or clarification
- supporting coherence of CfE (p129)

The [Scottish Government accepted the recommendation](#). It noted that there are currently three reviews ongoing on topic-specific issues but that it would develop a new overarching review process in the longer term.

Swimming and water safety

SPICe has contacted the Scottish Government on the provision of swimming lessons. Officials have responded—

“We do not hold the information on which Local Authorities provide swimming lessons to schools. We do know however, that eleven Local Authorities provide swimming opportunities through the Active Schools Programme, which is a partnership with sportscotland.

“Through sportscotland, we work with Scottish Swimming whose vision is ‘Every One Can Swim’. Ensuring every child learns to swim is a strategic priority for Scottish Swimming. There is no debate around the impact learning to swim has

on a young person or the physical and mental health benefits swimming provides throughout life. The Scottish Government are in discussions with Scottish Swimming on how to expand their programme.”

[Water Safety Scotland](#) has [developed a national Drowning Prevention Strategy](#). Water Safety Scotland was established in 2014 by ROSPA. Its website lists the partners involved in Water Safety Scotland, and these include the Scottish Government and a number of local authorities. Two of the strategy’s aims are:

- Promote and develop learning to swim, water safety education and initiatives within early years, primary and secondary schools
- Develop water safety across Scotland’s 32 local authority areas and promote the development of water safety policies

There was a [2-year review](#) on progress on the strategy published in 2020.

Scottish Parliament action

On [2 September 2021, Clare Adamson MSP asked a general question on the Drowning Prevention Strategy](#). The Minister for Community Safety, Ash Denham MSP, said:

“The Scottish Government continues to provide funding, via the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, to support the operation of Water Safety Scotland. In addition, this year, the Scottish Government has worked with partners to support a number of water safety activities and campaigns.

“... On 11 August, I convened a meeting with a range of key stakeholders to drive further action around delivery of the drowning prevention strategy, and I will convene a follow-up meeting later this month.” (Cols 2-3)

The Minister said that there was more work to be done, particularly in the context of Article 24 of the UNCRC (in relation to health). She said:

“A lot of good work on education around risk assessment and accident prevention is already being undertaken. There is also the underlying contribution of the getting it right for

every child programme. We have a very good platform on which to build.” (Col 3)

Ned Sharratt
Senior Researcher
10/09/2021

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Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 17 September 2021

PE1891/A: Make swimming lessons a statutory requirement in the primary school curriculum

I am responding to the Committee on behalf of the Scottish Government in relation to Petition PE1891 raised by Lewis Condy, which calls for swimming lessons to be made a statutory part of the primary school curriculum in Scotland, since this issue falls within my ministerial policy portfolio.

I know that all members of the Committee will share the Scottish Government's shock and sadness that, over the course of one incredibly tragic weekend in late July, there were 5 separate incidents that ultimately led to the loss of 7 lives by drowning. Our thoughts are with the victims and also with those who have drowned at other times and places. Every loss of life by drowning is heart-breaking, and our deepest sympathies go out to the bereaved families, friends and loved ones.

Firstly, with regard to the provision of swimming lessons in Scottish schools, under the provisions of Curriculum for Excellence there is no mandatory curriculum in Scotland, and therefore local authorities and individual schools have the flexibility to decide upon the content of their own lessons at the local level, ideally taking into account the local needs and circumstances of all children and young people in attendance. I am aware that some local authorities already do offer swimming lessons to school pupils as a part of the physical education classes. Also, in the 2018-19 academic year (the most recent year for which data is available), 21 local authorities were offering swimming lessons through their Active Schools programme.

Despite this I fully recognise that opportunities to participate in swimming lessons, both inside and outside of school, have been hampered over the past year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, after our move beyond Level 0 on 9 August, most of the remaining restrictions on the aquatic sporting environment have eased further or been removed. The National Learn to Swim Framework, which is supported by Scottish Water and delivered by aquatic partners every week, already helps children to become safe, competent, and confident swimmers and these water safety themed lessons are an essential part of the Framework to help educate on water safety.

We are of course determined to do what we can to avoid any repeat of the recent tragic incidents. On 1 September, Scottish Swimming published their guidance 'Back to the Water, which is available through the following web link:

https://www.scottishswimming.com/media/3389208/ss-beyond-level-0-guidance-01sept2021_final.pdf (scottishswimming.com)

It is important to recognise the difference between swimming in a heated indoor swimming pool and in a cold water loch or reservoir, and that that accidental drownings can affect people who can swim as well as those who can't. With this in mind I believe that, in addition to education, there is also a role for signage and for life-saving equipment to be located near outdoor open water sites.

While recognising that teaching children and young children to swim is a priority, our emphasis continues to be on personal responsibility, good practice and informed judgement. Recently, my colleague the Minister for Community Safety chaired a meeting with a range of stakeholders including the emergency services, and representatives from Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, the RNLI, Education Scotland and Water Safety Scotland among others. This meeting reflected on those tragic incidents and provided everyone in attendance with an opportunity to look at what more can be done to mitigate risks and to educate people about the dangers of Scotland's coastal and inland waters. Another meeting has been convened to take place on 22 September to assess what further effort is required to ensure greater protection for the public around areas of water in future.

Moving forward, we will work with stakeholders to consider greater opportunities for children and young people to engage with community swimming lessons along with considering wider water safety issues such as the importance of floating to live, and the dangers of cold water shock.

Petitioner submission of 21 September 2021 PE1891/B: Make swimming lessons a statutory requirement in the primary school curriculum

I am writing with regards your response to my petition; PE1891: Make Swimming Lessons a Statutory Requirement in the Primary School Curriculum.

Having read the response, I feel as though the main point of my petition has been missed. The response I have received is heavily relating to the saddening deaths of those who did unfortunately lose their lives to wild swimming. I agree that this can happen to anyone; those who can't swim but also to those who can, that is down to lack of water safety knowledge which is poorer in Scotland than other EU nations. My petition's aim was not to address this, it was to ensure that swimming lessons became mandatory in the primary school curriculum. Of course, the incidences which have occurred in wild swimming has been a factor in prompting me to start the petition. It was merely one factor on a wider issue.

When applying for the petition I was restricted with the words I could use and was unable to cover all aspects of why my petition had been created. The wild swimming point I raised was due to the issue being in the news quite recently and thought it may have been better to shine a light on why swimming lessons are important. I have looked at this topic at university as part of a sports policy module and some of the academic evidence I found showed that when children are exposed to swimming lessons at an early age (i.e. through school) the chance of drowning decreases significantly.

The current policy of allowing councils to choose whether to provide swimming lessons in my view, and in the views of many people who have contacted me about this petition, is in some ways unfair. This is because not every council will provide swimming lessons and those which do, do not always provide it to all schools within their local area. I know this to be a fact as I have been contacted by a few individuals who have experienced this. This leaves many kids left out and many will have to seek private lessons which can be expensive. This is unfair on low-income families who, do not receive lessons through schools, and are unable to afford private lessons. We also know that low-income families are more likely to have lower quality of health than more affluent

families. Making swimming lessons a statutory requirement, like other parts of the UK, would address this inequality but also provide exercise to those lower income families who may not have the luxury to afford for their child to do sports. Some people have also contacted me about the lack of swimming lessons available in rural areas and the highlands, another reason why I made the petition to be mandatory *across* Scotland.

Swimming is a life skill and learning to swim is not just about saving yourself, but also in some cases helping others. If you see someone struggling in a body of water (or perhaps even an animal) then if you are able to swim, then you may have a chance of preventing them from drowning. If you are not able to swim then the only real option is to contact the emergency services, which may not get to you quick enough. It is physical activity, and we know that when kids are active it reduces their chance of developing obesity later on in life.

To summarise, ensuring swimming lessons is mandatory in the primary school curriculum provides benefits not just to the kids involved but wider society as well. The Physical activity aspect helps keeps kids active helping reduce childhood obesity (and improve their mental health), which in turn reduces the burden on the NHS. It is a more inclusive approach to the policy as it means low-income families (and those in rural areas) benefit as they are not having to seek expensive private lessons, if their councils cannot provide them.

I do hope this explanation has cleared up the reasons why I started the petition. I am also happy to help in any way I can with this in the future as I think it has been extremely well received in regards to the support and overall reception.