

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

1st Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday 18
January 2023

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

Lodged on 16 September 2021

Petitioner Lewis Alexander Condy

**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. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [19 January 2022](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government.
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 a new response from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, which is 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's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

Action

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

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

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

Petitioner

Lewis Alexander Condy

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).

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1891 on 19 January 2022

The Convener: The next continued petition is PE1891, which was lodged by Lewis Alexander Condy and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn to swim by making it a statutory requirement to provide lessons in the primary school curriculum.

I am delighted to say that we are joined by our colleague Foysol Choudhury MSP. Good morning, Mr Choudhury. I will invite you to speak in a minute or so but, before I do so I will provide a bit more background to the following proceedings.

We previously considered the petition in November of last year, when we agreed to write to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to seek data on how many schools provide swimming lessons as part of the curriculum. We also wrote to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and Scottish Swimming.

COSLA's submission states that, currently,

“There are no local or national mechanisms in place”

to collect the data, and notes that the delivery of swimming lessons can depend on factors such as access to facilities, cost and delivery model. The latest figures, which are pre-pandemic and are for 2018-19, suggest that

“21 Local Authorities were offering swimming activity through the Active Schools Network.”

Scottish Swimming notes in its submission that

“there were over 106,000 children enrolled in learn to swim programmes ... prior to the pandemic”.

The submission also highlights data that suggests that

“there is a direct correlation between a child's socio-economic background and their opportunity to learn to swim.”

Scottish Swimming states that it has submitted a proposal to the Scottish Government in support of a programme of school swimming and is currently involved in discussions with sportscotland on its potential development.

We also received a submission from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, which highlights the need for any swimming programme to include consideration of outdoor water survival skills.

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, which might be inaccessible to lower-income families or those living in rural areas.

Before I turn to members of the committee, I ask Mr Choudhury whether he would like to comment on the petition's aims.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I again thank my constituent Lewis Condry, who brought this important issue to the Parliament's attention and provided a considered response to the Scottish Government's submission. This is a good example of positive citizen engagement with the Scottish Parliament. Lewis has, throughout, emphasised the importance of equality of access to swimming lessons. Inequality of access is a big problem, as has been highlighted repeatedly in the responses to the committee, and is a key failure in the current situation.

I thank all those who signed the petition and the organisations that responded to the committee's request for more information. They have provided a wealth of evidence about the value of swimming lessons and the factors that influence the inequality of access to them.

I note the following points in the response from COSLA. The Scottish Government previously answered a written question in Parliament from me about swimming lessons and competency levels in primary school children, by saying that the information was not held centrally. I am concerned and disappointed to learn that COSLA confirms that not only is there no data to indicate the presence of swimming lessons across Scotland, there is no mechanism to collect such data. It also notes the variations in the provision of swimming lessons across the country, with the availability of facilities and the cost of lessons being significant factors that drive unequal access. Although extracurricular support of the active schools network is highlighted, only 21 local authorities offer swimming activity through the network, and it is not known how many children that reaches.

The response from Scottish Swimming confirms the initial concerns raised by the petitioner that

“over 40% of children leave primary school unable to swim in Scotland”

Furthermore, it notes that only 10.5 per cent of children in swimming lessons through its learn to swim framework come from the most deprived areas of Scotland, and that there is a

“direct correlation between a child's socio-economic background and their opportunity to learn to swim.”

If we are serious about tackling inequality, we need a very different approach.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents notes that in England, despite swimming being a statutory part of the national curriculum, a significant number of children leave primary education without being able to swim. It highlights the known issue of equality of access, including that it is affected by a family's affluence and location. ROSPA's submission indicates that swimming lessons as a statutory requirement might not in itself be a panacea. Making swimming lessons mandatory without support for and from the organisations that would need to be involved in delivery may not have the desired effects, so a whole package of measures require consideration.

There is also evidence that is available through other sources in England and Wales that identifies particular barriers to accessing swimming regularly for some ethnic minority communities, which have proportionately fewer children who are able to swim and be confident in water safety.

From the responses to my constituent's petition, we have seen that there is widespread support in the sector for doing more on that issue. The committee has heard that there is no statutory curriculum in Scotland. However, the Scottish Government has previously found means to mandate an inclusive education in other areas where it has deemed that necessary.

At its heart, this is a question of social justice as much as it is one of education. The committee has heard that there are significant social disparities in the provision of swimming lessons. We know that access to swimming lessons gives people a benefit to their safety around water and to their health, fitness and wellbeing. Resolving those disparities is a matter of equality of opportunity.

The issue has public support and clear support from the sectors involved and, if properly addressed, would provide significant benefit to society. Many points have been raised by the organisations involved in that area, and the committee might wish to put those points to the cabinet secretary for further comment.

I thank the committee for allowing me this opportunity to speak.

The Convener: Mr Choudhury, you raised a number of important issues, and I thank you again for contributing to our consideration of your constituent's petition this morning.

We turn to questions from committee members, and the first is from David Torrance.

David Torrance: I thank the petitioner for lodging the petition, because it is a really important issue. From the number of tragedies since last summer in Scotland, we see the number of people who could not learn to swim. Learning to swim could be a life-saver and that is why it is so important. I know that there can be difficulties around the lack of swimming facilities in some geographical locations, but I would like to explore that more. The evidence from COSLA, Scottish Swimming and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents shows that it is really important that we

encourage every primary school child to learn to swim. As I said before, it would save lives, so I would like to ask for an update from the Scottish Government on the proposals to work with Scottish Swimming and sportscotland on a programme of school swimming, including who might benefit from that.

In response to comments from Mr Choudhury about data, I would also like to explore with the Scottish Government how we can collect data on the number of primary school children in Scotland who are able to swim by the end of primary school. I would also like that work to take into account factors such as a child's geographical location and socioeconomic and ethnic background, because those are also important and will highlight where we are missing children out.

Paul Sweeney: I congratulate Mr Choudhury for making such an elegant case on behalf of his constituent, the petitioner, and I thank him for coming to the committee. I agree with the points that he raised and with Mr Torrance's comments.

In my time as a representative in Glasgow, the issue has been brought up with me time and again, particularly by the Spiers family who, a few years ago, launched the Christopher's saving lives campaign, after their son tragically drowned in the River Clyde.

I have also met representatives from the Glasgow Humane Society, who raised a number of recurring issues about a lack of confidence when people encounter difficulty, particularly in open and tidal waters, as well as a lack of respect for life-saving equipment, which is frequently vandalised and removed—often by young people. There is an issue around general education in that area.

Teaching kids to swim is a fundamental life-saving exercise; it is not necessarily a recreational activity. That is the fundamental consideration. It is a public safety matter, rather than a sporting matter and that needs to be the consideration and basis on which we take the work forward. Furthermore, the issue of certain councils' infrastructure might be a valid concern. Not every school has a swimming pool or ready access to leisure centres.

However, we might also want to consider education with regard to open-water swimming and open-water confidence. Outdoor education was certainly a big part of my primary education and, given that confidence in open water is the main issue here, that might well be a consideration. As has been mentioned, there was the tragedy that happened at Loch Lomond last summer when young people got into difficulty.

That is a major issue to consider, and it might not raise the same issues with regard to physical infrastructure, given that there are plenty of opportunities to experience open-water swimming in Scotland at a relatively low cost. It is just a matter of introducing children to that environment and explaining some of the hidden dangers in such waters. The Glasgow Humane Society, for example, has described mud as

being one of the main safety issues in rivers. The fact is that a lot of people drown not because they cannot swim but because they get stuck in mud and cannot physically remove themselves from the river. Obviously that is a distressing situation for someone to be in, and it is not for want of being able to swim but a lack of awareness of how treacherous river banks can be. It is that broader spectrum of education that needs to be introduced to our schools.

The Convener: Thank you for those very helpful comments.

We have had quite a comprehensive discussion this morning. I see no indication that other committee members wish to come in, so I thank Foysol Choudhury for joining us this morning.

I think that we will keep Mr Condry's petition open and write as David Torrance has suggested, but I suggest that we also include some of the themes that Paul Sweeney has talked about and highlight not just the teaching of swimming as people would traditionally think of it in controlled environments such as swimming pools but the life-saving benefits of what one might call, for want of a better description, wild swimming in its widest sense and as described in the conversation that we have just had. It might go slightly broader than the range of the petition, but we could look at what more might be done to progress the issue in a way that would save lives, even though ultimately the petition's objective with regard to swimming pools is slightly impractical for certain local authorities. There is certainly a very important issue at the heart of this.

Do members agree to keep the petition open and to seek further information on the basis that has been proposed?

Members indicated agreement.

Annexe C

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills submission of 29 November 2022

PE1891/G: Make swimming lessons a statutory requirement in the primary schools curriculum

Thank you for your further letter dated 19 October 2022 in relation to Petition PE1891, lodged by Lewis Condy which calls for swimming lessons to be made a statutory requirement in the primary school curriculum following on from discussions at your committee meeting earlier this year.

I appreciate that learning to swim is an important life skill. With regards to the provision of swimming in schools, as my previous letter to the committee on 17 September 2021 stated, there is no mandatory curriculum in Scotland 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 their physical education classes, however we recognise the provision, approach and effectiveness of school swimming has been varied and inconsistent across Scotland. This was the case prior to the pandemic, which has also had a significant detrimental impact on both community and school swimming programmes in Scotland. Therefore the approach taken recognises that the provision of swimming lessons should be supported within schools where there is capacity to do so and within communities.

Scottish swimming's "learn to swim" framework within the community provides a positive impact from both physical and mental health perspective. Furthermore, we have been working with Scottish Swimming, Education Scotland, sportscotland and Scottish Water to develop interventions and approaches within local communities to

provide opportunities for more children to become confident, safer and competent swimmers.

The Scottish Swimming Learn to Swim Framework, coordinated by Scottish Swimming and supported by Scottish Water is delivered by 37 partners across 162 pools across Scotland. The Framework is delivered by the main Community Learn to Swim provider in 25 out of 32 local authority areas. It is also being provided in a further two local authority areas, albeit not by the main Community Learn to Swim provider. Progress is being made within two further local authority areas towards delivering the Framework during 2023.

There was a workforce of 1,275 swim teachers delivering to over 75,000 children per week - as at 31 March 2022. The Framework is aimed at youngsters from birth to 11-years-old and provides consistently high-quality teaching at least once a week, which progresses through a series of lessons and levels over a number of years. A list of lesson providers is available through the following web link: [Lesson Providers | Scottish Swimming](#).

With regards to your request for an update on proposals to work with Scottish Swimming and sportscotland on a programme of school swimming, including information about who might benefit from it, a number of Delivery Model Pilots are taking place during 2022-23 to support schools where there is capacity to do so, to understand and consider different approaches and models of delivery to help educate and provide opportunities for children across Scotland to experience the water in a fun, safe and inclusive approach. This reflects the many different scenarios faced by schools when deciding how best to support young people to access school swimming. Inclusion is central to the approach and there will be a specific focus on targeting SIMD quintile 1.

The results of the pilots will then be shared with the wider network and the small scale pilots will take place in the following areas using the following methods:

Pilot 1 - All children in a primary school receive a block(s) of school swimming provision during the school day (targeted year group normally P4 or P5). This is assessed and monitored against a framework.

Pilot Area - North Lanarkshire Council, targeted approach to deliver lessons to full classes of P5 pupils from identified Primary School areas of SIMD.

Pilot 2 - All children in primary school receive an "assessment" of swimming ability during the school day. A targeted approach identifies non-swimmers who then receive a block(s) of swimming lesson provision during school day.

Pilot Area - East Lothian Council, targeted approach following full assessment of all P5 children in East Lothian.

Pilot 3 - A combination of pilot 1 and 2 but developing a more holistic and sustainable model for areas that have access to their own swimming pool. Collaborative approach working with a variety of stakeholders (Active Schools, Primary Schools, Community LTS providers and Scottish Swimming) to support delivery.

Pilot area - Dundee City Council, (Baldragon High School), Secondary School with swimming pool to work with Primary School cluster to offer swimming provision supported by senior pupils.

Pilot 4 - Develop delivery model(s) for effective school swimming within a rural setting and the challenges this presents. Increase time on task per visit reducing number of visits to maximise the time spent on venue and offset cost of travel (time and money).

Pilot area - Dumfries and Galloway Council, to work with rural schools in the outskirts of Dumfries to deliver a more intense method of delivery. Increase time on task per visit reducing number of visits to maximise the time spent on venue and offset cost of travel (time and money).

However, I would add that it is not enough simply to teach people to swim - the importance of floating to live and the dangers of cold water shock should also be communicated. Water Safety Scotland and Education Scotland have launched a new education resource for schools to provide a consistent level of learning across Scotland's educational institutions to equip young people with the knowledge and skills required to reduce water-based accidents. This resource is available on Education Scotland's website through the following link: [Water Safety | Learning resources | National Improvement Hub \(education.gov.scot\)](https://www.education.gov.scot/national-improvement-hub/water-safety-learning-resources).

These materials aim to provide consistent and curriculum-aligned information which feeds into a full progression pathway created specifically for water safety in Scotland. The learning materials are intrinsically linked to Water Safety Strategy Water Safety Code, which was created to help people enjoy Scotland's waterways as safely as possible, it follows three key pieces of advice: • Stop and Think, Spot the Dangers • Stay Together, Stay Close • In an Emergency, Call 999. Starting from children aged 3, the resource is aimed at young people right up to the age of 18 and has been endorsed by a wealth of partner agencies.

You may also wish to note that, in March of this year, we published the interim review of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy and this is available on the Scottish Government's website through the following web link: [interim-review-scotlands-drowning-prevention-strategy.pdf \(watersafetyscotland.org.uk\)](https://www.watersafetyscotland.org.uk/interim-review-scotlands-drowning-prevention-strategy.pdf). Among the key actions in our Water Safety Action Plan include: new water safety promotions targeted at areas with a higher risk of drowning, improved signage at popular locations including lochs and reservoirs and a risk assessment of beaches; a continued development of the National Learn to Swim Framework delivered with local authorities; and lesson plans on water safety for pupils.