

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

5th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6), Wednesday
20 March 2024

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. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [14 June 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport, and **sportscotland**.
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 responses from **sportscotland**, 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's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 9,748 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

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

Clerks 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

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2018 on 14 June 2023

The Convener: Our final petition is PE2018, which was lodged by Helen Plank on behalf of Scottish Swimming. The petition calls 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. The petitioner notes the important role that swimming can play in supporting the physical and mental wellbeing of people of all ages and highlights that, pre-Covid, swimming was one of Scotland's highest-participation sports.

As noted in the papers, a report in November 2022 by Community Leisure UK found that 95 per cent of Scotland's leisure facilities are at risk of closure, with swimming pools facing an increased risk of closure, due to the cost of the energy that is required to operate such facilities; I believe that that has been the subject of recent parliamentary questions. Members might also be aware that increasing financial pressures have recently led to the closure of three public swimming pools in West Lothian, as well as Bucksburn swimming pool in Aberdeen.

In response to the petition, the Scottish Government states that it has repeatedly called on the UK Government to use all the powers at its disposal to tackle the cost of living crisis and to provide appropriate energy bill relief to leisure facilities. The Scottish Government response goes on to acknowledge the financial package that has been provided by the UK Government to support swimming pools in England, noting that, in deciding how to allocate the resulting consequential, it will consider what support can be provided to the sport and leisure sector in Scotland. I think that that too has been raised in the chamber. The Scottish Government also states that it is working with sportscotland to examine the facilities estate in Scotland.

We have also received a submission from the petitioner, which highlights the estimated social value—some £55 million—that swimming contributes to society and notes the role that swimming pools play in helping to keep people active, particularly women, people with disabilities and older people.

Members will also note from our papers that we have received a submission from our colleague Tess White MSP, a former member of the committee. She is unable to join the meeting but wanted to express her support for the petition and to highlight concerns about the closure of Bucksburn swimming pool in her region.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for further action?

Alexander Stewart: This is a very important issue, which, as you have identified, has already been raised a number of times in the Parliament, so it is important that we keep the petition open.

We should write to the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport to seek an update on how the Scottish Government intends to allocate the consequential that result from the UK Government's funding of swimming pools in England—which has recently been discussed at length in the Parliament—and to seek details on the Scottish Government's consideration of the support that it will provide to the sport and leisure sector in Scotland.

We should also write to sportscotland to seek further information on the support that it is providing to Scottish Swimming for the delivery of the Scottish swimming facilities project. That information would also help to give us an indication of where we are with the whole process.

Those are the actions that I propose, convener.

Foyso Choudhury: I will just add that I wrote to the minister to ask for a meeting about the West Lothian swimming pool closures. At that time, she did not have time for us to meet. I would like to keep the petition open and to ask questions about what the Scottish Government is doing to support swimming pools.

The Convener: We could ask the Scottish Government specifically to confirm what consequential have been received. It has given a commitment in the chamber, in response to parliamentary questions, that it is giving thought to the issue and deciding how to allocate the resulting consequential and what support can be provided to the sport and leisure sector in Scotland. I think that we should ask the Government not just for an update on its deliberations, but when it expects to conclude them. We should also ask that it make clear and public how, if at all, those consequential are going to be allocated. Given the parliamentary question, I think that we can be quite specific in regard to all that.

I think that we are content to keep the petition open and to proceed on that basis.

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C

sportscotland submission of 14 July 2023

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

Thank you for your recent letter in relation to the petition to 'recognise the value of swimming pools and provide financial relief help keep pools open' (PE2018). I am happy to provide further information on the Scottish Swimming Facilities Project, referenced in the Scottish Government submission to the Committee on 12 May.

Scottish Swimming have highlighted facilities as the highest risk to their sport. We are supporting Scottish Swimming to commission the Scottish Swimming Facilities Project, to complete a detailed piece of work to understand accurately 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.

The project has three phases:

1. Provide a high-level update on change since the Ticking Time Bomb report was produced in 2001. That report reviewed Scotland's public swimming pools and the costs associated with maintenance, upgrades and refurbishment. This new work will provide an update from the 2001 report, with a focus on the age, condition, numbers, categories and locations of pools.
2. Provide good practice guidance on creating a more economically and environmentally sustainable swimming pool estate. This will consider energy consumption, operational costs, refurbishment, replacement, and adaptations in relation to both new and existing pools. It will also provide guidance on the development and operation of school swimming pools for community access.

3. Work with pilot local authority areas to implement the guidance developed in phase two, to demonstrate the future sustainability of the swimming estate.

In March, Scottish Swimming appointed OLM Consulting to undertake this work. The work is well underway, and we would expect Scottish Swimming to be in a position to publish the results of phases one and two in the coming months.

We are supporting this work financially, providing £23,250 to the total cost of £42,400. Our Facilities Development team have provided the project with access to data and information we hold and are contributing their expertise to the project on an ongoing basis as part of our wider partnership approach to working with and supporting Scottish Swimming.

sportscotland recognises the vital contribution of swimming to achieving our vision of an active Scotland where everyone benefits from sport. I hope this information is of value to the Committee as they continue their consideration of this important petition.

Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport submission of 19 July 2023

PE2018/E: 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 understands that local sport and leisure facilities are vital in supporting the physical, mental and social health of the nation.

I can confirm that as a result of the UK Government's announcement in the spring budget of 2023 of a swimming pool fund the Scottish Government received Barnett consequential of £1.939m resource and £3.877m capital.

As noted in my previous response Barnett consequentials are accrued to the Scottish Government as a whole and it is for Scottish Ministers to decide how they should be allocated based on their priorities.

It is critical that we fully understand the overall position of sports and leisure facilities throughout Scotland in order to determine how the sector can best be supported therefore we are unable to put a timescale on decisions of support.

In the immediate future it is vital that all partners at a local level work together to explore all avenues and approaches to ensure that local clubs and communities have access to sport and leisure facilities.

MAREE TODD MSP

Petitioner submission of 7 March 2024

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

The following pools have closed in the last year since the petition was first lodged:

- Broxburn Swimming Pool, West Lothian
- Armadale Swimming Pool, West Lothian
- Livingston Swimming Pool, West Lothian
- Auchinleck Swimming Pool, East Ayrshire
- Bo'ness Recreation Centre, Falkirk
- Bucksburn Swimming Pool, Aberdeen (to be reopened)

An even greater number are under review or under threat if investment cannot be secured. This is devastating communities for whom pools are a lifeline for health and wellbeing and a social hub for fitness, fun and friendship.

In the attached report the [Future of Swimming Facilities in Scotland](#) - 147 pools are at risk in Scotland based on their age alone. Increasing operating costs, squeezed budgets and ageing venues are putting pools at risk of closure across the country.

There is overwhelming public support and demand for pools demonstrated by recent pressure and responses to pools earmarked for closure. A recent omnibus poll found that 95% of the Scottish population agree that pools are important for safety. 93% think that all children should learn to swim and 91% agree that pool closures are bad for communities.

The closure of pools such as the sudden closure of Bo'ness Recreation Centre has huge implications for local communities. Among those affected are the thousands of children learning to swim, the clubs who rely on them to support the health and fitness of young athletes; the elderly who use the pools for wellbeing; and the wider community including groups such as scuba divers, artistic swimmers, canoeists and triathletes. Ultimately these venues not only keep children safer in and around water through swimming lessons but contribute to significant NHS savings through prevention of some of the country's most prevalent diseases and illnesses, as swimming reaches all ages and abilities. In 2022 it was estimated that swimming generated social value savings of £2.4 billion across the UK.

Swimming is one of the country's highest participation sporting activities. According to the omnibus poll, 16% of the population go swimming in a pool at least once a month. It is also the fastest growing sport since the pandemic according to the household survey and reaches high numbers of women, older age groups and people with disabilities.

Swimming pools are critical community assets. They need government investment and support to keep open for current and future generations.

Liz Smith MSP submission of 8 March 2024

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

I am writing in support of the above petition, and I do so following extensive engagement with Scottish Swimming, with Olympic swimmer Hannah Miley MBE, and also as the long-serving Convenor of the Cross Party Group on Sport.

As you know, several swimming pools across Scotland have already closed and many more are under threat as a result of the funding constraints placed upon local government. Notwithstanding some encouraging developments in Blairgowrie, Cowdenbeath and Jedburgh, several communities will soon be without a pool altogether. Likewise, in other communities, there will be restricted access to pools because of reduced opening hours.

As someone who has been involved with sport throughout my life, I cannot stress enough how important physical exercise is in relation to our wellbeing. Swimming is one of the most important. It is a life skill which builds resilience, self-esteem and confidence and, as several important studies show, it also boosts educational attainment in children. It brings focus to their lives and, as Hannah Miley has stressed, it brings particularly beneficial effects to those in our more disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

As well as this, swimming pools and their amenities are important social assets. They provide a hub for both families and communities and, in many cases, for competitions at both elite and grassroots level.

In Scotland, we are privileged to live in a land of outstanding landscapes which include our many lochs and rivers and remote beaches. Not surprisingly, there is increasing demand from the public to enjoy these landscapes but they have to be able to do so safely. Sadly, recent statistics show an increase in the numbers of people getting into difficulty in Scotland's waters (the number of fatalities has also risen) and therefore it is imperative that as many people as possible can learn to swim.

I speak for many people when I assert that the loss of swimming pools would bring significant detriment to Scotland. At the very time when the Scottish Government and all political parties are seeking ways to address Scotland's poor health record, the closure of swimming pools would undermine the policies to improve health and wellbeing and bring untold damage to our communities.

I urge the Committee to support petition PE2018 in whatever way it can.