

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 7 May 2025
8th 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 23 April 2025.](#) At that meeting, the Committee heard evidence from –
 - John Lunn, Chief Executive, Scottish Swimming
 - Derek McGown, Coach, East Kilbride Swimming Club
 - Duncan Scott OBE, Olympic Athlete
 - Abi Thomson, Young Volunteer Programme ChampionAnd then from –
 - Dianne Breen, Coached Programmes Manager, Sport Aberdeen
 - Kirsty Doig, Director, The Darcey Sunshine Project
 - Jillian Gibson, Policy Manager for Sport and Physical Activity, COSLA
 - Ben Lamb, Chief Executive, West Lothian Leisure (Xcite)
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. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
4. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
5. [The Scottish Government gave its initial position on this petition on 12 May 2023.](#)
6. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 10,146 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

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

Clerks to the Committee
May 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 23 April 2025

The Convener: Item 2 on the agenda is the consideration of continued petitions. The first of those is PE2018, which was lodged by Helen Plank on behalf of Scottish Swimming. I gather that she is with us in the public gallery.

The petition was last considered in January this year. It raises issues that I think the whole committee were concerned to see addressed fully, and, at that meeting, we agreed that the right way forward was for us to hold a round-table discussion on the issues.

At the meeting in January, we also agreed to seek further information from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and individual local authorities. In advance of today's meeting, we received written responses from COSLA and Dundee City Council and another submission from the petitioner. We have also received representations in support of the petition from MSP colleagues Tim Eagle and Beatrice Wishart. All of those submissions are in the committee meeting papers.

We have two panels of witnesses with us this morning. On the first panel are John Lunn, who is the chief executive of Scottish Swimming; Derek McGown, who is a coach at the East Kilbride amateur swimming club; Duncan Scott OBE, who is an Olympic gold medal-winning swimmer and Scotland's most decorated Olympic athlete, adding a touch of lustre to the rather dry proceedings of the Scottish Parliament; and Abi Thomson, who is a young volunteer programme champion with Scottish Swimming. We will hear from the second panel of witnesses later.

We are also joined by our colleague Neil Bibby, who has taken an interest in the petition. He was with us when we last considered it and decided that we would go with the round-table discussion. Mr Bibby joins us for the first panel of witnesses and will, I think, leave us after that.

We will move straight to questions. Please indicate to me if you would like to speak, or you can nod to one another and decide whether you are going to speak. It helps if we say who is to speak, because the Official Report folk will not necessarily know who is speaking, and it will allow me to invite you to contribute, through the chair.

I turned 66 over the recess. When I was at school, swimming was not seen as just a recreational hobby, as some people seem to think of it now. Learning to swim was seen as a vital and essential life-saving tool. We learned to swim because we might be in a circumstance that meant that we needed to know how to swim, given that we are an island nation that has always had great interest in water and the sea. Therefore, I was very surprised to find, when we first considered the petition, that that is not now normally the case.

I had a look around my constituency of Eastwood, and it seems that we are quite well served there. We still have school swimming pools, and all the schools have programmes whereby everybody is encouraged and has the opportunity, as part of the curriculum, to learn how to swim. I am pleased about that, but it is not necessarily the norm any longer.

We understand that 40 per cent of children now leave primary school unable to swim. Why is the focus on swimming no longer there? In the future, what effect will the closure of swimming pools around Scotland have on the ability of young people to swim? In some cases, we are now talking about fairly significant geographical distances between where somebody lives and the nearest available pool. I would be interested to get your perspective on your experience of coming into swimming and what you think the consequence of that might be.

John Lunn (Scottish Swimming): It is nice to meet you all today. Thank you for inviting us all along. I hope that you get some useful information to add to the extensive evidence that has already been provided.

It is important to pick up on the point that you made about your age, convener, and the fact that you are an active swimmer in your local community. Swimming is really intergenerational. We see that a lot. If children learn to swim early, when they are very young, they continue to swim throughout their life, well into adulthood and older age. It is something that families can do together, and it is a really important life skill. If you do not learn it when you are younger—at primary school age, in particular—you cannot do any of that later on. That is really important. Swimming is also a gateway activity into other sports. It helps people if they want to do other water-based activities and sports.

As an island nation with 11,800km of coastline and 3,000 inland waterways, we are never far from water in Scotland. The important aspect linked to that is safety. Unfortunately, what we have seen—and we know it will happen again over the summer—is people having terrible accidents and instances of drowning. Scotland has the highest number of drownings in the United Kingdom. You cannot draw a cause-and-effect correlation between that and the ability to learn to swim at school or the availability of public pools, but there will definitely be an impact as pools start to come under threat, are not replaced and close. I believe that, in the years to come, we will see a higher number of drownings. The statistics will not improve; they will only get worse.

We have around 295 swimming pool facilities in this country. That is not just the number of pools, because some facilities have more than one. However, that number is under threat. We know that the ageing pool stock requires a lot of maintenance and incurs high energy costs. It is important not only to maintain, replace and repair those buildings to keep them in good order, but to look at the geographical spread to understand the gaps. Scottish Swimming has published its vision for aquatics, and our facilities strategy is linked to that. We know where some of the gaps are and we want to work with partners to address them and ensure that everyone has access in their local communities to what you and I experienced as children, which is the ability to learn to swim.

I learned to swim, transitioned to a local swimming club and worked my way up to not quite the level reached by Duncan Scott and Abi Thomson, although I did become a reasonable club swimmer. That stood me in good stead for teaching and coaching swimming in adulthood. My mum was a volunteer, because swimming was very much a community activity. That is another aspect: swimming is part of wider societal cohesion and of creating communities. Swimming pools are community assets. They are not just buildings where people come to learn to swim or to take

part in an activity and to compete or perform; they are community hubs in the widest sense.

The Convener: I am struck by a couple of points in that comment. The council-owned swimming pool in my Eastwood constituency is about to be replaced by a completely new community infrastructure development with a pool and theatre, whereas, in other areas, assets are just being axed without any replacement programme. We will come on to discuss that idea and what the consequences of that might be for the sportspeople of the future.

You touched on the fact that we have the highest rate of drownings in the UK—it is almost twice the UK average. Has that always been the case? Is there a deteriorating trend, or is that an emerging statistic? Would all those deaths have been avoided if people had known how to swim, or are we talking in some cases about people getting caught up in a force majeure that would have been impossible for them to survive? I suppose that, if they had known how to swim, they would have had an opportunity to survive. I am interested in understanding where that statistic sits and what might underpin it.

John Lunn: I will start at the end. Some accidents are avoidable. It is not always possible to say that someone having learned to swim or having had water safety skills would necessarily have made a difference. Those things will sometimes happen and will be unavoidable. However, if people have the opportunity to learn to swim and learn life-saving or water safety skills, they have a better chance of understanding what they might be going into, so accidents are a bit more avoidable. It is difficult to say whether there is an absolute correlation, but we could easily say that equipping people with swimming skills and a basic understanding of water safety would give us a chance of reducing the drowning rate.

There are wider statistics over time. I do not have them to hand, but we can provide those. We have looked at the recent statistics, which are quite startling.

The Convener: Do even the recent statistics show a deterioration, or are those statistics from when you uncovered the difference in drowning rates?

John Lunn: Those were the statistics when we uncovered it. We can look out those figures and get back to the committee with them.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to come in?

Duncan Scott: Thank you for allowing us to speak here today. I am hugely passionate about the area, not only as an athlete whose entire life has been devoted to swimming and who has learned so many lessons from the sport, which is a real passion for me, but as a learn to swim ambassador, which is also really important. We cannot have a framework for learning to swim if there is a lack of pools throughout the country.

As has been said, that is an issue and a challenge in Scotland. You said that your Eastwood constituency has a good number of pools, but, when I look back on my career as an athlete and at some of the pools that have been part of that journey, I

know that Alloa Leisure Bowl and Bo'ness swimming pool have both now closed. With my athlete head on, I wonder where the next athletes are going to come from.

I also think about the issue with my learn to swim ambassador head on. I have been in that role since 2016, and the save our pools campaign really started to hit home for me after I visited the Broxburn pool in 2022 and saw at first hand the impact that it had on the small local community. I saw the children's faces as they were learning to swim and the effect that it was having. I saw parents enjoying seeing their kids swimming, and I saw what the teachers were doing. It was great to be there, but that pool was closed later that year.

From my perspective, there is a direct correlation between pool closures and the real struggle for the learn to swim framework. In the 2023 report "The Future of Swimming Facilities in Scotland", Scottish Swimming estimated that £40.5 million per year was needed to maintain the current level of pool provision. That would allow for the building or, potentially, the refurbishing of four swimming pools a year. Costs are rising, though, and that figure is already out of date.

For me, there is some good news around the corner. There are going to be new swimming pools at Blairgowrie and Currie high school, and a pool is in the pipeline in Clackmannanshire, where I grew up. I swam at Alloa swimming club, and the current head coach at British Swimming is from there as well. There is a real ethos of swimming in Scotland, and we are starting to take over the British Swimming team.

The Convener: Having visited pools and been an ambassador in the way that you articulate, do you think that the obstacle to children being given the opportunity to learn how to swim is simply about the availability of facilities, or has there been a regression in the provision of that opportunity because of the significantly increased costs that are associated with providing those facilities? It has been suggested that the cost has increased by 53 per cent over the past five years or so. Has that also proved to be an obstacle? Is the problem due to a mixture of the reduced provision of facilities and something more fundamental, which is that the area is seen as one in which expenditure can be reduced?

Duncan Scott: Yes. Swimming is a life skill, and we need to hit that point home. We have already talked about the drowning element. There is pressure because of the energy costs of keeping pools alive, but it is of paramount importance that people can learn to swim and have that life skill. The learn to swim framework reaches, I think, 82,000 kids and adults throughout the week, and more than 100,000 people have already gone through the programme. However, without pools throughout the UK, such figures will not be possible.

The Convener: Before I bring in colleagues, I note that you mentioned the position throughout the UK, and you will obviously understand what is happening elsewhere. Our concern is the provision of opportunities for people to acquire this life-saving skill here in Scotland, but is the trend that we are discussing also being felt across the rest of the UK? Are your colleagues who compete elsewhere similarly concerned about what is happening, or does Scotland perhaps have a swimming pool estate that is older and more susceptible to closures?

Duncan Scott: Across British Swimming and the team that I am a part of, there is a big concern about where the next generation of athletes is going to come from, but also about how we can continue to take forward the “everyone can swim” idea. Scottish Swimming has a real focus on that.

A recent study by Swim England estimates the life span of pools to be 38 years. Scotland currently has 122 public swimming pools that are over that threshold, which is an alarming statistic.

The Convener: It sounds like our ferry fleet. [Laughter.] Sorry. Would either of our other two guests like to comment?

Derek McGown (East Kilbride Swimming Club): Thanks for having us along today.

I am a coach but, in my day job, I am a school teacher, so I have a vested interest in the education background of everything that goes on, and I have seen at first hand the knock-on effects and implications.

Although we come from a swimming perspective, it is not just about swimmers. There is water polo, kayaking and scuba diving, and there are our emergency services. We cannot have the emergency services learning out in open water—we need the pools to train them to their best capacity to be able to go and save lives. That is an important factor.

Based on the studies that have been completed, around 63 to 64 per cent of Scots want to holiday beside water. If we add that to the statistics that we have previously mentioned, it is a fair chunk of risk if we do not have everyone learning to swim in future, never mind just the kids.

I have been coaching swimming since I was an athlete, probably for the best part of 20 years, and I see at first hand the positive impacts of fun, fitness and friendship. There is a social and a physical element to it. We can always bring in current issues, such as the statistics of mental health in education. There is a real drive to improve the mental health of young people because they are the future of tomorrow.

That has affected me personally. I coach at the Dollan aqua centre in East Kilbride, which has just undergone what was to be a short-term closure that went 10 weeks beyond the original time that was planned for. That significantly impacted on the mental health of the young people who needed to travel to other pools and spend money to do that. The club had to negotiate getting pool time when it was already critical for the other clubs that were involved. I get that we needed the refurbishment and renovation, but we can do that while collaborating with other people to plan these things out, so that we can develop the pools that are more than 38 years old while keeping them open. There are methods for doing that.

I want to get across the fact that there are many different user groups. We have come here to represent Scottish Swimming, but there are so many other groups across the country. It is only when we see the fatalities on the news, unfortunately, that how much we need these things hits home.

The Convener: When young people learn to swim, do the majority of them learn in a swimming pool as opposed to open water?

Derek McGown: Yes.

The Convener: The swimming pool is the catalyst—not the catalyst; the genesis.

Derek McGown: Absolutely. I do not know if you have been in open water yourself. We have all the things that say that cold water immersion helps to improve mental health and so on, but it is not a good experience for three, four, five or six-year-old kids who are learning to swim. We are looking for positive experiences for young people.

The Convener: No, but I was interested when you said that the majority of Scottish people like to be near water when they are on holiday. Perhaps it is just that we are used to getting wet.

Abi Thomson, would you like to contribute at this stage?

Abi Thomson: Yes. Thank you for having us here again today. The closure of swimming pools and the reductions in opening hours have had an impact on people of all ages. Learning to swim is an essential life skill. Scottish Swimming has 23,000 members, volunteers and coaches, 16,000 of whom are athletes who swim for their physical and mental health.

Mental health is a challenge here in Scotland, as it is in the rest of the world, with one in four of us experiencing mental health challenges in our lifetime. As a student physical education teacher, I witnessed that in one of my placement schools, with topics such as self harm and anorexia being talked about more and the rise in mental health issues among young people.

Physical exercise, such as swimming, can make a huge difference—it did to me. Having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder when I was younger, I struggled in school with social things but swimming was my thing. It was my way of channelling my energy and finding my focus. It almost became my superpower.

JL Partners conducted a survey that showed that 70 per cent of adults swim for mental health, but it also showed that the same 70 per cent said that they swim for physical health, too. A lot of people think of swimming as getting up early on mornings like Duncan and a lot of other swimmers do, but it is a social thing. A lot of people come to the pool for social experiences, whether it is a cup of tea afterwards or whether they are doing an aqua fitness class. It is a social butterfly and, for some elderly people, it might be their only social interaction in a day.

The Convener: Thank you. I asked quite a bit. I think that we are developing themes rather than pursuing specific points. I should also say that we have now been joined by our colleague, Maurice Golden.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I am younger than the convener, but I remember when Kirkcaldy swimming club was in the harbour, and its membership numbers were very few until we got a pool in Kirkcaldy and I learned to swim.

On the benefits of swimming and the health and wellbeing of the population of Scotland, I once played football, but I am no longer able to do that physical activity, so I recently got a membership for a swimming club in Kirkcaldy, and I use it two or three times a week. As Abi Thomson says, I now interact socially with a number of people there. Will somebody expand a wee bit on how the health and wellbeing of the population of Scotland is affected by swimming?

John Lunn: I will expand a bit on the Scotland-based JL Partners survey that Duncan Scott and Abi Thomson have referred to. The headline figure is that 95 per cent of Scots agree that swimming pools are important for safety, but it goes further than that. If we start to unpack it, they are saying that pools are important for communities. They see them as community assets—88 per cent responded positively in that respect.

Scots also see swimming pools as an important piece of infrastructure in relation to Scotland as a successful sporting nation, so 87 per cent said that they felt that pools are important to that and 86 per cent said that they are important for overall health benefits; for social interaction, it was 69 per cent.

There are statistics that back up the assertion that swimming pools are not just about where people learn to swim and do that singular activity. As Derek McGown said, a lot of different activities take place in pools, and our partners in community leisure facilities and the local authorities and leisure trusts that run them work hard to put on engaged, active programmes and opportunities for children, young people, older adults and those with health issues, including long-standing health issues.

We know that swimming and aquatic-based activities are non-load-bearing and helpful for people who are recovering from long-term or post-surgery conditions and trying to get themselves back to normal activity levels. Such activities are incredibly beneficial as a health improvement and health benefit tool, as well as having some of the wider mental health benefits that Abi Thomson talked about. People are social animals. Increasingly in this day and age, we spend a lot of time online, but in swimming pools and community facilities such as those, it is the face-to-face interaction that develops us as people and supports our mental health and wellbeing in a broader sense.

Duncan Scott: Did you say that you swim two or three times a week?

David Torrance: Yes.

Duncan Scott: That puts you right in the 13 per cent of adults who swim regularly. It is the most participated-in sport in Scotland, outside of just going to the gym. The figure was actually 17 per cent before Covid, which just shows the magnitude and scale of the difficulty of saving pools. Everyone is affected.

From a personal point of view, from being an athlete and a learn to swim ambassador, I can say that Scotland punches above its weight on an international scale. Twenty-one per cent of Team GB's 2024 Paris team trained in Scotland, and five of the eight Team GB medals won in the pool at the 2021 Olympics were won by athletes who were made in Scotland. Those are quite big figures.

I will now put my learn to swim hat on. With the national framework for Scottish swimming, the Scottish Swimming and Scottish Water organisations have the vision of generation swim. The whole idea is to have a generation of safe, competent and confident swimmers who will get the most health and safety benefits from swimming. It is about the whole package. It is about not only the potential of going on to become a swimmer but, as has already been mentioned, the mental and physical health benefits.

As has already been said, more than 100,000 people have taken part in the learn to swim framework. However, pool closures are happening. We want to increase this area, not start to dampen it. The save our pools campaign would affect the learn to swim framework for athletes at the top end, the elderly and the injured in all the little communities up and down Scotland.

David Torrance: My next question was going to be about how competitive and successful we are at swimming, as a nation. You mentioned that we punch above our weight for the size of our population. However, somebody has already mentioned that pool closures affect the distances that people have to travel to learn to swim or to compete or train. The Kirkcaldy amateur swimming club is a great club that trains people, and the Fins competitive swim club in Fife is also a good club. Will pool closures restrict the way that we can bring athletes forward because of the distances that they have to travel to train?

Duncan Scott: The club that I grew up swimming for has decided to join with other clubs due to the financial costs being so high and pool closures happening. Forth Valley tridents swim team is a brand-new club that did not exist when I was beginning to swim, and it was created simply because the costs are now so high and the demands on clubs are so difficult. That being said, the travel aspect is even harsher. It makes it more challenging for parents to take their kids to swimming lessons to learn to swim or to take them to clubs or even to competitions, as they are all in locations across the country that are further away and more demanding to reach.

Derek McGown: When we talked about the rise in costs, the figure of 53 per cent came up. In South Lanarkshire, over the past three years—now that we have hit the new financial year—we have faced a 107 per cent increase in the overall costs of hiring a pool. They originally wanted to increase the costs within a two-week timeframe; we were told in mid-March that the costs would go up in the next April. We fought that and the increase has since been staged over three years. However, we have still had to deal with that 107 per cent increase, which is way beyond the 57 per cent figure that was spoken about.

We have managed to keep the travelling time down by working really hard with the young people and the athletes and by keeping things as close as we possibly can and working within our local community.

We have managed to increase our numbers. We cannot measure exactly how we have been able to achieve that, but I believe that it is down to the benefits that swimming brings. From an educational perspective, swimming involves transferable skills. I would probably not be sitting here today or be able to do what I do as a teacher and a coach without having some of the skills—such as confidence and

resilience—that I learned as a youngster through swimming. There was a study back in 2017 that matched rising attainment with swimming. There will be other sports that make attainment rise, too.

I know that we talk about being up early in the mornings and so on, but those kids are ready to learn. The kids that leave me at 7.15 in the morning to go to school for 9—we can have 50 or 60 kids—are more ready to learn than the child who gets out of bed at half past 8. How can we encourage more children to do that? In my day job, I am South Lanarkshire Council’s data officer for education resources, and we talk every single day about how we can reduce the attainment gap. This is one method to do that—if we can sell that, keep places open and increase participation.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I am sorry that I am not able to be with you in person today. Thank you for all the work that you are doing in your different ways, which is hugely valuable to Scotland. As someone who is even older than the other members of the committee—I will not say by what margin, but I learned to swim 60 years ago—I feel that the advantages of swimming, as the panellists have explained in different ways, are myriad and immense. They affect just about every area of life, including mental health, physical wellbeing and the ability to learn—we have heard that in the evidence.

I want to ask just one question: should there not be a statutory duty in Scotland to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn how to swim at school at the appropriate age? I presume that the younger they do that, the better, although I defer to your knowledge on that aspect. I ask that question for a very simple reason. We have already heard about the very real pressures and costs that local authorities face, which will never go away. It seems to me that, unless there is a very clear legal duty to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn how to swim, we will always be floundering around as we face the pressures of pools closing, and we will never achieve what we all want to achieve.

In order to fund that, we could stop spending money on a range of things—I could make suggestions about those but, frankly, now is not the time to do so—and could instead spend that money on ensuring that every child in Scotland at least has the opportunity, as a right, by law, to learn how to swim, because it is so important that they do that, for the reasons that the witnesses have identified. I do not know whether the witnesses are able to answer that question now or whether they wish to go away and reflect on it, because it is a big one.

My final point is that there is an election coming up, so you have an opportunity to make a pitch to all the parties to include such a proposal in their manifestos at the forthcoming election, which some of us may hope to participate in.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Ewing. You always provide an appropriate metaphor—in this case, it was “floundering around”. You put a challenge to members of the panel, and I think that they are ready to respond to your question. I first ask John Lunn whether he agrees with your suggestion about making it a statutory duty to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn to swim.

John Lunn: We whole-heartedly agree. We have been lobbying hard and engaging on the subject of getting school swimming back on the curriculum and making it

compulsory, and we have obtained cross-party support for that. You will be aware that the issue has been debated in the chamber. We have colleagues here who have vigorously supported that campaign, which we have undertaken for a long time. We have gone to the annual conferences of different parties to get support for the proposal, and we believe that there is already cross-party support for it.

The Convener: If that is the case, what is the issue? You have cross-party support, but not cross-party action.

John Lunn: Yes—that is probably the best way to put it. You have put it a bit more politely than I might put it. The way that I would describe the situation is that nobody has written the cheque yet. There is support for the proposal but, frustratingly, that has not translated into action. We have done pilots and gathered evidence, and we have a shovel-ready proposal to roll out. We have an on-ramp to that, and we think that we could roll it out to every school in the country within five years.

Obviously, there are different starting points, because there is different provision in different areas. We would use the learn to swim framework that Duncan Scott has mentioned, which he strongly advocates. We have the mechanisms to do this, and we also have the support—91 per cent of headteachers would support schools undertaking that activity. How the time would be found within the curriculum to do it is a slightly different question, which I would put to colleagues in education departments, but there is support at headteacher and school level for what we are proposing.

We would absolutely like such provision to be written into statute. That would also align with the goal of supporting and maintaining swimming pools, because it would bring activity to them during the day, when they tend to be less busy. Aligned with provision of the opportunity for every child to learn to swim at school, we would like to protect swimming pools as community assets and to make it a statutory requirement for consultation to be held on the closure of any pools, in the same way as such a requirement already exists for football pitches and playing fields.

That is not to say that pools would not be closed, but we are finding that, because of the nature of the estate—some of it sits in education, with schools, some of it sits in leisure trusts' control and some of it sits in local authority control—when it comes to our becoming aware of any pools that might be under threat, it is a very mixed picture. There is not a joined-up approach. In some areas, the local authority might be considering rebuilding a school for educational reasons, while a swimming pool down the road might be closing. Why not take a joined-up approach and build a community facility that has swimming pools and other things attached to it, at the same time as rebuilding the school? We believe that a statutory provision that required consultation with us and sportscotland at an early stage where any pool is under consideration for demolition, rebuild, new build or refurbishment would strengthen that.

Our other suggestion is that the answers should not sit with just a few people. We would like a task force or a group that is made up of a mix of representatives from local authorities, trusts, sportscotland, the Scottish Government and us to look at the solutions. How do we keep the pools open? How do we create universal or better access for people? What are the sustainable models for swimming pools in the

future? At the moment, a piecemeal approach is taken and decisions are made locally. That is fine—I am all for local democracy and local decision making. However, when these things come under review and threat, we get a very animated local community, supported by local and national politicians, who do not want to see the assets disappear. Those are our three suggestions on things that could help.

The Convener: Mr Ewing, do you have a follow-up to that, or has that answered your question?

Fergus Ewing: Rarely have I heard an answer from any witness that combines such clarity with a comprehensive account of what needs to be done. Perhaps that is a model for our ministers and Governments to emulate. In all seriousness, it is time for the parties to sign the cheque, instead of just uttering words.

The Convener: I will bring in Neil Bibby, who has been with us from the start of the panel's evidence. I note that he touched on the topic during a debate in the chamber.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Thank you for the opportunity to join you this morning, convener. I thank the committee for carrying out the inquiry and the witnesses for their evidence. I have raised the issue in Parliament on a number of occasions.

My children are learning to swim, but it was delayed because of Covid. I am aware of the increases in costs and reductions in opening hours, which are making it difficult for children and young people to access the opportunity to swim. There are benefits for people of all ages, but I want to focus on the fact that, as Fergus Ewing said, we have to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn to swim and to learn the basics of water safety. I commend the work that Scottish Swimming is doing and the work that Duncan Scott is doing on the swimming framework.

It is clear that, at present, we have a postcode lottery. My question follows on from Fergus Ewing's question. If we want to ensure that every child has the chance to swim, do you agree that that needs to be a national priority and a national mission? Previously, 40 per cent of children left primary school unable to swim, but when I asked the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport for the latest figures, the Scottish Government was unable to tell me what they were. In addition to making it a national priority and a national mission, do you agree that we need a national audit? To tackle the problem, we need to understand its extent so that we can address it at the national level.

John Lunn: I will give a very quick answer. We consider that, as well as providing the ability to swim, part of embedding learning to swim in the curriculum is to establish a baseline level of swimming safety skills, because that will let us know what the starting point looks like.

Derek McGown: The curriculum for excellence is continually under review, and potential changes to certain things are being considered. We therefore have an opportunity to, ultimately, get that into the curriculum.

If we consider the framework and how things can be embedded, it is not the case that we just need a set skill for those in primary 5, for example. Some of us live in

very rural communities, so we need to consider how we can combine certain year groups to make it financially valuable and possible. It should not be set in the curriculum that it must be done at a certain time. If it could be on the curriculum before children leave primary school, that is great, but how it happens within the curriculum could be up to headteachers and leaders in local authorities, especially in rural communities.

Abi Thomson: Some leisure facilities have not restarted their learn to swim programmes since Covid, and entire communities of people in possibly vulnerable locations are not getting that essential skill. Swimming should be higher on the political agenda. It is not all about sport—it is also about promoting the skill of learning to swim and about people being safe. Not everyone will be like Duncan Scott, but everyone should at least have the opportunity to learn, and we hope to get those programmes back up and running.

As children get older, we see the benefits of sport, as Derek McGown said. As well as generation swim, we need a generation of sustainable, carbon-efficient pools. It is great to see the new technologies in some of the pools that are being built, such as those in Blairgowrie and Currie community high school, but we need pools to be more sustainable so that they will serve future generations and not just the current generation. Swimming pools should be protected community assets. Having a statutory requirement for consultation on every pool closure would be a step in the right direction to keep them open.

The Convener: Mr Bibby, do you have a follow-up question?

Neil Bibby: No. As Mr Ewing did, I thank the witnesses for their clear and concise answers.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I was interested to hear about the 38-year life span of a pool, because in Dundee we cannot make it to 10 years. After nine years, the Olympia swimming pool closed for two years, and it then opened for two months before closing again. However, I walked past it just last week and it was queued out, which is a great sign.

I am interested in the types and sizes of pools and the groups that they might attract. Swimming pools are not all equal. There are leisure-type pools and more traditional-style pools. Do you have any thoughts on that? Is there a geographical gap in the provision of certain types of swimming pools? How are pools that are in schools set up for access by the wider community? When I have tried to access facilities in schools, I have found it incredibly difficult. There is no online service, so people have to go back to phoning and things like that.

Perhaps you could answer those questions in the round so that we can hear different points of view.

John Lunn: You asked about the different types and sizes of pools. We recently released our strategic vision for aquatics facilities in Scotland. I would not call it a facilities strategy, because we do not have the capital investment for that. However, we want to use the strategic vision as a tool to help to develop our understanding of the local context. It has mapping elements so, within that, we can overlay

participation and travel distances. We think that early consultation with us would really help. We want to work with partners so that we can help them to understand the geography and travel distances.

Within that vision, we have categorised pools as national, regional and local facilities, and we talk about the different types of facilities. For example, Edinburgh has an Olympic-size swimming pool with an adjustable floor, and the teaching pool next to the main pool and the diving tank also have adjustable floors. There are flexible models and facilities that can accommodate multitudes of users. That is what is required and what is being built.

It is not about having a single type of pool for every location or use. The likes of the Commonwealth pool in Edinburgh and the Tollcross pool in Glasgow have spectating facilities and they are used for world-level events as well as British-level events. Aberdeen sports village falls into that category as well. We have facilities that are capable of hosting—and do host—international and world-level events, but they are also able to accommodate learn to swim programmes, disability groups and people with wider health needs. We have the capacity to provide that within the strategy, and providers are looking at the models that work best for local communities.

In answer to Mr Golden's question about wider community access to school pools, it is a mixed bag—we have some good access, but it is not universal. There has been a lot of narrative about the school estate not always being accessible. In some cases, facilities are not suitable for wider community access because of the set-up, the nature of the access points and the management of that. We understand that. Wider community access can be accommodated, but it needs work.

Again, it comes down to having better, more joined-up planning at inception so that a facility can cater for community needs from the outset. Community needs should be taken into account when pools are planned either at existing schools that are being rebuilt or at new schools. Headteachers and the education department will be critical in that. We need to have better conversations to join up the processes and ensure that facilities can be accessed by communities. When pools are built in education environments, the wider community benefit and the ways that the community will use the facilities need to be considered.

Duncan Scott: Mr Golden joked about the Dundee pool being open for nine years. The Royal Commonwealth pool has been open for 56 years, which shows what can be done with a healthy amount of investment. It has undergone some major refurbishment over time, but it is one of the busiest aquatic centres in the country and is needed by all levels. It hosts international competitions, which I have been part of for many years, as well as day-to-day club swimming, learning to swim, diving and all sorts. It is a beating heart of Scotland learning to swim. That it has been running for 56 years speaks volumes.

Maurice Golden spoke about school swimming and access to pools. I agree with John Lunn that the pools are very different. I was a club swimmer and swam a lot in pools in schools throughout the Falkirk area, and I know that getting access to those can be difficult. The proposal for that combination with sportscotland to learn about the pools that are opening and which are closing—having that consensus across the board—will allow more efficient use of pools across Scotland. We will be able to get

the most out of the pools that we have as well as the pools that will potentially open in different areas.

Derek McGown: It is about the conversations and the things that are possible. There is a wealth of experience in my club. Come August, I will have been part of the East Kilbride swimming club as a swimmer and coach for 31 years, so it has been a significant part of my life. I know from the strong structure and wealth of experience in my club—this applies across the 150-odd clubs in Scotland—that we have ways of assisting people to make better use of facilities, but sometimes we are not listened to. People do not want to do those things, because there are pressures on them in the background. We could explore how you guys could help us to start conversations in our areas and your constituencies that would help to increase the efficiency of facilities. That will not happen in every area overnight, but we could get some fine examples of where things are working well.

Duncan Scott made a point about the international facility at the Royal Commonwealth pool. Sometimes, on Fridays, in setting up before the weekend, there are inflatables and other things that add a fun element. The Olympia in Dundee does something similar. You do not need to spend money specifically on additionality, but you can add to what we see as the traditional swimming pool and have that fun and social element. That is about creativity. If we can be creative, we could make massive strides.

Abi Thomson: Definitely. I swam competitively for 15 years and I am now a coach and teach at my local swimming club, which is Kingston. The facility that we primarily use has three pools: it has a tiny wee teaching pool for those who want to learn to swim, a boom pool for those who are developing their skills and the main 25m pool. Since Covid, only one of those pools has opened. We might not even need to have more pools—we could open up the facilities that we have already. Those facilities are useable, but we need more staff. Let us try to open up the pools that we have.

I am still trying to teach little ones with arm bands in the main pool, which is the same depth all the way along. We have had to invest in platforms and other things to enable us to do that, but it also takes away from the club swimmers. Instead of having all six lanes to use for swimming, they are down to four lanes, because we are teaching in part of the pool. Instead, we could use all three swimming pools. We need to look at whether we can make adaptations and fully open facilities, as they were prior to Covid.

Maurice Golden: I thank the panel members—that was very comprehensive.

The Convener: Thank you all very much.

David Torrance: Convener—

The Convener: David, I was just about to give you the opportunity to tell me whether you want to come in with some final questions before I ask whether there is anything that we have not covered.

David Torrance: Thank you, convener. My question is on opening facilities that have been closed. We all know that swimming pools have huge costs, especially

running costs, and that heating the water is probably the biggest cost that such facilities will have. There is modern technology out there and there are new ways of heating pools and using energy. Why are local authorities not embracing that as quickly as they could? Would facilities be more viable if they embraced the new technology that is out there to reduce costs?

The Convener: I am conscious of time—

John Lunn: Thanks, convener—

Duncan Scott: This is just a quick comment—

The Convener: You can both come in, but I am conscious of time.

John Lunn: I will keep my comments brief. That is probably more a question for our colleagues who will come in later in the meeting; they will be more au fait with the technologies and the current developments. We always advocate for investment in sustainable technologies and for looking at how those can make buildings more efficient, particularly in relation to heating the water.

A point that we have not covered is that a reduction in the availability of swimming pools and the ability to swim has an impact on the groups in society in Scotland who are most in need. We know that for a fact. If we continue to see an erosion in not just pools but the provision of the learn-to-swim programme and access to clubs, community groups and other activities, it will be children and others from the most deprived backgrounds who will be impacted the most. We need to remember that, as well as all the other factors that we have talked about. The evidence shows that eroding those facilities will impact on the groups that need them the most.

The Convener: Duncan, do you want to say something?

Duncan Scott: No, let us carry on. Will we get one final comment?

The Convener: You will get one final blast when the moment comes, but I see that Fergus Ewing has put his hand up again. Fergus, do you have a quick question before we come to the final moments of this evidence session?

Fergus Ewing: I have a quick question for some members of the panel. If there were to be a statutory right to learn to swim, would there be more use of pools due to more children being taught how to swim than at present? Would there therefore be additional income to pools as a general proposition? If so, can the panellists quantify that factor to help to take forward the delivery of a statutory right to learn to swim? That would be on the basis that it would help to bring in additional income, which would thereby help to meet the steep costs of running swimming pools.

The Convener: Does anybody want to chip in on that?

John Lunn: I will again keep my comments brief. The school swimming proposal that we have put to the Scottish Government fleshes out the detail on that. There are currently around 14,500 children who learn to swim in a school setting. To take one example, there are about 50,000 children in primary 5. Our proposal would ensure that all 50,000 of those children learn to swim and get access to water skills and

water safety activities as part of the school curricular time. As Fergus Ewing said, that would add income to the facility providers at times of the day when they tend not to be so busy.

The Convener: As we get to the end of the evidence session, I invite you all to think of any last comments that you want to make or any further thoughts that we have not touched on.

Derek McGown: Thank you for having us today. From what I have seen, I think that no political party would disagree with anything that we have said. It is about how we can work together to make this happen for us.

The Convener: You are speaking to a committee that is sometimes referred to as the awkward squad, in as much as we tend, irrespective of our political parties, to unanimously be a thorn in the flesh of everybody.

John Lunn: We have an opportunity not just to change lives but to save lives, and we need to lean into that. As Derek McGown said, there is almost universal support for pools, so we need to take positive action. I hope that we have outlined steps that the committee feels that it can support.

The Convener: I will come to the two witnesses who are still competitively swimming for us.

Abi Thomson: Swimming is a way of life for me. It is important that we continue to develop that way of life for others, too. Let us keep swimming at the heart of communities.

Duncan Scott: Thanks again for taking the time to listen. Some of the statistics are alarming. There are a number of reasons why pools are a beating heart of this country and are so important. As an athlete, that is special. I am grateful that I have been able to compete in many home competitions—“home” as in the UK—and in Scotland as well, which has hosted the European aquatics championships and the Commonwealth games.

I wonder what that legacy will come to if there is a lack of pools in this country. In 2023, 382 pools had closed in England since 2010, and as many were nearing the end of their lifespan. Because of that, a swimming pool support fund and a specific working group on swimming were set up for this vital life skill.

What can we do in Scotland to get the same level of focus and support? Without that, I fear that, instead of Scottish Swimming’s generation swim idea, we will have a generation who cannot swim, and that our drowning figures will only worsen. Having a joint Government task force with the Scottish Government and COSLA to assess the investment needs for pools would be a great outcome.

I thank you all again for taking the time today to listen to us.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That is an important and thoughtful note on which we will end this round-table discussion.

I now suspend the meeting to allow for a change in witnesses.

11:05 On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back to this meeting of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee. We have just concluded our first round table and we now have our second round-table discussion on PE2018, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to recognise the value of swimming pools and provide financial relief to help to keep pools open.

We are joined by Dianne Breen, coached programmes manager at Sport Aberdeen; Kirsty Doig, director at the Darcey Sunshine Project; Jillian Gibson, policy manager for sport and physical activity at COSLA; and Ben Lamb, chief executive at West Lothian Leisure, which is also known as Xcite. A warm welcome to all the witnesses.

If you are content to do so, we will move straight to questions. I hope that you will take the opportunity to use the answer to any question to articulate any additional views that you have.

I invite my colleague Maurice Golden to open the questioning.

Maurice Golden: Welcome, witnesses. In the previous evidence session, we heard about the different types and sizes of swimming pools and how they attract different cohorts in society. What is the provision in your areas? Are there any gaps? Do you have any thoughts on access to school swimming pools in particular? What are your first-hand experiences of that?

Ben Lamb (West Lothian Leisure (Xcite)): Thank you for the opportunity to talk about such an important subject. I will start at the back end of your question. I am the chief executive at West Lothian Leisure, which is a charity, a leisure trust and a not-for-profit that operates facilities on behalf of the council. It was referenced earlier that there are different models for different local authorities, trusts and operators. Currently, we offer community access to nine schools across West Lothian, so we have good experience of what that looks like.

As John Lunn mentioned, there are different access levels depending on the school buildings and facilities and how those allow us to drive participation through the school estate. I might touch on this a bit more once we have gone through the opening bits but, unfortunately, 18 months ago, we were in a position such that we closed three swimming pools. We managed to migrate some of our programmes to the school estate to make sure that we continued to drive participation.

I will give an example of using a school's facilities. In 2022, West Lothian Council, in partnership with West Lothian Leisure, opened the Winchburgh sport and wellbeing hub in West Lothian. There was investment in a new-build facility, in which access was set up for the community. There is now significant usage of that facility. On the other hand, for other schools that have been there for a number of years, access is not possible at all times because, for example, the swimming pool might be at the back of the school and is not set up for public access. School facilities are set up in an array of ways. Access to and use of school facilities is an important part of the conversation.

As Maurice Golden mentioned, there are different types and sizes of facilities. There are regional and national facilities but, sometimes, the access to water space in a school might be to a 20m or 25m four-lane swimming pool. That provides opportunities for many different types of use of school facilities—John Lunn mentioned intergenerational use. However, there are challenges with access to that.

I hope that that gives an insight into the different facilities that are available.

Jillian Gibson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Thank you for the opportunity to be here. I cannot speak about school estate access across the entire country. You have heard from Ben Lamb and the witnesses on the previous panel that access is different across local authorities and within each local authority. Different schools have different access needs, based on the combination of children in the school and the public access.

COSLA has new infrastructure and governance around sport and physical activity. One key theme of the new sport and physical activity special interest group is access to facilities in the sport and leisure estate. As part of that work, we are exploring how to support local authorities to work together and to understand how to learn from each other about accessing the school estate for broader sport and physical activity, of which swimming is an enormous part, as you have heard from the petitioners and previous witnesses. We are trying to support those conversations.

Alongside that, sportscotland is undertaking an estates review of the infrastructure of the sporting estate in Scotland. Pools are included in that, along with access to all sports facilities, including community access to school pools.

Although I do not have that information at the moment, I am happy to try to gather additional information about the level of community access to school pools, because it is an answer to a problem that we have. As Ben Lamb said, we in COSLA are working with sportscotland on what the estate looks like and how we support and enable as much use as we can of the estate that we have. Abi Thomson also alluded to that in the earlier session.

Dianne Breen (Sport Aberdeen): Unfortunately, we have had a couple of pool closures in the past couple of years; I hope that I can speak a little bit more about that in answer to further questions. We looked at the school estate where we did not have that pool access and worked up agreements with the city council to get it. We were able to use underutilised school estate to minimise the impact of the pool closures. That did not get rid of the whole impact, but it minimised it.

We moved some of our learn-to-swim programmes and club programmes across, but we have a real mix. We operate in six pools, four of which are school pools and two are pools that we run. Because of the closures, the council has allowed us good access to a couple of them, and we have good agreements in place. However, one pool sits empty from 4pm to 6pm at night—we cannot access it because of the design of the venue. School activity is still going on, so we are not allowed to use the pool.

There is a real mix of access. With those two pool closures, we have used up a lot of the capacity. We are working well and working closely to use as much of the school estate as we can, but it is a piecemeal picture.

The Convener: Kirsty Doig, do you have anything to contribute at this point?

Kirsty Doig (The Darcey Sunshine Project): Yes, absolutely. I reiterate our thanks for the opportunity to engage with you today. Five and a half years ago, I would not have expected to be sitting here having this discussion, but in 2020 I lost my daughter to drowning. Hence the start of our organisation, which looks specifically at making sure that all children have equitable access at least to basic swim skills. That is what has brought me to the conversation today.

When we talk about different sizes of pools, we are really looking for safe and warm bodies of water where children can embed the water safety education that we are trying to convey to them and embed those skills for a safer future. When we talk about maintaining the pools that we have and creating new infrastructure in new schools that we are building, it is important that ensuring safety for all children is at the forefront of our minds.

Maurice Golden: In relation to the attempts to keep facilities open, I presume that the issue is, in large part, lack of funding either from the Scottish Government or councils. If not, that is a flag. We have talked about maximising the assets that we already have, particularly in schools, as a way of not requiring extra funding for a facility, but there could be universities in certain parts of the country that have pools. With regard to maximising assets or income generation, are there any innovative examples of approaches or different practices that might allow facilities to remain open?

Ben Lamb: Typically, the model involves local authorities providing funding for leisure trusts or directly funding their swimming pools if they manage them in-house. The model varies but, particularly across the trust sector in Scotland, the income generation element is quite high. For example, in West Lothian Leisure, nearly 90 per cent of the income that we generate and use to run our swimming pools and sports facilities comes from customers—what we call earned income—and the other 10 per cent comes from the local authority, which makes up the funding shortfall. Historically, the level of local authority funding was a lot higher than that, but that has come down due to the pressures on local authority funding over the years. That is the situation that others are facing across the sector, too, although the percentages are slightly different.

It is really important to make the point that, particularly across the leisure trusts, for a number of years, there has been a strong drive to have flexibility in programming to drive revenues, make the maximum use of space and find the balance between providing affordable and accessible access for the community and ensuring that revenue is coming in to support the operation of the facilities.

On innovations and models that have allowed trusts and other operators to generate income, you will find that, across the sector, there is a cross-subsidy model. In larger leisure centres, a large part of the income will come from, for example, gyms, studios or sports pitches that accompany the swimming pools and the other facilities—that is

certainly the case in our example—and that income subsidises the operation of the swimming pools.

I am sure that this was in some of the evidence in the submissions, but, to help to quantify things, I note that the cost of running a swimming pool is between £100 and £200 per hour. That is certainly our experience, although it varies—as you rightly mentioned, there are different types and sizes of swimming pools. Larger swimming pools might have flumes, wave machines or a different configuration. Typically, more lifeguards and more members of staff are needed to ensure that those pools are safe, so the costs of operating those pools are greater. There is a sliding scale.

The Convener: The figure of £100 to £200 is for not just heating the water and so on; you are talking about everything that is involved in maintaining the operation of the pool.

Ben Lamb: That is correct—

The Convener: It covers the staffing costs and everything.

Ben Lamb: Yes, it covers the energy, staffing and chemical costs—everything that goes with the operation of the pool. Typically, as the previous witnesses mentioned, flexibility in programming is important. Dianne Breen from Sport Aberdeen has some great examples, as we do, of trying to use the swimming pool and to tank it as much as possible. Earlier, we heard about pools being used for canoeing, children's swimming lessons and aqua fit classes, so pools are being used by a range of people from the community. It is about trying to maximise the use of the space. Over the past couple of years, that has become harder and harder to do, because, although the space is maximised, the cost is still significant, and our raison d'être in the leisure trust sector is to provide affordable and accessible access, so the issue is the cost per hour and the cost per head.

For example, across our estate, the cost to us per visit of an individual is just shy of £5. At the moment, as a leisure trust, we subsidise that by about 81p, so we subsidise a small amount, using the management fee that we get from the local authority. When you move to a stand-alone swimming pool, the cost per visit increases. In some of our stand-alone pools, the cost is more than £6.50, because the running costs are so high and the programming is almost at capacity. That gives you an idea about some of the challenges involved in trying to offset the costs that we face.

Maurice Golden: That is very useful.

Dianne Breen: The reasons for the closures are exactly as Ben Lamb said: the increase in energy costs and the reduction in core funding. We have had a 40 per cent reduction in core funding since Sport Aberdeen came into existence, and that does not even take into account any of the increases in the day-to-day costs and that side of things, so the reduction is hugely significant. We have lost two pools over that period. During the year in which we closed Bucksburn pool, our core funding was reduced by nearly £700,000. There are those challenges.

With regard to innovative solutions, following on from what Ben Lamb has said, one of our venues, which had been a stand-alone pool, was closed and refurbished to include a gym and fitness suite, as well as a space for the national health service, to try to make it a community hub. It reopened a couple of years ago and has been a huge success since. We have had pain clinics there, in partnership with the NHS. We have tried to make it a community hub and it has been hugely successful.

We have provided more water wellbeing programmes and have introduced Good Boost classes to support adults in their rehabilitation following injury and diagnosis. We are diversifying our programmes to ensure that we offer health initiatives that support the NHS. We have also increased the number of disability programmes and the pathways in that regard.

It is about diversifying our programming rather than having only a core, standard learning offering. Although that standard offering is vital and crucial for income generation, we need to ensure that we serve the whole community, so we provide those programmes. That has been our approach. We are reducing NHS costs—if we were not running some of our programmes, there would be a significant extra cost. We are trying to show evidence of that through the case studies that we are working on.

Kirsty Doig: We are talking a lot about the increasing financial output from our swimming pools, but the costs are being transferred to families and children through the 53 per cent real-terms increase in the cost of swimming lessons over the past five years. We heard earlier that the costs have actually gone up by more than 100 per cent in some areas over the past three years. As you can imagine, that is a massive financial burden, particularly on the least affluent families.

A recent study showed that a staggering 63 per cent of children in 2023 could not even pass the basic water competency test in East Lothian, which is a fairly affluent area. The figures are even worse in more deprived areas according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. If we are going to give children a fighting chance to survive in, on and around the water, we need to ensure that access is equitable through school swimming lessons for all. That will help families who have not had access to such education to use their community pools as a hub, which will, in turn, increase the income to those pools when they become thriving community hubs, with everyone able to use basic skills.

Jillian Gibson: I do not have much to add. Ben Lamb and Dianne Breen have covered the question about local innovation perfectly. You will find examples of innovation for communities in all 32 local authorities, and that innovation will generate income to try to reduce the impacts that Kirsty Doig has mentioned. Energy and staff costs are rising, and every leisure trust and local authority will do whatever they can to reduce and mitigate the impact of those rising costs and find a balance, whatever the pressures might be. However, no one perfect solution has been found in the fiscal landscape in which we find ourselves.

The Convener: I will bring in David Torrance to take us forward, but I think that he would like to start by following up on the area that we have just been discussing.

David Torrance: Ben Lamb said that is costs between £100 to £200 an hour to run a swimming pool. The biggest cost will be energy, whether it is heating the building and the water, lighting and so on. How do local authorities and trusts embrace new technology? There is technology that can reduce energy costs greatly and probably make pools far more viable, but, from what I see in my local authority, local authorities are not very good at bringing new technology on board.

Ben Lamb: That is a great question about a pertinent point that resonated with me when it was made earlier. I speak for West Lothian Leisure, but I know that this applies more widely across the trust sector. We have been good at making low-cost interventions such as reducing pool temperatures, putting covers on pools, using LED lighting or making adjustments in plant rooms. The difficulties and challenges come from the cost of the high-impact and more innovative interventions. There are significant costs because buildings across the estate are 30 or more years old—someone mentioned 38 years—and retrofitting those can be challenging and difficult. It absolutely can be done, but there is a significant cost that local authorities and operators such as us just do not have the money for at the moment. That is the challenge.

We spoke earlier about statutory provision for swimming so that every child can have access to a pool and can learn to swim. I do not think that anyone would disagree with that, but we must ensure that facilities are sustainable, which brings on-going revenue costs because income does not match costs and they operate with a deficit.

As you said, there are also future capital and investment costs. I can give an example to clarify that. Everywhere is different, but one of our local swimming pools has a condition survey capital maintenance cost that will be in excess of £1 million over the next 10 years, whereas our annual budget for that swimming pool is less than 25 per cent of that cost, so we know that we face a real challenge. At the moment, like many others, my local authority leisure trust is struggling to pay life-cycle costs to maintain our buildings and, as a consequence, the lifespan of buildings is shortened. I am trying to show that there is a perfect storm that makes that all very difficult.

Kirsty Doig made a point about affordable and accessible pricing and price increases across the leisure trust and local authority sector. Everyone has concession schemes in place, and I know that we, in West Lothian, are working really hard to ensure that we can continue to provide discounted access for those who need it most, but it will not surprise you that it is becoming harder to do that. Our staffing costs have gone up because of national insurance increases and everything else that everyone is aware of. The real challenge is how to ensure that we have financial support for a number of areas.

I hope that that gives you a flavour of my take on investment in the capital side.

David Torrance: The committee has heard that 40 per cent of children in Scotland leave primary school unable to swim. What is the current provision of swimming lessons for primary school pupils, and how is that provision decided?

Jillian Gibson: I will address your previous point before going on to the next one. I can give a wider and more holistic picture than Ben Lamb—who painted the picture

for West Lothian really well but spoke about the situation with only one pool—by talking about how local authorities and local public leisure services can innovate in order to be sustainable for the future.

It will be no surprise for you to hear COSLA talking about the cost pressures that local government faces, because we have done that on a number of occasions. We can look at the cost of innovation relating to swimming pools and at the amount of money that is available for that. The 2025-26 budget put £40 million of additional capital funding into the local government budget settlement, which represents an £11 million increase in the core capital budget after the cut from 2024-25 is reversed. To put that in context, that means that local government has £777 million of capital funding to support £55 billion-worth of assets, and that total amount has to cover the entire estate.

If you multiply the cost just in West Lothian by 32, you will see the cost of managing and sustaining what is already there as well as innovating for the future. The case for swimming and for pool and water safety has completely been made—there is cross-party support for that and very little disagreement—but we must have a holistic conversation about how we manage things for the future that takes account of the rest of the sport and non-sport capital assets in the country. It is important to understand the context of the capital funding that is available for continued and sustained innovation in the entirety of local government.

I know that Dianne Breen wants to come in, so I can come back to your second question.

Dianne Breen: Regarding the learn to swim programme provision, in Aberdeen, we have community programmes that follow the Scottish swimming pathway, which 6,000-odd children benefit from weekly. We also deliver a school swimming programme. As Ben Lamb said, there are pressures on finances year on year, and one thing that is always looked at when our budgets get reduced is whether we can still deliver the programme. All primary 4 swimmers in Aberdeen city—about 2,200 pupils—get a block of 10 swimming lessons per year.

The statistics on the number of eight and nine-year-olds who have not been in a pool before and are absolute beginners are frightening. Generally, that is the case in regeneration areas, which do not have the finance to access community learn to swim programmes. In those areas, 90 to 100 per cent of the swimmers in the P4 swimming lesson programme are absolute beginners who have not had any swimming lessons before.

The Convener: To whom does that percentage apply?

Dianne Breen: It applies to the swimmers from the most deprived areas who come to the P4 swimming lessons. On average, about 70 to 75 per cent of the swimmers are total beginners, but the figure for those from poorer areas is between 90 and 100 per cent. We give them 10 weeks of swimming lessons, but the budget is constantly under threat.

The Convener: Crikey.

Ben Lamb: I echo that point—the figures in West Lothian are very similar. Last year, just over 1,000 P5 children who used our school swimming programme were assessed: 69 per cent—just over 750 children—were identified as weak swimmers and beginners. You can probably times that number by 32 or extrapolate the result across the country to get an idea of the challenge.

Kirsty Doig: Although many local authorities are delivering school swimming lessons despite that not being a statutory requirement in the curriculum, the provision remains very variable. What is delivered in one local authority certainly does not match what is delivered in another. It very much comes down to facilities, staffing and training. About six local authorities still do not offer any primary school swimming lessons whatsoever.

Although some people might believe that, if children do not learn to swim in primary school, they might well learn in secondary school or later in life, in reality, that is just not the case. As children grow older, they develop a certain self-consciousness and shame about not being able to swim, particularly at an age when risk-taking behaviour becomes more prevalent. It has been found that the best age to get children in the water and swimming is when they are in primary school.

A lot of the work that we do at the Darcey Sunshine Foundation is primarily based in South Africa, where we are dealing with generations of non-swimmers and have found that financial, social and cultural barriers exist. As we bring those basic swim skills into children's lives early, they take them back to their families, which builds a safety culture at the foundation level and throughout communities. We introduce and embed those skills early, before children get to the age when risk-taking behaviour and more independent activities take place.

Jillian Gibson: Kirsty Doig, Ben Lamb and Dianne Breen have highlighted the local and national challenge. I do not think that you will find a headteacher in Scotland who wants to cut school swimming lessons, but they must consider the logistical reality and the cost of transport to get to and from a pool. Not every secondary school in Scotland, whether it is brand new or 50 years old, has a swimming pool. We should consider the cost and time pressures on education in rural communities. There is the teachers' time to get the children to and from the swimming pool, along with the cost of the lessons and the holistic cost of swimming. Given the cost of transport, the time and the rest of the pressures on education, it is a real challenge, but that does not mean that it is a challenge not to be solved.

I would not counter anything that any witness has said, but the fact that providing school swimming lessons is not a statutory duty, along with the cost pressures on local authorities and the educational pressure on the school environment, means that it is a difficult but necessary conversation to have.

When I reached out to some local authorities for their views and school swimming situations, I found that there are issues not just with the cost of swimming lessons but with the availability of swimming teachers, the cost of training swimming teachers and the availability of lifeguards. The recruitment and retention of that workforce has been impacted by Covid. Typically, a young workforce has found other employment and other opportunities.

Although it is necessary, school swimming is serendipitous. Like the other witnesses, I have been involved in swimming my entire life. That has nothing to do with my job; it is personal to me. There is a need for a holistic conversation about school swimming, because decisions on provision are not taken lightly. We have a diverse geography in Scotland, as you all understand, and the time and cost pressures of getting to and from a pool are underestimated in conversations about simply providing school swimming lessons in the school day.

David Torrance: As somebody who represents some of the areas of highest deprivation in Scotland, I am a bit taken aback by the figures that Dianne Breen gave that almost 100 per cent of children go to those classes as first-time swimmers. That highlights how important it is for children to learn to swim at primary school.

On funding for that, how can the Scottish Government help to ensure that primary school children learn to swim? I am a member of the governing party, so I am asking how we can ensure that every primary school kid learns to swim. It is so important. In areas of deprivation, levels of health and wellbeing are very low, so if we can increase that through sport and activity, it will help us.

Jillian Gibson: John Lunn made a good, clear case for Scottish Swimming's ask. We need an open conversation across local government, the Scottish Government, Scottish Swimming, our leisure trusts and the entirety of the sector to understand what the solution is and what it will take for it to be realised. Swimming does not sit in isolation from the rest of the public leisure estate. The Scottish Government launched the new physical activity for health framework at COSLA, and it makes the case for the importance of physical activity. Education through active places of learning is included in that. That is the impetus; it makes the case for physical activity, the eight investments for physical activity and the eight outcomes of being physically active. The case has clearly been made for swimming.

Kirsty Doig is absolutely right. As a former swimming teacher, I know that you will not easily teach a 12-year-old how to swim in a secondary school swimming lesson.

The cross-party support is welcomed. The cross-sector conversation about the realities of understanding the financial implications of school swimming does not sit with just giving the money for the lessons. Does the infrastructure sit there? Does the transport sit there? Do we have teachers? Do we have pools that are fit for the future? I do not have the figures for the cross-sector conversations and cross-party support, but, if we are to take an innovative approach, we must start by working together from the very outset to understand that.

Kirsty Doig: I reiterate what Jillian Gibson said about the importance of a joint task force to look at how we move forward. Scottish Swimming has done the work. The pilots have been put in place, and they have proven the impact that school swimming can have in the areas where the pilots were run. They were hugely impactful, but we need action now. It is about funding it and making it a priority. As soon as it is a priority and the funding is there, it is ready to go. The teams are there and ready to move it forward. It needs backing now.

The Convener: I am intrigued. Jillian, you spoke about associated transport costs. We recognise that issue here because we want to get as many primary schools as

possible to come to the Scottish Parliament and have discovered that the issues in many cases are the distance between the school and the Parliament, the cost involved in getting here and back, and fitting it into the timetable of the school day because parents want to pick their children up at a particular time. I was equally taken aback by the statistic that, for three quarters of all children and almost 100 per cent of those living in deprived areas, the first experience of water—

Dianne Breen: It is not that it is their first experience of water but that they are beginners; for some of them, it is their first experience of water.

The Convener: They are beginners, and their first experience of learning to swim is through school lessons. I am intrigued by something that we have not touched on. Do you have any understanding of where the ability to swim sits within parental priorities? Is there a parental understanding of its importance and a desire to see it happen, or is it something that happens, but without the impetus to ensure that it does?

Jillian Gibson: I am not a parent and cannot speak for all parents, but I have worked in local government for 20-odd years in some of Scotland's most deprived communities and have an understanding of that from conversations and anecdotally. For a parent who lives in poverty, or on the edges of poverty, in an area of deprivation and has to make difficult choices every day for their family and children, getting their children to a swimming lesson that they may not be able to afford, when they might not have a vehicle, might mean taking one or more buses to get to the local swimming pool. The child might be able to access that transport for free at the moment, but the parent might not. For the past few years, and certainly since Covid, we have heard about the choice between heating and eating. Where does swimming sit on that parent's priority list? That is not because it is not important or because parents and families do not understand that it is important.

The Convener: That is what I am trying to understand. I get what you are saying about the pressures on family budgets and that the scale of that is all the more intense in areas of deprivation. I am trying to understand whether the issue is the budgetary aspect of swimming or whether there is less appreciation by parents of how important it is. Does that need to be worked on, or is there a high level of understanding of that importance? I am curious about that.

Jillian Gibson: I think that it is both, but those who work more closely with communities can probably give you a better answer.

Kirsty Doig: One initiative by the Darcey Sunshine Foundation is that we offer bursaries for local authorities that do not currently offer swimming in schools, to try to remove the financial barriers to swimming. We know that there are other barriers, including cultural ones, to break down, but we offer financial bursaries.

I can give examples of parents who have written to apply for bursaries. One lovely mum who was passionate about trying to get her children swimming was a widow with three children under the age of eight. There was absolutely no way that she was able to take those children swimming by herself, because you cannot take more than one child into a pool if they are not competent swimmers and she was unable to afford lessons, so there was no opportunity whatsoever for that woman to get her

children to have even basic swimming skills. We understand the financial barriers and can remove some of those, but we should look at and explore the other barriers for parents.

Water safety education is a big part of that. We are talking a lot today about swimming but the understanding of water safety lies behind that. Being a competent swimmer and being competent in and understanding the water is a big part of that. Water Safety Scotland is working hard to educate people about all water-based activity, and part of that is about educating parents.

The Convener: Was the Darcey Sunshine Project able to intervene and assist in that situation?

Kirsty Doig: Yes.

The Convener: Was Darcey your daughter?

Kirsty Doig: She was.

Ben Lamb: I will let Dianne Breen come in, but I want to echo some of the points on the question whether it is about priorities or financial issues. I think that it is a combination of both. From a local point of view, the number of users of our facilities in West Lothian who are from the areas of most deprivation in the SIMD is minimal. I do not have any figures to support this, but I suspect that, if you looked at local authority areas more widely, the situation would be similar.

There will be a combination of reasons for that—it will be cultural, economic and societal. That is a particularly difficult challenge. The hard-to-reach groups and barriers to participation are evident more than ever now, and, as other witnesses have articulated, the challenge is how to change that picture and that landscape.

Sorry, Dianne—I came in ahead of you.

Dianne Breen: That is okay.

Last year, we introduced a new initiative on the back of the school swimming 10-week block. Any of the children who were involved in that could get a free month in our community learn-to-swim programmes. That reduced the financial barrier, certainly for a month, and we wanted to see how that went. I think that there was 20 per cent take-up, which tells us that those are the parents for whom finance perhaps was a barrier. For the rest, there might be other barriers, whether they are to do with time, transport or opportunity. That is our experience.

The Convener: Thank you all again. That has been very helpful. Is there anything that we have not touched on? If you would like to make any final points, please do so. Dianne, I will start with you. Is there any thought that you would like to leave us with?

Dianne Breen: I just emphasise our health and wellbeing programmes, which I have touched on. Trusts' and pools' programming is really moving towards helping with that. About 70 per cent of the people who participate in our Good Boost programmes have an injury or diagnosis, and about 16 per cent of them are unable to work.

Through the programmes that trusts now offer, we are trying to reach inactive people. Through that wider offer, there are benefits to the country as well as just the swimming impact. Forty-five per cent of the participants come through general practitioner referrals. We are trying to be that future medicine and to provide that pathway.

I could list hundreds of participants, but I will mention one who is an ex-soldier in his 50s and who developed vasculitis about six years ago. He has permanently damaged his nerve endings, he has no feeling in his lower legs and he has balance issues. He started coming to the Good Boost programmes and has now lost 10 stone in weight. That is helping to deal with obesity, and it shows the wider benefits from the swimming offer. He has said that, after three days without swimming, he can hardly move. He told us that he was in a really bad place but now, when he comes in, it is amazing and makes a huge difference.

It is a social thing, too, and people can speak to others who are experiencing similar issues. We need to find a way to get the messaging out about how such programmes are having an impact, and what the impact on the NHS would be if we were not delivering them. It is hard to quantify that, but it is vital that we get the messaging out that we are not just a pool; we are having a big impact on the NHS agenda and are providing complementary support.

Ben Lamb: Thank you for the opportunity to come to the committee and raise some points. I have really enjoyed the discussion.

I will not reiterate what Dianne Breen said, but the impact on people's lives from leisure facilities, swimming pools and sport is evident—everyone is aware of that and knows about it.

My closing remarks are probably a bit of an ask. You have heard today that there clearly needs to be greater investment. We need to consider spending in this area as an investment and not a cost, whether we are talking about new technologies, infrastructure or school swimming. Scottish Women in Sport has articulated that ask very well. There needs to be a long-term sustainable plan for investment, and I believe that there are mechanisms and support in place to do that. It is not just about asking for money; it is about asking for smarter investment and a different way of doing things because, frankly, without that, further closures are inevitable.

The Convener: I rather took that point from Jillian Gibson's earlier statement. I will come to you now, Jillian. It seems that, although you are grateful for the support of all the political parties, you feel that, unless something happens, the immediate prognosis could be one of reversal rather than progress. We have to be realistic and alert to that when we are considering the issue. What are your final thoughts?

Jillian Gibson: I echo others' thanks for the opportunity to speak today. I do not want to repeat what anybody else has said, but my plea would be around the holistic nature of the conversation on public leisure. You will have heard a lot about the wider fiscal challenges that the public sector faces. Dianne Breen makes an excellent point, which we all too often forget, about early intervention and prevention. That is about saving money not just for the NHS but for many parts of the public sector through the provision of public leisure.

There are very few stand-alone pools in Scotland that are not part of a wider leisure centre or school. We have to place value on public leisure in people's lives. You have heard the argument today about water safety, swimming for life, physical activity and rehabilitation—that is what public leisure does. I do not disagree with anyone's comments about school swimming and water safety, which are all well made, but it is important to have a cross-sector and cross-party discussion about public leisure services, which are discretionary services in local authorities at a time when they are under increasing pressure in providing statutory services. That means that, inevitably, there are conversations about future closures.

Those conversations will continue to happen while there is increasing pressure on statutory services, which leaves less money for discretionary ones. I do not like the term "discretionary", because I do not think that anyone would agree that leisure facilities should be discretionary, but that is the provision at the moment. We need a wider conversation.

The Convener: Our colleague Liz Smith has a member's bill before the Parliament, which is about the right to outdoor learning in the general sense. That could be related, too.

Finally, since her daughter Darcey is at the heart of all that we have been discussing this morning, we will hear from Kirsty Doig.

Kirsty Doig: We have discussed so much today. I again thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to engage with you on this important topic.

As we have learned today, swimming pools are critical community hubs for vital life skills, for safety, health and wellbeing and for fitness, fun and friendships. For that reason, they need to be protected as essential community assets. Again, we urge the committee to ensure that there is a consultation process for every proposed pool closure.

Our pools are essential. They are safe learning spaces for essential life skills, and they must be protected. Closing pools today might offer a short-term win but will surely end in much more long-term loss, as I have experienced and as we have outlined today. Thank you very much.

The Convener: Thank you all very much. We very much appreciate your participation. It has been a fascinating morning for us. We have been able to give the issue the attention that it deserves and have heard from two panels of very high-quality witnesses.