

A Decade of Decline:

The Future of Swimming Pools in England

Report 2021



FOREWORD

Jane Nickerson

As we reflect on the amazing achievements of our Team GB and ParalympicsGB athletes this summer in Tokyo, it was heartening to hear so many reflect on the important role their local pool played in their sporting journey.

Sadly, those successes threaten to be engulfed by a dark cloud on the horizon which puts the future of all our aquatic sports in England in danger.

If we are to nurture the next Adam Peaty, James Guy, Tom Daley, Isabelle Thorpe or Maisie Summers-Newton, ensuring we have enough water space across the country is vital.

However, this report paints a bleak nationwide picture which could leave millions missing out on the activities they love.

Within these pages you will read Swim England's predicted loss over the next decade – as well as the number of pools we need as a nation and the anticipated shortfall.

I wish I could say that our predictions only present the worst case scenario, but we know this isn't the case and is a situation which, sadly, we fear will get much worse.

I am also vastly aware that our calculations cannot always reflect the personal and

community stories. Those heart-breaking stories of clubs, recreational swimmers and those people with long-term health conditions who rely on the water for their only form of exercise having nowhere to go as community pools are being shut and not replaced.

Swimming is a unique activity in that it can be enjoyed by people of all ages.

Pools are valuable hubs of the local community, helping people of all ages to lead healthier, happier lives, saving the NHS hundreds of millions of pounds each year as well as being the place where millions of people will learn a skill that could one day save their life.

We know that each 25 metre pool can generate £7.2 million in community savings.

Without adequate investment into the new pools the country needs, we are forecasting a huge decline in available water space by the end of the decade.

This report clearly shows that the time to act is now.

Jane M Nickerson MBE

Chief Executive Officer – Swim England

Value of pools

We know swimming pools are much-loved community facilities, used by clubs, casual swimmers, schools, support groups and families alike.

Swimming is one of the most popular activities up and down the country, particularly amongst women and girls.

Unlike most activities, swimming can be enjoyed at any age and the unique properties of the water can be an ideal environment to help support people to be active who may struggle to exercise on land due to a range of health conditions.

Every **£1 spent** on community sport and physical activity generates nearly **£4** for the English economy and society¹.



Weekly swimming **saves the NHS** and social care system more than

£357m
each year²

Swim England's Value of Swimming report showed that swimming supports:



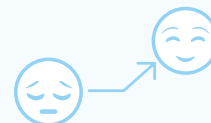
Physical wellbeing

with swimmers reporting feeling **12 years younger** than non-swimmers



Mental wellbeing

1.4 million adults feel swimming has significantly reduced their anxiety or depression



Individual development

with **women and girls** reporting that swimming more than **doubled** their levels of self confidence



Social and community development

swimmers have been found to be **more socially connected** and to have more friends than non-swimmers



Volunteering

swimmers are **26.1%** more likely to volunteer



¹ <https://www.sportengland.org/news/why-investing-physical-activity-great-our-health-and-our-nation>

² <http://www.swimming.org/swimengland/value-of-swimming>

Future of facilities

It is vital there are appropriate facilities in the right locations to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of swimming and every child has the opportunity to learn an essential life skill.

We also need enough pools that are capable of supporting all our aquatic sports of swimming, diving, water polo and artistic swimming.

The 1960s onwards saw a huge increase in pools being built in England and the current national supply of water space is equivalent to 12 sqm of water space per 1,000 head of population.

The average life of a pool built from 1960 onwards, based on open and close data of facilities since that time, is 38 years.

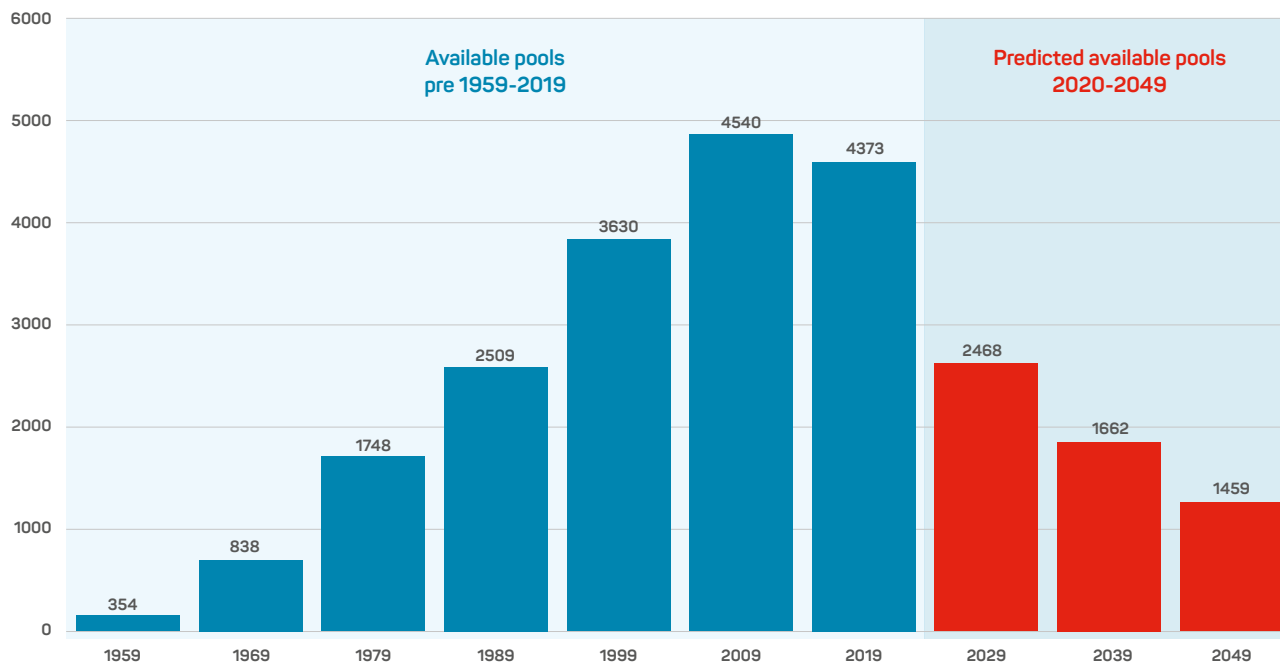
Therefore, many of these pools are now coming to the end of their lifespan

or have closed and it is clear that the number of pools in England is in decline.

This, coupled with an increasing population, means that there is an urgent need to invest in new (or refurbish existing) facilities.

To ensure we have the pools we need for the future, investment into public leisure of £1 billion is needed.

Number of pools available at the end of each decade



Based on current pool build trends,
the number of available pools could
decrease by more than

40% by the
end of the
decade

That's almost

2,000
pools

POOL CLOSED



This could mean

3.86
million

people shut out of the
activities they love





CASE STUDY



Helen's story

Swimming pools are 'special places' which have helped create lasting family memories for Helen Mbaziira.

Helen initially had a fear of the water and only enrolled in adult swimming lessons after her daughter came into difficulty in a pool – and she felt helpless and unable to save her.

Her learn-to-swim journey was featured as part of the Swim England-led **#LoveSwimming** campaign in 2019.

Since then, the pool has become a special place for the Mbaziira family – and Helen believes they need to be 'adequately funded'.

She said: "I only learnt to swim in the last few years but my local pool is somewhere we spend a huge amount of time at as a family.



"The poolside has become like a second home and we have formed lasting memories and built friendships and support groups.

"During the recent lockdowns when my pool was closed it was really challenging to try and keep my physical activity levels the same.

"Having fun with my daughters, watching them compete, and spending family time together is what makes the pool such a special place.

"Local pools shape local communities in ways that cannot be overlooked or questioned and they deserve to be adequately funded."

Impact of Covid

The issue of a looming shortage of available swimming pools precedes the coronavirus pandemic but it is clear that the pandemic has exacerbated the issue.


Since the pandemic began 206 pools have closed, either permanently or temporarily, including 68 public pools.

Local authorities are one of the biggest investors in leisure facilities in England. They have faced huge budget pressures in recent years which has only increased as a result of the pandemic. This places the future of many facilities at risk.

As the Local Government Association (LGA) identified in its report looking at how local authorities responded to Covid: "As largely discretionary services, they (culture and leisure budgets) will be under huge pressure as a result of the current gap in council finances³."

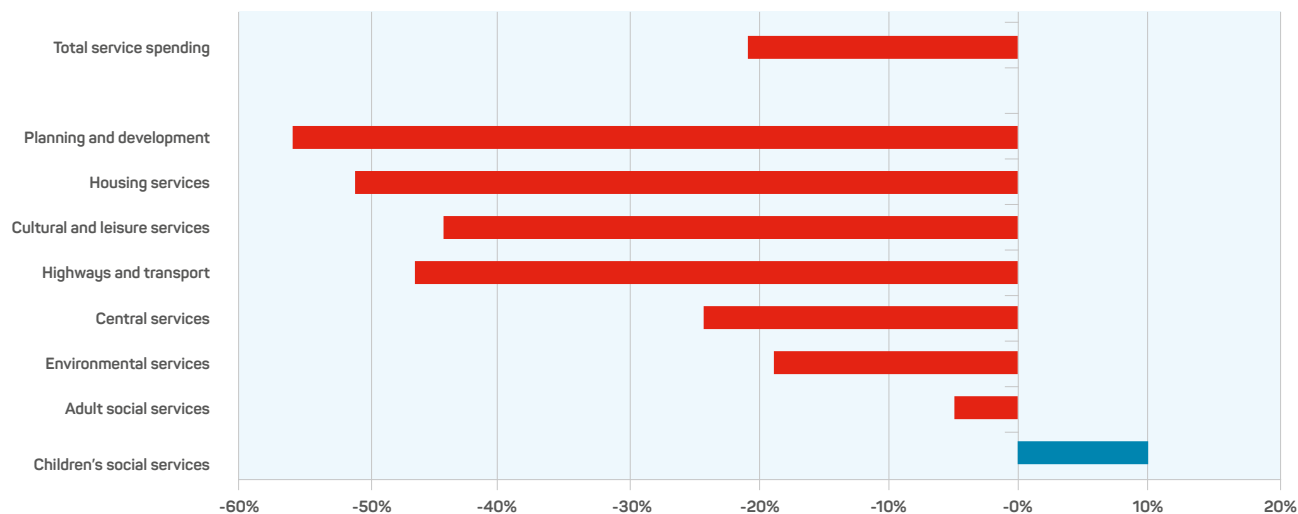
Certainly, the evidence pre-Covid⁴ suggests that when local authority budgets are reduced, it is the discretionary services like leisure that bear the brunt of cuts.

Since the pandemic began



206
pools have closed
either permanently or temporarily
including 68 public pools

IFS analysis – real-terms change in local government service spending by service area, 2009-10 to 2017-18



Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies (FSR0090)

³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/leisure-under-lockdown-how-culture-and-leisure-services-responded-covid-19-full-report>

⁴ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/2036/2036.pdf>

Recognising the desperate situation during the pandemic, many local authorities provided emergency financial support to subsidise pool operators who had suffered loss of income due to pool closures through direct grants, or deferred payments or loans – in some instances up to millions of pounds.

Pool operators and owners also had to dig into their reserves to absorb the impact of the pandemic, leaving them less able to invest in their facilities or survive any further disruption. Community Leisure UK reports that its members across England have, on average, lost all their reserves and currently have a deficit of £336,000 in reserves⁵.

During Covid, the Government's £100 million National Leisure Recovery Fund was incredibly welcomed and undoubtedly helped many pools up and down the country to open their doors again once they were allowed to do so. However it is clearly not enough, covering only a portion of the time period pools were forced to close or operate with reduced capacities and it is naive to think that now pools are allowed to reopen that the danger has passed.

Indeed, one national pool operator alone reported that the pandemic had cost it £170 million in lost revenue, warning earlier this year that 50 of its pools and gyms could be forced to close⁶.

Currently the nation's pools are not evenly distributed with some regions facing a much greater shortage of available pools.

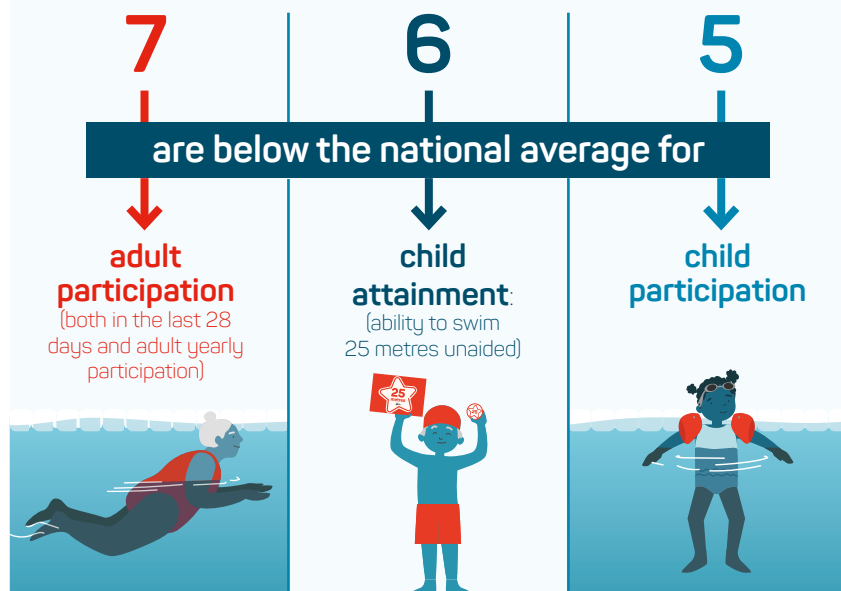
Levelling up

Health inequalities have been entrenched in England for many years, but have been sharply exposed by Covid-19.

Local pools have an essential role improving the health of local communities up and down the country.

Investing in new facilities that support community sport and physical activity can play an important role in boosting the economy and helping to level up inequalities within communities. Improving the health and wellbeing of local areas should be a key component of the government's 'levelling up' agenda.

Of the 10 most water-deprived local authorities:



None of the 10 least water-deprived local authorities falls below national averages in all three of the reported measures.

⁵ <https://communityleisureuk.org/news/community-leisure-uk-publishes-new-covid-19-impact-report/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jan/10/better-leisure-centres-being-bailed-out-across-uk-says-gll-chief>

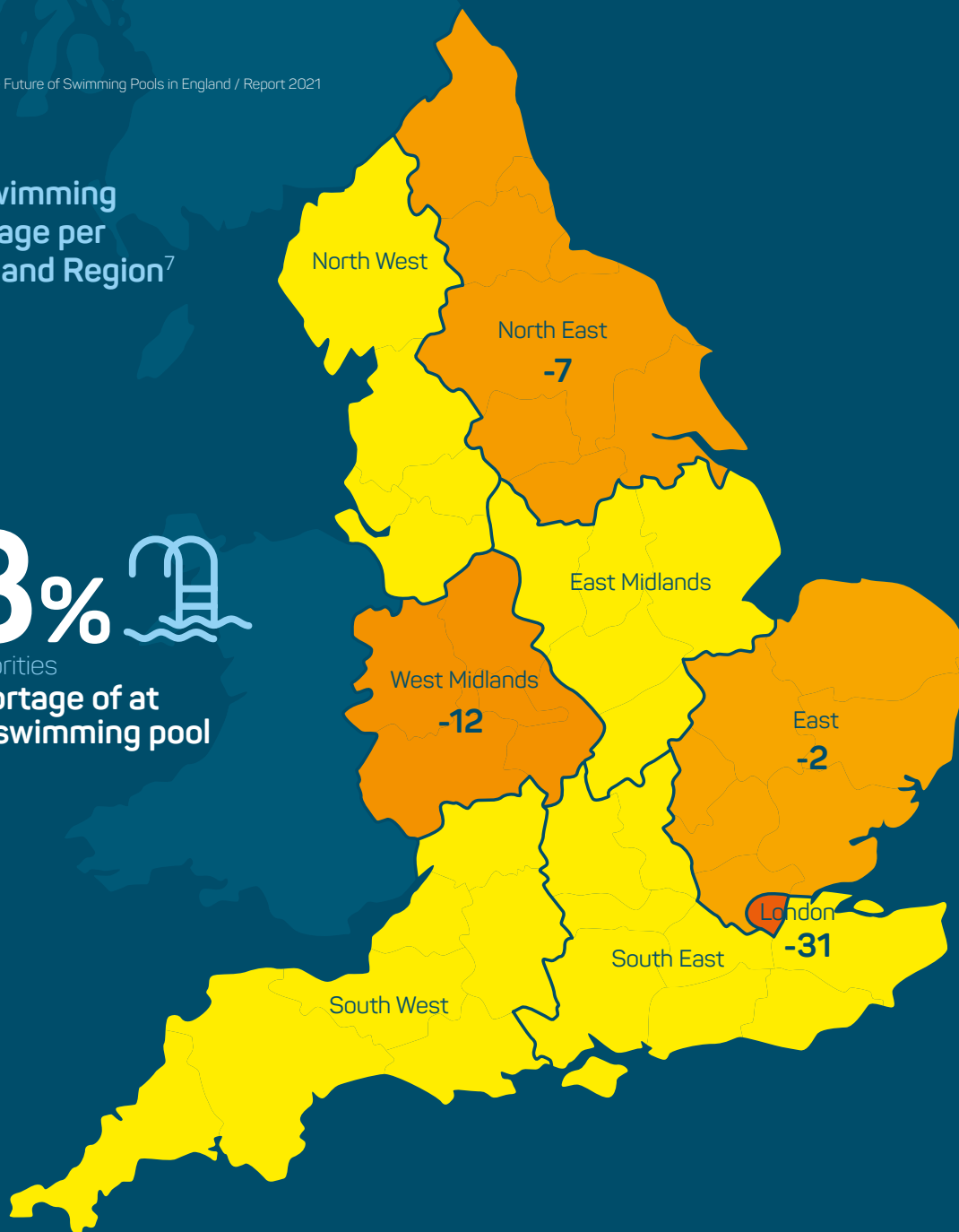
Current swimming pool shortage per Swim England Region⁷

Currently

23% 

of local authorities

have a shortage of at least one swimming pool



⁷ This excludes outdoor pools/lidos, pools that are not available for community use (e.g hotel pools and private member clubs) as well as pools where there is insufficient pool data.

Projection of swimming pool shortage per Swim England Region in 2030⁸

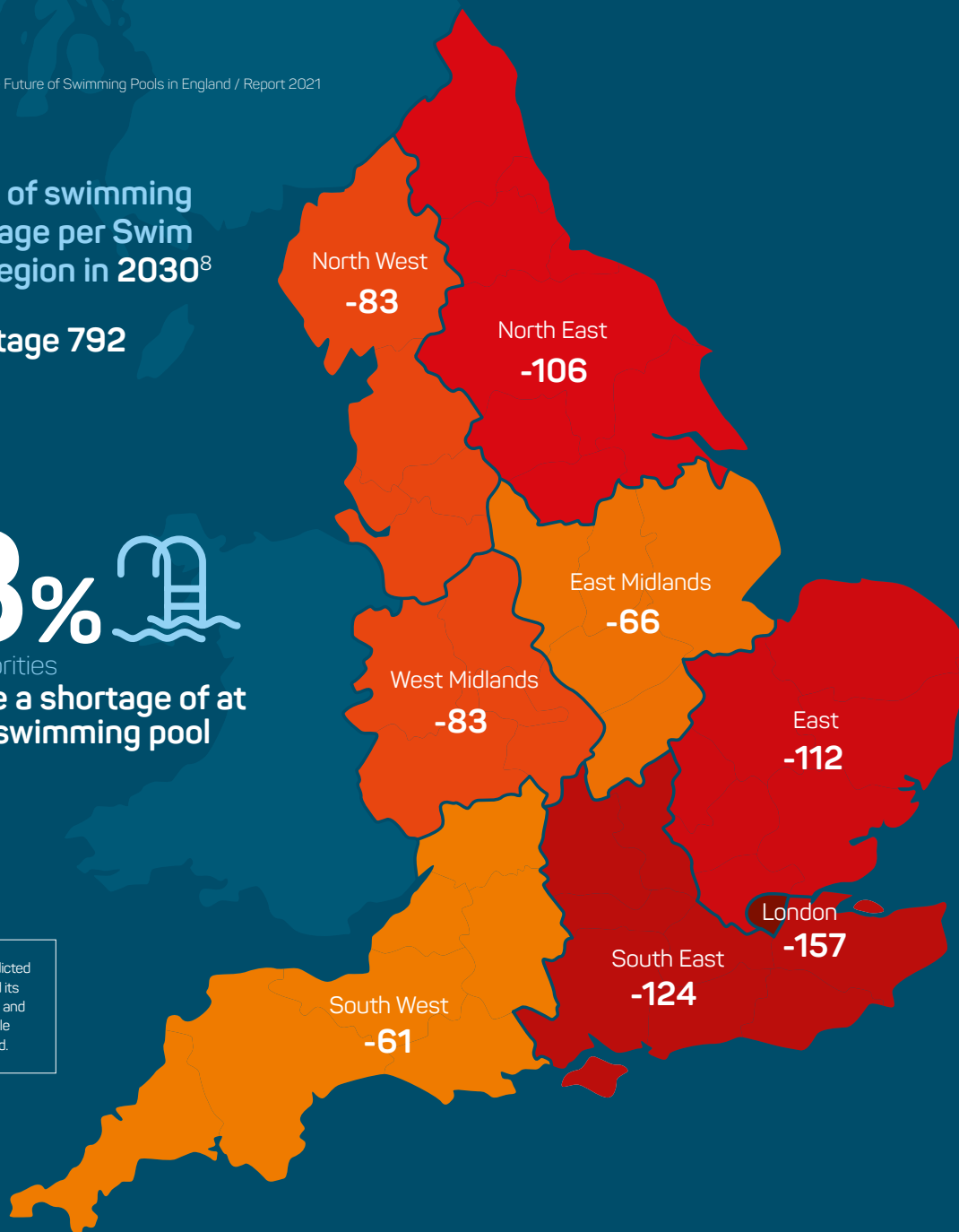
Total shortage 792

By 2030

73% 

of local authorities
could have a shortage of at
least one swimming pool

Results based on predicted population growth and its demand for swimming and the forecasted available water space in England.



⁸ This data assumes the current average of 45 pools being built per year will continue and highlights the resulting equivalent number of six lane, 25 metre swimming pools each region will be short by 2030.

Solutions

One barrier for local authorities can be the costs associated with conducting a feasibility study for a new pool.

We encourage local authorities to conduct an analysis of its pool stock to understand if it has the right pools in the right places to meet the needs of the local community, both now and in the future. Sport England has produced 'Strategic Outcomes Planning Guidance' to support local authorities. This has been successfully utilised by many councils but should be rolled out to be available for all local authorities.

Investing in new pools, or refurbishing an existing facility, offers the opportunity to deliver a much more sustainable facility for the community, both economically and environmentally.

With leisure facilities accounting for over 40 per cent of some councils' direct carbon emissions⁹ this is crucial to supporting efforts to reach net zero targets.



CASE STUDY



Hart District Council

Hart DC replaced its ageing leisure centres with a new facility, including significantly-enhanced water space. The original facility lacked a specific teaching facility making it impossible to meet the local demand for swimming lessons.

The new centre offers:

- 8 lane x 25m pool
- 4 lane x 25m training tank (with moveable floor)
- teaching pool (with introductory water area capable of being heated to a high temperature, for use by disabled people, or very young children) and a range of other dryside activities.

The aquatic facilities support learn to swim, pay and play use e.g. lane and fitness swimming, club use for swimming, water polo and artistic swimming, events and disability swimming.

The swimming provision has completely changed the ability of the operator and the council to meet the demand for swimming in the local area; not just for swimming lessons but also the increased demand as a result of local population increases.

The facility was funded through a mixed finance model. A new leisure management contract was agreed alongside the development of the new centre. This contract realises a payment to the council from the operator, based on the levels of usage and income generation. This payment contributes to the capital cost of the facility.

⁹ [https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Securing%20future%20\(summary\)%20with%20links.pdf](https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/assets/File/Securing%20future%20(summary)%20with%20links.pdf)

Greener pools



St Sidwell's Point

St Sidwell's Point pool in Exeter, will become the first swimming pool in the UK to meet the 'Passivhaus' energy efficiency standard when it opens shortly. It is expected to save the local council £200,000 each year in energy costs alone, meaning it would take fewer than 10 years to pay back the increased construction costs. Advances in technology, such as microfiltration, enables the pool operator to waste less water and use fewer chemicals, resulting in further savings in heating and enhancing the swimming experience.

CASE STUDY



CASE STUDY



Paragon Pool Concept

Swim England has worked with Paragon Structures Ltd to develop a concept design¹⁰ for a cost-effective and environmentally-friendly pool facility at a works cost estimate of £2,500 per sqm.

This could bring the construction cost of a pool facility build down to around £4 million.

CASE STUDY



Leisure Local

Sport England's 'Leisure Local' concept can play a role in the leisure offer for some areas. While there will always be a need for larger pools to support our aquatic sports, there is a role within the facilities mix for smaller facilities aimed at reaching the inactive with an emphasis on activity space for informal recreation and play.

¹⁰ <https://www.paragonstructures.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020.08-Swim-England-25m-Pool-Design.pdf>

What is Swim England doing?



Swim England will continue to be a strong voice for the swimming community, lobbying for the much needed investment into facilities to safeguard the future of our sports and all the amazing activities that take place in pools up and down the country.



With unparalleled expertise as the national governing body for swimming, diving, water polo and artistic swimming in England, our dedicated facilities team can provide expert guidance on new and refurbished pool design, pool management and health and safety.

We engage with both the public and private sector to ensure swimming pools are built or refurbished 'fit for purpose'.



The Swim England Facilities team provides insight and leadership to the wider sector through our work on national and international standards for the design and operation of swimming facilities.



Our Business Engagement team, with field experts in all regions of the country, can work with pool owners and operators to maximise the efficiency of their pool programming to support a pool's profitability.



Swim England's 'Business Solutions' offer provides a suite of free and paid for products and services for all pool owners and operators to utilise. From workforce and learn to swim audits that establish benchmarks and recommendations, to detailed latent demand analysis and pool viability studies, Swim England has a toolkit of products to support pool optimisation.



The way in which we build and manage our facilities will change. Working collaboratively with partners, Swim England will ensure the facilities of the future are greener and more environmentally sustainable through our continued research into the latest building design and monitoring and evaluation technology including the heating and treating of swimming pool water.

Over the past **five years** we have engaged with and supported over

80%

of **new pool builds** and refurbishments within England to help ensure the facility is **built fit for purpose and sustainable** for the communities they serve

What is needed?

1

Government

£1 billion of government investment and support into public leisure facilities to develop the next generation of pools.

This should include:



Capital investment in infrastructure

Funding is needed to build the new pools (and refurbish the existing pools) we need for the future.

2

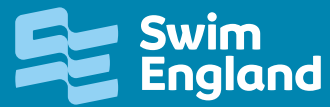
Local authorities

Local authorities that are short of water space as identified through a strategic needs assessment, should include new pool(s) in any Levelling Up Funding application they make.



Grants

Part of this fund should be allocated to supporting local communities to undertake a strategic needs assessment for their area.



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Funding Partner

