

P-06-1321 Protect leisure centres and swimming pools from closure during the current energy crisis

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 27 Chwefror 2023
Petitions Committee | 27 February 2023

Reference: SR23/4917 7

Petition Number: P-06-1321

Petition title: Protect leisure centres and swimming pools from closure during the current energy crisis

Text of petition: Swimming pools and leisure centres across the country are under threat as the energy crisis impacts communities across the nation. These facilities provide an essential service for the people of Wales, and are vital to the country's wellbeing.

We, the undersigned, call on the Senedd and Welsh Government to recognise the vulnerability of swimming pools by providing a ring-fenced package of financial aid above and beyond the Final Local Government Settlement to ensure swimming pools remain open.

More details

40% of council areas are at risk of losing their leisure centre(s) or seeing reduced services at their leisure centre(s) before 31 March 2023

Three quarters (74%) of council areas are classified as 'unsecure', meaning there is risk of the closure of leisure centres and/or reduced services before 31 March 2024. (UK Active data: <https://www.ukactive.com/news/forty-per-cent-of-council-areas-at-risk-of-leisure-centre-and-swimming-pool-closures-and-restrictions-before-april-without-immediate-support/>)

61% of Welsh Primary School children want to swim more (Sport Wales School Sport Survey 2022)

Only 42% of children in Years 3-6 can swim 25m unaided in Wales (Source: Swim Wales Provider Audit, 2022)



Powys council to use cash reserves to keep pools open (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-64010393>)

80% of Community Leisure UK members are at financial risk (<https://communityleisureuk.org/news/sos-plea-to-chancellor/>)

234,000 Welsh adults want to swim more (National Survey for Wales 2021)

1. Background

In September 2022 the UK Government announced a scheme to offer support with energy bills for businesses and other non-domestic energy users (including charities and public sector organisations like schools). This followed a scheme for UK households announced earlier in the month.

After this initial 6 month scheme, the government said that it will provide ongoing focused support for vulnerable industries. There was a review 3 months after the scheme began to consider where this should be targeted.

A pared back scheme, announced in January 2023, and due to start in April, has led to concerns that widespread closures of leisure centres have been postponed, but not averted. From April 2023 a reduced level of support will be available, although some sectors – including museums, libraries and historic sites – will receive extra help.

UK Active – which represents gyms and leisure centres – said that it will cause “further service restrictions, closures, and job losses”.

2. Welsh Parliament action and Welsh Government response

2.1. “It would be a tragedy if we lost the swimming pools in which we teach our children to swim and offer accessible exercise to those who need it”.

In November 2022 the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee published a report into the impact of increasing costs on culture and sport.

During the inquiry, Andrew Howard from Welsh Sports Association told the Committee that operators of swimming pools – which have increased demand after disruption to swimming lessons during the pandemic – were reducing temperatures to save money. He added that one of his members “doubted whether there'd be swimming pools in his area in the next 12 months.”

He also described the particular vulnerability of swimming pools, which have high energy bills, and have experienced other shocks, such as increased costs for cleaning chemicals.

Once closed, the costs of reopening leisure facilities are extensive. Welsh Sports Association explained to the Committee that “restarting pumps, heaters and testing for contamination require significant investment”, and so “if increasing costs cause public and private leisure venues to close, we anticipate that it is unlikely that they will reopen”.

The Committee Chair said “It would be a tragedy if we lost the swimming pools in which we teach our children to swim and offer accessible exercise to those who need it”.

2.2. Call for additional targeted funding for bodies with “a sustainable future beyond the current crisis”

“The crisis now facing the sector”, the Arts Council told the Culture Committee “is as great as at any time over the last two years”. It called for additional investment from the Welsh Government to establish a £5-10 million fund, just for the arts, “that will help stabilise companies through the critical period”.

The Committee agreed, and recommended the Welsh Government provide “additional targeted funding to the sports and culture sectors to help venues and organisations that face closure but have a sustainable future beyond the immediate crisis.” Otherwise, it felt, the £140 million invested by the Welsh Government in keeping these sectors afloat during the pandemic would be wasted.

The Welsh Government accepted this recommendation. In its response it highlighted an additional £3.75 million for culture and sport during the 2022-23 financial year to help with “exceptional inflationary pressures to utility costs and costs of living pressures at the arm’s length bodies and also local sector organisations”. This extra funding has not led to targeted funding to help organisations survive the period of increased costs, as the Arts Council and Committee called for.

The 2023-24 draft budget includes increases in revenue funding of between 3% and 7% for culture and sport bodies funded by the Welsh Government (the National Botanic Garden is the only body to see its funding cut). These modest gains look set to be eroded by inflation, which is running at 10.5%.

The Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport said that extra funding “is not feasible”, and that the Welsh Government will “continue to press the UK Government to do all it can to try to ensure that these organisations are supported effectively”. She had previously rejected the Committee’s call to discuss a UK-wide culture and sport emergency funding package with the UK Government, saying “this is wholly a matter for UK Government”.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.