



June 2023



Exploring the Value of Swimming and Public Pools

In partnership with



What people think, feel and do

Introduction

In partnership with Opinium, a market research and insight agency, London Sport distributed a poll to adults across London and the UK from 21st to 24th February 2023 to explore public perceptions regarding the value of swimming and access to public pools. This included 2,000 UK adults and 500 London-based adults.

This research highlights the value of swimming and access to public pools for the wellbeing of individuals and communities. The poll revealed that the majority of UK adults value affordable access to local public pools. However, the potential closure and reduction of swimming pools brought on by the increased cost of living and other factors pose a significant risk to the long-term health of the population. While pools received additional Government funding in March 2023, it is insufficient to ensure the long-term future of swimming and adequate pool access.

About London Sport

London Sport is a charity that exists to help all Londoners live longer, healthier and happier lives through being active. Our focus is on children and adults in the most deprived communities who face the greatest challenges of inequality.

With physical inactivity responsible for 1 in 6 premature deaths, we want to help every Londoner find their way to move more.

Supported by Sport England and the Mayor of London, we collaborate with London's local authorities and other organisations to provide better access to sport and physical activity across the capital.

The value of swimming pools

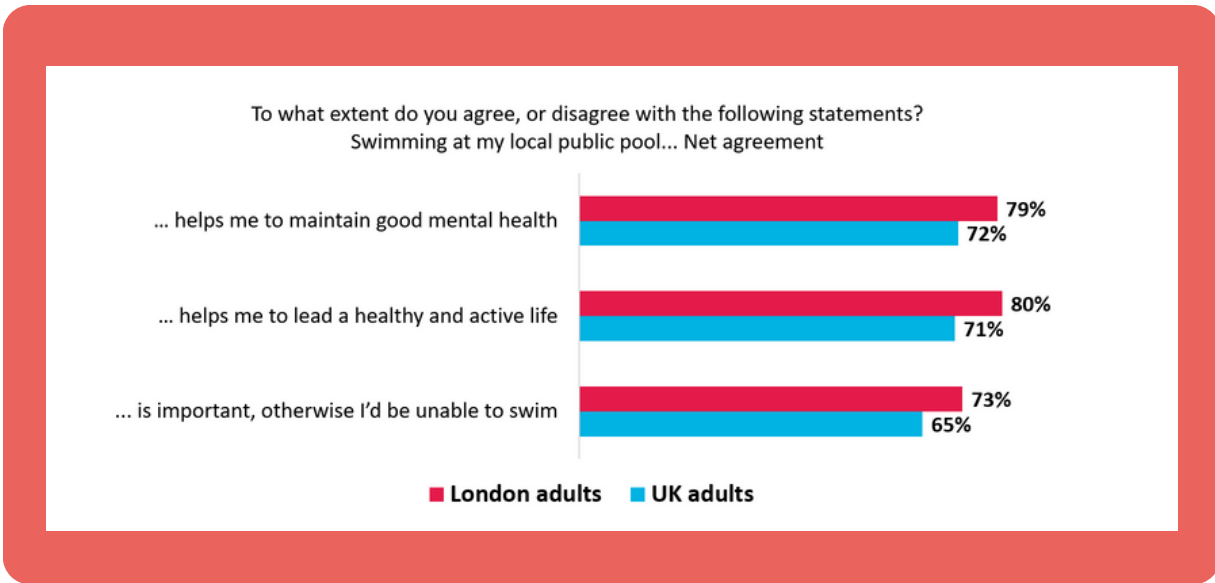
The vast majority of adults see value in having access to local and affordable public pools.



Source: London Sport X Opinium online survey conducted in February '23 amongst n = 500 London based adults and n= 2,000 UK adults more broadly (age 16+)

In England, around 3.8 million (8.2% of the population) adults swam at least twice in the last 28 days, of which around 623,000 were London adults.

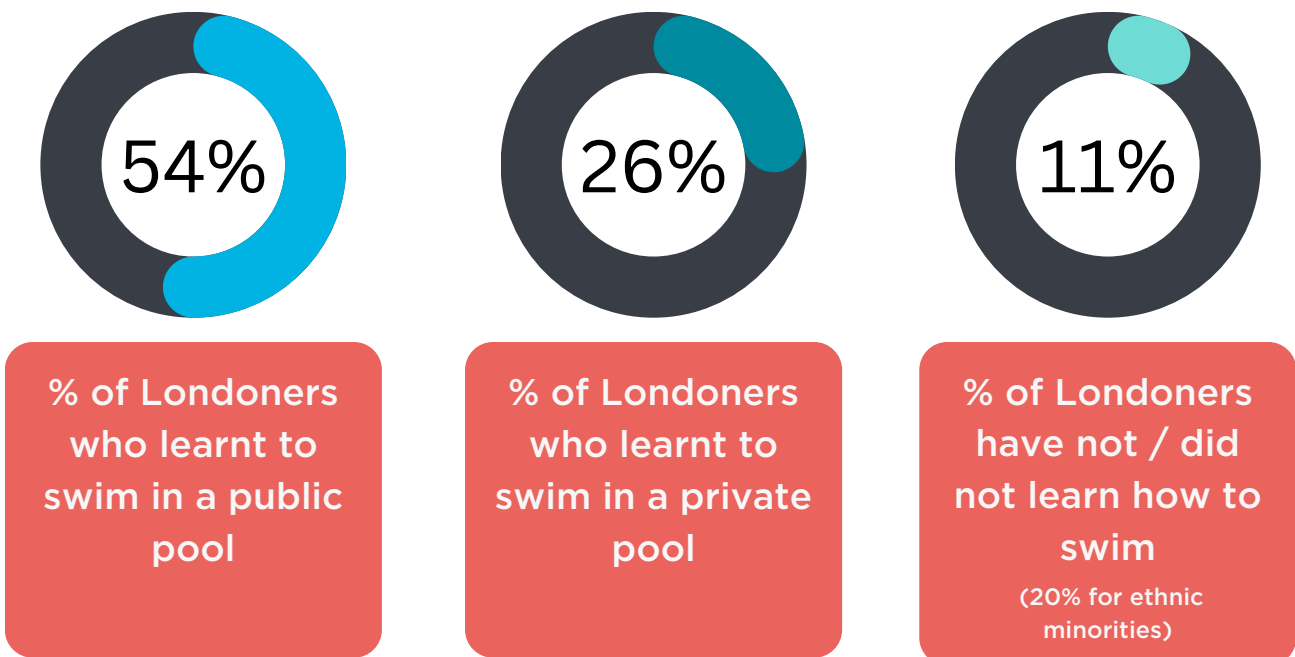
Unless further interventions are made, swimming levels are likely to decline as many leisure centres and swimming pools at risk of closing partly due to increased energy costs. In addition, London Sport's recent [cost of living report](#) demonstrated that many communities are also struggling to afford pools and sport facilities, with 13% of Londoners cancelling their memberships and 1 in 5 (22%) increasing their use of free activities.



Source: London Sport X Opinium online survey conducted in February '23: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Swimming at my local public pool... (n = 213 LDN adults; n = 591 UK adults)

Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) of Londoners who currently swim agree that swimming helps them maintain their mental health. There are similar figures agreeing that swimming helps them lead a healthy and active life.

Underlining the importance of public pools, more than half (54%) of Londoners learnt to swim in a public pool.



Source: London Sport X Opinium online survey conducted in February '23 amongst n = 500 London based adults and n = 2,000 UK adults more broadly (age 16+)



The risk of closure

According to figures shown on Sport England's Active Places Power website which lists leisure facilities for local use, London currently has 563 swimming pools.

However, Swim England has predicted a 40% fall in swimming pools by 2030. The average lifespan of many pools built from 1960s onwards is 38 years and most are now approaching the end of their time or have closed. A growing population also adds pressure on the need to have new or fully refurbished facilities to meet demands. This prediction was made in 2021 and does not account for the challenges imposed on the sector by the cost of living crisis.

To combat some of the immediate challenges faced the sector, the Chancellor announced £63.3 million of support to pools and leisure centres in the Spring Budget in March 2023. While this is welcome news for the sector, it does not go far enough to secure the long-term future of swimming and wider benefits that access to pools have on communities across the country.

We know that swimming is an excellent form of exercise - particularly for people with health and mobility conditions who are unable to take part in other forms of activity - and it is a real concern that the reduction in pools would increase health inequalities.

In addition to the physical health risks, the closure of swimming pools have wider effects including:

- fewer people learning how to swim;
- fewer opportunities for communities to be active together;
- fewer opportunities to take part in and enjoy other water-based activities;
- and fewer opportunities for individuals to improve their mental health.

Poll responses:



There are so few sporting facilities as it is, so to lose this would be a huge blow.

[Closing the pool] would be a big impact to the health of the local community.

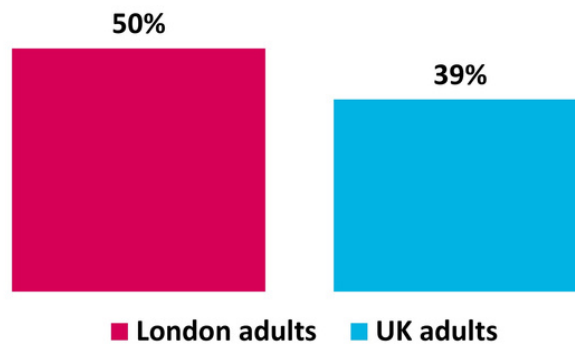
I learnt to swim at my local swimming pool, it would be a shame to see them go.



Source: London Sport X Opinium online survey conducted in February '23 amongst n = 500 London based adults and n= 2,000 UK adults more broadly (age 16+)

Our research shows that this concern is widely shared amongst the population with half of Londoners stating they would be impacted by a closure or reduction in their local swimming provisions. The polling also demonstrates that Londoners are more than 10% more likely to be impacted compared to average UK adult (50% vs 39%).

To what extent would you or your family be impacted if your local public swimming pool was to close temporarily, or be open for reduced hours? Net agreement



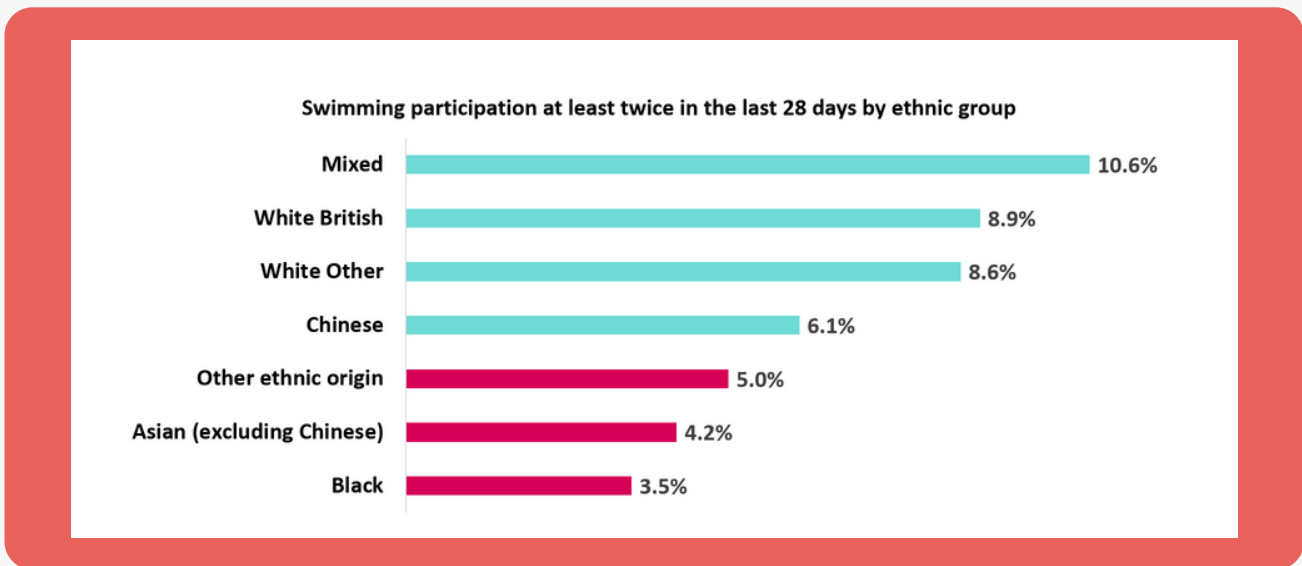
Source: London Sport X Opinium online survey conducted in February '23 amongst n = 500 London based adults and n= 2,000 UK adults more broadly (age 16+)





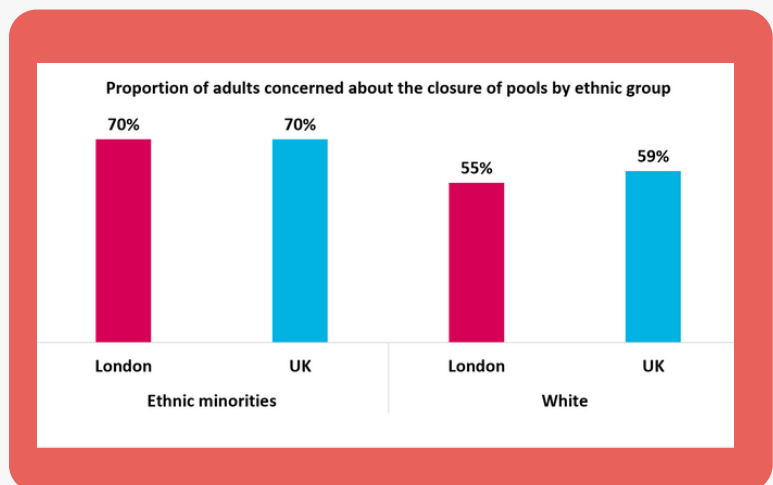
Inequitable impact

Nationally, ethnic minorities are less likely to swim, with data suggesting that 96.5% of Black adults not regularly swimming compared to 89.4% of their White counterparts. Unfortunately, this means there are disproportionately more ethnic minority individuals who do not reap the physical, mental and social benefits of swimming.



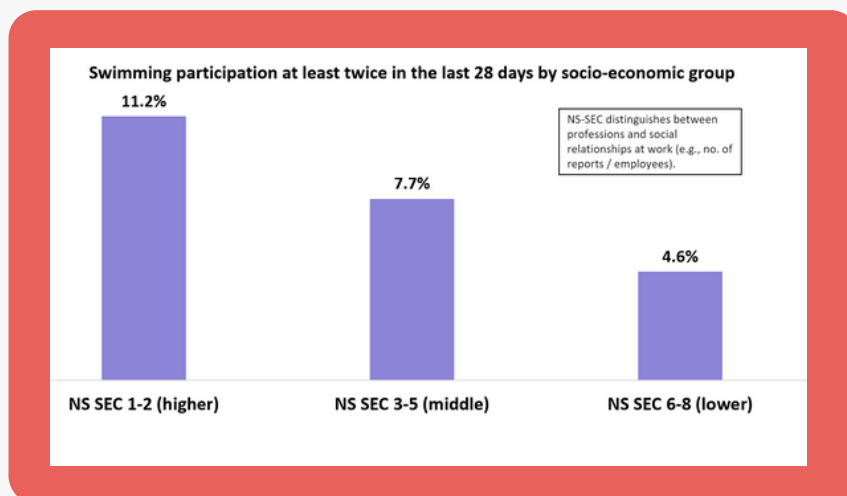
Source: Sport England Adult Active Lives survey (Nov 2021-2022 wave)

Reflecting those most likely to be impacted, 70% of ethnic minorities in London are concerned about the closure of pools due to factors including rising energy costs in comparison to 55% of White group. The picture is similar at UK level (70% vs. 59%).



Source: London Sport X Opinium online survey conducted in February '23 amongst n = 500 London based adults and n = 2,000 UK adults more broadly (age 16+)

There is a similar disparity when it comes to income, with lower socio-economic groups (semi-routine / routine occupations and unemployed) almost three times less likely (4.6%) to swim in comparison to higher socio-economic groups (11.2%) who are mostly in managerial, administrative and professional occupations.



Source: Sport England Adult Active Lives survey (Nov 2021-2022 wave)

Unsurprisingly, the cost of living crisis is likely to make swimming inaccessible for lower socio-economic groups in particular. This raises concerns about widening health inequalities and the exclusion of certain groups from the benefits of swimming.

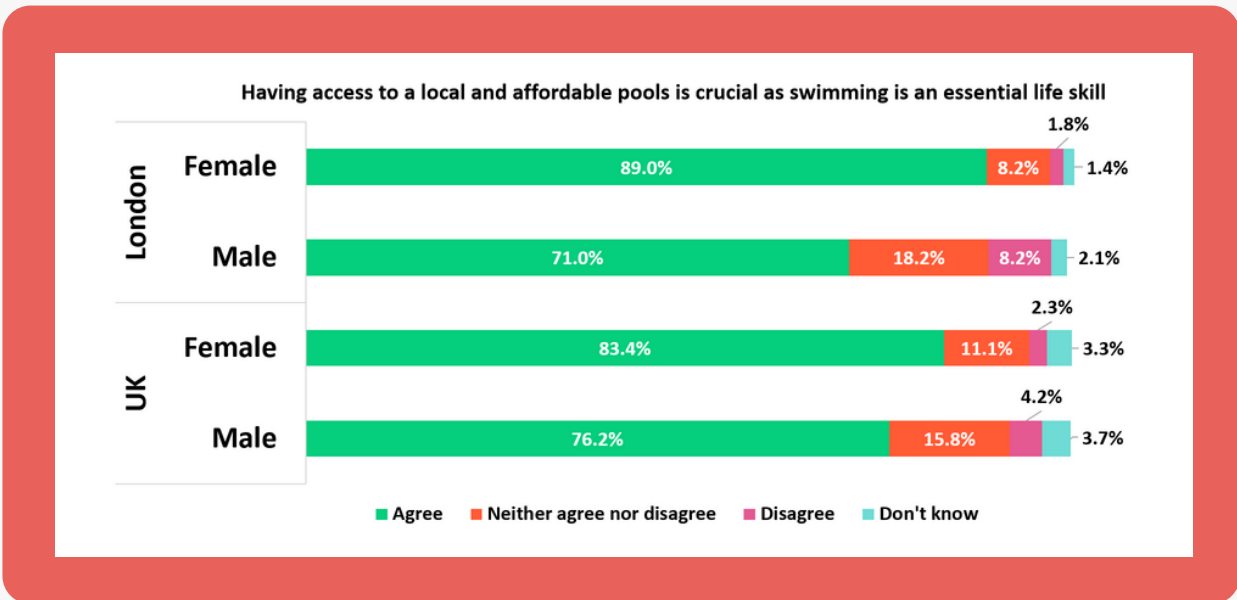
This has also been flagged by Swim England, whose new 10-year strategic priorities include the removal of barriers to participation and making swimming more inclusive, accessible and safe for everyone. Swim England are also focusing on achieving a 50% reduction in the number of children unable to swim, and increasing the number of swimming members from under-represented groups.





The importance of swimming skills

4 in 5 (79%) Londoners think swimming is an essential life skill. Additionally, more London females (89%) than males (71%) agree, yet large numbers of the population do not swim.



Source: London Sport X Opinium online survey conducted in February '23 amongst n = 500 London based adults and n= 2,000 UK adults more broadly (age 16+)

Swimming was also considered by three quarters (75%) of Londoners to be a life skill especially important for children to learn.

These figures reflect the severity of this issue and relate to current discussions around the Water Safety (Curriculum) Bill in the House of Lords. These discussions demonstrate the importance of incorporating water safety education into the school curriculum to prevent future drowning incidents and to promote safer swimming practices.

Looking forward

To ensure the long-term future of swimming and adequate access to pools, it is crucial for local authorities, sports organisations, policymakers and many others to prioritise and invest in the maintenance and development of swimming facilities.

Efforts should be made to address the disparities in swimming participation among different communities and socio-economic groups, ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities to engage in this form of physical activity.

By recognising the benefits of swimming, promoting water safety, and fostering inclusive and accessible aquatics-based activities, we can help more communities to longer, healthier and happier lives.

For more on this report and the data:

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