# UK swimming pool closures threaten a lost generation of water safety skills and widening health disparities



Young people in the UK face a growing risk of drowning as a consequence of widespread swimming pool closures over the past decade, a trend that has sparked alarm among unions, local government leaders, and health advocates. The GMB union has warned of the "terrifying" implications of losing access to swimming facilities, noting that around 500 public pools have shut since 2010, with nearly half closing in the last five years. These closures span multiple regions, including London, the West Midlands, South West, Wales, South East, Yorkshire, Scotland, and the North East, severely restricting opportunities for children to learn this vital life skill.

Kevin Brandstatter, GMB national officer, linked this crisis to the austerity measures introduced under Conservative governments, describing the shuttering of pools as leaving "brutal scars" on society. He emphasised that swimming is both a fundamental safety skill and a source of childhood enjoyment, warning that denying thousands of youngsters access to pools could have life-threatening consequences. Brandstatter called on the Labour Party’s fair funding review to restore proper funding to local authorities. This bleak outlook is supported by a coalition of local government and leisure sector bodies—including the Local Government Association, Swim England, and ukactive—which has highlighted that 30% of children in Year 7 cannot confidently swim 25 metres, marking a rise from 27% in 2017/18.

The coalition’s report also flagged an urgent maintenance issue: 60% of swimming pools are beyond their expected lifespan or require refurbishment, jeopardising their continued operation. Liz Green, chair of the Local Government Association’s culture, tourism and sport board, stressed that leisure facilities are integral to communities, supporting physical and mental health. She welcomed the government’s recent £400 million investment pledge for grassroots sports facilities but emphasised the need for sustained funding to keep pools and gyms open, maintaining these crucial social assets.

Swimming is considered a compulsory part of the primary school curriculum, with children expected to swim competently for at least 25 metres by the end of Year 6. Yet, recent data shows that one in three children cannot meet this benchmark. The disparity is acute along socio-economic lines; children from low-income families and deprived areas are significantly less likely to learn to swim, increasing their vulnerability. Parliamentarians have debated this growing inequality, noting that children from the most deprived communities face double the risk of drowning compared to their more affluent peers.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the crisis, with pool closures during lockdowns causing a decline in water confidence and swimming ability among children. The Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK) has forecast a worrying rise in drowning incidents linked directly to the loss of safe swimming environments. Latest figures illustrate a sharp increase in child drownings, with an 85% jump in England between 2019 and 2022, disproportionately affecting children from minority ethnic groups and deprived backgrounds. The risk of drowning for children of Black or Black British ethnicity is 3.5 times higher than for White children, according to National Child Mortality Database researchers at the University of Bristol.

The consequences extend beyond safety concerns. Swimming promotes physical fitness, motor skills, coordination, and psychological well-being. Its absence undermines not only children’s health but also exacerbates social inequalities, as fewer swimming lessons are accessible to disadvantaged families. The estimated loss of social value due to the closures—amounting to around £1 billion—reflects diminished community health benefits and social cohesion.

Government officials from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport have stated their commitment to building a healthier nation and easing pressure on the NHS through improved funding of grassroots sports and facilities. They are consulting with the sports and leisure sector and local authorities to optimise the £400 million fund aimed at removing barriers to physical activity, particularly for under-represented groups. However, experts and advocacy groups stress that without sustained and targeted investment, the decline of swimming facilities will continue, putting countless children at heightened risk and reversing decades of progress in water safety education.

The swimming pool closures in the UK represent a multifaceted crisis of funding, health, safety, and social equity that demands urgent and coordinated action. Without it, the legacy will be a generation less able to navigate water safely, with dire consequences for public health and childhood safety.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swimming-pool-closures-put-children-at-risk-of-drowning-TPYW5Q5PAZMYNAJIWN7KJ5PG2A/), [[4]](https://www.swimmingclass.co.uk/the-closure-of-swimming-pools-across-the-uk)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swimming-pool-closures-put-children-at-risk-of-drowning-TPYW5Q5PAZMYNAJIWN7KJ5PG2A/), [[6]](https://aquatic2012.org/britains-swimming-crisis/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swimming-pool-closures-put-children-at-risk-of-drowning-TPYW5Q5PAZMYNAJIWN7KJ5PG2A/), [[2]](https://www.ukactive.com/news/could-swimming-pool-closures-lead-to-increased-childhood-morbidity-and-mortality/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swimming-pool-closures-put-children-at-risk-of-drowning-TPYW5Q5PAZMYNAJIWN7KJ5PG2A/), [[5]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-19/debates/B9A7306A-9101-4FCB-9997-2539B7A69164/WaterSafetyEducation)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://outdoorswimmer.com/news/the-crisis-facing-our-swimming-pools-and-why-more-people-could-drown/), [[7]](https://www.rlss.org.uk/news/new-report-shows-sharp-increase-in-child-drownings-in-england-with-children-from-minority-ethnic-groups-and-families-from-deprived-areas-most-at-risk)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.ukactive.com/news/could-swimming-pool-closures-lead-to-increased-childhood-morbidity-and-mortality/), [[4]](https://www.swimmingclass.co.uk/the-closure-of-swimming-pools-across-the-uk), [[6]](https://aquatic2012.org/britains-swimming-crisis/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swimming-pool-closures-put-children-at-risk-of-drowning-TPYW5Q5PAZMYNAJIWN7KJ5PG2A/), [[5]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-19/debates/B9A7306A-9101-4FCB-9997-2539B7A69164/WaterSafetyEducation), [[2]](https://www.ukactive.com/news/could-swimming-pool-closures-lead-to-increased-childhood-morbidity-and-mortality/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/swimming-pool-closures-put-children-at-risk-of-drowning-TPYW5Q5PAZMYNAJIWN7KJ5PG2A/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ukactive.com/news/could-swimming-pool-closures-lead-to-increased-childhood-morbidity-and-mortality/> - This article discusses the potential impact of swimming pool closures on children's health, highlighting that 1.2 million children typically learn to swim each year through Swim England's programme. However, these opportunities have been significantly reduced due to recent closures. The piece emphasises the importance of swimming as a compulsory part of the primary school curriculum, noting that by the end of Year 6, children are expected to swim competently for 25 metres. Despite this, one in three children are currently unable to swim, with disparities based on affluence. The article also highlights the broader health and social benefits of swimming, including improved physical fitness and mental well-being, and calls for urgent investment to prevent further closures and ensure all children have access to swimming education.
3. <https://outdoorswimmer.com/news/the-crisis-facing-our-swimming-pools-and-why-more-people-could-drown/> - This article highlights the crisis facing swimming pools in the UK and the potential increase in drowning incidents. It notes that during the COVID-19 pandemic, many pools were closed, leading to a drop in water confidence and swimming ability among children. The Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK) foresees an increase in drownings as a result of these closures. The piece underscores the importance of swimming pools as safe environments for water activities and the need for their preservation to prevent children from missing out on essential life skills and water safety education.
4. <https://www.swimmingclass.co.uk/the-closure-of-swimming-pools-across-the-uk> - This article discusses the impact of swimming pool closures across the UK, reporting that drowning claims the lives of around 400 people annually, with a significant proportion being children. It emphasises the essential role of swimming lessons in equipping children with the skills to stay safe in and around water. The piece also highlights the physical and mental development benefits of swimming, such as improved motor skills, coordination, and self-esteem. Additionally, it points out the inequality in access to swimming education, noting that the closure of public pools disproportionately affects children from low-income families, exacerbating existing disparities.
5. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-19/debates/B9A7306A-9101-4FCB-9997-2539B7A69164/WaterSafetyEducation> - This parliamentary debate addresses the issue of water safety education in the UK. A report by Sport England estimates that only 74% of children now leave school able to swim 25 metres, a decline since before the pandemic. The debate highlights the disparity in swimming ability based on social class, with only 35% of children from low-income families able to swim 25 metres compared to 76% from more affluent backgrounds. The discussion also notes that children from the most deprived areas are twice as likely to drown, underscoring the need for increased investment in swimming education and facilities.
6. <https://aquatic2012.org/britains-swimming-crisis/> - This article discusses the decline in swimming facilities across the UK, noting a net loss of 382 swimming pools since 2010, including local authority- and community-owned pools, privately run health facilities, schools, and sports clubs. The closure of these facilities has led to an estimated £1 billion loss in associated social value through health and community benefits. The piece highlights the impact on communities, particularly children who cannot swim and are at greater risk of drowning accidents. It also points out the rising inequality in swimming proficiency, with disadvantaged children disproportionately affected, exacerbating social inequalities.
7. <https://www.rlss.org.uk/news/new-report-shows-sharp-increase-in-child-drownings-in-england-with-children-from-minority-ethnic-groups-and-families-from-deprived-areas-most-at-risk> - This report from the Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK) reveals an 85% increase in child drownings in England between 2019 and 2022, with 20 drownings occurring in 2019/20 compared to 37 in 2021/22. The data, published by the National Child Mortality Database team at the University of Bristol, indicates that the risk of drowning was 3.5 times higher for children of Black or Black British ethnicity than for White children, and twice as high for children from more deprived areas. The report calls for greater government involvement and urges families to discuss water safety with their children.