



water safety  
Scotland



Scottish  
Swimming



# Situational Analysis of School Swimming in Scotland



# Contents

Introduction	1
Background	2
Approach	3
Results	4
Conclusion	7







# Introduction

**Water safety and drowning prevention is of paramount importance given the extensive coastline and vast array of inland waterways in Scotland. On average, there are 96 water-related fatalities every year in Scotland – 50 of these are accidental<sup>1</sup>. When considering the population rate, the average accidental fatality rate is 0.93 per 100,000<sup>1</sup>. This rate is disproportionately high in comparison to other countries within the UK.**

Water Safety Scotland works to prevent water-related fatalities through the implementation of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy (SDPS)<sup>1</sup> and the Minister's Action Plan (MAP) on water safety<sup>2</sup>. Water safety education is a key aspect of SDPS which has a specific objective to

*drive a generational change to facilitate greater safety education and enjoyment in and around water.*

To help achieve this objective, a situational analysis on the state of school swimming was set as a key activity. This document reports on this activity and provides current insights into the issue.



## Background

**In 2022 and 2023, through support from the MAP, Water Safety Scotland and Education Scotland released classroom-based water safety education resources. These resources are age and stage appropriate and aligned to each level in the Curriculum for Excellence.**

In 2010, the Scottish Government funded a Swimming Top Up (STU) pilot programme to support the improved delivery of swimming lessons for primary school children across Scotland. The programme's funding was not extended, and the provision of school swimming became, and remains the responsibility and management of each local authority. As a result, provision varies across local authorities in Scotland.

There are a number of quality community based Learn to Swim programmes delivered outside the Physical Education (PE) curriculum such as the National Learn to Swim Framework, supported by Scottish Water. However, such programmes are not universally available due to factors such as accessibility and costs<sup>3</sup>. As an example, the cost of children's community swimming lessons experienced the largest real-term increase among activities between 2018 and 2023, rising by 53% over this period<sup>4</sup>. As a result of factors like cost, not all children in Scotland are able to access swimming programmes.



# School Swimming in Scotland

**Scottish Swimming through their work to steer the direction of school swimming undertook research to help understand the state of school swimming in Scotland. Working with key partners including sportscotland, the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and local leads, the project was completed in two phases.**

## PHASE 1

Phase one was delivered from March 2022 to August 2023 and focused on piloting and evaluating different delivery models<sup>5</sup> for school swimming as well as the development of a National Primary School Swimming Framework<sup>6</sup>. The framework, which was supported by sportscotland and Scottish Water, was designed to be flexible and adaptable for any local authority to utilise depending on their needs and available resources. The end of this phase involved the completion of the first national survey to help understand the current landscape of school swimming in Scotland.

## PHASE 2

Phase two of the project was delivered from August 2023 to July 2024. This phase involved the piloting of the National Primary School Swimming Framework across eight different local authorities. Additionally, this phase involved the completion of two further national surveys to help understand the current landscape of school swimming in Scotland. A mapping exercise of all primary schools and swimming pools was also completed to help understand where in the country pupils' are most at risk of not learning to swim.

## THIS REPORT

This report focuses on the results of the three national surveys and the mapping exercise.

# Results

## 1

### **SURVEY ONE National School Swimming Landscape Survey 2022**

Scottish Swimming and sportscotland issued a survey in 2022 to understand the current landscape of primary school swimming across Scotland. The survey received responses from every local authority in Scotland and provided valuable information to help inform the ongoing strategic development of school swimming. The key results included:

- 75% of local authorities provided school swimming for primary pupils\*
- Primary school swimming ranged from P4 to P7. It was most likely to occur in P4 and P5
- The number of sessions and the session length varied significantly across the country. The average number of sessions provided was 11. The average duration was 41 minutes
- Sessions were delivered by either a qualified swimming teacher or a (registered) PE teacher
- All local authorities would welcome the development of a National Primary School Swimming Framework
- Financial support, facility access and teacher training were identified as areas where support is required from local authorities.

## 2

### **SURVEY TWO National School Swimming Landscape Survey 2024**

The survey was repeated in 2024 to establish any changes to provision in the last two years. 29 out of 32 local authorities completed this survey. The key results included:

- 86% of local authorities provided school swimming for primary pupils, very similar to that of 2022\*\*
- Primary school swimming ranged from P4 to P7. It was most likely to occur in P4 and P5, similar to the results of 2022
- The number of sessions varied significantly from 4 to 16 sessions. The average number of sessions delivered was 9, down from 11 in 2022. The session length also varied
- Sessions were delivered by either a qualified swimming teacher or a (registered) PE teacher
- 79% of local authorities were aware of Water Safety Scotland's Progression Pathway and classroom education resources
- 52% of local authorities provided information/resources to schools or parents/guardians about water safety and the importance of learning to swim. 28% noted that they would consider providing information.

\* It should be noted that the interpretation of delivering school swimming within a local authority is varied. Some areas reported 'yes' to this question as they offer sessions if a school requests it, rather than physically delivering across a local authority.

\*\* Since completion of Survey Two, some of the local authorities that responded 'yes' no longer support school swimming provision.



# 3

## **SURVEY THREE** Primary School Headteacher School Swimming Survey

The final survey was the Primary School Headteacher Swimming Survey. This survey aimed to understand the current views, challenges and opportunities within school swimming, as experienced by primary school headteachers. The key results included:

- A total of 436 out of 1991 primary schools responded to the survey - a 22% return rate
- Of the 436 respondents, 98% supported school swimming as part of their pupil's curriculum education
- 52% of schools currently teach water safety in the classroom
- Only 28% of schools were aware of Water Safety Scotland's Progression Pathway.



## School Swimming Mapping

Scottish Swimming also undertook a mapping exercise of all primary schools and swimming pools across Scotland. The mapping exercise aimed to understand where pupils are most at risk of not learning to swim by considering SIMD and distance to the nearest pool. The key results included:

- On average, primary schools in Scotland are an 11-minute drive away from their nearest pool
- 83% of primary schools are less than a 15-minute drive away from their nearest pool
- 17% of primary schools are less than a 15-minute walk away from their nearest pool
- When looking at a targeted approach, 99% of schools within SIMD 1 are within a 15-minute drive
- When looking at a targeted approach, 25% of schools within SIMD 1 are within a 15-minute walk
- The local authorities where over 20% of their primary schools were more than a 15 minute drive away included:
  - Orkney islands – 52%
  - Argyll and Bute – 51%
  - Shetland Islands – 48%
  - Highland – 45%
  - Na h-Eileanan an Iar – 38%
  - Dumfries and Galloway – 32%
  - Perth and Kinross – 31%
  - Aberdeenshire – 28%
  - Scottish Borders – 27%
  - Clackmannanshire – 22%





The school swimming mapping highlighted that generally, with the exception of some local authorities, there is currently enough water space in Scotland to accommodate school swimming. However, a recent report on the future of swimming facilities in Scotland highlighted that the pool stock in Scotland is rapidly ageing and requires continued investment to maintain, refurbish and build new pools<sup>7</sup>.

It is positive to see that, when considering SIMD and distance to the nearest pool, all schools are within 15-minute proximity by either walking or driving. However, the cost of transport must be taken into consideration especially for those areas in 'water deprivation' (more than 15-minutes' drive) where cost and travel time may be increased.

A priority moving forward should be to ensure school swimming providers have access to appropriate water spaces to deliver school swimming sessions. This requires collaboration and willingness between key stakeholders to prioritise access to school swimming across the full pool estate.

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## Conclusion

Water Safety Scotland and Scottish Swimming aim to have every local authority adopt the new National Primary School Swimming Framework, delivering vital water safety messaging and skills to the pupils that need it most. Additionally, Water Safety Scotland and Scottish Swimming aim to have every local authority in Scotland adopt the Water Safety Scotland Progression Pathway and take part in classroom-based water safety education by utilising its free resources.

This short report documents the initial findings from Scottish Swimming's three survey reports and functions as a situational analysis of the current state of primary school swimming in Scotland.

Water Safety Scotland and its partners are committed to driving a generational change to facilitate greater water safety education and enjoyment in and around water. Primary school swimming is an important aspect of this and is considered an invaluable life skill.

Scottish Swimming and Water Safety Scotland believe that, where schools and local authorities have the capacity, pupils should be provided with the opportunity to learn 'in-pool' basic water competence during curriculum hours. Going forward, Scottish Swimming will monitor against the National Primary School Swimming Framework, to provide standardised data on the water competency of children at Primary school. Scottish Swimming welcomes discussions with local authorities and pool operators interested in delivering the new framework and accessing additional supporting guidance, resources and training.

## Contact Us

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