



# Swimming Pool Gap Analysis Report

December 2025

**SWIM  
IRELAND**

# Content

Acknowledgments	3
Foreword by Swim Ireland	4
Executive Summary	5
Summary of Policy Implications & Asks of Government in this report	7
Our Asks	10
Background	11
Overview of the Project Data Collection	12
Key Theme: Pool Condition & Age	13
Key Theme: Provincial & County Analysis	20
Key Theme: Swimming Lessons	38
Key Theme: Energy and Sustainability	45
Key Theme: Community Accessibility	52
Other Findings	64
Enhancing National Swimming Participation in Ireland: Overview and Future Research Priorities	65



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We would like to thank all those swimming pool operators and their staff who responded to our requests for data and who contributed their time willingly to assist us. Without their input we could have not completed this Report.

Finally, our thanks go to the team at FMG Consulting Limited who have supported and steered us throughout the project.

We look forward to utilising the data presented in this report, to build our understanding of the swimming pool infrastructure across the island of Ireland, to enable better decision-making and target investment more effectively in future years.

Swim Ireland



## Foreward by Swim Ireland CEO Sarah Keane



Whilst we are lucky in Ireland to have great open water facilities, a fundamental part of providing swimming opportunities is having sufficient swimming pools and public access to same.

As the CEO of Swim Ireland, it is my pleasure to introduce this comprehensive report which provides independent data driven evidence as to the gaps of swimming pool provision in Ireland.

The insights and recommendations contained within this report are an essential contributor to future planning and strategic decision-making.

On page 132 of the current Republic of Ireland Governments 'Programme for Government, it is provided that they will 'Implement the New National Swimming Strategy by investing in pools and swimming facilities allowing everyone an opportunity to swim' and a key part of the National Swimming Strategy will be the closing of these infrastructure gaps in the short, medium and long term in order to ensure that everyone in Ireland has the opportunity to swim, recognising swimming as a key lifelong skill with wide health and social benefits.

It also supports the goals of the National Sports Policy 2018–2027, which emphasises the importance of inclusivity and lifelong participation in sports.

As a reminder, some of the main statistics relating to swimming that make it an essential activity in Ireland -

- Swimming is consistently the number two sport for adults in Ireland, behind personal exercise, with over €350,000 adults taking part each week
- Swimming is the number one sport for people with a disability
- Swimming is the number one sport for women
- Swimming is a gender neutral sport, with participation rates 45% female and 55% male
- Swimming is the number three sport for primary age children (number one for girls) and the number two sport for post primary (number one for girls).
- Participation in the aquatics strand of primary PE appears to be in decline from 50% in 2010 to 43% in 2018 to 28% in 2022.

This report emphasises the need for immediate strategic investment in swimming infrastructure to ensure accessibility, sustainability, and support for both recreational and competitive swimming across Ireland.

It highlights the importance of maintaining and upgrading existing facilities while addressing regional disparities in pool access and availability.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to this report. Your efforts are invaluable, and your dedication to supporting our goal of making swimming accessible to everyone is truly inspiring.

Thank you for your continued support and commitment to Swim Ireland and swimming across the island of Ireland.

Sincerely,

Sarah Keane  
CEO, Swim Ireland

## Executive Summary

This Report provides an assessment of swimming pool provision in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland using data collated throughout 2024. It is structured around five main themes: Community Access, Swimming Lessons, Energy & Sustainability, and Pool Condition & Age and Provincial & County Analysis. The Report will build our understanding of the swimming pool infrastructure across the island to enable better decision-making and target investment more effectively in future years.

Some of the key themes to emerge from the data are:



### Swimming Pool Sites

- There are 404 operational swimming pool sites, with 346 in the Republic of Ireland and 58 in Northern Ireland.
- Ownership is divided among local authorities, privately-owned\*, educational organisations and other operators. For clarity, much of the data in the report is categorised as hotel and non-hotel.
- In the Republic of Ireland, 57% of pools are in hotels, in Northern Ireland, it is 31%.



### Community Swimming

- 93% of facilities offer membership options, and 58% provide Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) alternatives.
- Only 27.9% of pools are available for hire by swimming clubs, the vast majority (113) in the non-hotel sector.
- 55% of pools offer aqua aerobics, 87% have gyms, and 78% have spa facilities.



### Accessibility

- Public pools generally have better accessibility features compared to private pools.
- Only 48% of pools have hoists.
- 76% of non-hotel pools reported having a hoist, but only 28% of hotel pools reported to having one.



### Swimming Lessons

- 85% of facilities offer swimming lessons, with 67% having waiting lists.
- 78% of sites offer children's lessons, and 72% offer adult lessons.

\*Privately-owned refers specifically to a facility which is owned by a private individual, leisure operator, or other business (e.g., hotel). It does not include facilities which are owned jointly by a council and a private body, nor charity-owned facilities.

## ⚡ Energy & Sustainability

- 55% of sites use gas for heating, 21% use heat pumps, and 13% use electric boilers.
- Heat pumps are more widely adopted in Northern Ireland, especially in hotels.
- There is a need to transition to more sustainable energy sources.

## 🔧 Pool Age & Condition

- 25% of pools were built before 1990 and are nearing the end of their lifecycle but only 2.5% were built in the last 5 years.
- 58% of pools were refurbished in the last 5 years, and 80% in the last 10 years.
- The focus has shifted from new construction to refurbishment.

## 🇮🇪 Provincial & County Analysis

- Urban centres like Dublin have better pool access, while rural areas face longer travel distances.
- Leinster has the most 25m pools and relatively strong lesson availability.
- Connacht has the fewest pools, limiting access in rural areas. There is no 50m pool in Connacht and the average distance to travel to one is 100km.
- Cork, the second largest city by population has no 50m pool

***A series of appendices accompany this report. These provide further details for the reader that help with understanding the key findings.***



## Summary of Policy Implications in this Report

### Hotel Pools Mask Public Deficits

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In the Republic of Ireland 57% of all pools are in hotels. In Northern Ireland it is 31%. The over-reliance on hotel pools raises concerns about whether local authorities are living up to their responsibilities to their citizens. The data shows that across the island Ireland has 1 public pool per 81,053 people (1/52,865 NI, 1/100,950 ROI) with cities such as Galway, Limerick and Cork and counties such as Kilkenny, Meath, Clare, Kerry and Donegal all being above 1 pool per 100,000, showing a deficit in public pool provision. In stark contrast, Scotland has 1 public pool per 14,047 people. 57% of pool space comes solely from hotels and this has frequently served to mask the shortage. Only 13% of hotel pools offer pay-as-you-go options, making swimming less accessible for many, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds from whom membership fees are a barrier.

Swim England (ASA) recommends 11 m<sup>2</sup> m of public pool space per 1,000 people in urban areas for local authorities when planning swimming pools. New Zealand, another island nation with a similar population to Ireland has 26 square metres of pool space per 1,000 people. Ireland has 13.7 m<sup>2</sup> per 1,000 people total pool provision, which on the surface seems reasonable. However, only 4.8m<sup>2</sup> per 1,000 people is in public pool provision.

### Accessibility

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Accessibility to swimming pools is a fundamental aspect of creating inclusive and equitable communities. Ensuring that swimming pools are accessible to everyone, regardless of physical ability, age, socio-economic status is essentially in promoting widespread participation and enjoyment. 85% of pools reported being accessible to people with disabilities. However, only 48% reported having pool hoists to assist patrons with limited mobility to enter the water. Public pools generally have better accessibility features compared to private pools. In the hotel sector only 28% of pools have hoists.

## Community Swimming

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A strong club culture is vital for sustained participation in sport, providing organised support, community engagement, and consistent opportunities for social and competitive participation. One of the most startling statistics to emerge from the report is that only 28% of pools are available for hire by swimming clubs, the majority of these in the public sector.

## Population Access to Pools

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On average, most regions have pools located within 5-8km for most of their populations but bearing in mind that their nearest pool may be a private hotel pool and therefore inaccessible. Residents of Galway City for example all live within 5km of a pool but of the 11 pools, only 1 is a local authority pool. Rural regions such as Leitrim and Roscommon counties see much lower percentages of their populations within close proximity to pools. The average Roscommon resident must travel 11km to their nearest pool, which is the largest in Ireland. In Leitrim, the average is 9km.

Locating swimming pools close to where people live not only promotes greater community access and participation, but also reduces reliance on car travel, helping to lower carbon emissions and support climate action goals. Long travel distances, especially for school swimming lessons, make it harder for schools to include swimming in their activities due to transport costs and time away from class. The data shows that access to 50m pools, which are typically used for competitive swimming and higher-capacity training, is an even bigger challenge.

The average distance to a 50m pool in the Republic of Ireland is 51km which is more than double that of Northern Ireland (22km) which is relatively well served. The provision of 50m pools is an area of particular concern for competitive swimming in two geographical areas (Connacht and the Cork region) where provision is inadequate due to travel distances. The average travel distance to a 50m pool in Connacht is 105km with Mayo and Sligo being particularly isolated at 119km and 142km respectively. No county in Connacht is within 50km of a 50m pool.

## Pool Age & Condition

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25% of pools were built before 1990 yet only 2.5% of were built in the last 5 years. With over 100 pools nearing the end of their lifespan there is a need for investment in new construction. This is becoming even more important in the context of a circa 10 year timeline to build new pools, population growth and an aging demographic, bearing in mind that Swimming is one of the few sports that maintains participation across the full life course. The Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund is significantly oversubscribed and in the latest round of the grant, only 1 swimming pool received funding.

## Swimming Lessons

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Swimming is more than a sport. It is an essential a life skill, crucial for safety, physical health, and well-being. Swimming lessons need to happen in order for this life skill to be learned. The data shows that demand for lessons outstrips provision. 67% of pools reporting having waiting lists for lessons. The only way to address this is to increase the supply.

## Environmental Considerations

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Energy efficiency is a critical consideration for the sustainable operation of swimming pools, particularly in the context of rising energy costs and the growing importance of environmental responsibility. Swimming pools require substantial energy inputs for heating, ventilation, and circulation, making the choice of energy sources and heating methods a significant factor in both operational costs and environmental impact. The findings in the report highlight the dominance of gas, the gradual adoption of heat pumps, the limited role of solar, and differences in heating strategies across public and private sectors. Gas is the most used heating method across all regions and sectors, particularly in public pools. This dominance reflects its affordability, reliability, and widespread use. However, this heavy dependence raises sustainability concerns.

Additionally, the existence of open-air pools across the nation was noted, although they were not the primary focus of this study. These pools, generally run by voluntary community groups are often only used during the summer months. They offer a unique recreational option and frequently provide swimming lessons and other programmes.

The data shows the need to invest in the provision of new pools for several key reasons.

These are:

- The prevalence of hotel and private swimming pools, compared to the limited number of public pools, has obscured the underlying issue of inadequate public swimming facilities. This imbalance means that the true extent of the shortage in accessible swimming opportunities is often underestimated. Swim England recommends 11 m<sup>2</sup> of public pool space per 1,000 people in urban areas for local authorities when planning swimming pools. The data shows that we have only 4.8m<sup>2</sup> of pool space operated directly by our local authorities.
- The insufficient provision of public pools has a particularly significant effect on individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds and on people with disabilities. Without adequate public facilities, these target groups face heightened barriers to participation, as private and hotel pools are often inaccessible due to cost, membership requirements, or lack of appropriate facilities.
- Building a new swimming pool can take up to 10 years. A quarter of pools are over 35 years old and half are more than 25 years old, meaning many are nearing the end of their usable life. As the population ages and swimming remains a key lifelong activity, replacing these outdated pools is essential.

## Our Asks

The National Swimming Strategy 2024-2027 (NSS) recognises the need to address gaps in swimming infrastructure. The vision of the Strategy is to *“to plan, construct, preserve and upgrade swimming facilities that will sustainably and safely cater for increased access and participation”*.

With the insights garnered from this report Swim Ireland is calling on Government to take specific actions to support the delivery of this vision. These are:

- ➔ Target to increase the provision of 11m<sup>2</sup> of public pool space per thousand population over the coming 10 years.
- ➔ Actions 2.6 and 2.8 of the NSS outline the need for an innovative approach to providing additional pools. It is our view that the government (in addition to the private sector) needs to reestablish a new separate capital swimming pool programme similar to the ‘Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme’ providing dedicated grants for new swimming pool construction and refurbishment for the next 10 years.
- ➔ There is a need for strategic investment in the provision of two additional 50m pools, located in Galway and Cork to support the needs of elite swimmers and to build on the success of the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games. The format of these pools should be developed depending on local need for competitive and community use, which may not necessarily need to cohabit, and should be informed by innovative new construction techniques.
- ➔ It is our view that the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (Action 1.2 of the NSS) should provide grants to both public and private pool operators for the provision of pool hoists and other accessible infrastructure, where there is no restriction on public access. Given that the majority of pool provision is in the hotel sector and only 28% of hotel pools have pool hoists, it is essential that a mechanism is provided to improve accessibility.
- ➔ We believe that a strategy is needed to transition to more sustainable energy sources such as heat pumps and solar panels (where possible). This should be done in combination with a retrofitting scheme for pool buildings.
- ➔ Consideration should be given to exempting Local Authorities from climate targets for swimming pools until an energy transition strategy is introduced. This will ensure that pools are not closed due to fears of not meeting climate targets given their contribution to community cohesion, health and well-being.

## Background

As an island nation deeply connected to water, we recognise the importance of swimming as an essential skill that provides numerous health benefits across the full life course. Overall, swimming is the second most popular participative sport behind personal exercise and one of the three most popular sporting activities among all socio-economic groups.

Swimming pools are more than just places to swim - they are vibrant community centres that offer a wide range of activities catering to different age groups, fitness levels, and interests. Well-maintained and accessible facilities attract more participants, fostering a stronger community and promoting a healthier lifestyle. What's more, swimming forms a critical part of the €230m sports and fitness industry in Ireland which employs 9,500 people across the country.

The overarching goal of the National Swimming Strategy (NSS) 2024-2027, is to create 'an Island of Swimmers' by making swimming accessible to everyone across the nation. Feedback from the public consultation on the Strategy suggests that there are gaps in provision within the swimming ecosystem with **49% of respondents indicating that they have no access to facilities within walking or reasonable driving distance.**

This Gap Analysis Report seeks to provide insight that will drive decision making for the future of our swimming infrastructure. It is structured around five main themes:

**1 Pool Condition & Age**

**3 Swimming Lessons**

**2 Provincial & County Analysis**

**4 Energy & Sustainability**

**5 Community Access**

The Report analyses the current state of swimming facilities in Ireland, identifies key trends and explores their implications for the future of swimming in Ireland. It provides insights into the adequacy of public swimming facilities for all societal sectors, with a focus on improving access for underrepresented groups such as people with disabilities and those from lower income backgrounds. Whilst the report emphasises public provision, it also considers private pools, such as those in hotels, recognising their role in meeting demand. The report concludes with a summary on the future of swimming in Ireland and recommendations for future research.

## Overview of the Project Data Collection

The project was commissioned by Swim Ireland and funded through grant support from the Dormant Accounts Innovation Fund, administered through Sport Ireland. The project focused on two primary objectives: first, to establish an up-to-date database of the existing stock of swimming pools across the island; and second, to develop a Swimming Planning Model that utilises the information captured within the database to guide future investment decisions.

## Project Methodology

Data collection for this report involved a mixed-methods approach. Survey links were distributed directly to swimming facilities, where the surveys were primarily completed by facility managers. In addition to this self-reported data, a team of researchers conducted telephone interviews with pool operators to ensure broader participation and completeness of the data. A more detailed overview of the project methodology is available in the accompanying appendix.

Although every effort was made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information, it is important to note that the data may be subject to human error, as it was reported by facility staff. The data presented in this report reflects the best available knowledge based on the responses and follow-up efforts made during the data collection process. A more detailed overview of the project methodology is available in the accompanying appendix.

## Why Was the Project Commissioned?

The National Swimming Strategy (NSS) emphasises the importance of swimming as seen from a life-course perspective; swimming being one of the few sports that can be participated in throughout the full life-course. The Strategy prioritises six key areas of focus including: Access, Inclusion & Disability; Infrastructure & Facilities; Open Water; Education, Lessons & Coaching; and Pathways & Performance. Open Water swimming is not examined in detail in this report, as the focus of the report is on indoor pools. The NSS also seeks to focus on maintaining a sustainable network of swimming pools that provide sufficient water space to support all aquatic activities across the country. Achieving this goal requires a comprehensive understanding of the current infrastructure, making it essential to create an accurate inventory of swimming pools and their specific characteristics. This inventory will inform future planning and development priorities, ensuring that investments are aligned with the nation's aquatic needs, with a particular focus on those who have historically faced barriers to accessing swimming facilities.

## Key Theme: Pool Condition & Age

### Summary

This chapter analyses the condition of facilities focusing on construction periods, refurbishment rates, and examining regional and sectoral differences. It includes international comparisons using recently published data from Scotland and Australia. This data reveals a slowdown in new construction and the reliance on refurbishment signal the need for strategic future investment. The contrast between public and private sector roles, as well as international comparisons, provides valuable context for policy and planning decisions.

The chapter opens with key findings and ends with a summary of policy implications and main recommendations.



## Key Findings

**25%**

of all pool sites in Ireland were constructed over 34 years ago, suggesting they may be coming to the end of their economic life.

**50%**

of pools were built after 2000, indicating that half of Ireland's pools are relatively modern.

**25%**

of pools were constructed after 2006, reflecting a steady pace of development in recent years.

**79.42%**

of pools were refurbished within the last 10 years.

**58.44%**

of pools were refurbished in the last 5 years, showing a concentrated effort in recent times to upgrade facilities.

**94.65%**

Nearly all pools (94.65%) have been refurbished within the last 20 years, ensuring that the majority of Ireland's swimming pools meet modern standards.



## Pool Construction

Analysis of years of construction reveals that across the private and public sectors, around half of Ireland's swimming facilities have been built since the millennium. In the Republic, there was a period of intense construction during the early 2000s: over a quarter of facilities across the private (hotel and non-hotel) and public sectors were built during the 2000-2008 period. This was not mirrored in Northern Ireland, whose rate of construction has been steadily increasing since the 1990s, peaking in the mid-to-late 2010s.

It is interesting to note that as far as the relative rate of construction goes, there is not a significant difference between the different sectors. It appears that when e.g. when the private sector decides to double facility construction over a five-year period, so too does the public sector.

In the last ten years, 4% of the Republic's public sites and around 2% of its private sites were constructed. This is drastically lower than the equivalent ten-year period from 2004-2014, where 45% of its public sites, 43% of its private non-hotel sites, and 34% of its hotel sites were built.

It is also significantly lower than Northern Ireland, where in the last ten years 19% of public facilities and 24% of hotel facilities were built, which is comparable to the previous ten-year period.

By international comparison, 56% of Scotland's 396 public swimming pools[6] (578 total pools) are over 30 years old with an average pool age of 36 years. It is estimated by Scottish Swimming that pool lifecycles are 38-60 years. Australia paints a similar picture to Ireland where 'research has shown most of the pools built during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s are reaching or have reached the end of their operational lifespan'.[7]

Approximately 40% of public pools in Australia need to be replaced in the next 10 years particularly in regional areas where 58% of aquatic facilities are located, not dissimilar to the situation in Ireland.

[6] [The future of swimming facilities in Scotland, 2023](#)

[7] [State of Australian Aquatic Facilities 2025, Royal Life Saving Australia](#)



## Pool Refurbishment

Out of the 404 sites, 389 gave data and 250 reported that they had been refurbished. All facilities have been refurbished in the last forty years, 95% have been refurbished since 2004, 80% since 2014, and 58% since 2019.

Whilst private and public sector construction have roughly tracked one another in the past thirty years, they diverge when it comes to refurbishment. In the Republic of Ireland, in the last five years, 62% and 66% of private hotel and non-hotel sites respectively have been refurbished; over the same period, only 48.3% of public sites have been. Similarly, in the last ten years, 88% and 91% of private hotel and non-hotel sites respectively have been refurbished; for public sites: 67%.

This trend, as with construction, is not reflected in Northern Ireland. Across the last five years, 44% of private hotel pools were refurbished, whereas 60% of public pools were refurbished. Over the last ten years, it becomes 67% and 64%. Over the last twenty, 78% and 88%. This points to a slowdown in public refurbishment in the late 2010s, felt more so by the public sector than private, which has since recovered.

In Leinster and Munster, there is a concentration of newer swimming facilities, especially from the 1990s and 2000s. Private facilities, particularly those in hotels, tend to be more recently constructed, reflecting a focus on hospitality-driven amenities.

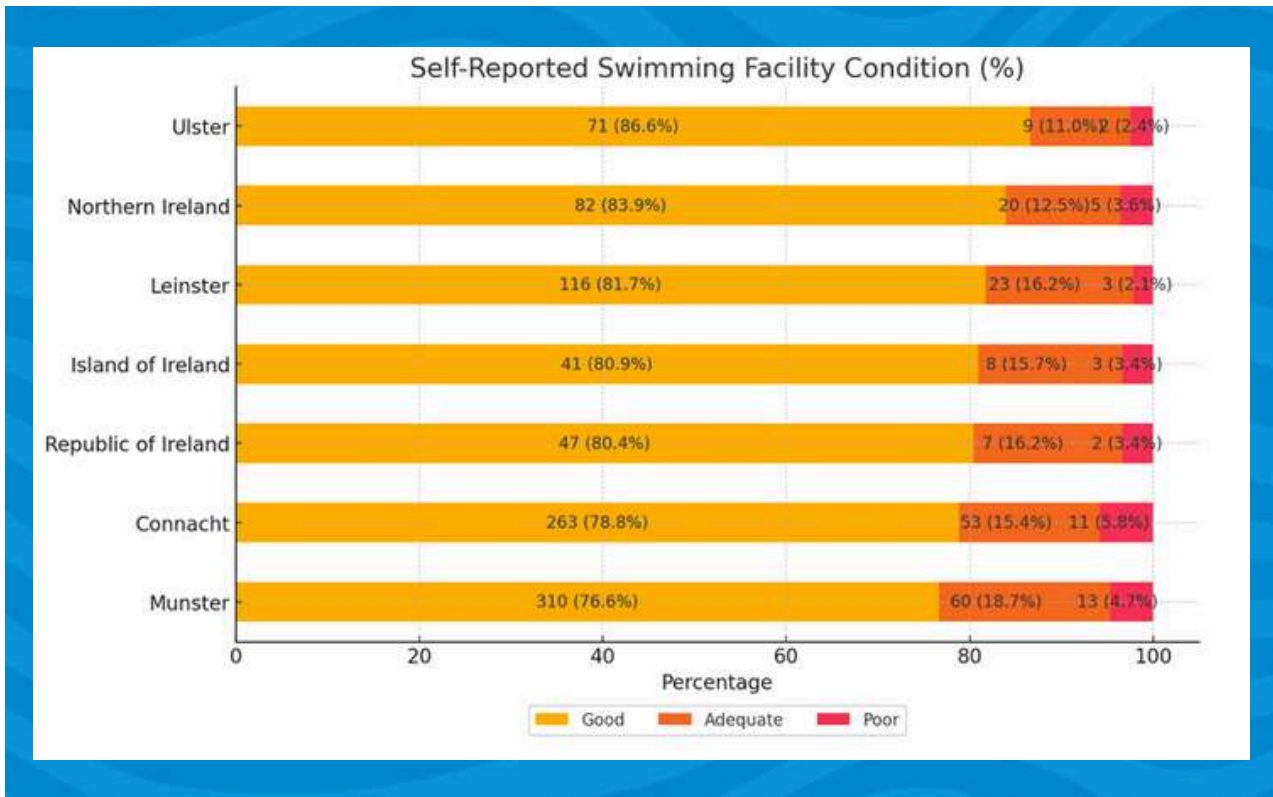
In Connacht and Ulster, a broader range of construction years suggests a mix of old and new facilities in operation. In Connacht specifically, private (non-hotel) facilities are newer compared to public facilities; in Ulster, there seems to be more recent builds in the public sector.

The Island of Ireland, representing all regions combined, shows a long-standing presence of swimming facilities with significant expansion in the 1990s and 2000s. Northern Ireland has the widest distribution, including both very early and very recent constructions; this pattern suggests an established base of older facilities that continue to operate alongside newer developments, catering to various community needs and reflecting ongoing investment.

Overall, the graphs in the appendix reflect the growing demand for swimming facilities in recent decades, beginning from the 1980s and peaking in the 1990s and 2000s, with a notable expansion in both private and public sectors across all regions.



## Pool Condition by Region



Where facilities answered the question 'How would you rate the condition of your pool facilities?'



While there is less construction data before the 1960s, Northern Ireland has seen significant refurbishment activity in the 1990s and 2010s

This likely reflects the aging infrastructure from earlier periods now reaching critical maintenance phases.

Ulster has a mix of older pools and recently refurbished ones, with 36 pools refurbished in the last 10 years. It also has the largest proportion of rated 'good' pools. This area also appears to prioritise refurbishment over new construction of pools, suggesting a focus on modernising existing structures as opposed to building new ones, according to the box plot diagram.

Leinster has a well-maintained pool infrastructure, with 78 pools refurbished in the last 10 years. It has the second largest proportion of 'good' rated pools. Leinster also displays extensive construction of pools throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; refurbishments have been ongoing, with a steady increase in activity over the last two decades.

Munster has seen significant investment in its pool facilities, with 50 pools refurbished in the last decade. However, it has the largest proportion of 'adequate' rated pools. There has been consistent refurbishment efforts in the past few decades in Munster, with substantial construction of buildings in the 1970s.

The average age of pools in Connacht reflects the need for ongoing investment, with 29 pools refurbished in the last 10 years. This province has the largest proportion of 'poor' rated pools. This area, like Ulster, looks to place refurbishment of buildings over new construction in recent years.



In summary, many of the provinces exhibit a pattern where mid-20th-century construction is followed by refurbishments 20 to 40 years later, which aligns with the natural lifecycle of buildings. The surge in refurbishment activity from the 2010s onward reflects a proactive approach to maintaining and modernising infrastructure, especially in regions with older structures like Leinster and Munster.

Overall, the data suggests that while new construction has slowed, there is a strong emphasis on maintaining and refurbishing existing buildings. This is evident in the significant number of refurbishments carried out between 2000 and 2024.

## Observations

The trends in pool construction and refurbishment reflect a mature yet actively maintained swimming pool infrastructure in Ireland. While new pool construction has slowed, the focus on refurbishment—particularly the 58% of pools refurbished in the last 5 years—looks to suggest that existing facilities meet modern standards for safety, accessibility, and energy efficiency. This approach highlights a cost-effective strategy of upgrading older pools rather than investing heavily in new construction.

With 50% of pools constructed since 2000, Ireland's pool infrastructure remains relatively modern, although the slowdown in new construction since the 2000s—only 2.3% of pools built in the last 5 years—may signal the need for future investment, especially in areas of population growth or increasing demand.

The 25% of pools that are nearing the end of their lifecycle needs to be considered in the context of the planning and construction time frames.

It should be noted that only 15% of the Republic of Ireland's pools are owned and operated by local authorities compared to 62% of Northern Ireland's. By international comparison 69% of Scotland's pools are public.

Both Scotland and Northern Ireland have high levels of public pool provision compared to the over reliance on the private sector in the Republic of Ireland which in turn impacts on the access to swimming lessons and for swimming clubs.

The high percentage of pools refurbished in recent years reflects the growing recognition of pools as essential community resources, offering both recreational and health benefits. As 80% of pools have been upgraded in the last 10 years, Ireland's swimming facilities are well-positioned to serve their communities, but continued investment in both refurbishment and new construction may well be necessary to sustain this standard in the future.

### Policy Implications - Pool Condition & Age

- The National Swimming Strategy (Action 2.2) states that it should 'advance all remaining swimming pool projects under the LASPP and projects already approved for funding under the LSSIF.'

### Ask of government

- As outlined earlier in this report, it is our view that government needs to go further and launch a new round of dedicated grants for new swimming pool provision and major renovation of existing pools for the coming 10 years. Provision should be focused on areas of most need as outlined in this report. Community access should be safeguarded for any pool being funded by government.

## Key Theme: Provincial & County Analysis

### Summary

This chapter reviews pool provision by region and county. It examines population sizes and facility types, including hotel and non-hotel pools, highlighting where there is an overreliance on hotel pools to cater for demand. The analysis considers how far people must travel to access a pool and calculates water space per 1,000 residents. Differences between urban and rural areas are highlighted. The chapter also compares local provision with international data for similar population sizes.

The chapter opens with key findings and ends with a summary of policy implications and main recommendations.



## Key Findings

Urban centres like Dublin have greater pool access, while rural areas face longer travel distances, limiting participation.

95% of Dublin City residents are within 2km of a pool. In Roscommon, the average distance is 11km.

Provinces focus on refurbishing mid-20th-century pools, with fewer new builds, reflecting an emphasis on modernisation.

50-metre pools are rare outside urban centres. There is no 50m pool in the province of Connacht, where average distance to a 50m pool is 100 km.

Counties Mayo, Sligo, Roscommon, Leitrim and Galway City are all more than 50km on average from a 50m pool. The provision of a 50m pool in the Galway region would best serve the area.

There is no 50m pool in Cork, the second largest city by population, and if constructed this would serve additional surrounding areas such as Kerry, West Waterford and South Tipperary.

Ulster has a mix of competition-ready and older pools, with the most 50-metre pools (4) but fewer 25-metre pools for community access.

Leinster leads with the most 25-metre pools (63) and strong availability of swimming lessons, making it well-suited for both recreational and competitive swimming.

Munster offers a balance of urban and rural pools, but high demand for swimming lessons highlights the need for more facilities.

Connacht has the fewest pools, especially for competitive swimming, limiting access in rural areas.



## The Provinces

To better understand the state of swimming facilities across Ireland, it is valuable to examine them from a provincial perspective. This section provides an overview of each province, highlighting key facilities and key data that is specific to each province.



Ulster, with its population split between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, includes urban centres and counties like Armagh, Belfast, Derry, Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan. The province showcases a contrast between recently refurbished, competition-ready pools and smaller, older facilities.

For example, the Bangor Aurora Aquatic and Leisure Complex features a 50-metre pool - one of only eight across the island of Ireland - alongside a leisure pool. In contrast, other facilities, such as a small hotel pool in Cavan, are less suited for competitive training.



Leinster, the most populous province in Ireland, is home to Dublin, the largest urban centre in the country. The province boasts a diverse range of swimming facilities catering to both recreational and competitive swimmers. Notable venues include the National Aquatic Centre in Dublin, which houses a 50-metre Olympic-sized pool and hosts national and international competitions, and University College Dublin's 50-metre pool.

Additionally, Leinster features numerous community-focused pools, such as the Markievicz Leisure Centre, Tallaght Sports Complex, and the Watershed in Kilkenny, all offering 25-metre pools with comprehensive programmes. In highly populated areas like Leinster, especially around Dublin (with over 1.2 million people in Dublin City and the surrounding suburbs as of 2022, and predicted to grow), there is likely a higher demand for swimming facilities.





Munster, the second most populous province, includes cities such as Cork and Limerick. The region offers a mix of urban and rural swimming facilities, with Cork serving as a significant hub for commerce and culture. Key facilities in Munster include the University of Limerick Sports Arena, which boasts a 50-metre pool and serves as a premier venue for competitive swimming and

training. Cork also features pools like the Mardyke Arena and the Gus Healy Swimming Pool, which provide a variety of programmes ranging from lessons to fitness swimming, but does not have a 50m pool.

In coastal areas with a high population density, such as parts of Munster (e.g., Cork and Kerry), swimming is not only a recreational activity but also a crucial lifesaving skill. The emphasis on swimming education in these areas might be higher due to the proximity to the ocean and the potential for water-related accidents.



Connacht, the least populous province, is predominantly rural, with Galway as its primary urban centre. Although the region's swimming infrastructure is more limited compared to other provinces, it is host to pools like the Kingfisher Club and Leisureland both offering 25-metre pools that support a range of programmes.

In less populated parts of the province, access to swimming facilities might be more limited. Residents in these areas may have to travel longer distances to reach swimming pools, which can reduce participation.

### Summary of Populations by Province (as of 2022 census):

#### Leinster:



2,858,501



152 pool sites

#### Connacht



589,338



55 pool sites

#### Munster



1,363,346



111 pool sites

#### Ulster (ROI)



306,676



28 pool sites

#### Northern Ireland



1,910,500



58 pool sites

## Pay-As-You-Go vs Membership

This section will start with a high-level provincial view of the availability of public pay-as-you-go and membership access to pool water, before looking at the differences between sectors in each region.

### Northern Ireland – and thus Ulster as a whole

As You Go' and membership pools. This suggests a focus on making swimming facilities accessible to a broader public.

Leinster offers a significant number of both 'Pay As You Go' and membership pools reflecting its large population and diverse swimming infrastructure. The significant number of pools offering both services highlights the province's commitment to flexibility for users.

The high availability of both types of services supports a wide range of users, from casual swimmers to those seeking regular access through memberships.

Munster has a balanced distribution between 'Pay As You Go' and membership pools, though some pools offer neither option. The balance it does have, however, indicates a well-rounded approach to meeting the needs of both occasional and committed swimmers.

The province's infrastructure supports both spontaneous visits and regular usage, catering well to its urban and rural population mix.

Connacht has fewer pools overall, with a closer balance between 'Pay As You Go' and membership options. This indicates a more limited but still accessible swimming infrastructure. The relatively even distribution of services suggests that despite having fewer facilities, Connacht is working to ensure that both casual and regular swimmers have access to pools.

Whilst pay-as-you-go as a method to access hotel pools is lower everywhere, hotel sites in Northern Ireland and Ulster offer it at a significantly higher rate than elsewhere on the island, almost twice as often in some cases. This could be a result of a greater ratio of public pools, meaning the disruption caused to a hotel if it made PAYG available is lesser as a lot of raw PAYG demand is already being soaked by other pools, making it a more



The non-hotel private sector has a greater availability of pay-as-you-go in all regions, but some are more comparable to the hotel private sector than others. For instance, PAYG is widely available in Connacht's non-hotel private pools, but in Munster the hotel and non-hotel private sectors look more similar.

Note that due to the sparsity of non-hotel private pools in Ulster and Connacht, there is uncertainty associated with the percentages in those regions.



The public sector is very uniform across the island. Almost all public pools have elected to offer pay-as-you-go, which benefits the financially insecure and encourages more people to take up swimming. Interestingly, there are a small number of public pools in Northern Ireland which reported they do not offer PAYG.

### *The other sector*

– which includes all non-private, non-public sites, notably educational, charitable, and trust – offers pay-as-you-go at a rate second only to the public sector.



## Pool Water Space

This section analyses the availability of pool water space across Ireland, focusing on both pool water space per thousand people and pool water space per head of population. These metrics provide important insights into how well different regions are served in terms of swimming facilities and accessibility for the general population.

### Pool Water Space per Thousand People

The metric of pool water space per thousand people is useful for understanding the distribution of swimming facilities relative to the population size. It shows how much pool space is available for every 1,000 residents in a given region. Higher values indicate better access to pool facilities for the local population.

Island of Ireland

The average pool water space per thousand people is 13.7 m<sup>2</sup>, which reflects the combined capacity of private, public, and other pools. This figure is a useful benchmark for comparing regional differences.

Republic of Ireland

With 14.9 m<sup>2</sup> of pool space per thousand people, the Republic of Ireland shows a relatively good overall availability of swimming facilities. However, 40% of this pool space comes solely from hotels, which may limit accessibility for certain populations. The figure for pools operated directly by local authorities is much lower at 3.2m<sup>2</sup>.

Northern Ireland

Pool space per thousand people in Northern Ireland is lower, at 10.7 m<sup>2</sup>. This is primarily due to the smaller number of private pools and far higher reliance on public facilities, which contribute significantly to pool space.

Connacht: This province has 18.5 m<sup>2</sup> of pool space per thousand people, the highest of any province. Despite 10.2 m<sup>2</sup> coming from the hotel sector, Connacht still has a large provision of public pool space.

Leinster: In Leinster, the pool water space per thousand people is 13.2 m<sup>2</sup>, slightly below the national average. This indicates some pressure on the existing facilities, particularly in urban areas such as Dublin, where demand is liable to be higher due to the concentration of people in this area.

Munster: Munster shows good availability, with 16.3 m<sup>2</sup> per thousand people. Regions such as Kerry County stand out, with 23.6 m<sup>2</sup> per thousand people, reflecting strong pool infrastructure in this area, albeit predominantly privately-owned hotel pools.

Ulster: Ulster's pool water space per thousand people is 11.5 m<sup>2</sup>. While public pools provide a large share of the available space, the overall availability is slightly lower than other regions, suggesting room for improvement in expanding pool facilities.

All the above data may on the surface present a picture of adequate pool space, however a major caveat applies, which is that most of the provision is in the private sector, and much of that is in tourist hotels which have limited public access. Only 3.2 m<sup>2</sup> pool water space per thousand people is available in local authority owned and operated facilities in the Republic of Ireland and 9 m<sup>2</sup> in Northern Ireland, well below the benchmark of 11m<sup>2</sup> per thousand people recommended for public pools in urban areas.

## International Comparison

Swim England (ASA) recommends 11m<sup>2</sup> of pool space per 1,000 people in urban areas for local authorities when planning swimming pools[8]. Whilst Ireland may seem relatively well served by the above metrics, it must be noted that almost half of pools are in hotels (many of which are tourist hotels) which have limited public access, and the Swim England guidance relates to public pools. New Zealand[9], another island nation with a similar population has 26 square metres of pool space per 1,000 people (to meet a demand of 27 square metres) which is in stark contrast to the Island of Ireland which has 13.7 m<sup>2</sup> per 1,000 people total pool provision and only 4.8m<sup>2</sup> per 1,000 people in public pool provision.

Scotland has 14.8m<sup>2</sup> of public water space per 1,000 head of population, more than four times that of the Republic of Ireland (3.2m<sup>2</sup>) and 64% more than Northern Ireland (9m<sup>2</sup>).

Another metric of measuring public access to pools is the number of people per public pool. In Australia, the Adelaide metropolitan area (pop. 1,367,000), a population similar in size to Dublin (pop. 1,458,154) there are 80,412 people per public pool[10], whereas in Dublin there is one public pool per 104,153 people. The new pools in Balbriggan and Lucan will go some way to addressing this gap in provision. Other cities in Australia have much better provision with Melbourne and Sydney both having approximately 1 public pool per 50,000 people. The Island of Ireland has 1 public pool per 81,053 people (1/52,865 NI, 1/100,950 ROI) with cities such as Galway, Limerick and Cork and counties such as Kilkenny, Meath, Clare, Kerry and Donegal all being above 1 pool per 100,000, showing a deficit in public pool provision. Some counties such as Carlow and Waterford have no local authority operated swimming pool at all. In stark contrast, Scotland has 1 public pool per 14,047 people. The provision of a 50m pool in Cork and Galway would go some way to alleviating the shortage of competitive swimming space and club access in these regions.

[8] [Sport England, Design Guidance Note for Swimming Pools, 2013](#)

[9] [New Zealand National Aquatic Facilities Strategy, 2023](#)

[10] [State of Australian Aquatic Facilities 2025, Royal Life Saving Australia](#)



## Implications of Pool Water Space Distribution

The analysis of both pool water space per thousand people shows significant regional disparities. Areas like Connacht and Munster are well-served, but the reliance on private pools, particularly in the Republic of Ireland, creates barriers to accessibility for certain groups. Galway City has appears well served by pool space, even when excluding large competitive facilities, however, much of the pool provision in Galway is aimed predominantly at the tourist market or for membership only hotels, with limited public access.

Leinster has a lower pool space per head, suggesting a need for further public investment in swimming infrastructure. Expanding public pool facilities in this region could help reduce the burden on private pools and make swimming more accessible to lower-income groups and those in urban centres.

**Overall, increasing public pool space and ensuring balanced distribution of swimming facilities will be key to addressing gaps in accessibility and meeting the growing demand for pool space across Ireland.**

## Population Access to Pool Sites

The data in the accompanying appendix provides a comprehensive analysis of the population's proximity to swimming pools across different regions in Ireland. This section offers key insights into provincial differences in access to pools, including those with no waiting lists for swimming lessons and 50m pools.

Across Ireland, the majority of the population enjoys relatively good access to swimming pools. On average, most regions have pools located within 5–8 km for the majority of their populations. However, there are significant differences between urban and rural areas:

- **Urban Areas:** Regions like Dublin City and Galway City stand out for their pool accessibility. In Dublin City, 95% of the population is within 2 km of a pool, and nearly 100% are within 5 km. Similarly, Galway City sees 100% of its population within a 5 km radius of a pool. However, much of the provision in Galway is in hotels with limited access for swimming clubs and for pay as you go options which improve accessibility.
- **Rural Areas:** Conversely, rural regions such as Leitrim County and Roscommon County see much lower percentages of their populations within close proximity to pools. In Leitrim, only 2% of the population is within 0.5 km of a pool, with an average distance of 9 km to the nearest pool. The average Roscommon citizen has to travel 11km to their nearest pool, which is the largest in Ireland.
- **Connacht and Munster:** These provinces experience larger distances, with the average person living 7–8 km away from a pool. However, within 20 km, 90% of the population is covered in Connacht, indicating that while pools may be spread out, they are still within reasonable travel distances for the majority.

While many populations have reasonable access to nearby pools, availability of swimming lessons without waiting lists remains a challenge, particularly in rural areas, where fewer options exist. The availability of pools with no waiting lists for swimming lessons varies significantly between regions:

- Dublin and Galway City once again show superior access, with 92% and 100% of their populations, respectively, able to access pools without waiting lists within 5 km or less. This reflects the higher availability of facilities and possibly better resource management in urban areas. The limited public transport options in Galway, do however limit access to pools which might be within 5km, but which are difficult to access without a car.
- Rural regions face greater challenges, with some areas showing very limited access. For instance, in Roscommon County, only 2% of the population is within 2 km of a pool with no waiting list, and the average distance to such a pool is 25 km. Sligo County faces similar challenges, with only 2% of its population within 2 km.
- While 82% of the population in Northern Ireland is within 10km of a pool, only 9% can access one without a waiting list for lessons.



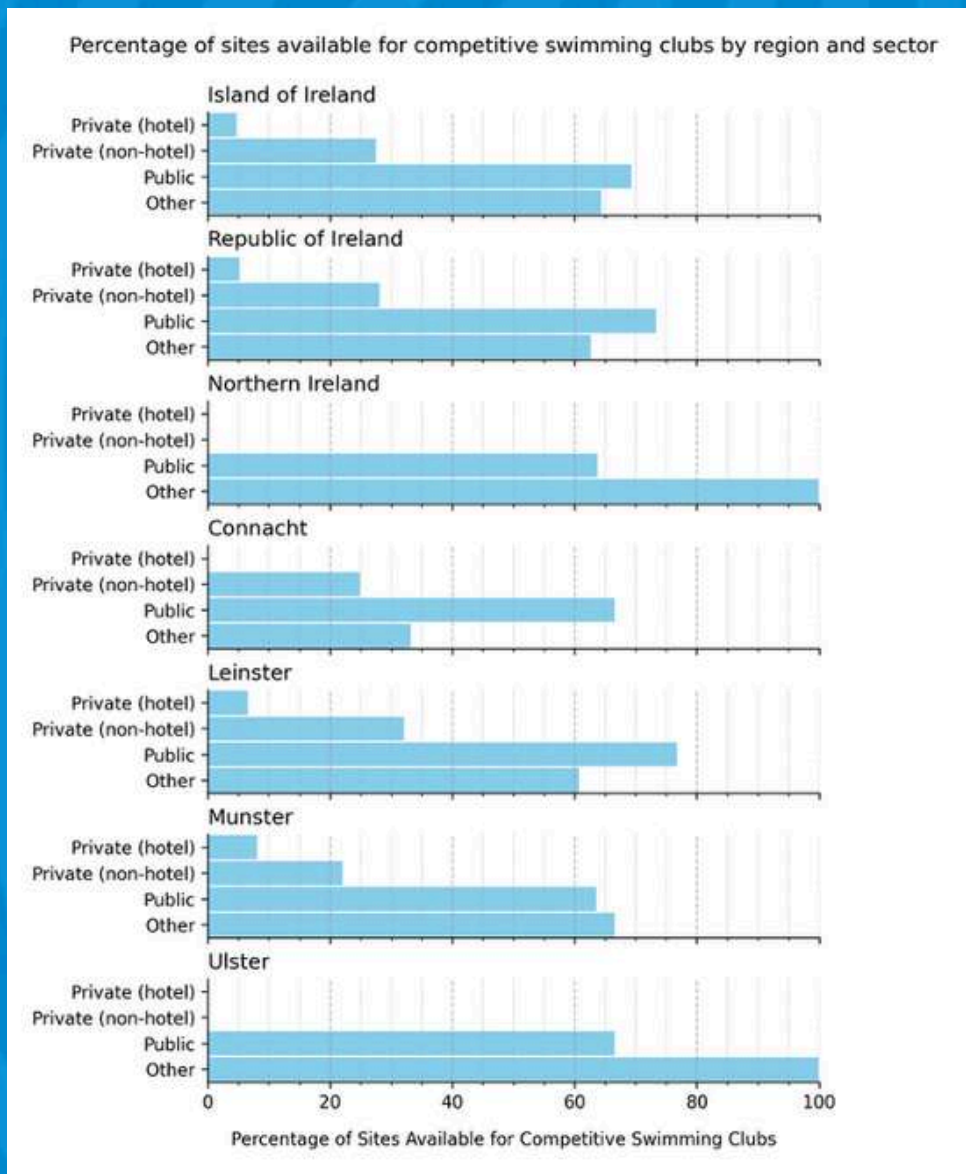
50m pools, which are typically used for competitive swimming and higher-capacity training, are much scarcer throughout Ireland. The majority of the population, especially in rural regions, faces long distances to access these pools:

- Dublin City: Unsurprisingly, Dublin City leads in accessibility, with 100% of the population within 10 km of a 50m pool, highlighting the capital's well-developed infrastructure for swimming. Dublin's residents benefit from excellent access to competitive swimming facilities.
- Connacht and Munster: These regions face significant limitations in access to 50m pools. In Connacht, the average distance to a 50m pool is over 100 km, with many residents in counties like Mayo and Sligo having no 50m pool within a 50 km radius. This lack of access to competitive swimming facilities presents a major gap in swimming infrastructure.
- Northern Ireland fares much better, with an average distance of 22 km and 95% of the population within 50 km of a 50m pool. This highlights a more balanced distribution of such facilities in Northern Ireland compared to the Republic of Ireland.

The population's access to swimming pools across Ireland is generally positive, with most regions providing reasonable access to nearby facilities.

However, urban areas benefit from much greater access, particularly in terms of pools without waiting lists and 50m pools. Rural areas, especially in Connacht and Munster, face greater challenges in accessing these resources, indicating a need for strategic investment to ensure more equitable distribution of swimming infrastructure across the country.





The above graph highlights the percentage of sites available for competitive swimming clubs across various sectors (private hotels, private non-hotels, public, and others) on the island of Ireland, including the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and individual provinces. Public and 'Other' sites (charity-run pools and educational facilities) are consistently the primary providers of facilities for competitive swimming clubs, reflecting their focus on community access and sport development. In contrast, private venues—especially hotels—show very limited availability, as their facilities are likely geared towards recreational rather than competitive swimming.

Regional disparities are evident, with Connacht and Ulster having no competitive provision by hotel pools, instead relying on other types, notably public pools. Northern Ireland also demonstrates a strong reliance on public infrastructure, though "other" sites are slightly more available than in the Republic of Ireland. These patterns suggest the importance of maintaining and upgrading public swimming facilities to support competitive swimming.

## 25m vs 50m Pools

Province	25m Pools	50m Pools
Connacht	13	0
Leinster	63	3
Munster	30	1
Ulster	40	4

Table 9 – Number of 25m and 50m pools by region

With the highest number of 25-metre (63) and substantial 50-metre pools (3), Leinster is well-equipped to support competitive swimming. The extensive infrastructure provides ample training and competition opportunities, making it a key hub for the sport.

Leading in 50-metre pools (4), Ulster offers excellent facilities for elite training and major competitions, benefiting from a focus on high-standard aquatic environments. However, its fewer number of 25-metre pools may limit some community access although it still has the second highest (40) of the provinces.

While Munster has fewer 25-metre pools (30) compared to Leinster, the one 50-metre pool in Limerick does support some competitive swimming. The province maintains a balanced approach but lags behind Leinster and Ulster in facility volume.

With no 50-metre pools and the fewest 25-metre pools (13), Connacht faces limitations in competitive swimming infrastructure. This could impact swimmer development and competitive opportunities in the region.



The average distance to a 50m pool in the Republic of Ireland is 51km which is more than double that of Northern Ireland (22km) which is relatively well served. The provision of 50m pools is an area of particular concern for competitive swimming in two geographical areas (Connacht and the Cork region) where provision is inadequate due to travel distances.

The average travel distance to a 50m pool in Connacht is 105km with Mayo and Sligo being particularly isolated at 119km and 142km respectively. Access to swimming pools for competitive swimming clubs is only 9% in Galway and 11% in Sligo and no county in Connacht is within 50km of a 50m pool.

Given the largest population centre in the region is in Galway, and the county itself having an average distance of 80km to a 50m pool, it is perhaps the best location for a new pool to be situated for the Connacht region.

The large geographical area and populations in Munster of Cork, Kerry and Waterford provide particular challenges for access to a 50m pool. The average distance to a 50m pool in Cork is 89km, 94km in Kerry and 100km in Waterford. Cork City, Kerry and Waterford have no 50m pools within 50km of the population. Swimming pool access for competitive swimming clubs is only 9% in Kerry and 17% in Cork City. Given the total population of the three counties is 867,977, their large geographical areas and their lack of access to a 50m pool for competitive swimming, the Cork region is best situated for a 50m pool given its central location within the region (Cork county, Kerry County, West Waterford, South Tipperary).

	Average distance [km]	Within 10km	Within 25km	Within 50km	Within 100km
<b>Island of Ireland</b>	43	25%	45%	63%	91%
<b>Republic of Ireland</b>	51	27%	37%	52%	87%
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	22	19%	68%	95%	100%
<b>Connacht</b>	105	0%	0%	1%	47%
<b>Galway</b>	80	0%	0%	3%	90%
<b>Galway County</b>	82	0%	0%	4%	86%
<b>Galway City</b>	76	0%	0%	0%	100%
<b>Leitrim County</b>	107	0%	0%	0%	28%
<b>Mayo County</b>	142	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Roscommon County</b>	113	0%	0%	0%	25%
<b>Sligo County</b>	119	0%	0%	0%	2%
<b>Munster</b>	70	9%	15%	29%	84%
<b>Clare County</b>	35	9%	32%	78%	100%
<b>Cork</b>	89	0%	0%	3%	83%
<b>Cork County</b>	89	0%	0%	5%	73%
<b>Cork City</b>	87	0%	0%	0%	100%
<b>Kerry County</b>	94	0%	0%	0%	75%
<b>Limerick City and County</b>	17	54%	72%	95%	100%
<b>Tipperary County</b>	49	1%	7%	49%	100%
<b>Waterford City and County</b>	100	0%	0%	0%	39%

Table 10 – Excerpt from 50m pool database focusing on Connacht and Munster (see Appendix G.3 for full data)



## County level Analysis

Following on from the regional analysis, this section focuses on a county level analysis to highlight the areas of need which inform the policy implications highlighted throughout the document.

As can be seen in the the data reveals a clear need for:

*New and refurbished swimming pools in certain regions/counties where travel distances are too large*

*The funding of pool hoists and accessible equipment to fill gaps in provision*

*A strategy for transitioning to more sustainable energy sources such as heat pumps and solar panels*

*Improved access for clubs*

*50m pool provision in two regions (Connacht and Cork),*

*Increased access to swimming lessons*

## Pool provision and access to public pools

Out of the 404 swimming pools on the Island of Ireland, only 22% are public pools. There is however a stark contrast between Northern Ireland (62%) and the Republic where only 15% of pools are Local Authority owned and operated. By way of comparison, Scotland has 396 public pools (69%) out of its total of 578 total pools, showing the Republic of Ireland's over reliance on the private sector for the provision of swimming in Ireland.

There is a strong correlation between areas with low public pool provision and long distances to travel for swimming lessons with no waiting list and even longer distances to 50m pools for the provision of competitive swimming. This is particularly the case for swimming lessons with no waiting lists in Connacht for counties Roscommon (25km), Leitrim (27km) and Sligo (26km) and Carlow (22%), Offaly (26km) and Wicklow (25km) in Leinster and Tipperary (37km) in Munster. Additional pool provision/access should be focused on these areas through new (and where appropriate temporary) pool provision, and/or through improved access to pools for lesson providers.

Access for swimming clubs to pool time is an issue across the Island with only 28% of pools being accessible to clubs. It is particularly low in the ROI (26%), in private sector hotels (5%) and in counties such as Galway (9%), Sligo (11%), Louth (10%), Kerry (9%), Tipperary (15%) and Donegal (11%). As detailed earlier in this report, the Connacht and Cork regions are most in need of a 50m pool, with Galway and Cork being the most suitable locations given their large population centres and proximity to surrounding counties without access.

## Pool provision, construction, pool hoist provision and energy type

In terms of construction and refurbishment, across the provinces the focus is on updating existing infrastructure, with many pool sites built in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century having recently undergone refurbishments.

Little new pool construction has happened in the past 10 years (particularly in the public sector) and refurbishment has been the focus of existing facilities the majority of which have been refurbished in this timeframe. As outlined previously in this report the majority of stock is aged in the 30-40 year range which is the average lifecycle of a pool. The focus should remain on refurbishment of existing stock, with a renewed focus from government on providing for additional pools in areas of need.

In addition, specific focus should be given to the improvement of energy saving measures and accessibility provision in the counties and pools which are most lacking. Pool hoist provision is less than 50% in many counties including Roscommon (20%), Louth (20%), Clare (20%) and Galway City (27%) all being below very low. The private sector overall (32%) is particularly low and a grant scheme by government should be launched to address accessibility for both the public and private sectors. The low uptake of sustainability improvement measures across the Island (and in particular in the ROI) such as heat pumps and solar panels merits a strategic approach to transitioning away from gas which will contribute to the pool sustainability and Ireland's climate goals. As noted earlier in this report, consideration should be given to exempt local authorities from having to include swimming pools in their climate targets until such a grant scheme is in place, to avoid the unintended consequences of pool closures.



A clear theme across the provinces and counties is the disparity in pool access between urban and rural areas. These disparities highlight the need for targeted infrastructure development in rural regions.

To improve competitive swimming across Ireland, targeted investments in facility development, especially in regions with fewer resources, could ensure more balanced opportunities and support for swimmers nationwide. In Scotland, there are two Olympic-sized pools and five additional 50m pools across the country. The Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Scotland are similar in population size (circa 5.5m), making this a useful comparison. The ROI has three 50m pools in Dublin and one in Limerick, with Connacht and Cork the areas most in need for an additional 50m pool. Northern Ireland has four 50m pools for a population of 1.9m people (one pool for just under half a million people) which is more like the provision that the ROI should be striving for as it currently has one pool for over 1.25m people.

The analysis of swimming facilities across Ireland's provinces reveals significant differences in infrastructure and accessibility. Ulster stands out with a mix of recently refurbished, competition-ready pools and smaller, older facilities. The province is notable for its strong provision of both 'Pay As You Go' and membership pools, making swimming accessible to a broad population. Ulster also leads in 50-metre pools, supporting competitive swimming, although it has fewer 25-metre pools, which may limit community access.



Leinster, as the most populous province, offers a diverse and extensive range of swimming facilities, particularly around Dublin. Munster strikes a balance between urban and rural facilities, with a significant stock of swimming infrastructure. High demand for swimming lessons in Munster, with many pools reporting waiting lists, indicates a need for further investment. Connacht, the least populous province, has the fewest swimming facilities, particularly in terms of 25-metre and 50-metre pools, which limits its ability to support competitive swimming. Despite these challenges, Connacht's facilities are vital to local communities, and there is a need for continued investment to improve access.

In terms of pool water space, the analysis highlights significant regional disparities in terms of both pool water space per thousand people and pool water space per head of population.

Across the provinces, the focus remains on updating existing infrastructure, with many pool sites built in the mid-20th century having recently undergone refurbishments. While this focus on refurbishment is important, there remains a pressing need to increase the total pool capacity in some regions to meet growing demand, particularly for competitive swimming.

A clear theme across the provinces is the disparity in pool access between urban and rural areas. Urban centres, particularly in Dublin and Munster, face high demand for swimming lessons and public pool access, while rural areas, especially in Connacht, suffer from a lack of competitive facilities. These disparities highlight the need for targeted infrastructure development in rural regions, ensuring that every province has the capacity to meet both recreational and competitive swimming needs.

## Policy Implications

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- The National Swimming Strategy (Actions 2.1-2.9) outline the need for a gap analysis and funding of previously approved and new swimming pool developments in areas of need, in addition to accessibility improvements and energy efficiencies.

## Ask of government

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- New swimming pool provision in the regions/counties where travel distances to pools is prohibitive. This will require a new government pool grant scheme and swimming pool planning templates as outlined earlier in the report.
- The provision of 50m pools is most needed in the Connacht (Galway) and south Munster regions (Cork) to provide adequately for competitive swimming and improving access for clubs.
- A dedicated grants scheme to improve accessibility targeting the counties with the lowest uptake of provision of pool hoists.
- A strategic approach to energy transition for the provision of heat pumps and solar panels in all regions and counties given uptake is so low.
- Target to increase the provision of public pool space on the Island of Ireland to 11m<sup>2</sup> per thousand population over the coming 10 years.



## Key Theme: Swimming Lessons

### Summary

Swimming lessons are a cornerstone for swimming participation in Ireland, not only providing an essential life skill but also fostering a lifelong connection with water. Swimming is not just a sport but a vital life skill, crucial for safety, physical health and wellbeing. This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of current lesson programmes, the distribution of sites offering instruction, and the prevalence of waiting lists.

The chapter opens with key findings and ends with a summary of policy implications and main recommendations.



## Key Findings

**328** (85%) sites offer swimming lessons across the Island of Ireland

**75%** 42 sites (75%) offer swimming lessons in Northern Ireland

**285** (86%) offer swimming lessons in the Republic of Ireland

**201** (67%) of all pools providing swimming lessons reported having a waiting list

**191 (73%)**  
in the Republic of Ireland

**10 (27%)**  
in Northern Ireland

Across the Island of Ireland, 85% of facilities offer swimming lessons, with 67% of these facilities having a waiting list. In particular, the Republic of Ireland has a slightly higher lesson provision at 86%, and a higher percentage of facilities with waiting lists at 73%. In Northern Ireland, lesson provision drops to 75%, and only 27% of facilities have waiting lists.

*Further details on sample sizes, percentages, and regional statistics can be found in accompanying appendix.*



## Current Offerings

### 328 said they offer swimming lessons in general

The survey results indicate that the vast majority of swimming pools across Ireland offer a range of swimming lessons catering to different age groups and skill levels. These programmes typically include

### Children's Lessons

Out of the 249 sites for which we have data, 194 sites (78%) offer children's swimming lessons. This high percentage reflects a strong emphasis on providing swimming lessons for younger populations. Notably:

- Of those sites which offer children's lessons, 90% (175) also offer adult lessons, showing that sites catering to children often provide adult lessons as well, suggesting a multi-generational approach.
- 86% of sites which offer children's lessons (167) run them internally, highlighting a preference for in-house lesson provision. Only 26% (51) run lessons through an external provider, while 12% (24) offer both internal and external options.

### Adult Lessons

Similarly, 179 sites (72% of the 249 sites) offer adult swimming lessons. Of these:

- 97% of these sites (173) also offer children's lessons, indicating a strong overlap between adult and children's lesson provision.
- Like children's lessons, 86% of sites (154) offer adult lessons internally, with 25% (44) of sites running them externally, and 11% (19) offering both internal and external options.

### Internal vs. External Lesson Provision

A key theme emerging from the data is the preference for internal lesson provision across both adult and children's lessons. For the 199 sites that offer lessons for either group:

- 69% (171 sites) run lessons internally, highlighting a strong trend toward in-house lesson provision.
- 21% (51 sites) run lessons externally.
- 10% (25 sites) run lessons both internally and externally.

## Lesson Availability in Hotel vs Non-Hotel Facilities

- Public facilities show strong performance in lesson provision across all regions, with 100% of public facilities in Connacht, Leinster, Ulster, and Northern Ireland offering swimming lessons.
- Private (non-hotel) facilities in the Republic of Ireland also report high lesson availability at 88%, though waiting lists are more prevalent in private hotel facilities (77%).
- In contrast, other types of facilities, including pools in educational institutions, show strong lesson provision (over 96% across the Island of Ireland), with waiting lists commonly found in 78% of these facilities in the Republic of Ireland.



## Swimming Lessons by Region

A more indepth breakdown of data on swimming lessons is in the accompanying appendix

Ulster has 65 pools offering swimming lessons, reflecting a strong commitment to providing aquatic education across the province. The provision is particularly noteworthy given the province's split population between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.



Ulster has the fewest pools with waiting lists, 24, compared to other provinces.

**This may indicate that current facilities are better able to meet the demand, though there could still be areas where access is limited.**



Leinster leads with 127 pools offering swimming lessons, reflecting the province's strong infrastructure and high demand for aquatic programmes. The extensive availability of lessons supports a wide range of users, from beginners to competitive swimmers. Despite the high number of pools offering lessons, Leinster also has the most pools with waiting lists, 75, indicating that demand still outstrips supply.

**This suggests a need for further investment in swimming facilities to meet the growing demand.**



Munster has 88 pools offering swimming lessons, making it the second-highest province in terms of availability. The province's balance of urban and rural facilities ensures that lessons are accessible to a broad population. With 73 pools reporting waiting lists, Munster faces similar challenges to Leinster.

**The high demand for swimming lessons suggests that additional resources and facilities could help alleviate pressure and reduce waiting times.**



Connacht, with 47 pools offering swimming lessons, has the fewest facilities dedicated to this service. This is reflective of the province's smaller population and more rural nature, where access to facilities may be more limited. Despite having fewer pools, Connacht has 32 pools with waiting lists, showing that demand exceeds supply even in less densely populated areas.

**This highlights the importance of further developing swimming infrastructure to meet the needs of local communities.**

## Observations: Expanding Swimming Lessons Across Ireland

Despite the strong presence of swimming lessons in Ireland, where an estimated 500,000 children are enrolled in lessons each year, there is opportunity to further expand the availability of these vital programmes to ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to learn to swim. Current demand often exceeds the capacity of existing facilities, as evidenced by waiting lists and limited access in certain regions, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. This gap highlights the need for a more strategic approach to the provision of swimming lessons, ensuring that they are accessible, affordable, and available to a wider demographic.

The data shows that a majority of sites focus on offering lessons internally, with a strong overlap between adult and children's swimming lesson provision. This suggests that sites are well-equipped to cater to the needs of diverse populations, fostering swimming participation across multiple age groups. However, with 21% of sites relying on external lesson provision and 10% offering both internal and external options, there is a level of flexibility in how lessons are delivered, providing more opportunities for tailored approaches depending on local demand. Additionally, diversifying the types of lessons offered—including more beginner, adult, and inclusive sessions for individuals with disabilities—will help meet the varied needs of the population.

Swim Ireland's goal to create over 100,000 new participation opportunities includes making swimming lessons more accessible and affordable for a broader segment of the population.

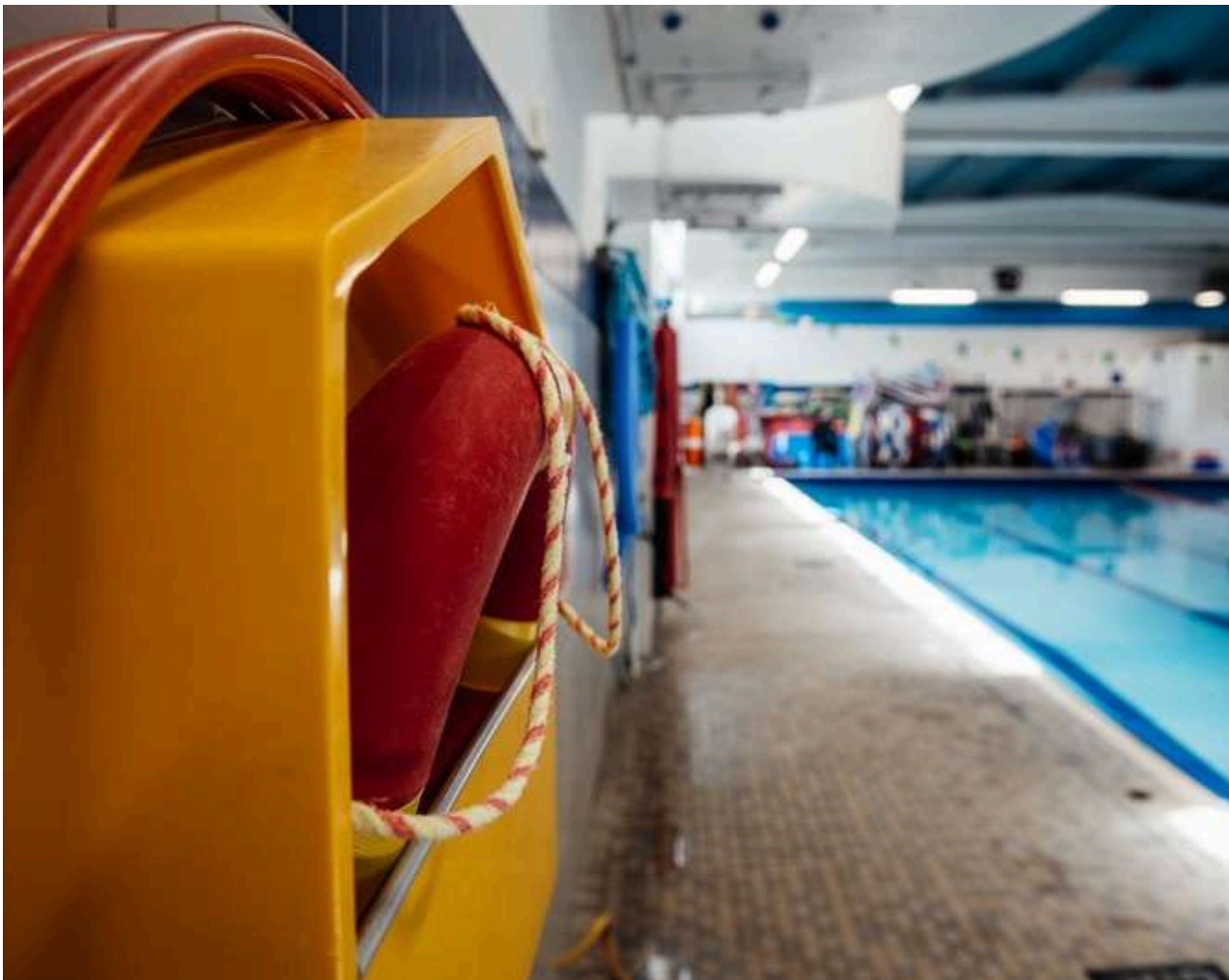


## Policy Implications- Swimming Lessons

- The National Swimming Strategy (Action 2.6 and 2.8) outlines the need for an innovative approach to providing additional swimming pool provision in either pop-up pools or other over ground solutions. This gap analysis report highlights that demand outstrips provision in swimming lessons and the only way to address this is to increase supply.

## Ask of government

- It is our view that government (in addition to the private sector) needs to invest in new pool provision. A new round of dedicated grants for new Swimming Pool construction and refurbishment is needed for the coming 10 years.
- 
- The funding of the development of a swimming pool programming template (NSS Action 3.1) would also help improve provision in existing facilities.



## Key Theme: Energy & Sustainability

### Summary

Energy efficiency is a critical factor in the sustainable management of swimming pools, especially given rising energy costs and increasing environmental responsibilities. This chapter examines the various heating methods employed across facilities, highlight differences in strategies between public and private sectors. The analysis emphasises how energy choices impact cost management and environmental outcomes, underscoring the importance of adopting sustainable approaches in pool operations.

The chapter opens with key findings and ends with a summary of policy implications and main recommendations.



## Key Findings

- Over half of sites heated their pools using gas.

**336** sites (83%) used a single heating method; 14 sites (3%) used multiple heating methods; 54 sites (13%) did not provide data.

- There is a wider adoption of heat pump technology in Northern Ireland than in the Republic across all sectors, most notably in hotels.

## Gas: 55%

**Republic of Ireland: 57%**

**Northern Ireland: 40%**

The relative majority of sites in Northern Ireland, and the absolute majority of sites in the Republic of Ireland use gas boilers. This widely used method is favoured for its lower costs and higher reliability than the alternatives, but is associated with greater environmental impact.

Across both countries, local authority pools make greatest use of gas boilers:

- 1 64% - public sector
- 2 60% - non-hotel private sector
- 3 59% - other (including education and charity)
- 4 49% - hotel private sector

Only 55% of Northern Ireland's public sector uses gas boilers compared with 70% of the Republic's public sector. This is compensated for by a 3% higher use of oil boilers, a 3% higher use of electric boilers, and a 10% higher use of heat pumps.

### **Heat Pump: 21% (Republic: 18%, NI: 38%)**

The second most popular method is heat pumps, almost approaching the popularity of gas boilers overall in Northern Ireland specifically. This technology, whilst not new, has enjoyed a surge in popularity over the last decade owing to its greater efficiency – and therefore lower ongoing costs and environment impact – than traditional electric boilers. The trade-off is a high upfront cost.

In the Republic of Ireland all sectors are beginning to embrace heat pumps, but the private sector is the primary user base with 19% of hotel pools and 25% of non-hotel private pools. Only 11% of public sector pools have heat pumps, likely a reflection of the investment required.

In Northern Ireland, it is the hotel sector which drives the 38% overall uptake: 79% of facilities associated with a hotel which gave heating information said they used heat pumps. The adoption of heat pumps in the public sector is still a minority at 21% but higher than in the Republic of Ireland.



### **Electrical: 13% (Republic: 12%, NI: 16%)**

Whilst heat pumps are also electrically driven, using electricity to collect heat from outside and move it inside the building, traditional electric boilers directly convert electricity into heat. As such, they require more electricity per unit of thermal energy than heat pumps and therefore have higher ongoing costs; however, upfront costs remain lower. Electrical boilers are typically more expensive to run than gas boilers, depending on differences in cost between electricity and gas, but this can be offset by lower maintenance requirements and the addition of solar electric panels.

It is the hotel and public sectors which use electrical boilers the most across both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

## Other Heating Methods: 5% (Republic: 6%, NI: 2%)

The three methods listed above account for the vast majority of heating methods reported. Other niche methods include oil, solar thermal, and biomass or woodchip fuel. Oil heating is an alternative to gas heating with many of the same pros and cons. The big difference is oil cannot be delivered via mains connection and must be delivered and stored on-site; it is therefore appropriate for any areas for which a mains gas connection is impossible or impractical but requires associated storage facilities which can add to installation cost.

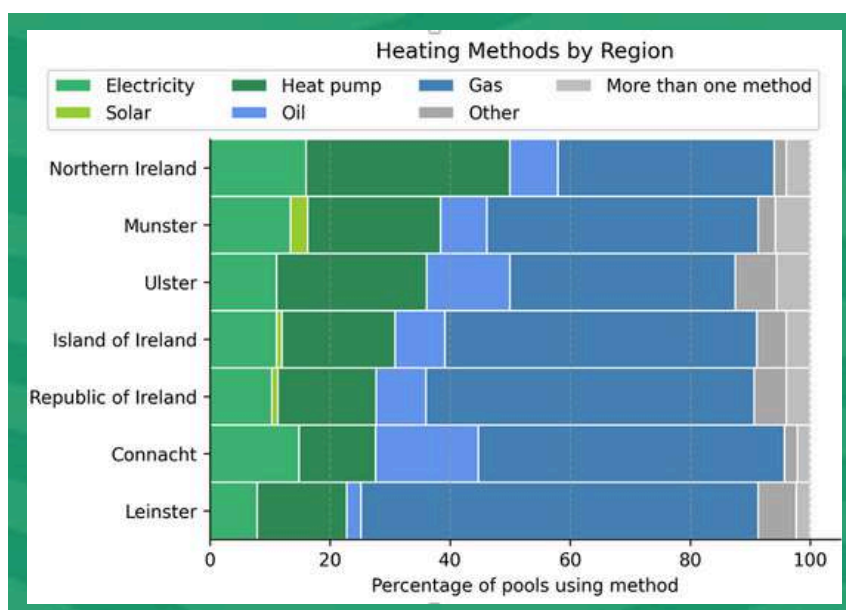
Solar thermal involves the installation of panels which heat up in sunlight and transfer this heat to water. These are impractical as the sole heating source and are therefore typically combined with any of the other methods for continued heating during cloudy days.

Five facilities specified that they burn woodchips to generate heat, two of which couple this with oil boilers. These biomass boilers are carbon-neutral but are otherwise comparable to oil boilers in that they require specific fuel storage on-site and need regular maintenance.

One facility reported a CHP (Combined Heat and Power) unit. CHP units typically use combustible fuel like gas to generate electricity, then collect and uses the heat which would otherwise be wasted. According to the SEAI, by capturing and using heat that would otherwise be wasted, and by avoiding electricity distribution losses, CHP can achieve effective fuel efficiencies of over 80%, compared to 50% for typical technologies[4].

## Pool-Heating

### Overall Regional View



[4] SEAI, CHP Technology Manual, April 2025

Key findings highlight the dominance of gas, the gradual adoption of heat pumps, the limited role of solar, and differences in heating strategies across public and private sectors.

Gas is the most used heating method across all regions and sectors, particularly in public pools. This dominance reflects its affordability, reliability, and widespread infrastructure. However, this heavy dependence raises sustainability concerns. Public pools rely heavily on gas, especially in regions like Leinster yet private non-hotel pools rely on gas in Northern Ireland.

Private hotels and private non-hotels adopt a more diverse range of heating methods overall, including electricity and heat pumps, indicating a growing preference for modern or energy-efficient systems. This trend is most evident in regions like Munster and Connacht, where heat pump usage is significant.

Oil heating, though declining in usage, remains prominent in rural areas like Connacht and Ulster, where gas infrastructure may be less accessible.

Solar energy plays an insignificant role across all regions and sectors, with only marginal use in Munster and the Republic of Ireland.

The use of hybrid systems ("more than one method") is most notable in public facilities, particularly in Munster and island wide. This reflects the sector's effort to improve efficiency and reduce operational risks by combining multiple heating sources.

Heat pumps are gaining traction, particularly in private facilities in Munster and Connacht, where they serve as a cleaner alternative to gas and oil.

## Observations

The dominance of gas boilers highlights the need for reliable and cost-effective heating solutions, as well as more sustainable alternatives.

With the growing emphasis on reducing carbon emissions, there is significant potential for swimming pools to transition to more sustainable energy sources. Heat pumps, particularly those powered by renewable electricity, offer a viable alternative that can reduce both energy costs and environmental impact.

Local Authorities are required to reduce their carbon emissions by 51% and to improve energy efficiency by 50% by 2030. It was reported that four buildings alone in Mayo County Council area produced 40% of the local authority's overall emissions[5], three of which were swimming pools/leisure centres. It is obvious that government, through local authorities, should urgently prioritise energy efficient upgrades to swimming pools to help meet their climate targets.

[5] [https://www.westernpeople.ie/news/retrofitting-leisure-centre-could-help-council-hit-halfway-mark-on-emissions-target\\_arid-5136.html](https://www.westernpeople.ie/news/retrofitting-leisure-centre-could-help-council-hit-halfway-mark-on-emissions-target_arid-5136.html)

A strategic approach to transitioning pools to more sustainable energy sources as well as a retrofitting scheme to upgrade swimming pools. This would go a long way towards local authorities being able to meet their climate targets. In the meantime, until such a scheme is launched, consideration should be given to exemptions for swimming pools from meeting these targets to avoid any risk of closure due to energy efficiency measures not being in place. The enormous benefits of swimming pools to the health and wellbeing of local communities must be prioritised.

As Ireland moves towards a more sustainable future, the energy efficiency of swimming pools will play a crucial role in reducing the environmental impact of the country. While gas boilers remain the dominant heating method, there is a clear opportunity to transition towards more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly alternatives such as heat pumps. By embracing these changes, swimming pools can not only reduce their carbon footprint but also contribute to the long-term sustainability of the sport in Ireland.

## Policy Implications- Energy and Sustainability

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- The National Swimming Strategy (Action 2.1) outlines the need to identify the environmental sustainability of pool facilities. This report has identified a glaring need for investment in sustainable infrastructure to reduce energy consumption by swimming pools. The energy costs of operating a pool are sizeable and any investment in energy efficient heating and retrofitting measures will in turn make pools more financially sustainable.

## Ask of government

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- We believe that a strategic approach to converting swimming pool energy provision to heat pumps and solar panels (where possible). This should be done in combination with a retrofitting scheme for pool buildings.
- Consideration should be given to exempting Local Authorities from climate targets for swimming pools whilst they transition to more sustainable energy sources. This would ensure pools are not closed due to fears of not meeting climate targets, given their contribution to community cohesion, health and wellbeing.



## Key Theme: Community Accessibility

### Summary

This chapter reviews how accessible our pools are for different community groups. It covers facility ownership (hotel vs. non-hotel), entry policies (public access vs. members-only), and accessibility features for people with additional needs. It also considers whether clubs can use the facilities, the presence of additional amenities like gyms and wellness suites, and the range of activities offered, highlighting their role in attracting diverse users and supporting revenue generation.

The chapter opens with key findings and ends with a summary of policy implications and main recommendations.



## Key Findings

**57%** of pools in the Republic of Ireland are hotel pools

**31%** of pools in Northern Ireland are hotel pools

**93%** of pools offer membership options, and only 58% provide Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) alternatives. Only 13% of hotel pools offer PAYG

**111** pools (28%) of pools said they are available for use by clubs across the island, the vast majority in the public sector. In Northern Ireland, 43% of non-hotel pools are available to clubs and the figure is only 38.4% in the ROI. Only 10 hotel pools reported that they are available for club use.

**55%** Aqua aerobics is a leading organised event, with 55% of pools offering such activities.

**87%** Most pools (87%) also offer gyms, while around 78% have spa facilities, and 79% include saunas or steam rooms

**48%** Reported having pool hoists to facilitate entry to the water

**83%** of hotel pools described their facility as being accessible, but most do not have hoists



Swimming pools are more than just places to swim—the audit found that they are vibrant community centres that offer a wide range of activities catering to different age groups, fitness levels, and interests.

The variety of activities available at these facilities, from aqua aerobics to additional wellness amenities like gyms and steam rooms, plays a crucial role in attracting a broad demographic of users as well as providing opportunities to generate significant other revenues to support the operation

Accessibility to swimming pools is a fundamental aspect of creating inclusive and equitable communities. Swimming is not only a vital life skill that enhances personal safety and health, but it is also a source of recreation, social interaction, and physical therapy for people of all ages and abilities. Ensuring that swimming pools are accessible to everyone—regardless of physical ability, age, socioeconomic status, or location—is essential in promoting widespread participation and enjoyment of aquatic activities.

The audit sought a high-level assessment of pool accessibility.



## Swimming Clubs

Only 111 (28%) of swimming pools said that they are available for hire by swimming clubs, the vast majority of these in the non-hotel sector. The low number is indicative that it is not well understood that most club swimming is at a participatory rather than elite level. A vibrant swimming club as part of the eco-system of a facility not only provides a year-round guaranteed income stream but will lead to sustained participation.

The data reveals the extent to which swimming clubs rely on the public sector, as well as facilities owned by universities, colleges and trusts to access pool water.

Paris 2024 was Ireland’s most successful Olympics to date. Swimming contributed 43% of the medal haul, significantly elevating the profile of competitive swimming in Ireland and infusing new energy into the sport. This triumph underscores the importance of making swimming more accessible, enhancing infrastructure, and refining the pathways for competitive swimmers. The over-reliance on a limited number of facilities also suggests that access needs to be protected for clubs.

## Competitive Swimming

The data highlights the need for swimming facilities to support competitive athletes across Ireland. Currently, there are gaps in the availability of pools suited for competitive training, with resources unevenly distributed. For example, Connacht lacks a 50m pool, and the average distance to travel to one is 100km. Cork, the second largest urban area, also lacks a 50m pool. By way of comparison, Scotland (population 5.5m) has seven 50m pools[1] spread out on a regional basis and New Zealand (population 5.3m) has nine 50m pools according to its aquatic facilities strategy[2]. This lack of infrastructure presents significant challenges for aspiring swimmers. To address this, we need to consider a facility mix that supports both grassroots participation and the development of world-class athletes.

	Number of sites available for swimming clubs									
	Total		Private				Public		Other	
			Hotel		Non-hotel					
<b>Island of Ireland</b>	111	29%	10	5%	13	28%	59	69%	29	64%
<b>Republic of Ireland</b>	86	26%	10	5%	13	28%	36	73%	27	63%
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	25	45%	0	0%	0	0%	23	64%	2	100%
<b>Connacht</b>	8	15%	0	0%	1	25%	6	67%	1	33%
<b>Leinster</b>	48	34%	4	7%	10	32%	20	77%	14	61%
<b>Munster</b>	25	23%	6	8%	2	22%	7	64%	10	67%
<b>Ulster</b>	30	37%	0	0%	0	0%	26	67%	4	100%

Table 1 - Regional Availability of Facilities for Competitive Swimming Clubs.

As Ireland seeks to build on the achievements of its athletes, investment in infrastructure that supports elite training will be crucial to maintaining momentum and ensuring continued success in the pool. This report highlights the need for a balanced approach that considers both the requirements of competitive athletes and the broader community, ensuring that everyone has access to high-quality swimming facilities.

## Aqua Aerobics and Water-Based Fitness Classes

Availability Type	Number of Pools (out of 404)	Percentage
Available for organised events	220	55%
Available for private hire	97	24%

Table 2 – pools offering aerobics and water-based fitness classes

[2] *Scottish Swimming Future of Swimming Facilities in Scotland, 2023*

[3] *New Zealand National Aquatic Facilities Strategy, 2023*

The audit found that 220 of the 404 pools (55%) were available for organised activity with 24% of pools available for private hire i.e. for external instructors to teach or deliver classes.

At 55%, Aqua aerobics is the most popular activity offered by pools. These classes are designed to provide a low-impact, full-body workout that leverages the natural resistance of water. Organised events like aqua aerobics contribute to making swimming facilities a central part of community health and fitness.



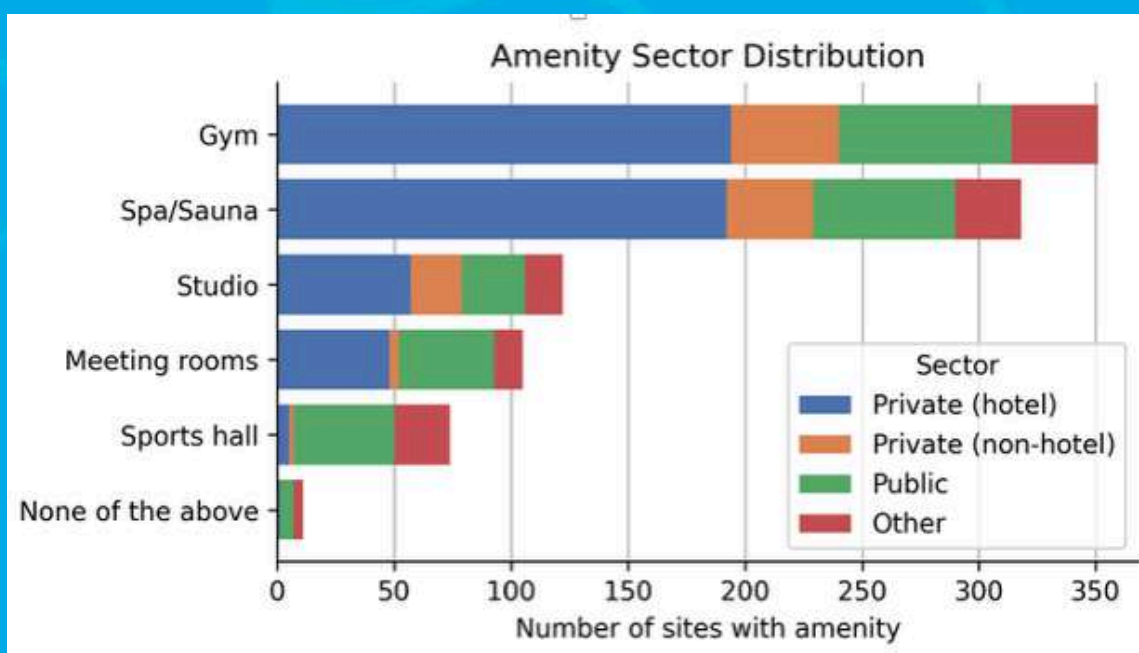
## More than Just a Swimming Pool: Additional Amenities: Gyms, Saunas, and Steam Rooms, Studios etc.

Beyond swimming, many pools are part of larger leisure complexes that offer a range of additional amenities, such as gyms, saunas, and steam rooms. These facilities attract a broader demographic, including individuals who may not primarily visit the pool for swimming but are drawn by the overall wellness offerings.

The table below and accompanying graph below is based on the numbers of facilities who responded to this section of the survey.

Amenity	Number of pools with amenity					Percentage of pools with amenity [%]					
	Total	Private		Public	Other	Total	Private		Public	Other	
		Hotel	Non-hotel				Hotel	Non-hotel			
Gym	351	194	46	74	37	92	94	100	88	82	
Spa/Sauna	318	192	37	61	28	83	93	80	73	62	
Studio	122	57	22	27	16	32	28	48	32	36	
Meeting rooms	105	48	4	41	12	28	23	9	49	27	
Sports hall	74	5	2	43	24	19	2	4	51	53	
None of the above	11	1	0	6	4	3	0	0	7	9	

Table 3 - number of facilities who responded to this section of the survey



The audit found that some 351 sites (92%) offered a gym alongside their pool. The percentage is greatest for non-hotel private pools, who are looking to maximise their fitness offering. Whilst the majority of public pools also offer gyms, they do so at a slightly lower rate than the private sector. The availability of a gym allows for a well-rounded fitness experience, where individuals can combine their swim with strength training, cardio workouts, or group exercise classes.



The majority of sites (316; 83%) also offer a spa or sauna. Saunas and steam rooms provide relaxation and therapeutic benefits, such as improved circulation, muscle recovery, and stress relief. These amenities enhance the appeal of community pools by offering a comprehensive wellness package that meets a variety of health and fitness needs.

Some sites (122; 32%) offer a dance or exercise studio. Almost half of non-hotel private pools offer these, but hotels and the public sector are not far behind. Nearly half of public sites and a quarter of hotels offer meeting rooms. Only 20% of facilities overall, but over half of public and other sites, offer a sports hall alongside their pool. Increasing the number of multi-purpose studio spaces alongside the pool and gym offer may encourage more community events, workshops, and health education sessions, making the pool complex a versatile venue for a wide range of activities that support physical and mental well-being.



## Membership Vs. Pay-As-You-Go

### Pay-as-you-go

Number of Sites offering PAYG	Total Number	Hotel Pools	Non-Hotel Pools
Island of Ireland	223	72	151
Republic of Ireland	176	62	114
Northern Ireland	47	10	37

Table 4 – national breakdown of which sectors offer pay-as-you-go access to the public. Subset of data from Appendix I.2 - Any Pay-As-You-Go, Any Membership

Pay-as-you-go (or PAYG) access is a flexible way to offer access to those who are unable or unwilling to commit to a contract, as a result of financial insecurity or concerns over the frequency of their own use. Depending on the cost, it can be an effective method to increase the number of swimmers by allowing the public to try it out before committing.

55.5% of pools across the island offer PAYG, concentrated massively in the non-hotel sector. Less than 18% of hotel pools offer PAYG as an option. This could be an indication of the different market that the private sector as a whole targets.

It is worth noting that the pay-as-you-go is widely available in Northern Ireland. 81% of pools in Northern Ireland offer PAYG, relative to 50.5% in the Republic of Ireland.

### Membership

Memberships, particularly common in hotel pools, are designed for regular users, offering unlimited access and often include additional amenities like gyms and saunas. This model is cost-effective for frequent swimmers and aligns with the comprehensive wellness packages offered by many hotel pools. However, membership can be less accessible for those who swim less regularly or are unable to commit to higher upfront costs.

Memberships are available at almost all facilities across the island and form the steady bedrock of income for pools. Those pools that don't offer memberships include hotels which restrict access to guests only, college or university pools which don't offer regular public access, company pools, and leisure resorts. There are additionally a small set of facilities, largely public, which have opted for a pay-as-you-go only model.

## Accessibility Features

85% of swimming pools reported that they were accessible to people with disabilities. Facilities typically included such features as:

- Wider doorways
- Non-slip flooring
- Handrails
- Shower seats

This indicates a commitment to making pools more accessible for individuals with physical disabilities. Respondents were entrusted to self report however, and each respondent may have had differing ideas of what 'accessible' means.

## Limited Availability of Braille Signage

However, the survey also highlighted a notable gap in accessibility features for individuals with visual impairments. Overall, only 21% of sites reported that they have Braille signage to assist visually impaired users in navigating the facility. This lack of accessible signage can pose significant challenges for these individuals, making it difficult for them to independently access and use the pool facilities.

## Pool Hoist

Roughly half of sampled sites have installed pool hoists and ramps to facilitate easier entry into the water for users with limited mobility. However, the availability of these features is not yet universal across all facilities. 91.8% of non-hotel pools have hoists compared to just 28.2% of hotel pools.

The absence of such features contrasts with the broader goals set out in Ireland's [National Physical Activity Plan](#), which emphasises the importance of removing environmental barriers to physical activity for all population groups. Enhancing visual and tactile accessibility is important to meet the aims set out in this plan.

## Disparity between private and public facilities

The responses revealed a trend of greater accessibility in local authority-owned sites. Every feature that improves water access to those with disabilities is present at a greater rate in public facilities than anywhere else.

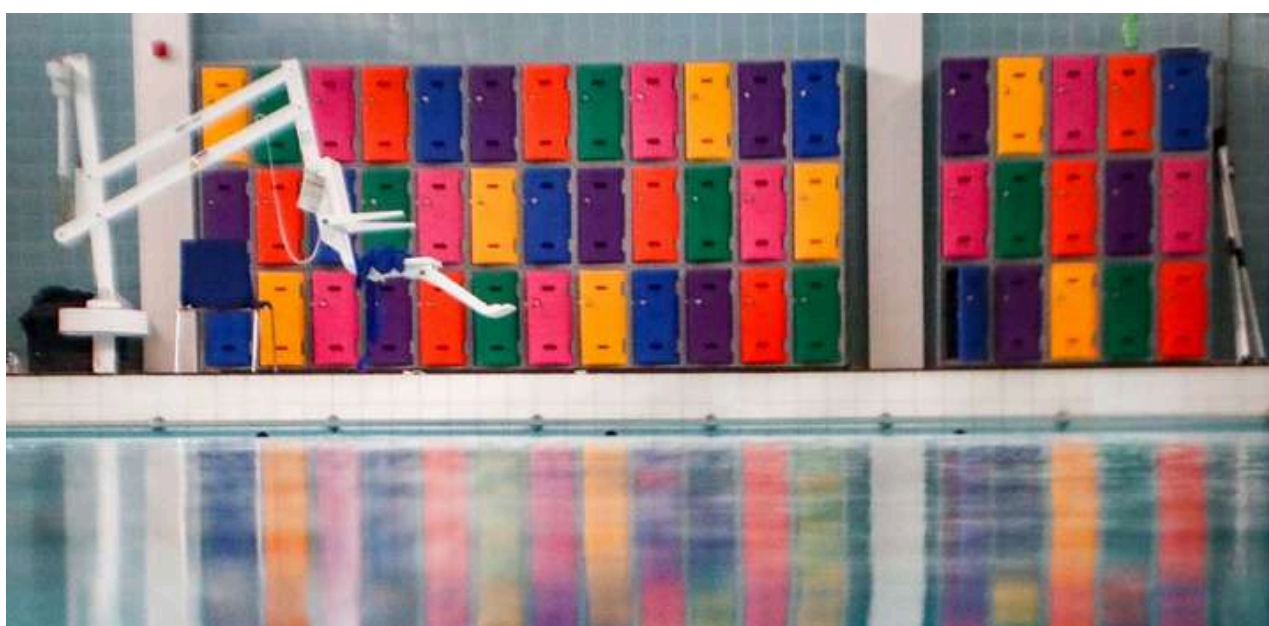
Inversely, hotel-associated private pools have the lowest presence of accessibility features. This highlights a significant space for improvement, especially if such pools are to be relied on as a major component of the swimming facility mix.

## Observations

Successful swimming environments balance specialised competition features with multipurpose spaces that encourage broad community engagement. By incorporating flexible designs, we can create swimming facilities that serve dual purposes – supporting grassroots participation whilst also fostering the development of world class athletes. We can also consider that it is not always necessary to develop facilities that serve both grassroots and elite athletes simultaneously, a more effective strategy may involve tailoring infrastructure based on local demographics and the specific needs of the communities.

Swimming holds the distinction of being the number one sport for people with disabilities in Ireland, offering a unique combination of physical, mental, and social benefits that are unmatched by other sports. The buoyancy of water provides a low-impact environment that is particularly beneficial for individuals with mobility issues, allowing them to exercise with greater ease and reduced risk of injury. Moreover, swimming promotes cardiovascular health, muscular strength, and flexibility, making it an ideal form of exercise for people of all abilities. Ensuring that all pools are fully accessible will allow more individuals with disabilities to participate in swimming, whether for recreation, fitness, or competitive purposes. This focus on accessibility will not only enhance participation rates but also support the overall health and well-being of the nation.

Based on the findings for this report, accessibility can be improved in pools across the nation. Facilities that do not currently have pool hoists, ramps, or other necessary equipment should prioritise their installation. This will ensure that all individuals, regardless of physical ability, can safely and comfortably access the water and meet aims set out in the National Swimming Strategy. Government commitment to making swimming inclusive is clearly outlined in the National Swimming Strategy where the need to make swimming accessible to a more diverse community is emphasised.



## Policy Implications - Community Accessibility

- The National Swimming Strategy (Action 1.1) outlines the need for an analysis of swimming pool provision and to identify gaps in accessibility for people with a disability. This report has carried out the gap analysis and finds that provision is much higher in the public sector than the private sector.

## Ask of government

- It is our view that the Sports Capital and Equipment programme (Action 1.2 of NSS) should provide grants to both public and private pool operators for the provision of pool hoists and other accessible infrastructure. Given that the majority of pool is in the hotel sector and only 28% of hotel pools have pool hoists it is essential that grant assistance is provided to improve accessibility.





## Other Findings

During the data collection phase of this project, several additional insights emerged that, while not the primary focus, provide valuable context for understanding the current state of swimming infrastructure in Ireland.

One significant observation is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on swimming facilities and the availability of lessons. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the pandemic led to prolonged closures and restrictions, which in turn created longer waiting lists for swimming lessons. Many pools struggled to meet the pent-up demand when they reopened, as a backlog of individuals seeking lessons developed during the pandemic.

Another noteworthy finding is related to the types of water treatment methods used in swimming pools. While treated water remains the most common method, there are alternative options, such as UV light filtering, which are becoming more prevalent. UV light filtering offers several benefits, including reduced chemical use and potentially improved water quality. As Ireland continues to develop and upgrade its swimming facilities, considering these alternative treatment options could be beneficial. Future pools might look into incorporating these methods to enhance the overall swimming experience.

Additionally, the existence of open-air pools across the nation was noted, although they were not the primary focus of this project. These pools, often used during the summer months, offer a unique recreational option and frequently provide swimming lessons and other programmes. While not a central element of the study, open-air pools represent an important part of Ireland's aquatic landscape, offering seasonal opportunities for swimming and community engagement.

These findings suggest areas for possible further exploration and consideration as Ireland seeks to enhance its swimming infrastructure and programmes.

## Policy Implications- Outdoor Swimming

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- The National Swimming Strategy (Actions 4.1, 4.2 and 4.8) outlines the need for the further development of outdoor swimming provision.

## Ask of government

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- We propose the establishment of a dedicated Outdoor Swimming Development Fund to build on the burgeoning outdoor swimming culture in Ireland.

## Enhancing National Swimming Participation in Ireland: Overview and Future Research Priorities

This report provides a detailed overview of swimming pool facilities in Ireland, highlighting the important role that well-maintained, accessible, and efficient swimming pools play in encouraging swimming across the country. The findings emphasise both the strengths and areas for improvement within the current landscape, particularly in terms of accessibility, availability of teaching at swimming pools, geographical spread of pools, and the sustainability of facilities.



A significant insight from this research is the need to develop more sustainable and cost-effective community swimming pools, especially as many facilities built during the 1980s are nearing the end of their lifespans. The pool age and condition analysis supports this. While 58.44% of pools have been refurbished in the last five years and 79.42% within the past decade, only 2.31% of pools were newly constructed in the last five years. This highlights a slowdown in new builds, with 94.65% of pools being refurbished in the last 20 years. This trend indicates a shift from expansion to maintenance, as a large portion of mid-20th-century facilities require significant upgrades to meet modern standards. As 50% of pools were built since 2000, the focus must remain on refurbishment, but new construction will also be vital to meet growing demand and replace aging infrastructure. The challenges associated with high running costs and the capital required for new builds have historically been barriers to the expansion and modernisation of swimming infrastructure.



New swimming pool delivery can take 5-10 years from inception, through planning, funding, tender, construction, completion and into operation phase. All this time lag adds cost. The new planned 6 lane 25m swimming pool in Balbriggan in Fingal[11] for example conducted public surveys in 2019, a gap analysis in 2021 and has only recently gotten the go ahead from the Council at an estimated €10m construction cost hoping to be completed by the end of 2026. The Lough Lannagh Leisure Complex in Mayo, an 8 lane 25m pool with gym facilities, was first mooted in 2012, a revised project scope was developed and funding approved in 2015, and the project was finally completed in 2019 at a cost of €12m[12]. The Lucan Leisure Centre swimming pool project was originally costed at €12.9m in 2017 and is expected to cost in the region of €20m when completed in 2025 after numerous delays, including the Covid pandemic and subsequent increases in construction costs[13]. All of this highlights the need for government (and local authorities) to take a long-term strategic approach to planning swimming pool construction in Ireland.

This requires the development of a new dedicated swimming pool grant scheme on a 10-year planning cycle for new pools and refurbishment/extension of existing pools. In tandem it would be useful for government to develop standardised pool design and construction standards to streamline development and contain costs. We believe that by adopting a standardised design approach and leveraging the latest modular technology, we can significantly shorten the project timeline and cost, as being currently demonstrated in the Fingal County Council area.

This report does also raise concerns about whether existing local authority pools are fully living up to their responsibilities. Despite being intended to provide accessible, inclusive facilities for all members of the community, local authority pools are not meeting the demand for swimming services. This gap has been filled by hotel pools, which are privately owned and are, for example, less likely to offer Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) options. The reliance on hotel pools, which often require memberships or higher fees, limits access for individuals from lower-income backgrounds,



[11] <https://www.fingal.ie/news/new-eu10m-public-swimming-pool-be-built-balbriggan>

[12] <https://www.mayonews.ie/news/home/1123437/new-castlebar-pool-to-open-this-week.html>

[13] <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/council-leisure-centres-swimming-pool-project-takes-on-water-as-costs-of-eight-year-project-set-to-rise-to-20m/a1930750762.html>

making swimming less accessible for a significant portion of the population. Similarly, many people likely prefer to swim on a day-by-day basis rather than commit to a membership, and this is a group of people not being catered for by the current provision of pools across Ireland.

Moving forward, there is a clear necessity to adopt a more cost-effective and operationally efficient model that can sustain and expand swimming participation across Ireland. This shift must prioritise sustainable community pools that offer appropriate programming and access for those who need it most. Local authorities, in particular, must step up to ensure that public pools are meeting the needs of all demographic groups, especially those who may not be able to afford private facilities. Similarly, access to various types of swimming pools—both community and competitive-level—must be ensured across the country, including in more rural areas.

The analysis of pool space per head of population highlights critical regional disparities that will impact the future of swimming in Ireland. While provinces like Connacht and Munster are relatively well-served, other regions such as Leinster and Ulster show lower availability. Leinster, with 13.4 m<sup>2</sup> per thousand people, faces growing pressure, particularly in urban areas like Dublin, where demand is expected to increase. Ulster, at 11.5 m<sup>2</sup> per thousand people, also highlights the need for additional facilities to meet both community and competitive swimming needs. These findings underscore the need for strategic investment in public swimming infrastructure to ensure that Ireland can meet future demand, support the growth of swimming as both a recreational activity and competitive sport, and provide equitable access to facilities across all regions.

The data presented in this report underscores the importance of addressing areas of under-provision by exploring innovative, modern options for building more accessible pools. At Swim Ireland, we will continue to advocate for several potential solutions, including the implementation of location-flexible Pop-Up Pools, which are moveable pools built from shipping containers to help relieve the backlog of swimming lessons for children. Also available are Swim Box Pools, modularly constructed pools designed to be installed in existing warehouses or community halls. Additionally, the 20m Community Pool concept leverages the latest construction methods and above-ground swimming pool technology at a fraction of the traditional cost, while the 25m Community Pool offers reduced operational and maintenance costs due to its refined design. These alternative pool designs present a cost-effective and functional model that can cater to various target groups and user types, addressing current gaps in swimming provision.



To support this transition, the report also sets out the potential future use of the Swimming Facility Planning Model, a tool available to local authorities to determine the best-fit solutions for the provision of swimming pools at local and regional levels. This model can guide strategic decisions, ensuring that investments are aligned with the nation's aquatic needs and that the most effective solutions are implemented where they are needed most.



Looking ahead, future research should prioritise exploring the pricing structures of swimming pools across Ireland, including membership fees, pay-as-you-go options, and the availability of discounted rates for specific groups. This research should also examine regional cost disparities and how pricing impacts overall participation and demographic engagement. Another critical area for investigation is user experience and satisfaction, focusing on facility cleanliness, staff professionalism, program variety, accessibility, and perceived value for money. Understanding the barriers that impact regular swimming will help inform future strategies to increase participation.

Additionally, research should investigate participation trends and the influence of demographic factors on engagement. Examining the impact of external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and seasonal variations on swimming habits will provide a more comprehensive view of participation dynamics. Moreover, the role of technology in enhancing the swimming experience through digital tools and innovative pool designs should be a focus of future studies.



By addressing these areas in future research, Swim Ireland and other stakeholders will gain deeper insights into the factors influencing swimming participation and facility usage across the country. This knowledge will enable more targeted interventions, better resource allocation, and ultimately, the achievement of Swim Ireland's goal to create an "Island of Swimmers."

In conclusion, this report lays the groundwork for a sustained, strategic effort to enhance Ireland's swimming infrastructure and participation rates. By prioritising the development of a nationwide, accessible network of community-centred pools—with a focus on introducing swimming at an early age through lessons, promoting swimming as a hobby and life skill, ensuring competitive-level access across the nation, and accommodating the needs of individuals with disabilities—while also ensuring that these pools are sustainable and align with Ireland's broader goals of economic efficiency, Ireland can move closer to its goal of significantly increasing national participation in swimming. This approach will ensure that in the future, a diverse range of people—from toddlers to Olympic athletes to individuals with disabilities—can learn to swim and enjoy swimming in modern, long-lasting facilities. This will ensure that swimming remains an accessible and vital life skill for all, fostering a healthier, more active population and securing swimming's place as a cornerstone of Ireland's cultural and athletic identity.



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