

**FABIAN
SOCIETY**

THE PEOPLE'S POOLS

A LABOUR PLAN TO BUILD LIDOS

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Dedication

In memory of Nicky Gavron, 1941-2024. Champion of civic rejuvenation. Friend and Fabian.

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FOREWORD

Britain's lidos are undeniably a glorious inheritance. They have their roots in the interwar idea that enlightened local authorities should take responsibility for the health and wellbeing of their citizens. The flourishing of lidos in the 1930s left a legacy of beautiful art deco buildings, like my own wonderful local lido in Peterborough.

They are more than outdoor swimming pools. The idea behind the architecture was that the factory worker, the coal miner, the office clerk, the apprentice, and the housewife had as much right to lounge on a sundeck or enjoy a swim in clean water as the aristocrat on an ocean liner or the stockbroker on a Monte Carlo beach. This was the egalitarian – dare I say *Fabian* – vision that motivated the construction of lidos across Britain.

The heyday of lidos was an era in which the world faced global uncertainty, the aftermath of financial shocks and the rise of divisive populism – themes that echo in today's world. Against this backdrop, lidos symbolized the public good while the pioneers behind them transformed our understanding of civic pride and public health. But lidos are not just about preservation and heritage like stately homes or old canals. They are about the future. Lidos can and should be modern, accessible, popular, and part of real pride in place. They can belong to us all, and be used by us all, for decades to come. Certainly, we understand the benefits of swimming for physical and mental health. We know for sure how important it is to teach every child to swim and be confident in the water. We crave shared public spaces to meet one another and put down the phone, even just for an hour or so. The lido speaks to modernity as much as to the past.

That is why I welcome this new pamphlet by Greg Rosen. Greg is a Fabian and an admired Labour historian, but he approaches this subject as a problem-solver with a policy solution. This pamphlet represents a serious-minded and useful contribution to the debate about how public assets can be guaranteed for the long-term, what sustainable funding might look like, and how the state should interact with the private sector. It should be widely read by Fabians, policymakers, ministers, and indeed anyone interested in the future of Britain's lidos, civic renewal, or developing pride in place.

Andrew Pakes is the co-convenor of Labour Friends of Lidos and Historic Pools and the Labour MP for Peterborough

1. INTRODUCTION

Pride in Place is a flagship government programme for good reason. Polling analysis undertaken for Liam Byrne's important new book analysing the rise of British populism underlines that a "sense of decline in local places is visceral" among many voters disillusioned with the government; that places "...once full of pride are now symbols of decay."¹

The government's Pride in Place programme attempts to address this decline. But while the investment it brings will make a difference to those communities it targets, the problems the Pride in Place programme seeks to solve impact far more communities than the limited funding of the programme can encompass.ⁱ

Urban centres are declining across much of Britain, in part because there is not yet a coherent answer to what they are for in an age of out-of-town supermarkets and internet shopping. Traditionally, the high street, the town square and the city centre were destinations. Keystone businesses and facilities, such as banks, the Post Office, the local cinema, the library, and the leisure centre or swimming pool sustained the wider high-street ecosystem.

The widespread preference for internet banking has clearly made the old high street of banks and building societies unsustainable. So for the high street ecosystem not to atrophy, urban centres need alternative keystones to sustain them. In many urban centres, even in less disadvantaged parts of Britain, market forces alone are failing to drive the evolution of city and town centres in a successful direction, and councils no longer have sufficient capacity or funding to step in.

The role of civic infrastructure like cinemas and public swimming pools is arguably more important than ever. In cities like Plymouth, a lido still provides a magnet that sustains the retail and hospitality businesses around it,² as lidos once did for so many towns and cities – New Brighton in Merseyside, for example.

For Byrne, "Rebuilding pride of place is every bit as central to defeating populism as raising pay or reforming the state... if we can't give people back a sense of home, the populists will. Rebuilding communities is a test case of

ⁱ New JRF analysis reveals 430 doubly disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England remain unfunded. These areas are home to approximately 3.5 million people and include some neighbourhoods ranked among those facing the greatest challenges. [Why social infrastructure matters for economic security | Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#)

whether we have a state that can deliver.”³ Labour has faced test cases like this before. 1930s Britain was scarred by the austerity that followed the Wall Street crash and overshadowed by the looming clouds of war. The Labour party had blown its own credibility in the collapse of the 1929-31 Labour government. It rebuilt that credibility by showing it could deliver meaningful change for working people.

It did so by building pride in place, physically transforming slum housing and the facilities on which people living there depended. It built more, built better, and built different. Voters wanted community facilities alongside decent housing. And by building them, Labour gave communities enduring civic icons.

Alongside art-deco cinemas, the 1930s lido programme sculpted into popular imagination one of the iconic motifs of that era. They became a totemic achievement of the golden age of municipal socialism, not just for leisure, but for health.

Many of today's Labour ministers hark back to the Clement Attlee era for their inspiration. Attlee's ministers themselves had more limited scope when looking for practical examples of previous Labour success in government. Labour's prior, brief stints (1924 and 1929-31), both led by Ramsay MacDonald, lacked concrete successes. It was in local government, and especially in London after Labour took control of the London county council (LCC) in 1934, that Labour had been able to deliver tangible results for voters. Emblematic of this was the 1930s lido programme. For many of Attlee's ministers, it represented the most visible manifestation of Labour's prior success in office.

A Labour Lido Plan

Many of Britain's leading politicians over the last two decades have recognized personally the importance of access to open air swimming. Boris Johnson ensured that he had his own private swimming pool.⁴ So did David Cameron, who also has family access to a Scottish island estate with its own beaches.⁵ Rishi Sunak, admittedly, wanted his own private family pool to be indoors.⁶

But not everyone can afford their own private pool, or island. As climate change brings longer, hotter summers, it will only become a more important public policy issue. The nation's largest public swimming operator (Better) has confirmed that the summer of 2025 was the busiest it has ever seen for lidos and outdoor swim spots. Between June and August 2025, 542,998 swim visits were recorded – up from 416,847 over the same period in 2024 – a rise of 30 per cent.⁷

The Labour party that achieved the 1945 landslide victory was a labour Party that championed “people’s pools”: lidos built during the 1930s by local councils to enable people from all backgrounds to have the opportunity for open air swimming, not just for recreation, but for health. In parts of Britain with strong mining communities, many of the new lidos were funded by miners’ welfare funds: in some cases, miners even helped build them.⁸

Where they were not demolished by successor councils wrestling with Thatcher-era austerity, they remain cherished community assets. Where they are derelict or demolished, many voters want them restored. But there is currently no money to do so, with an ever-greater proportion of council budgets being required for statutory social care responsibilities. Provision of community leisure facilities by councils is not statutory, and councils lack the expertise and capacity they had during the 1930s to build, maintain and operate local community infrastructure. So what is to be done?

This paper sets out a Labour Lido Plan.

Building on the critique of current water regulation contained in the Cunliffe review, the government could leverage the forthcoming water reform bill (which will abolish Ofwat and overhaul water regulation) to empower local authorities to harness the expertise and delivery capabilities of the water utilities and rejuvenate Labour’s historic mission to deliver quality public infrastructure.

A viable plan to rejuvenate the lost Labour lidos – and build new ones – would deliver tangible community assets, improve public health and environmental outcomes, and demonstrate Labour’s commitment to popular collective public infrastructure.

2. THE 1930s LIDO PROGRAMME

The lido most associated with its Labour origins is the so-called 'Lansbury lido' in Hyde Park's Serpentine, named after Labour's 1931-35 leader George Lansbury, who created it as first commissioner for works in the 1929-31 Labour cabinet. Such was the paucity of lasting achievement of that government that the historian AJP Taylor wrote caustically that the Lansbury lido is "the only thing which keeps the memory of the second Labour government alive."⁹

Labour's political implosion at the 1931 general election was devastating. Labour had won 287 parliamentary seats in 1929. In 1931 that collapsed to a mere 52. Most of the outgoing Labour cabinet who had remained loyal to the Labour party lost their seats, including Herbert Morrison, Labour's transport minister from 1929-31 and a leading Fabian. Following the collapse of the 1929-31 government, Labour's opponents popularized a narrative that a Labour government simply did not work.

Labour rebuilt itself during the 1930s by winning victories at the local level and showing that Labour councils could and would deliver better collective public services and infrastructure to voters, including better housing and slum clearance. Combined with that housing was the ambition for better public recreation and health facilities epitomised by Labour's lido programme. Herbert Morrison, who was Labour's leading strategist in London, and its leader on the LCC, put that ambition at the heart of his successful strategy to win and consolidate London for Labour. Harold Wilson, Labour's prime minister from 1964 to 1970 and 1974 to 1976, declared: "If the London county council is to go down to history – as I believe it will – as the greatest unit of local government which the world has ever seen, more credit is due to Herbert Morrison than to any other individual."¹⁰

The London labour party, which had swept to victory at the 1934 LCC elections, championed a lido construction programme that built 68 lidos across 1930s London.

Three years later, London Labour's leadership declared its ambition for London to be a "city of lidos".¹¹ The 1937 elections, the last LCC elections until after the second world war, were a Labour triumph. Labour's 1934

landslide majority increased even further, validating three years of Labour government in London and Labour's vision for the future. As the former Lib Dem president and notable electoral strategist Lord Pack recently observed, Labour's powerfully successful 1937 London municipal election slogan – "Better Homes. Good Schools. Health Care. Play Fields. Lidos." – has "aged pretty well".¹²

The Labour party that swept to power nationally in 1945, with Morrison as its electoral mastermind and deputy PM, was the party that had championed the construction of more than 300 public lidos across Britain. They were part of Labour's inner monologue, an expression and celebration of the benefit of collective public infrastructure drawing on the optimistic vision of the British summer implicit in the concept of a lido.

These 'people's pools' were central to and emblematic of Labour's conception of what a Labour Britain would and could be. Open to all, they gave everyone access to what had until then been a privilege of the elite: the opportunity to swim in clean fresh water, typically cleaner and safer than the rivers, canals and lakes of the era. Many of the ministers of the 1945 Labour government had cut their teeth in 1930s local government. Labour's post-war Attlee-era success was rooted in this municipal legacy, a legacy of providing better public services and infrastructure for all, of which the art-deco optimism of Labour's 1930s lidos was the totem.

Where did it all go wrong?

The 1930s Labour lido legacy bequeathed popular public infrastructure to a generation whose horizons were otherwise constrained by post-war austerity. While the 1950s was a decade of rejuvenating Tory fortunes under prime ministers Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, the soaring popularity of Labour's lidos highlighted the continuing electoral salience of well-designed collectivist civic infrastructure. But their very success as publicly-provided swimming facilities sowed the seeds of their undoing. For Britain's inclement climate meant that indoor public pools were also needed to ensure all-year-round access to swimming, especially for teaching schoolchildren to swim in winter, and there were insufficient numbers of indoor pools.

Pressure grew to address this issue, including from the professional sports lobby, for whom wider access to all-year-round swimming for sports training was of paramount importance. A 1960 government report on 'Sport and the Community,' and the 1968 Sports Council report, both recommended that new UK sports and swimming facilities ought to be indoors to maximise all-year-round use. This led finite budgets to be redirected away from any expansion of lidos to accommodate the growth of UK population towards a new wave of indoor leisure centres.

After this shift in focus towards indoor pools, less money was available to refurbish the once grand fleet of 1930s lidos as it began to age. During the 1980s, the 1930s lidos were celebrating their fiftieth birthdays, and the wear and tear of decades of popular use created a growing need for major refurbishments of concrete basins and buildings and the replacement of pipes, pumps and filtration systems. This was also an era of local government austerity. In 1975, Labour's secretary of state for the environment, Anthony Crosland, had told local councils "the party's over" with regard to spending largesse. Margaret Thatcher's government tightened the screw further, and the 1980s saw councils cut capital spending in order to protect other areas.

An additional factor was the changed relationship between local councils and the water supply as a result of Ted Heath's Water Act 1973. Before 1973, there were 198 statutory water supply undertakings, including 64 run by individual local authorities and 101 joint boards of local authorities (plus 33 private companies). Water was publicly owned but not nationalised. The longstanding relationship between local government and water provision, confirmed and extended by Attlee's Water Act 1948, gave local authorities access to expertise and capability in the field of water infrastructure.

While some of Britain's water suppliers have their origins in pre-Victorian private enterprise (by 1830 there were multiple private companies supplying water to London), the municipal tradition of water infrastructure provision was well established in many parts of Britain before the second world war. London had secured the municipalisation of its water infrastructure under the Metropolitan Water Board in 1903, a body responsible to the LCC and the other relevant local authorities of Greater London.

Many of England's great cities, including Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds, had municipal water departments and were, like London, lido enthusiasts. Heath's 1973 Water Act restructured the water supply industry, transforming the municipal water suppliers of Britain into a regionally-based nationalized industry. This change removed the role that had given local authorities access to expertise and capability in the field of water infrastructure.

The cumulative effect was dramatic. By the end of the 1980s, nearly two-thirds of Britain's public lidos were derelict or demolished. Where Britain had over three hundred lidos in the 1930s, only one hundred or so remained open by 1990. A 1991 report by the Thirties Society, *Farewell My Lido*, documented the loss of dozens of historic lidos and sounded the alarm on their potential extinction. In Wales, as of 2026, there is now only a single open air public swimming pool. Once there were 57.¹³

3. THE RESURGENCE OF OUTDOOR SWIMMING

The widespread closure of lidos in the 1980s sparked a popular backlash in many communities. Local residents who fondly remembered summers at their neighbourhood lido – or younger people simply frustrated by the lack of outdoor swimming facilities – began to organise campaigns to save, restore, or rebuild lidos. What started as scattered local efforts in the late 1980s and 1990s evolved into a broader movement for outdoor swimming access, including a turn toward “wild” freshwater swimming in rivers and lakes where pools are absent.

In Manchester, for example, which went from several lidos to zero: “while some swimmers turned to Salford Quays or embraced wild swimming, for many, the absence of a lido symbolised a gap in Manchester’s identity.” As the Stone Roses’ Ian Brown observed, “Manchester’s got everything but a beach.”¹⁴

By the early 1990s, a number of high-profile “friends of” groups had formed to campaign to restore derelict lidos.

- In London, activists successfully pushed to reopen London Fields lido in Hackney, which had closed in 1988. They finally succeeded in 2006.
- In Bath, the historic Cleveland pools (dating to 1815) sat derelict for decades. A trust was formed to restore them, securing a major Heritage Lottery grant by 2018. The pools reopened in 2023 after a £9.3m restoration, but tragically closed shortly afterwards due to flood damage to the plant room.
- Droitwich Spa lido in Worcestershire was closed in 2000 by the council, but a residents’ campaign saved and reopened it in 2007.
- In Pontypridd, Wales, the council partnered with Heritage Lottery to restore the lido in Ynysangharad park which had been closed since 1991. It reopened in 2015 as Lido Ponty, the National Lido of Wales.
- Tinside lido in Plymouth (a grade II listed art deco icon) closed in 1992, but was rescued after a local campaign, reopening under the Blair government.

These hard-won successes demonstrated that public demand for lidos never went away. Even where councils were reluctant, persistent community pressure and creative funding (like lottery grants or charitable trusts) could rescue a lido. The ripple effect helped inspire other campaigns. By the 2010s, a lido revival was underway in Britain.

Yet for every reopened lido there were others that community activists campaigned for in vain. In many towns and cities, cash-strapped councils simply told campaigners that lidos were unaffordable. As a result, attention began shifting to rivers and lakes.

- Wild swimming advocacy exploded in the 2010s and especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when outdoor exercise was one of the few permitted freedoms. Rivers, lakes, and ponds became the focus of swimmers who had no access to a public pool. Local Facebook groups monitoring water quality spread nationwide.
- Activists and the wider public put increased scrutiny on river pollution, particularly sewage overflows by water companies, since in the absence of the widespread reopening of lidos, making rivers and lakes swimmable seemed the only way to enable outdoor swimming.

This movement has had significant political impact. For example, the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, pledged in his 2024 manifesto to make London's rivers swimmable within a decade.¹⁵ He branded the state of the River Thames a "national embarrassment" and suggested that a Labour mayoralty might be able to secure bathing water quality for the Thames much as the Paris Olympics had secured swimming water for the Seine.¹⁶

But the London mayoralty as an institution lacks any authority over Thames Water, which is accountable not to the mayor of London but to Ofwat and Defra, so it is difficult to see how the pledge can end up anything other than unmet. This highlights the insufficiency of mayoral powers and reflects a broader breakdown of the democratic levers of power. Superficially, it might appear more practical for Khan to seek to address unmet demand for safe outdoor swimming by putting pressure on Thames Water to make London's rivers swimmable than to fund new lidos out of limited public money. However, the opposite is the case.

The BBC reported in early 2025 that the Port of London Authority (PLA) had warned the Greater London Authority (GLA) that "between Teddington Lock and Putney Bridge, the PLA allows, but does not 'encourage', swimming. Any swimming in the Thames east of Putney Bridge is completely prohibited, as the PLA points out that, among other dangers,

'powerful tides running at around five miles an hour will overpower even the strongest swimmers'."¹⁷

Given the scale of cleanup needed, the fact that the Thames is a working tidal river with strong currents and substantive freight traffic, and the fact that the mayor controls neither Thames Water nor the Port of London Authority, it would be substantially more practicable on every level to create swimming facilities for Londoners by improving lido provision.¹⁸ But unlike the LCC led by Labour in the 1930s, London's mayor has no personnel in-house with the expertise, experience, capacity or funding to launch a London lido programme. The era when local councils in London and elsewhere built lidos was an era in which they, as local authorities, retained both powers and expertise in municipal provision of clean water infrastructure.

Councils also face an ever-greater proportion of their budgets being reserved for statutory social care responsibilities. This leaves precious little to spend on maintaining the non-statutory services they provide, such as parks, libraries and leisure facilities including lidos, even though it is usually these facilities that local voters identify with council provision. And it leaves the square root of zero funding to invest in capital projects such as building a new lido or restoring one that is derelict. The impressive new river-water lido at London's Canary Wharf opening in summer 2026 is commercially funded, predominantly by the substantial private sector investors of Canary Wharf Group. This is not an approach that many parts of Britain can replicate.

In this context, a growing number of local authorities are publicly calling for designated "bathing rivers". Again, this is putting the onus on water companies and regulators, even though this designation may be either meaningless or potentially dangerous.¹⁹ As a Water UK factsheet pithily put it: "the regulations protecting rivers were not originally designed to include consideration for swimming and were more focused towards protecting river ecology. As a result, not a single river in the UK currently meets bathing water standards."²⁰

Moreover, while there is focus on the pollution going into rivers from sewage treatment works discharges, even if sewage treatment plants were to work correctly, they were not necessarily built to ensure their discharges produce a purity that can ensure complete safety for swimmers. And even if they were in the future, it would not actually ensure the river or lake was swimmable safely: as the independent review of the water sector commissioned by the government concludes, much of the pollution comes

from sources that have little to do with the water utilities, such as agriculture and road run-off.ⁱⁱ

Lidos are, moreover, clearly safer than lakes or rivers, especially for less experienced swimmers. Forcing people who may lack cold water swimming practice into lakes or rivers if they want a dip during a summer heatwave by closing the lido on “safety” grounds is a convoluted logic for voters to follow, as Labour councillors recently pointed out in Stroud where this happened.²¹

Voters would like cleaner rivers. They would also like to be able to swim in clean water, outdoors, without having to secure their own private swimming pool. This was possible in the 1930s because Labour delivered it. It is not possible now because the 21st-century political and regulatory systems and processes stymie it. Therefore, those systems and processes need to be fixed.

The grassroots momentum on this issue represents a clear signal to government: there is popular demand for outdoor swimming that is not being met by current infrastructure. Voters have demonstrated willingness to volunteer, fundraise, and campaign for lidos – but they cannot do it alone. A national policy response can harness this enthusiasm and provide the coordination and resources to deliver on it.

ⁱⁱ The management of water also has to operate across multiple economic sectors...agriculture has the most significant environmental impact on water bodies in England and Wales. Nutrient pollution from farming can damage water body health by causing algal blooms, oxygen depletion, and habitat destruction. The River Wye is an example of this, where over 70% of excess nutrients and sediment in the English stretch of the river have been identified as entering from agricultural land. The water industry is the sector with the second most significant impact on water quality. Both treated and untreated sewage can impact water bodies by introducing chemicals, pathogens, or nutrients, such as phosphorus. Urban and transport sectors are the third highest sector of impact. Road run-off contains the build-up of pollutants from oil spills and tyre and brake wear of vehicles on roads. These pollutants accumulate, particularly in dry periods, and are then washed into nearby rivers when it rains, posing risks to river ecological health and aquatic life. [Independent Water Commission Final Report](#) p 20

Case study: a new lido for Manchester

Manchester is currently building a new lido. Councillor Bev Craig, the leader of Manchester city council, captured the project's significance thus: "Cyrus Street's transformation from an ugly dump to a beautiful swimming destination has got people excited. This lido is a key part of Holt Town's regeneration story, and it shows how we can turn neglected spaces into thriving community assets."

The Manchester news site I Love Manchester expressed similar sentiments:

"The new lido signals a broader shift in how Manchester views its outdoor spaces. As the city grows, projects like this are about more than leisure – they're about creating community spots, encouraging active lifestyles, and reclaiming urban spaces for the people who live there. Manchester's lido isn't just a return to the past – it's a leap forward. It's a chance for the city to redefine what outdoor recreation can look like in an urban setting, blending its industrial roots with a greener, more people-focused future. So, while we wait for the first splash at Holt Town's new lido, it's worth pausing to celebrate how far we've come. After all, Manchester's got everything – and now, finally, it's got a lido, too."²²

The Labour lido plan set out in this pamphlet would secure the pride in place that Holt Town's new lido will bring to Manchester for people across the country.

4. THE ROLE OF MPS

Across the country, MPs face a convergence of constituency pressures:

- Local environmental and swimming groups campaign on river pollution and demand action against water companies for sewage discharges to address it.
- At the same time, community lido campaigners urge MPs to support funding bids to restore much loved derelict local pools or build new.

Often, these campaigns overlap and reinforce each other – reflecting a growing widespread public aspiration for more places to swim safely in the open air in fresh water. For an MP this can create unmanageable expectations.

MPs have limited direct leverage over either.

- River water quality is partially shaped by regulation of water companies and enforcement by agencies. An opposition or backbench MP can campaign vigorously about sewage spills – which many have done – but cleaning a river is a multi-year technical challenge outside of an individual MP's control; as the Cunliffe review sets out, it is in many cases outside the control of any one agency or institution, including the water company. Successive governments have struggled to create viable plans to solve pollution to the extent that is needed for safe swimming.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Providing a new or restored lido is even harder for an MP, as it usually requires the local council to prioritize funding for the project. MPs do not have influence over council budgets, and increasingly, as

ⁱⁱⁱ The Commission has heard that there is overreliance on the water industry to deliver environmental improvements. The water industry is comprised of large companies with guaranteed revenue streams which can be directed towards improving water outcomes through the price control process. Other sectors that impact the water system are more diverse and do not have equivalent funding mechanisms available for addressing water quality issues. For example, projects in the agricultural sector, such as Environmental Land Management or the Slurry Infrastructure Grant, are voluntary and only provide payments for specific environmental actions. Similarly, there is a lack of funded plans for remediation of impacts on the water environment from road run-off [Independent Water Commission Final Report](#) p 50

an escalating and disproportionate volume of council budgets is reserved for statutory social care responsibilities, leaving in some cases barely 10 per cent of budgets distributed amongst the discretionary services councils most voters actually see, nor do councillors. And if the local authority says it cannot afford a lido, an MP can formally do nothing. An MP cannot simply deliver a pool via parliament.

Thus, MPs are increasingly forced to become mere commentators on these issues. The public is losing patience with the inability of democratic representatives to achieve change, and, understandably, does not draw fine distinctions about jurisdiction – they just see that nothing is being done. This frustrates MPs who genuinely want to help but currently have few levers to do so.

Many of the 2024 intake of Labour MPs have been among the most vocal champions of lidos, including:

- Andrew Pakes, the MP for Peterborough, has successfully campaigned to save Peterborough's lido, and has sponsored parliamentary debates to highlight the wider importance of lidos.²³
- Jack Abbott, the MP for Ipswich, has championed the efforts to restore Broomhill lido. The pool has been closed since 2002, but after two decades of campaigning, a £10m restoration (with National Lottery funding) is finally underway and aims to reopen the lido in 2026.
- Worthing MPs Dr Beccy Cooper and Tom Rutland have been working to secure funding to restore and reopen the grade II listed Worthing seafront lido.
- The MP for Stroud, Dr Simon Opher, is campaigning to fix and reopen the art-deco Stroud lido, built in 1937, which closed in 2025 after the council announced it could not afford the £5m refurbishment costs for the lining, pump, valves and pipework that it had been advised were necessary.
- The MP for Bishop Auckland, Sam Rushworth, backs the reopening of Stanhope lido.

But only a minority of lido campaigns have been successful.

5. THE EROSION OF CIVIC PRIDE

The decline of lidos and other public amenities is symptomatic of the wider failure of local democratic politics over recent decades. Voters expect their councils to provide visible, quality public services: parks, playgrounds, libraries, sports facilities, swimming pools. Yet councils have been increasingly unable to do so, largely due to financial constraints, despite steadily rising council tax rates. This has created a disconnect: people feel they pay more and get less from local government.

Following years of Conservative cuts to central government funding for councils, more than half of local authorities' budgets are now consumed by social care alone. According to a 2025 House of Commons report, 58 per cent of English councils' spending goes to statutory adult and children's social care – a proportion that has steadily risen with growing demand. In some councils, that figure is over 70 per cent. This essentially squeezes out everything else – the so-called “discretionary” services which, though not legally mandated, are vital to community wellbeing and civic pride.

The numbers are stark: between 2010 and 2023, as councils shifted spending to social care, at least 1,376 libraries and 1,243 youth centres closed across England. In the same period, over 1,600 public toilets were shut. Leisure facilities like lidos, while less easily counted, have suffered the same fate – many were closed or handed to volunteer groups. Essentially, councils have been forced to abandon “quality of life” services to fund the life-and-death responsibility of care for the elderly, disabled, and vulnerable.

This trend has major political ramifications:

- **Eroding trust:** Residents see their council tax bills rise year after year (often above inflation) while the leisure centre's hours are cut, the bin collection is less frequent, potholes abound – et cetera. The perception of decline is widespread and growing. The Commons health and social care committee reported in 2025 that councillors across multiple cities warned of public anger that “they are paying far more in additional council tax every year and getting less” in visible services.
- **Democratic frustration:** Councillors themselves are frustrated that so little of their budget is discretionary. The Local Government

Association noted councils “are no longer able to respond flexibly to local needs” because mandatory care so dominates finances.²⁴ So even if a council leader wants to revive a lido, the cost pressures facing them for statutory services represent an obstacle too great for most local authorities to circumvent.

- **Loss of civic pride:** The 1930s lido programme was about celebrating public infrastructure. In 2026, by contrast, many councils are struggling to maintain basic services. The closure of iconic local amenities has a psychological impact – communities feel neglected and hollowed out. It is precisely the totemic, tangible infrastructure, such as lidos or railway stations, that signals to citizens that their government cares. Without it, civic pride, or “pride in place” as the government terms it, is diminished.²⁵

All of this contributes to what can be described as a failure of the political system to align outcomes with public expectations. People vote for councillors expecting them to maintain and enhance local infrastructure. Councillors themselves often expect to be able to do that. Instead, they are drawn into the role of underfunded care providers.

Restoring that balance – ensuring that voters see tangible benefits from their contributions – is essential for the health of local democracy. The ‘People’s Pools’ programme is about democratic renewal. It would signal that local government can once again deliver things that the majority of voters can see and use.

6. FUNDING HURDLES AND VIABILITY

Any serious policy to rejuvenate lidos must grapple with the costs – both the upfront capital expenditure to build or restore facilities, and the ongoing operational costs to run them.

Capital costs: Recent projects suggest £5-10m as the ballpark estimate to construct or fully restore a decent-sized lido in the UK. The ‘typical’ figure seems to be £7-10m per lido. Simpler refurbishment of an existing pool can be less.

But £5-10m per lido is a sum that most individual councils find prohibitive. It often exceeds the entirety of their annual capital budgets for leisure. This is why so many campaigns stall at the fundraising stage – raising £5m through cake sales and local grants is impossible.

However, viewed nationally, these numbers are tiny. They are a rounding error in the budget of HS2. A modest reallocation of national funding or a dedicated fund could finance dozens of lidos if prioritized. The key is finding a mechanism to unlock that capital funding without needing to draw upon council coffers that are already empty.

Operational costs and viability: If a lido is built; can it sustain itself year-to-year? Some have claimed that outdoor pools inevitably lose money and burden councils. While pools can require subsidy, especially if entrance charges are capped to maximise access, the gap is not necessarily large, and there are ways to boost viability.

- **Expense factors:** Heating (if year-round), staffing (lifeguards, engineers), maintenance, and insurance are the main costs. Many lidos choose to heat water to extend the season. Filtering large volumes of water and upkeep of older structures can also be costly.
- **Revenue:** Ticket income, season “membership” passes, on-site cafes, and ancillary facilities (gym, spa, events) can offset costs. A well-utilized lido on a hot summer day can generate thousands of pounds in entry fees. Some lidos, like London Fields and Charlton, have

greater year-round popularity thanks to year-round heated operation and a growing number have packed swimming lanes even on winter mornings.

- **Subsidy context:** Councils often subsidise indoor pools, too. Seldom do public swimming pools make a profit. The question is how large the subsidy is and if it is recognised as worthwhile in return for wider social benefits. In Peterborough's case, the lido's net cost was around £400,000 per year before recent cost-cutting. After implementing savings, the subsidy may be reduced to around £120,000 per year.²⁶ For a unique civic amenity with tens of thousands of visits each summer, that is surely not outrageous.
- **Economies of scale:** A patchwork of separate councils running one lido each might miss opportunities to share resources. If a larger body helped coordinate, bulk purchasing of chemicals and shared mobile maintenance teams could reduce costs. Some regions might adopt a "hub and spoke" model, with one operator managing multiple lidos across a region and drawing on centralised expertise.
- **Extended seasons:** Many revived lidos use heating, covers, and programming (winter swims, Christmas events) to extend their season and bring income beyond July-August. This partly reflects climate change and the extension of hotter and warmer weather beyond "peak summer". Moreover, over the last decade there has been a clear growth in year-round outdoor swimming demand, and more lidos than ever have a regular group of winter swimmers.

While a new lido might need some ongoing subsidy, this should surely be weighed against the considerable social value it provides: a swimming facility for schools (teaching children to swim in cold water and manage cold water shock is a vital lifesaving skill);²⁷ the health benefits of outdoor exercise and a safe place to swim in summer heat; the benefits of tourism and civic pride. Narrow cost-benefit accounting often fails to capture these.

There is also the potential for innovative cost-sharing: linking a lido with a datacentre to lower energy costs.

Tackling the financial challenge of lidos requires a structured approach. This is why restoring the role of the water utilities, the modern successors to the municipal water infrastructure utilities that played key roles in building many of the original lidos, and who have both capital and relevant operational know-how, is so important to unlock this.

Why involve water utilities?

While water utilities primarily deal with drinking water and sewage treatment, there are clear and compelling reasons to involve them in a lido rejuvenation programme, especially under a revised regulatory mandate.

1. **Expertise in water infrastructure:** Building and maintaining a lido (essentially a large tank of clean water with filtration) is essentially a water engineering challenge. The water utilities are the organisations in that manage large bodies of water, pumps, filters, and treatment systems every day. They employ thousands of engineers who design and operate reservoirs, treatment works, and networks. They have intrinsic expertise in designing, constructing, and operating freshwater facilities. For them, the circulation and filtration system for a municipal swimming pool should be less complex than a drinking water treatment plant. They also have deep expertise in water quality standards.
2. **Project delivery capacity:** A major challenge for local authorities is that few have architects or engineers on staff who would have practical experience relevant to building or restoring a lido. Water companies, in contrast, regularly invest billions of pounds in capital projects. They have project managers with relevant experience, and civil engineers. Involving them could accelerate lido projects and ensure competent delivery to high standards, filling the in-house expertise gap that councils have lost. Instead of the extra cost implicit in each council reinventing the wheel, a water company could potentially act as an implementation agency for a suite of lidos, achieving greater cost-effectiveness.
3. **Existing assets & sites:** Some water companies have existing water assets that could be leveraged. For example, they own many reservoirs that might have recreational areas on the surrounding land. While lidos are usually urban, in some cases it might be viable for water companies to integrate lido facilities near reservoirs or link them to water treatment facilities to supply clean water. The water companies' property portfolio could offer optimal site options that councils could not otherwise access. In some cases, the sites were themselves formerly municipally owned and transferred under the Water Act 1973 to what became the regional water companies.
4. **Social responsibility alignment:** Over the last decade, some water utilities have made a point of embracing a 'social purpose'. Anglian Water even amended its articles of association to this effect. Water utilities are under pressure to rebuild public trust due to pollution controversies and billing issues that have in some regions been severe. Funding or facilitating lidos could be a flagship social project for water utilities and demonstrate their commitment to give back to communities as 'local champions' of clean, fresh water.
5. **Obligation and incentives:** Importantly, the water companies currently lack an obligation to do any of this. However, the forthcoming water reform bill provides an opportunity to impose new obligations and create incentives. If the government (and the new regulator replacing Ofwat) were to require companies to develop social infrastructure plans or allow a portion of regulated investment towards community projects,

lidos would suddenly become much more appealing to them. These changes could even be structured as part of their operating license conditions or performance metrics, which would help realise recommendation 53 of the government's Cunliffe review to “reset the sector in line with public interest.” More broadly, it could effectively unlock a large pool of private capital for public good at a time when taxpayer funds are tight.

6. **Financial resources:** The combined annual capital expenditure of English water companies is some £9bn.²⁸ Even a small part of that, or of their environmental improvement funds, could build multiple lidos. Ofwat operates according to 5-year asset management plan (AMP) cycles. If each of the nine major regional companies devoted perhaps £10-20m per AMP cycle (a small fraction of overall budgets), that would be £90-180m in total – enough to build 10-20 new lidos nationwide every AMP. These companies can raise finance more easily than local councils, and if such spending were allowed in their asset base, it could be achieved without a meaningful impact on bills. A small bill component that visibly delivers community swimming facilities might prove popular.
7. **Regional coordination:** The water utility regions remain those created by Ted Heath's government, which sought a clean break with Britain's tradition of municipal water infrastructure, and they do not directly align geographically with local councils. But they cover logical geographical areas, and as such, they could help ensure an equitable distribution of lido provision. For example, a company like Yorkshire Water could coordinate with all councils in Yorkshire to identify priority locations so that every major population centre gets a lido (or more) without duplication or gaps. This “helicopter” view is hard to achieve with fragmented councils alone. A utility could act as a regional planner to optimize who gets what and avoid, say, five councils all trying to build in competition or a whole area getting overlooked. This could link to recommendation 3 in Labour's Cunliffe review.^{iv}
8. **Environmental synergy:** Clean, safe water is (theoretically) their business. For water companies, championing lidos would be complementary to their environmental mission: providing a safer alternative to river swimming *while* they work on cleaning rivers. It is not an either/or – and many swimmers enjoy both lidos and “wild”

^{iv} Par 91: “A systems planning approach would address the ‘missing middle’ in the current system and give greater decision-making responsibility over water investment planning to people, organisations and authorities with a stake in their local water systems. Such an approach would consider the needs of current and future generations in planning for the delivery of water system outcomes, including water quality and supply. While some water system planning functions already exist, including regional planning for water resources and some environmental outcomes, they are dispersed across different organisations, operating at different spatial scales, and often lacking clear accountability. Recommendation 3: A comprehensive systems planning framework should be introduced for England and Wales, with responsibility for integrated and holistic water system planning. In England, the systems planners should be regional – or ‘regional water authorities’. In Wales, the systems planner should be a national authority”. [Independent Water Commission Final Report](#)

water. Water companies have the expertise, organisational capacity, and, if directed, the capital to unlock a lido revival. But the policy framework needs to be created, which can be achieved via the water reform bill.

The next section outlines how this plan could work in practice.

7. USING THE WATER REFORM BILL

Set out below is a plan to build or restore dozens of lidos over the next decade to ensure safe and clean outdoor swimming is once again accessible by the many rather than the preserve of the privileged few. The plan leverages water companies' expertise and resources under new obligations introduced in the upcoming water reform bill. To implement the plan, the bill, which is set to overhaul water regulation and replace Ofwat, would include specific provisions requiring water companies to support lido development as part of their licence to operate and ESG commitments.

This approach links explicitly to the critique of the existing system in the independent review of the water sector conducted by Sir John Cunliffe, especially section 2 and recommendation 3.

The key elements of the proposal are:

- **A statutory obligation on water companies.** Each water utility in England would have a duty to “promote and facilitate public access to safe outdoor swimming” in its region. This duty would be analogous to existing obligations on water quality and conservation. The legislation could be phrased to require companies to cooperate with local authorities to ensure a minimum provision of lidos per population or area. For example, one option could be to stipulate that each water utility must ensure, by a certain date, and with milestones along the way, that in each unitary authority, or defined population centre, within its region, there is at least one functioning public outdoor swimming facility, provided in partnership with local democratic stakeholders. The duty would set the outcome but allow flexibility around how to achieve it. Thus it could encompass building a new lido, refurbishing an old lido, or building or creating a swimming lake as has been undertaken so successfully at Beckenham Place Park in south-east London.
- **Regulatory enforcement.** The new water regulator (replacing Ofwat) would enforce this obligation. Companies would submit lido provision plans as part of their business plans. Failure to deliver

could result in penalties or adjustments to their allowed revenue, creating a strong incentive to comply. Exemplary performance, such as delivering ahead of schedule or above requirements, could be incentivised via reward in the regulatory settlement.

- **Clear roles and responsibilities.**
 - The water utility would act as a delivery partner. It would provide project management, engineering design, and possibly ongoing maintenance support (especially for water treatment aspects). It might also contribute capital – for example, by matching funding from a council or covering a certain percentage of costs.
 - Individual local authorities would identify sites, handle planning permission, and typically own the lido once built. Councils would also be responsible for finding an operator.
 - In each region, democratic accountability could be ensured via a local authority-led Board. In cities with directly elected Mayors, such as Manchester, Liverpool or London, consideration should be given to those Mayors playing a leadership role to the Board. Consideration should also be given to the involvement of local MPs.
 - Local Lido and swimming groups would provide an important sounding board.
 - Potentially, a technical advisory team could be set up to work across water utilities (with experienced pool architects etc) to assist projects nationwide.
- **Commercial viability.** For each lido, a sustainable operating model would be devised.
 - Where feasible, all lidos would incorporate revenue-generating elements (gyms, cafes, event spaces) to help offset costs.
 - Some lidos could be run by existing leisure operators under contract.
 - Water utilities might offer ongoing technical support – for example, water quality testing services or emergency repairs assistance – with which they would be well placed to assist. This would reduce the burden on councils and on contracted leisure operators.
 - Potentially, lidos could receive a small endowment from the local water company each year. For example, a utility might

commit £50k per year for 10 years to a certain lido's upkeep, built into its business plan as an operating cost. This would be negligible from the perspective of the water company, but valuable for the pool's budget.

- **Scale and deployment.** A goal could be set: for example, "25 new or restored lidos by 2030/35." The distribution might be informed by a needs analysis or demand assessments, focusing on large towns and cities currently without any outdoor pool, and on areas of health deprivation that would especially benefit. Water company regions would need to cover both urban and rural areas: each company might facilitate 3-5 lidos initially, or more if capacity allowed. The programme would not be able to build hundreds of lidos overnight, but even restoring a few dozen would have a meaningful impact.

There are several options for the programme's funding structure. The government could:

- Allow water companies to include capital expenditure for lidos in their regulated asset base (RAB) – meaning they can recover it via customer bills (which would spread the cost widely). Since the amounts would be very small relative to overall spend, the impact on bills would be minimal.
- Set up a National Lido Fund financed by mandatory contributions from water companies (either a fixed amount each or proportional to company size). This fund would then invest in specific projects. Water companies could draw from it when coinvesting with councils.
- Use an offset mechanism: companies that invest in lidos could get credit against specified penalties or targets. For example, if a water company is facing a fine for missing a leakage target, it might be required to channel that money into a local lido project (provided the public benefits are comparable). This would effectively turn some punitive fines into constructive investment, with tangible outcomes of local value.
- There is also the potential for wider private finance to be leveraged into supporting this agenda. The Cunliffe review notes that water companies are likely better placed to secure such investment than individual local authorities (apart from the largest city mayoralities).^Y

^Y A system planner could also have a role in leveraging private finance from other sectors. One of the benefits of a regional approach to water system planning is that water system improvements are at a sufficient scale to attract private sector funding. This is an important area in which a system planner may be able to add significant value to help reduce reliance on water industry funding to deliver benefits. Integrating catchment partnerships into systems planning will also help to leverage smaller scale private funding and prevent existing smaller scale funding partnerships being crowded out. [Independent Water Commission Final Report](#) p 64

If Labour implemented the People's Pools plan, it could expect a number of positive outcomes.

- **Improved public health:** more people swimming and exercising could help to tackle obesity and poor mental health.
- **Greater safety:** generations of children learning to swim in lidos with lifeguards could reduce drowning incidents from cold water shock in rivers, lakes and the sea.²⁹
- **Stronger social cohesion:** lidos could build community and civic pride in places that have felt unsupported and unvalued.
- **A rejuvenation of a totemic Labour programme:** a People's Pool programme would visibly demonstrate Labour's philosophy of partnership between public and private for the common good. It would be innovative yet rooted in practical Labour history.

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