

Northbrook Swimming Pool Consultation: Analysis of how a potential closure would affect users

Context and Purpose:

At the budget-setting meeting on February 28th, 2025, Council backed a £3.5 million package of measures necessary for the authority to set a balanced budget for the next financial year.

As a result of this substantial savings are required to be found across Exeter City Council, some of which need to be identified from the leisure offer in the city. Of all the leisure facilities controlled by the council, Northbrook Swimming Pool has had a consistently low membership base of members. Despite extensive efforts to increase the membership base since the facility was brought back under the direct control of the council in 2020, there has been little improvement in numbers.

The low membership and the resulting low income have impacted Northbrook's long-term viability when combined with projected costs in repair and on-going costs to maintain the building, meant that the facility was identified for potential closure as a cost saving measure to deliver a balanced budget.

Because of this potential closure, a consultation was required with those people who would be most impacted if it were to go ahead. It was decided that in order to understand how people would be impacted, a predominantly qualitative approach to the consultation was required. This report highlights how the consultation was delivered, how the qualitative data was analysed, and what themes arose from the data that was explicitly related to the impact of a potential closure.

Process:

In line with Exeter City Council's Consultation Charter, the consultation was open for a 6-week period. The team delivering the consultation included the Consultation and Engagement Manager, and two members of staff from the Culture and Leisure Team (General Manager; Sales and Marketing Manager). An internal steering group of senior and multi-disciplinary staff also supported the delivery team at weekly meetings throughout the consultation period. Additionally, other teams within the Council were also brought into to support the delivery team with any additional requirements (for example, Demographic Services supporting responses to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests).

Methods:

A mixed methods approach was used during this six-week consultation to best understand how a potential closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool would impact its users. A survey was produced using Sanp Survey software, which ran for the whole six-week period consultation. The survey was made available online via the Exeter City Council website. A paper format of the survey was also produced, and copies were left in the reception area of Northbrook Swimming Pool. QR codes were produced as posters and were displayed at Northbrook Swimming Pool, as well as at other local community venues (ISCA Centre & Beacon Centre). When the QR code was scanned it took people straight to the online survey for completion. All those people registered as being a member of Northbrook Swimming Pool were emailed, making them aware of the consultation and giving them a link to the online survey. Reminder emails were sent out twice during the six-week consultation. The survey was also advertised on Exeter City Council's website and social media channels (Facebook, LinkedIn, X, Next Door).

The survey was mainly focussed on obtaining qualitative information and so utilised free text questions. Demographic questions were also asked as part of the survey so we were able to obtain descriptive and demographic information from those people completing it.

Survey questions

A complete version of the survey can be found at the end of this report, containing all the demographic questions that were asked in addition to the open questions. The open questions were as follows:

1. *Please just tell us a little about what Northbrook means to you, either as an individual, being part of a club, or someone who works at a school.*
2. *Please let us know how you're feeling about the news you have been told about Northbrook by Exeter City Council*
3. *Please let us know about any potential impacts that changes in Northbrook's services would have on you*
4. *What barriers might stop you going to the swimming pools at St Sidwell's Point or Riverside, instead of Northbrook?**
 - a. *I can't easily travel to either place*
 - b. *It's too expensive to travel by car*
 - c. *It's too expensive to travel by bus*
 - d. *It's too expensive to travel by train*
 - e. *It's daunting to think about joining a different leisure centre*
 - f. *You don't feel you know enough about the other places you can swim in Exeter*

g. There are no barriers to me joining a different leisure centre

**Respondents could tick all options that applied to their circumstances.*

5. *If you face other barriers that aren't listed, please let us know what they are.*
6. *Please let us know what might help you overcome any barriers that might stop you going to St Sidwell's Point or Riverside*

This open question approach was adopted so that we could start to build our understanding through prompting respondents to supply rich and in-depth insights. Observing the types of responses coming in with this amount of detail also helped the consultation team to frame the content and direction of the four focus groups.

In total 322 respondents completed the survey.

Focus Groups

In addition to the survey, focus groups were carried out with people impacted by a potential closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool. In the survey, respondents were asked if they would like to attend a focus group so that we could continue to build our understanding the impacts. Respondents could choose between four different times and dates. By offering different times and dates, it was hoped that we would be able to cater for different people's availability (i.e. morning, afternoon, evening, and weekend).

The focus groups were limited to 12 places at each one. Once each date had become fully subscribed, it was removed from the online survey and new paper copies were produced to replace older versions and reflect focus group availability. It should be noted that scope was allowed for the focus groups to become oversubscribed to a maximum of 15, in the expectation that not everybody would attend on the day. Aiming for a number of around 12 attendees would allow for the smooth running and facilitation.

Each focus group lasted for 2 hours and was delivered by a facilitator (Consultation and Engagement Manager) and the support team from Leisure and Culture (General Manager; Sales and Marketing Manager). In three of the four focus groups, there was also attendance from at least one Exeter City Councillor, who was there to listen and not participate.

Firstly the facilitator covered what the purpose of the focus groups was, establish ground rules for how the session should run and how people should treat one another throughout it, and set attendee expectation for what their feedback and insights from the day would add to the consultation process (depth of understanding as to the impacts, putting user voice at the forefront of reporting).

Once this was achieved the facilitator presented a top-line overview of the survey insights to date. This topline overview was produced without any kind of deep level qualitative analysis and instead aimed to gain a snapshot of sentiments from survey respondents. This top-line overview was given to each focus groups attendee in a handout and was talked through by the facilitator.

Once this had been completed, attendees were asked to discuss how much they agreed or disagreed with what the top-line overview of sentiments was saying. They were then asked to tell the facilitator and support team if they felt that anything was missing from the overview. This process allowed a sense-check of the direction the information being obtained through the survey was representing how people felt about a potential closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool.

Then, all attendees were given the opportunity to tell the facilitator and support team in greater detail of how a potential closure would impact them, what barriers they might face to attending a different swimming pool, and what may help overcome any barriers. Throughout the focus groups, the facilitator asked follow-up questions to attendees who spoke and asked for clarifications about what they had said so as not to draw assumptions. The support team members took notes and provided practical support during the focus groups.

In total the four focus groups were attended by 35 people – it should be noted that the 35 people came from the 322 survey respondents, they were not ‘new’ to the consultation.

Individual Telephone Calls

Within the survey, respondents were asked if they would prefer to have a telephone conversation with the team, rather than attending a focus group, to tell us more about how a closure would impact them.

The telephone calls were limited to 15 minutes each, in an attempt to replicate the amount of time focus group attendees would have had to tell the team about how they were feeling about the impacts, barriers and potential solutions in relation to a potential closure. Each person who had registered to receive a phone call received two attempts to reach them. These attempts were made on different days and at different times.

In the survey 75 people said they would like to receive an individual telephone call from the consultation team. Of the 75 only 44 gave contact details that would allow a call to take place. In total 30 calls were successfully made to those who had requested one.

Social Listening

The team also monitored social media channels to observe what was being said that related to the impacts of a potential closure to Northbrook Swimming Pool. Additionally, all information coming into Exeter City Council via email, and which related to the impact of a potential closure to Northbrook were collated.

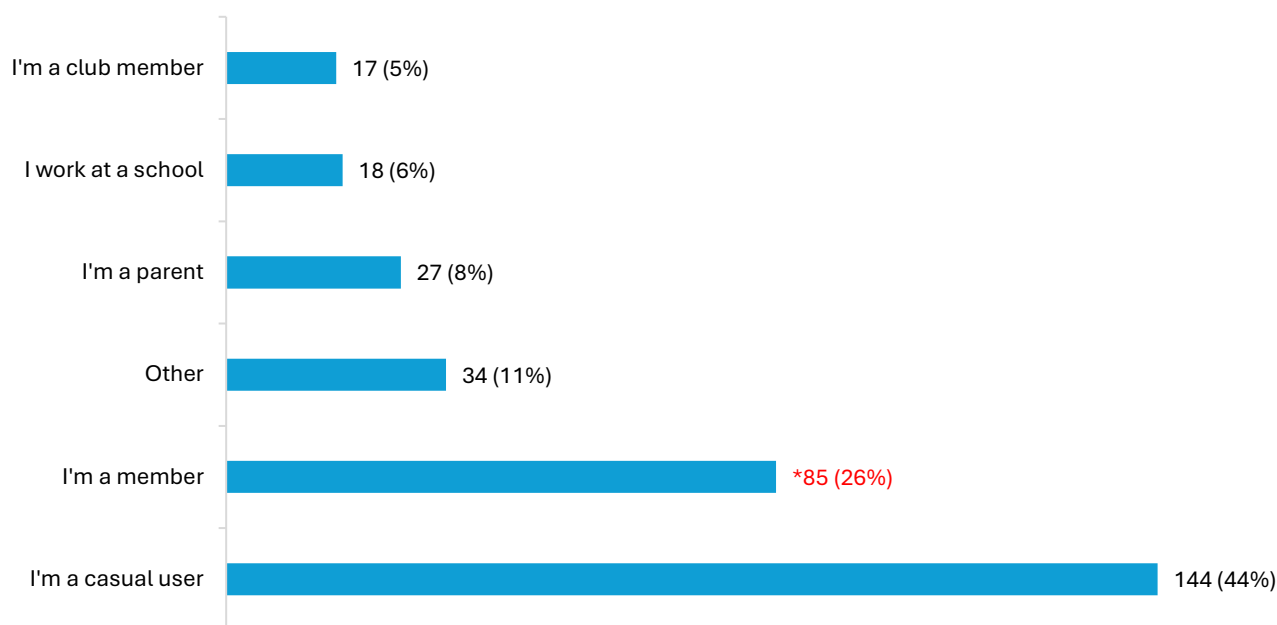
Results

The Quantitative demographic information from the survey respondents was analysed using Excel. The descriptive statistics are displayed.

Descriptive Statistics: Quantitative Analysis

In total 322 people responded to the survey within the six-week consultation period. The majority of these were online, with around 60 paper copies being inputted by hand to be combined with the online survey data.

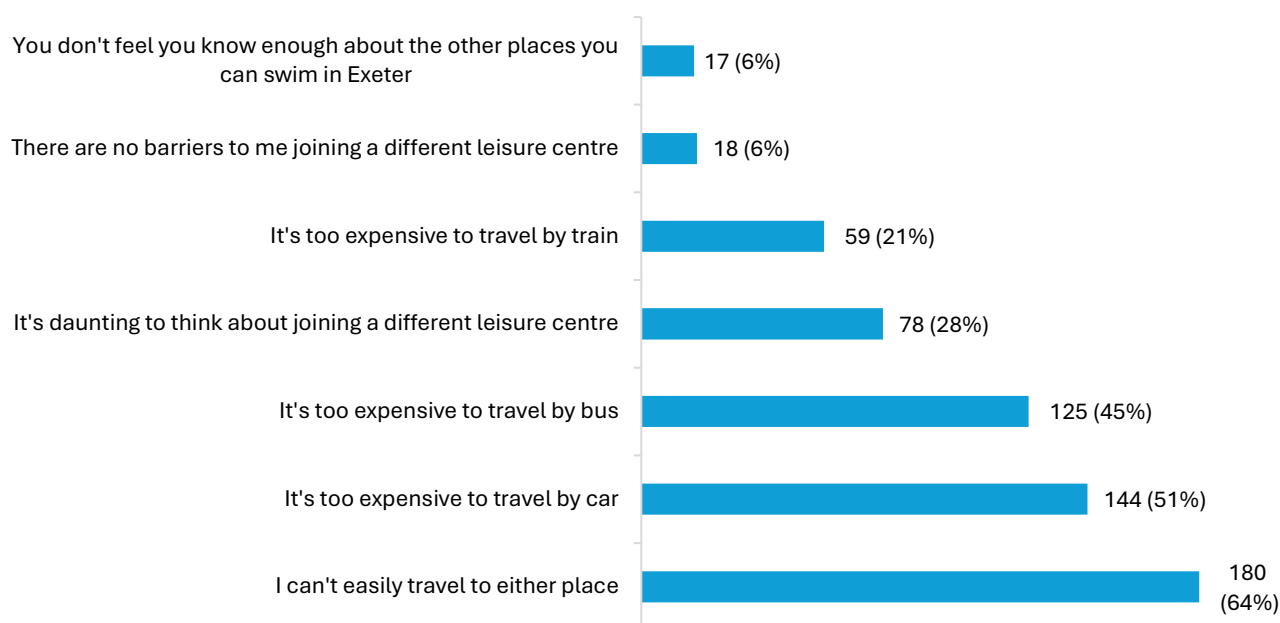
Figure 1: How People Use Northbrook



Although 34 people responded to this question with 'other', the vast majority did not add any further detail when prompted. There were some who did, such as an individual who uses the pool as a support worker, another who uses it to help her mother when she uses the pool, and another who uses Northbrook for private hire. Additionally, a Councillor in an adjacent ward completed the survey.

*Self-reported membership numbers from the consultation research outnumber the total number of Exeter Leisure members registered to Northbrook Swimming Pool (80). This is because people may have been unaware that at the time of signing up to Exeter Leisure, they (or the person who signed them up online) did not select Northbrook as their 'home' membership site. Therefore, it should be noted that more people than the officially registered number of Northbrook members (80), self-identify themselves as being a Northbrook member.

Figure 2: Barriers to Attending SSP or Riverside



The barriers listed in the survey were generated by the consultation team. It should be noted that the survey also included an option for respondents to add their own thoughts around barriers by using a free text option. Many supplied in-depth insights connected to barriers, and those responses were included in the qualitative data set for analysis.

Additional breakdowns of the barriers faced by respondents are displayed in Table 1 and Figures 6, 10, and 12.

Figure 3: Age Groups of Respondents

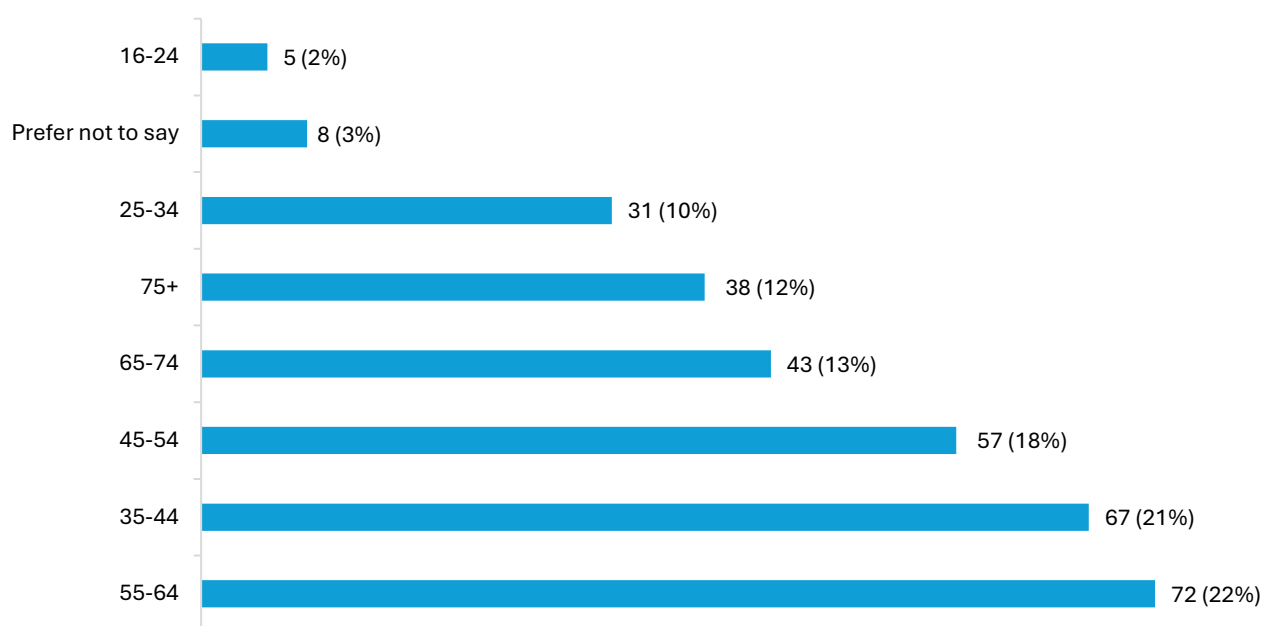


Table 1: Most Prevalent Barriers Faced Among Age Groups

Barriers faced	Age group
I can't easily travel to either place	45-54 (n=40)
It's too expensive to travel by car	55-64 (n=38)
It's too expensive to travel by bus	35-44 (n=35)
It's too expensive to travel by train	25-34 & 35-44 (n=16)
It's daunting to think about joining a different leisure centre	75+ (n=18)
You don't feel you know enough about the other places you can swim in Exeter	75+ (n=9)
There are no barriers to me joining a different leisure centre	65-74 & 55-64 (n=4)

Figure 5: Sex of Respondents

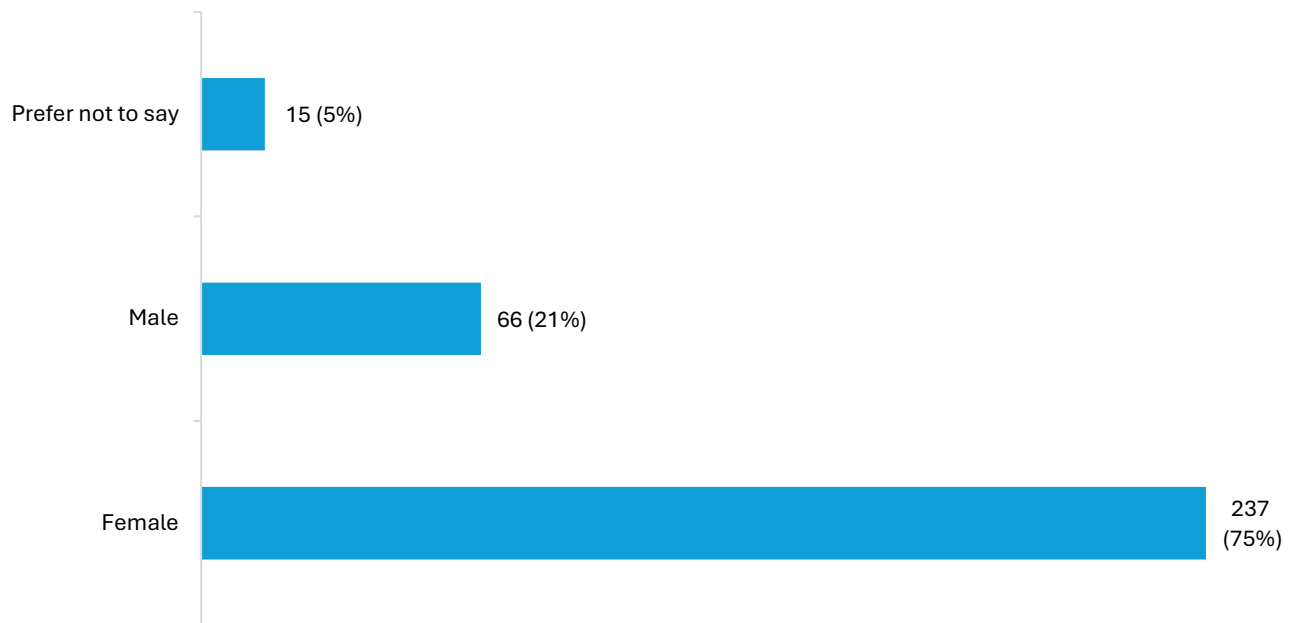


Figure 6: Barriers to Attending SSP or Riverside: Broken Down by Sex

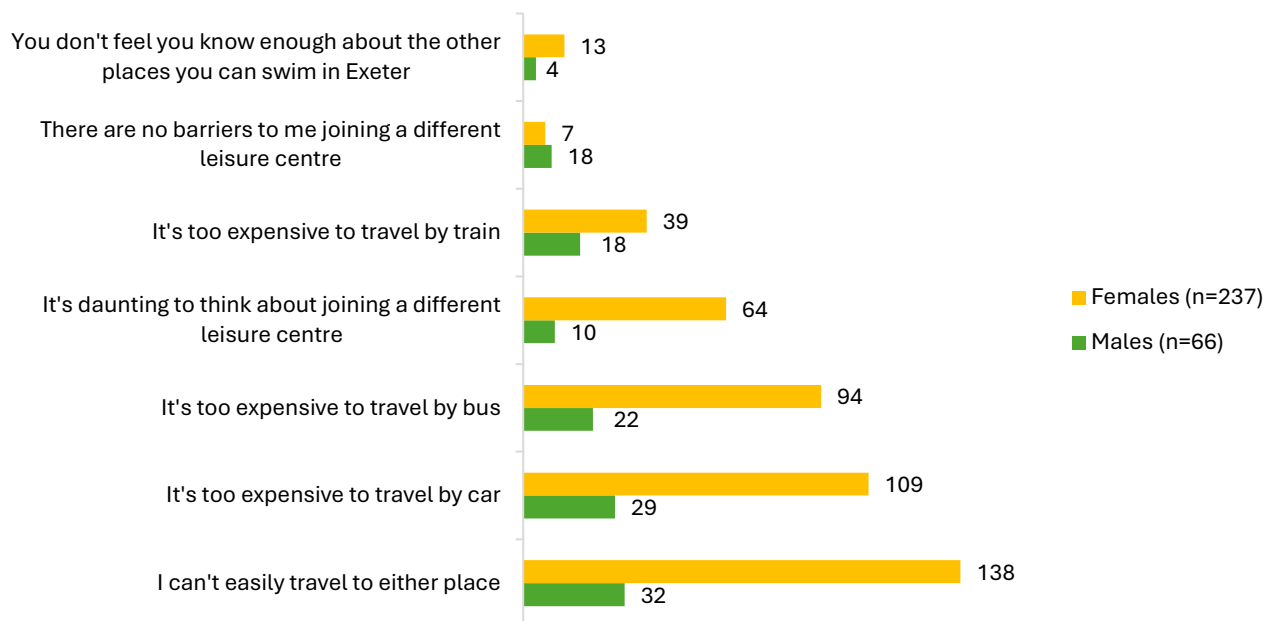


Figure 7: Gender Identity of Respondents

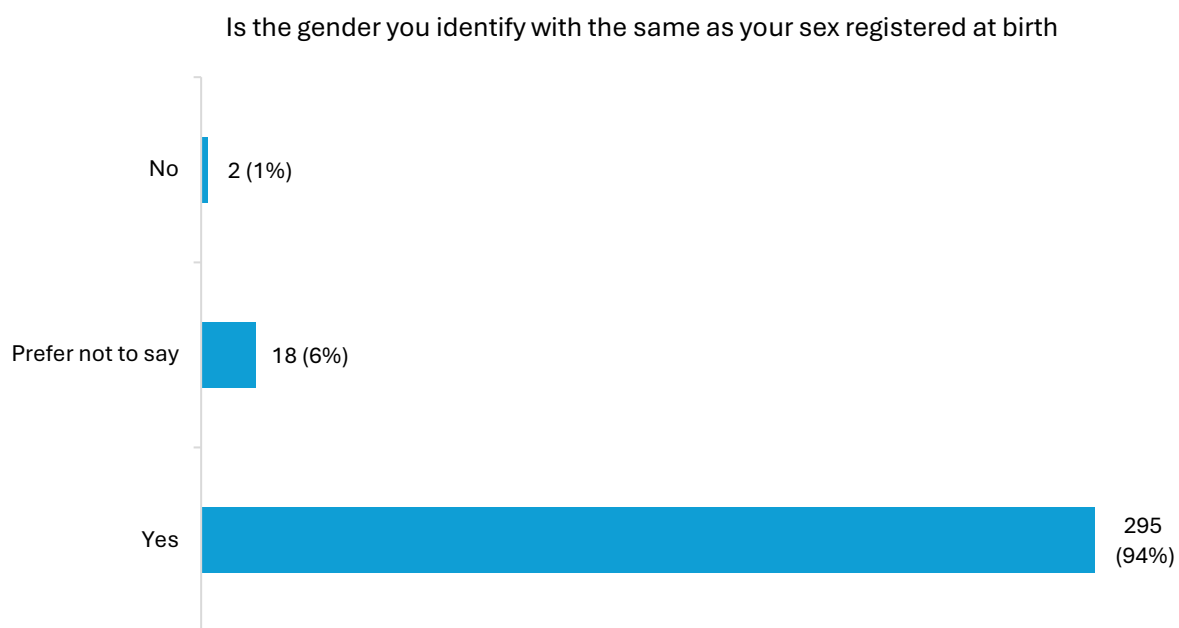


Figure 8: Ethnic Breakdown of Respondents

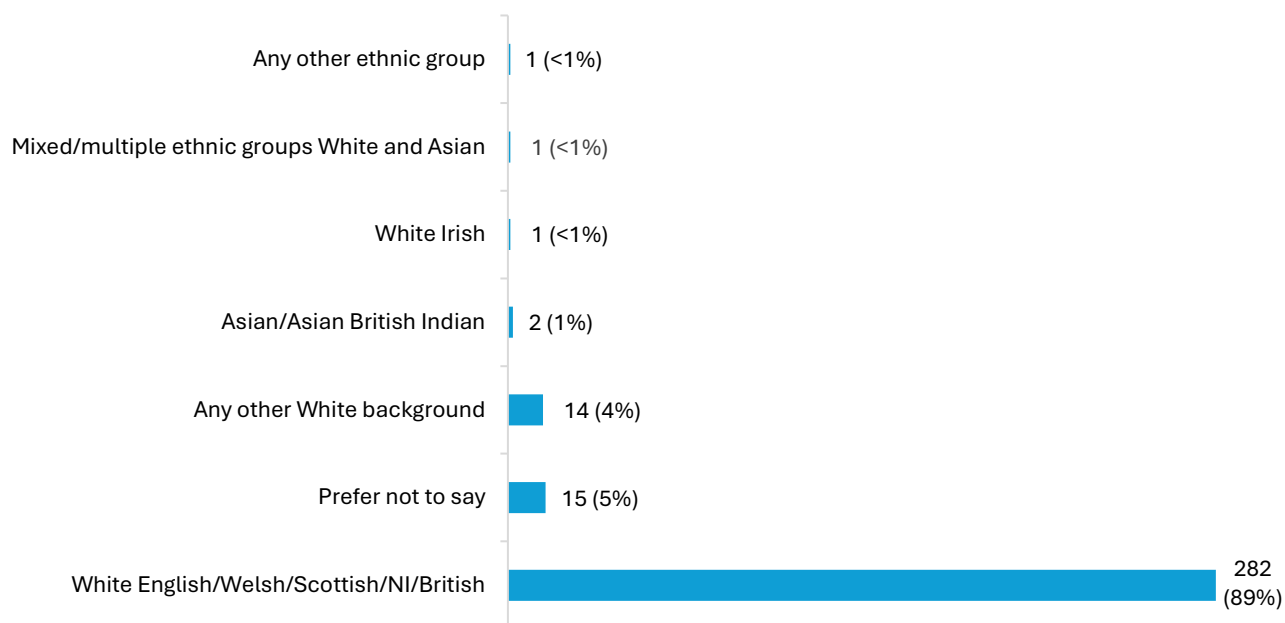


Figure 9: Respondents With a Long-Term Health Conditions

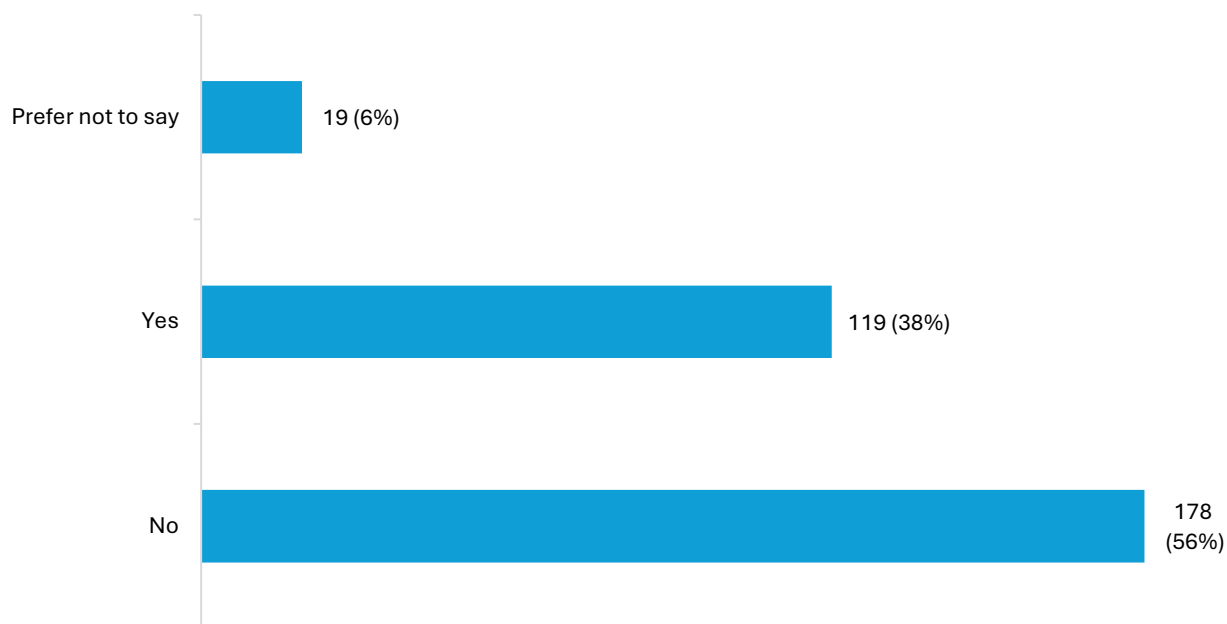


Figure 10: Barriers to Attending SSP or Riverside: People with long-term health conditions

The 119 respondents with long-term health conditions

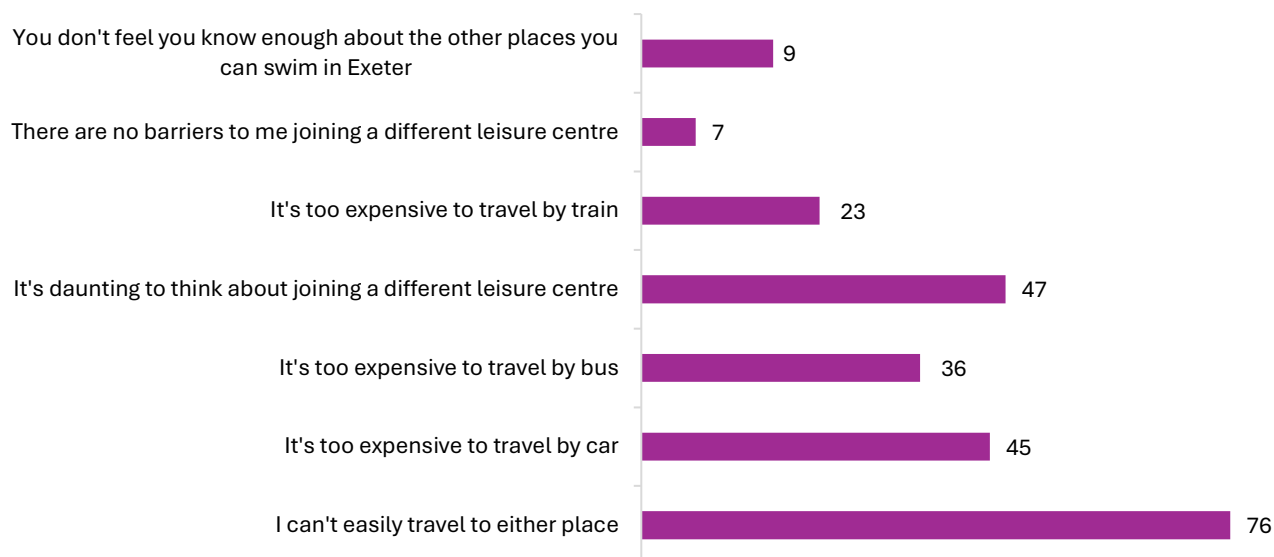


Figure 11: Tenants of Exeter City Council Housing Services

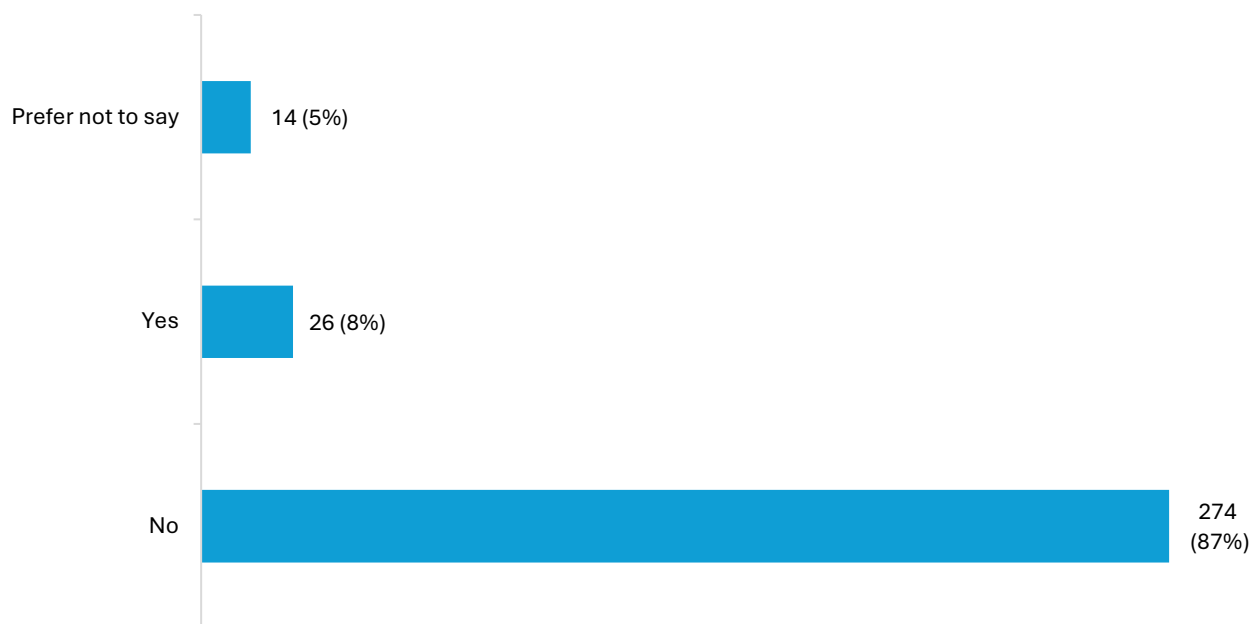
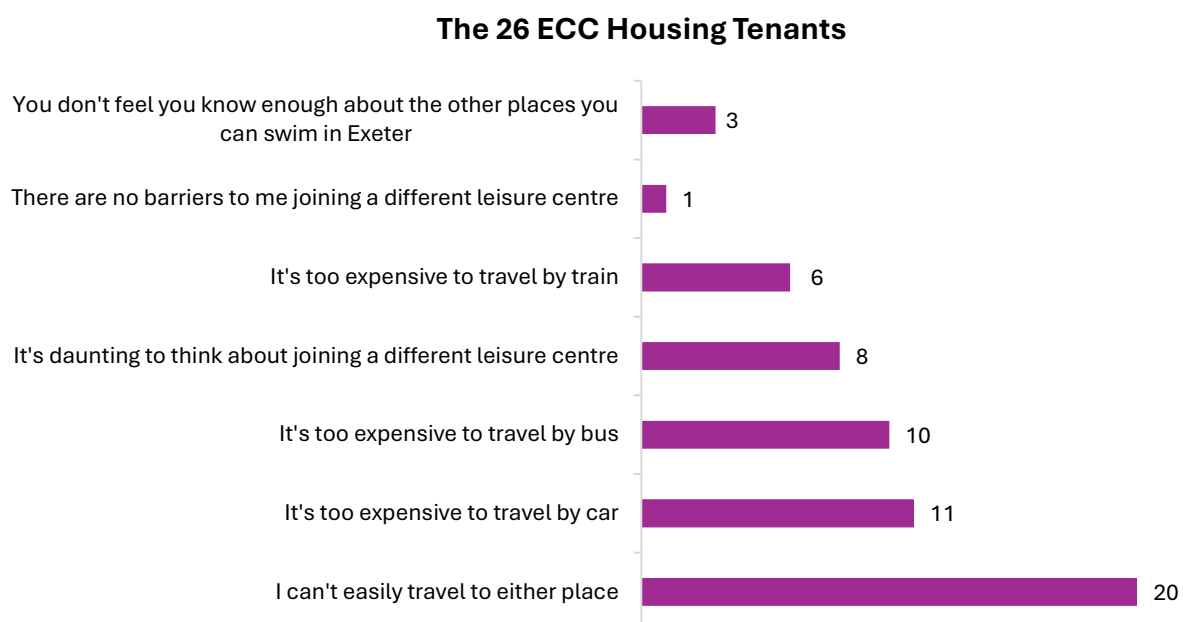


Figure 12: Barriers to Attending SSP or Riverside: ECC Housing Tenants



Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data coming from the free text survey questions, verbatim note taking from the four focus groups, social listening, and individual telephone calls were combined into one data set for analysis.

The data were analysed using the principles of inductive thematic analysis. It should be noted that the analysis was carried out with the context of the consultation front of mind, in that we were exploring the impacts of a potential closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool, the barriers users face in considering visiting alternative pools, and how any barriers could be overcome or reduced. However, the themes presented did emerge naturally from the data and are representative of the user voice.

It should be noted that the themes presented in this report were formed from the qualitative data collected from the 322 people who took part in the consultation. While specific numbers of users with views, opinions, and personal experiences will not be mentioned (in line with thematic analysis), given that a theme is presented in this report means there were widespread commonalities and agreements within the user group we engaged throughout the survey, focus groups, and telephone calls.

The themes are presented under three overarching categories:

- **Contextual** – the role of Northbrook Swimming Pool in people's lives
- **Specific impacts** – the impact of a potential closure on people's lives
- **Specific barriers** – barriers people face to attending a different council pool

A list of user thoughts of how to potentially overcome some barriers people face came out of the data and are presented as an overarching category. However, these ideas are not presented as individual themes because there was much less of a consensus about what would help overcome barriers among users, with many not giving any insights around this topic.

- **Overcoming barriers** – user Thoughts

Of those who attended the focus groups, the majority fell into the 55-64 years of age category, and more women than men attended them.

Contextual Themes: The role of Northbrook Swimming Pool in people's lives

1. Strong emotional connection to Northbrook

Among the users we heard from, there was a clear emotional connection to Northbrook Swimming Pool. This was for various reasons, such as people who had been going to the pool for much of their lives, and had seen it play an important part in their lives and within the wider community. This extended to people who had experienced a generational connection to the pool, having learnt to swim there themselves and now teaching their own children to swim there, or older people taking their grandchildren there to learn to swim. Additionally, Northbrook has been seen as a lifeline to users in difficult and trying times in their lives, while others have come to depend on the pool for a sense of structure in supporting their routines for positive mental and physical health.

User Quotes

"Northbrook has been my local pool for over 40 years I first used it in primary school through to adulthood children within my family now swim there"

"The community of the Northbrook is special. The range in ages and people who have been brought together by their love of the pool, activity and connection is unique. I have met and engaged with people I would never have if not part of my day. I love our interactions and the benefits to my wellbeing has been monumental."

"I learnt to swim a Northbrook pool in the 1970's and have such fond memories of my first 10 metres swim. Since then my family have used the pool for their own swimming"

"It's my lifeline. I have to do regular chest therapy daily and my children and I have no immune system. We can't go to busy crowded pools."

"A total lifeline for myself and the community it has been a lifesaver in my cancer recovery. Northbrook has been my lifeline over many years. It has been my haven when life is rough."

"Northbrook is a great local community pool which I use several times a week for both swimming and aqua fit classes to improve both my physical and mental health"

"I have found it hugely beneficial for myself in terms of physical and mental health and also in helping me feel part of the local community."

"I feel for everybody for mental health problems as it's not fair. I've been going for many years and suffered with mental health problems, and it is so so sad [to think of it closing]. I learnt to swim there with my mother-in-law and if anybody could see how I feel inside, it kills me."

2. An important educational provision

Northbrook users identified the pool's importance in the education of children. This was clear from users representing schools that use the pool, but also from others unconnected to schools, but very aware of schools using Northbrook. It was highlighted that for school children learning to swim is an important life skill and helps in gaining water confidence and water safety. Additionally, it was noted that Northbrook being a smaller pool with fewer users offers a comfortable environment for SEND school children who use the pool for lessons. Having Northbrook playing a role in the education of local children in a deprived area of the city was seen as important.

User Quotes

"Free swimming lessons my child has had at Northbrook through Willowbrook School have enabled my child to learn confidence in the water"

"Northbrook is extremely important to the school. We cannot afford swimming lessons for our daughter and we have relied on the school being able to teach her"

"Northbrook is vital to Ellen Tinkham school, our children would not be able to access the other pools in Exeter. Many of the children learn important life skills such as; water confidence, water safety, and swimming"

"I am a parent of a child attending Stoke Hill school and feel strongly that the children benefit from swimming at the pool and also walking there from school. It would not be easy for them to access SSP as there is no parking and it is not a particularly easy/safe route to walk to the centre"

"My son has been to Northbrook regularly with his school to learn to swim. Having a local swimming pool means that they were all able to walk there."

"It is important for my child's learning to swim. Closing the Northbrook pool would severely affect my child, as learning to swim is a vital skill"

"Northbrook is vital to our local schools and the life skills it gives our children in teaching them how to be water safe"

"Northbrook is the location of our school swimming lessons. Swimming lessons provide a vital life skill to our very deprived families."

"The pool is vital for the children at stoke hill Junior School. It's a safe walk from the school"

"It's very important to me that my children are able to use a local pool to learn to swim in via their school, Stoke Hill."

"I bring disadvantaged students to the pool once a week from St James School. Since starting this club these students have grown in confidence"

3. A community and social hub

A clear and consistent sentiment from users of Northbrook, was the sense of community and belonging it offers to the people who use it regularly. Many spoke emotionally about the social connections and friendships they had formed through visiting the pool over many years, or over just a few months. There was a sense that many people viewed the friends and connection created at Northbrook as their support network. It is seen as a welcoming place that helps users from different walks of life tackle loneliness and isolation, and this was particularly true for older people, young mothers, and people with neurodivergence. The community feel of the pool is perpetuated by how local it is to many users, offering a convenient location for swimming that fits around people's life circumstance.

User Quotes

"I feel that Northbrook is viewed by many people who use it as a valuable space to socialise - people are always friendly and spend time chatting in the changing room afterwards"

"Northbrook pool is not just a pool, it is a mini community and provides an essential service to both the young and old."

"Northbrook is an important part of my life. It is not just another swimming pool. It is the heart of a community where the regular users know each other well and support and encourage each other"

"Northbrook epitomises a community resource which is personal, supportive , encouraging and provides opportunities to build social relationships with other users."

"I have met many friendly people there. I always chat with people when I am there which does not happen in other leisure resources people use this as a place to get out and see people / socialise/ see a friendly face."

"I have seen firsthand how the local community benefit from its use - it is a social venue as well as a health centre. If it closed, I fear it would make me and others less likely to access swimming on an ad hoc basis."

"Through aquafit and just going to the pool I've made so many friends because of Northbrook. A group of us meet every week at ISCA for coffee and breakfast too"

"Sadly I lost my husband last year, and still go to Northbrook on my own three times a week. It helps with my fitness after having hip replacements and a knee replacement. It also gives me a chance to socialise and meet up with many friends, all of who I have met through Northbrook. Northbrook gives me purpose and motivates me to leave the house."

"My daughter learnt to swim at NB and loved it, I went to mother and toddler groups there, met valuable people"

Specific Themes: The impact of a potential closure on people's lives

1. Fear of missing out on education

There was a certain amount of fear among parents, school representatives, and general users of Northbrook Swimming Pool, that if the facility were to close, local children would miss out on vital education. People felt that local schools would struggle to provide swimming lessons if Northbrook was to close and so would not be able to meet National Curriculum requirements. People also felt that it would not be possible to fold in swimming lessons to other pools in the city due to issues around capacity at those pools. It was also noted that a closure would impact SEND children who regularly use the pool for lessons, as Northbrook provides a quieter environment which is beneficial to their needs.

User Quotes

"Swimming is part of our school curriculum and Northbrook Swimming Pool plays a vital part in ensuring that our pupils get the most out of their sessions. It would be detrimental to their learning to lose Northbrook Pool."

"My child's school will no longer offer swimming lessons to the children as part of their school week."

"It'll deprive children of the opportunity to learn to swim. Swimming lessons are a shocking cost to parents - many parents rely on children being taught swimming through school; without this pool, the schools won't teach and the children in this community are left without opportunity"

"If Northbrook closes it is likely swimming lessons will no longer be provided to pupils in our school. We require a small pool that can close access to the public. This will mean many children will no longer have access to swimming lessons."

"NB in an area of financial deprivation, without that pool the children from that area won't have the opportunity as travelling further afield is not an option for many families."

"We as a special school swim weekly, a vital experience for the children. Many have needs that make it difficult for their parents to be able to take them swimming so have no other way to learn vital water safety lessons and become confident swimmers"

"Northbrook has enabled our school to provide swimming lessons to children with complex addition needs. Northbrook is a small pool that provides a safety net for our children."

"I work in a special school and the pool and swimming is so valuable to our students for many different needs"

"My son who has complex sensory needs uses it throughout the year through school, support clubs and privately. It is vital to have resources such as this as a health and physical benefit"

2. Loss of social connections and support networks

Among users of all ages, but particularly those in older age groups, there was a fear that a closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool would mean an impact to their friendships and support networks that they have built at the pool over time. As already mentioned, for many Northbrook is not just a place for people to exercise through swimming, it is a chance for them to leave the house and interact with friends, receive and provide support. There was a fear that this community and with-it social connections and networks of support could not be picked up and transferred to a different pool location within the city.

User Quotes

“Northbrook means a lot to me and is the only thing that helps me to remain active and healthy. It's good for my mental health because it's a close nit group of people who I socialise with and meet at the pool with. Northbrook has become my only lifeline, escape, and respite.”

“The large number of people I have meet have become friends I use the pool about four times a week I would sadly miss it!”

“A local pool means we often see others we know there and it helps build a sense of community and belonging to the area. The city centre pools do not have this aspect”

“Social isolation will increase for all age groups if NB closes. This will be particularly true for older people, but also mother and baby groups. Both of those rely on NB to meet new people and get support”

“If I had to go somewhere else I wouldn't go, I only get 1 day off a week, built exercise into my routine and really important, someone to talk to, have a laugh with, its such a lovely pool, wonderful feel, for so many people having a chat with people for some is the only interaction they have all day”

“My mother suffers with severe anxiety, has had a lot of joint replacements and long-standing health issues and it's really important she exercises. She has built up a social group, at NB and the users of SSP are different. Closing NB would cause isolation for my mother, and would cause anxiety, depression - it's like a lifeline for her”

“NB is also a bit of a swim and chat, it's not just a swim, mental wellbeing is important as well, and you would not get that at SSP.”

“If they close the pool, there is no one else for us to go, its more than just a pool, it's a community”

“I use Northbrook 5 times a week, suffer from mental health issues, COPD and I use Aquafit, one session was taken away. If this closes I will spend more time in the doctors and hospital and the pool means so much to me. [Crying] And there would be no reason for me to get out of bed.”

I would lose a community of friends I have found in the months since I started using the pool.

“It would be the end of my fitness regime and the interaction with the other members of the group who are my friends.”

“A closure of Northbrook would negatively impact my mental health and my friendship groups, as a weekly member of the aquafit group. The friends I have made at Northbrook includes a coffee morning groups which has given me a lot of support.”

“Isolation. Northbrook gives me three days where I will leave my house. Without Northbrook I would be virtually house-bound and very depressed”

3. Loss of swimming as exercise and a hobby

For many people, but particularly users in older age groups, there was a strong feeling that a closure of Northbrook would impact them by taking away their only option in the city to swim for exercise with any regularity, as well as diminishing a hobby. While it was acknowledged that other local options for exercise are available, there was a clear preference (from those we engaged with) for swimming over other types of exercise, for reasons such as it being low impact, good for joint health, and positive for recovery from illness. For these people, not being able to swim locally would take away this option because of an inability to get to other pools.

User Quotes

“Not everyone feels comfortable going to the gym and I think swimming is a great alternative. It is important that our swimming pool is protected for future generations to learn how to swim, especially schools who use the facility”

“I attend aqua as it's the only form of exercise I can do with my illness.”

“Essential to me to have access to a pool that doesn't require me going into Exeter.”

“Northbrook is important to me as swimming is an ideal form of exercise for those of my age, to maintain flexibility and reduce muscle loss. I have been swimming there regularly for 8 years and had intended to continue.”

“I have been diagnosed with Osteoarthritis and my knees are particularly bad, I was advised by my Doctor to go swimming and join an Aqua fit class to help with mobility.”

“As an elderly lady swimming at Northbrook is the only real exercise I get, as I can't walk very far.”

“I won't be able to exercise, I have joint issues so swimming is the only option”

“Swimming has been very good for my developing arthritis. I will swim less and it is hard to find a replacement for this activity.”

“I need to swim for my health to get better so without it I’ll get worse

“Huge impact as I won’t be able to swim now”

“My mental health will drop, my exercise would decline. Water is a great healer.”

“Without a daily swim/Aquafit my fitness levels are going to drop as I am unable to walk any distance, swimming is currently the only exercise I can do without pain.”

“Swimming is my only hobby and the one thing I can enjoy and which helps my mental health. Without Northbrook I would be virtually house-bound and very depressed”

“Swimming is a perfect exercise for me due it being non weight bearing.”

“I just would not swim and this would negatively affect my health and wellbeing and also increase isolation.”

“I think inevitably it will mean that I swim less often, which could lead to poorer health/fitness.”

“Swimming is my only hobby and the one thing I can enjoy and which helps my mental health.”

Specific Themes: Barriers people face to attending a different council pool

1. Time and cost of travel for schools

The user group we spoke to emphasised that schools who currently use Northbrook Swimming Pool would struggle to access other pools in the city because it would increase the cost of providing those lessons to their children. This is because there was a feeling that travelling to other pools would mean incurring bus hire fees, putting pressure on already pressured school budgets. Further to this, the increased travel time it would take for schools to provide swimming lessons at other facilities would cut into the time available for other lessons.

User Quotes

“Unfortunately, we do not have the budget to hire a coach every week to take the children elsewhere and many of Exeter’s other pools would not have space to accommodate more school lesson time.”

“Local schools like St James would probably be less inclined to run swimming as an elective as its further away from school but I would also worry that there would not be availability for additional schools to use the facility and that the cost would be prohibitive”

“It would be more expensive to access a pool elsewhere for us and the schools meaning more cost to parents and schools, also cutting down learning time and making it logistically more difficult for schools to take children swimming.”

“Many of these children are from disadvantaged backgrounds and if there was a cost implication for the school of having to travel further and use transport to get to swimming lessons, rather than walking, it would have to be taken from the budget and would impact the money that could be spent on pupils’ needs.”

“Our school budget would not be able to afford a coach to travel to these other pools”

“The school and students would not have the time to be able to get to a different pool, as we walk to Northbrook and only have 90 minutes to travel there and back and run the lesson.”

“We do not have a minibus so any other travel arrangements would be too expensive and take too much of their lesson time.”

“If schools need to go somewhere else, who is going to pay for their bus? Council or parents who are already struggling?”

“We do not have the funds to pay for a coach to another location. All other swimming lessons in Exeter are highly booked or difficult to secure due to lack of swimming teachers in Exeter.”

2. Increased cost and unaffordability of alternative swimming pools

There was a strong thought that the closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool would present a substantial barrier of affordability when it came to attending different pool facilities in the city. Northbrook is seen as an affordable local option for lower income families and many older residents. The increase in cost associated with bus travel (ticket prices) and car travel (fuel costs) was seen as prohibitive for being able to continuing exercising through swimming. Additionally, the costs associated with parking at other facilities, particularly SSP, would make swimming unaffordable.

User Quotes

“Will no longer be able to swim as I can't afford the parking fees in the city centre to use St Sidwell's”

“In the holidays it [Northbrook] provides a cheap accessible trip out, very good for physical and mental health and affordable to those of us on a lower income that can't afford to travel”

“Northbrook is the only swimming pool within walking distance for a lot of the families in and around Beacon Heath who can't afford to go into town”

“If it closed then I would not pay to park in Exeter or the bus fare to use St. Sidwell's Point as the cost becomes too much”

“If Northbrook were to close, I would find it difficult financially to catch the bus into town or drive and pay for parking several times a week.”

“The cost of car parking is ridiculous therefore making a family swim unaffordable for most.”

“The parking charges in the city centre are a barrier especially as you now charge to park in the evenings. I cannot afford to pay the parking charges on top of the leisure membership.”

“We wouldn't be able to swim as a family and teach our son to swim as the other pools are out of area and budget”

“We'll have limited access to swimming opportunities for our children as we cannot get into town easily and cheaply with parking cost rises and limited bus services.”

“I would stop swimming as I cannot easily get to the other venues and it would cost too much.”

“Put simply I would no longer swim as would not be able to afford to get to St Sidwell's Point and pay to swim.”

“The parking is far too expensive in top of the price of the swim”

“Bus service too expensive for two adults and two children to go to town”

3. Travel time makes alternative pools inaccessible

A serious and multifaceted barrier for people attending alternative pool facilities if Northbrook does close is the time it would take out of their day to travel to those facilities from where they live. The reality of being time poor and not able to fit in extended travel time for swimming was felt across the user group we spoke to, from working people, parents, and older aged people. This feeling was exacerbated by the need for many to use buses to travel to alternative pools, with those buses being considered unreliable, expensive and stressful – particularly for families. People with caring responsibilities also spoke frequently about being time poor. For them it would not be possible to consider leaving the person or people they care for, for the increased time taken to travel to alternative pools.

User Quotes

“If we’re forced to travel to the city centre, we simply won’t have the time. Between work, school runs, and other commitments, it’s already difficult to balance everything, and adding extra travel time makes regular swimming lessons impractical.”

“As an 81 year old carer of my husband, I can't get to any other pools because I can't be out of the house for very long so wouldn't be able to travel there in the time I have. I would not be able to use other pools and so if Northbrook closes”

“It’s [Northbrook] the only accessible and convenient place for my child to learn to swim, and if we have to travel to the city centre, we simply won’t have the time.”

“I fit my swim around caring for my Dad on the day I use the pool so the additional travelling time would prevent me from being able to use these facilities.”

“Northbrook is closer so I can walk there, swim and be back for the start of work. The other pools are further / involve driving and parking and traffic.”

“Northbrook is the only local swimming pool which you can access with busy working life. If I join the other centre, I need to re arrange my working day, which will impact the time I can spend with my children.”

“As a working parent, I don’t have the extra time needed to travel further for swimming lessons. Northbrook fits into our routine, and adding a longer journey would mean my child simply wouldn’t be able to attend regularly.”

“To get to riverside on the other side of the city takes forever! And to get to the city centre would cost me £10 on the bus or similar in parking. I would get the train but I have 3 children, one of whom is under 2 and needs a pushchair - the local train station isn’t accessible.”

I'm very time constrained and rush around trying to care for my parents. The time it will take to get to SSP, if I can get a class space, having the constraints with more people means I might not get a space

No bus service takes most of the day to travel there and back as a care giver for my husband I can’t leave him that long.

I cannot leave my disabled wife for the longer periods of time that would be required to attend a different pool.

4. Alternative pools are intimidating

There were users who find the other pool facilities in the city (SSP and Riverside) intimidating, overwhelming and anxiety inducing. This links back to people appreciating the smaller size of Northbrook, the friendly atmosphere being more welcoming than the other larger pools which feel unwelcoming. This makes transitioning to those facilities a serious barrier. There was a sense from users that these issues would be exacerbated for those with mental health conditions, those who are neurodivergent, and older people. There was also an acknowledgement here that playing a part in other pools being intimidating, was fear of not being able to transfer friendships groups and support networks to the other facilities because of capacity issues and issues with everyone being able to travel.

User Quotes

“Personally, I would have to use St Sidwells pool which would be difficult for me due to my anxiety issues.”

“It would really be detrimental to mental health and wellbeing. It would cause distress as an autistic person to have such a change and have my routines disrupted.”

“I would like to see the [Northbrook] pool stay in use more so that the other two, especially the one in town which I find intimidating and less accessible.”

“I choose Northbrook over the other Exeter facilities because it feels less overwhelming and even though it’s open much less, it has much more public swim time, not mainly filled with clubs.”

Northbrook is a place where I don't feel intimidated like at the other pools and the fellow swimmers are very friendly and considerate when lane swimming and I benefit both physically and mentally.

“I swim for my Mental Well-being, as its smaller place, I am able to go alone, but if it closes, that will stop me from swimming, as the City is too busy for me.”

“The city pool is a wonderful complex for families and young people but it is far too vast and daunting for the regular elderly population who swim throughout the day at the smaller, quieter facility that Northbrook provides.”

“Other centres are quite busy compared to this pool which make me not wish to use them. St Sidwell’s specifically is quite big in comparison which makes it very daunting.”

“St. Sidwell's Point isn't a facility I can see myself using and I don't feel welcome there. It's for younger people who work in the city and excludes the old, disabled, fat or otherwise not young/fit.”

“The other pools are huge and I would be far too anxious to even think of going there”

"I've been to SSP once and I've never been back, it's too intimidating and busy and full of serious swimmers. At NB everyone is friendly and you feel like you should be there."

5. Travel issues not always linked to affordability

There was agreement among the users we engaged with that there were barriers to people traveling to alternative pools, even when affordability was not an issue. Broadly speaking people spoke about very unreliable public transport, particularly related to buses. Older aged people mentioned that mobility issues would become a major barrier to them easily being able to travel across the city. Other users were reluctant to travel to the other pools because of the environmental impact these additional journeys would have, with an increased carbon footprint, pollution and congestion.

User Quotes

"With agility problems how am I going to "walk" to the bus stop with all my kit, catch a bus to town (if it arrives!) walk to the pool then after Aqua - if the class is held in the daytime! walk back to the bus stop, get the bus home (if it arrives....) then walk back to my home!!....it is just NOT possible."

"Mobility problems, so I can't use public transport. I'm elderly and not confident to drive far, and would need to park very close to the pool."

"Parking is bad at St Sidwells, and I have mobility problems. Parking at Riverside can often involve a long walk which is a struggle for me."

"Reliability of local buses especially in the evening. for a 1 hour swim at Sidwell point it would take up 3 hours of my evening to allow for buses."

"Bus infrastructure is a nightmare with buses randomly not turning up which puts people off from travelling to other pools and there is no parking for members at St Sidwells."

"I ended up in tears last time I used Sidwell pool as buses were unreliable. My neighbour collected me 2hrs later. Now there are no buses to any of the pools."

"Buses aren't reliable and are costly. Plus many people would need to take more than one bus. Riverside serves the bottom of Exeter and Alphington areas, it's a long way from Pinhoe and Cranbrook."

"Bus is too unreliable and will stop people from going in."

"Riverside is too dangerous to access by bicycle as the surrounding roads are terrible."

"We would cycle to St Sidwells but the cycle route beyond Prince Charles Rd is non-existent."

“I do not want to drive into the city to swim, adding to traffic and pollution, but any other means of transport would add 1+ hours and would not fit into my day.”

“Surely there is enough traffic coming to the centre of Exeter. Bus from Pennsylvania is too infrequent and I don’t want to add to the congestion and pollution by driving.”

“Not sustainable for people to travel outside of their area to use facilities. Increases in Carbon and pollution of people travelling.”

“The environmental impact of the extra travel also needs to be considered alongside the increased financial burden.”

“I don't want to add to traffic and pollution”

Overcoming Barriers: User Thoughts

Although that within the data we obtained from the consultation processes, users opted not to give as much information on how any barriers to attending alternative pools could be overcome, there were still some ideas that were brought forward. These are presented below:

- Cheaper parking for leisure members attending SSP or Riverside
- Free parking for leisure members attending SSP or Riverside
- Provide schools with free transport to other pools
- Guarantee that all classes currently delivered at Northbrook can be transferred directly to other pools
- Work on ways in which users of Northbrook can sustain the social connections and groups they have built up if they have to attend other pools
- Supply free or subsidised public transport for users
- Ensure that those with free bus passes can use them before 09:30am so that they can travel to other pools in the early morning
- Provide shuttle buses for people living in and around Northbrook who have mobility issues
- Improve the reliability of public transport – particularly buses
- Improve cycling infrastructure and cycling safety into the city centre and to Riverside from northeast of the city
- Introduce educational programmes to improve how users of other pools see and regard people with mobility issues who use the pools (e.g. patients, understanding of mobility issues, etc)
- Work with interested parties to transfer the running of Northbrook Swimming Pool to the local community

Conclusion

The potential closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool is a strongly emotive subject within the user groups who took part in the consultation. It is clear from the themes which emerged from the qualitative data, that if the pool closes, it will have real-world impacts on many of those users. A consultation of this type is obviously going to attract user groups who have a strong connection to the subject matter, as it should, but this does not diminish the findings that have come out of the process, because they are the people we have needed to hear from so that we could become more informed and ensure that we were not making assumptions about the feelings of users.

Within the 322 people we who took part, older people, school children (including those with SEND), carers, and lower income families are likely to be most impacted by a closure. While some barriers people face to access a different swimming pool in the city (SSP and Riverside), may be overcome by working with particular groups (e.g. schools) to find a resolution, other barriers would be difficult to overcome. This is because some of the issues highlighted in the report are deeply connected to people's life experiences, such as affordability, mobility issues, and time associated with travelling further distances with the city. Additionally, other barriers fall outside of the Councils control, such as unreliable public transport, and so there are limited options to drive improvement.

In all, this report has been carried out in a robust, thorough manner and reflects the user voice of the people who will be most affected by any closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool.