

REPORT INTO NORTHBROOK SWIMMING POOL, EXETER

INTRODUCTION

This report has been produced by the Save Northbrook Pool Campaign. It represents a summary of all the financial and related facts which we hope will assist councillors in the examination of the decision to close Northbrook swimming pool.

We welcome the Ben Langston's recent consultation report – *Northbrook Swimming Pool Consultation: Analysis of how a potential closure would affect users* – and the confirmation of so many issues we have highlighted in recent months, but we are slightly disappointed that, in the introduction, there is a restatement of the misrepresentations that have been put about by ECC. We can see that these have emanated from the original *Briefing Report* supplied to ECC and dated 24 January 2025, a copy of which has now been supplied to councillors. In a nutshell, Exeter Leisure's assertion that it costs a great deal of money to run the pool and that the closure of the pool has been caused by not enough people wanting to swim at Northbrook – 'despite extensive efforts to drive income and footfall'. It has been frustrating to see this narrative repeated and repeated in local media and on-line, and by our elected representatives. It has been depressing to be reminded by this week's article in the *Exeter Observer* that this was precisely the kind of language and tactic used by ECC when it was trying to close the Clifton Hill Sports Centre (see *Exeter Observer*, 19 June 2025).

We hope that after reading our report councillors will see that what has been presented as fact is overly simplistic and quite definitely not true.

This report goes into more depth on many issues but there are five really key points:

- **Any pool would struggle after the way our income has been decimated by Exeter Leisure**

The absolutely vital concept to grasp is that swimming pools do not succeed or fail just on the numbers of individual people who turn up to swim. To survive, all swimming pools require a mix of income from many different sources. They must have hires to outside organisations, whether schools or clubs or parties; they must run profitable classes, such as Aquafit, or classes for the elderly or swimming classes; they may have a café or a function room; and they need to charge what their competitors are charging, to swimmers and to hirers. Northbrook income has been gradually and systematically stripped out over the last four years – some of it to boost income at SSP, there is no doubt – so that no pool could be profitable on just the scraps of income from five schools and a few daytime swimmers which is all that Exeter Leisure has left us. See how our income streams have been eroded in **Section 3**.

- **Yes, ECC can afford it**

Having read our report, you will realise that the running costs of Northbrook are tiny – basic costs coming to less than £130,000 in 2023/24 – and its subsidy was just under 8% of the total leisure subsidy in 2023/24. If run properly, its income could be doubled easily, which would make it almost self-financing. ECC has enjoyed a surplus against last year's Leisure & Sport budget of £874,000, which more than covers the cut to this year's budget that ECC seeks. We suggest several other sources of funding in **Section 4**.

- **On no measure can Northbrook be identified as the worst performer in Exeter**

Councillors have been led to believe that Northbrook 'has had a consistently low membership base... [and] the low membership and the resulting low income [has] impacted

Northbrook's long-term viability', yet in 2023/24 Northbrook took more income from its members than the Arena took from theirs.

You have been told by council executives that 'the income from the centre is substantially less than it costs to run it' but in 2023/24 all 6 leisure sites across the city – 3 pools, 2 gyms and the Arena – required subsidy ie none was profitable and Northbrook received the lowest level of subsidy, at only two-thirds of the amount given to ISCA and Wonford, the two next cheapest sites to support. It has been the cheapest swimming pool to run.

- **Other parties can see that it might be profitable – why can't ECC?**

We know of at least two parties who are interested in running Northbrook or activities from that site, including swimming lessons, and we believe a formal bid is in the process of being submitted to ECC. Whilst pursuing these leads might seem a good option for the council, enabling ECC to offload Northbrook, you should also consider whether it is desirable to have a competitor in such close proximity to SSP. We know that parents preferred having swimming classes at Northbrook and find getting children to SSP a logistical nightmare, so alternative offerings would certainly be popular, and that would be considerable lost income for Exeter Leisure.

- **Swim England is concerned**

Swim England has provided us with a Water Deprivation Report (see **para 2.5**, and reproduced at the end of this report). This shows that there is already a deficit of swimming pool availability to the Exeter population in the winter months, when Topsham Pool and the University's outdoor pool are closed. If Northbrook closes, this deficit will be an all-year-round deficit and may threaten the delivery of programmes such as the annual learn to swim programme. For a city which trumpeted its huge investment in a new state-of-the-art pool in 2022, to now have a lack of adequate swimming facilities is not a good look.

Save Northbrook Pool Campaign

20 June 2025

Rates provided for hire charges, birthday party rates etc are gleaned from conversations with staff and are calculated at present day values. Hence, income figures based on these are estimates.

For ease, we generally make reference to and comparisons with SSP, it being our nearest pool and the one to which our members are most likely to go in the future.

1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1.1 Size and design of the pool

Northbrook is a small pool, roughly 19m in length, with a roof, and some changing rooms. Unlike SSP or Riverside, no other activities go on in this centre, which is why schools such as Ellen Tinkham like it – they can hire the whole facility and keep children safe in the water and, crucially, in the changing rooms.

Pre-Covid, it used to be hired once a week by naturists, who, for obvious reasons, valued the unique privacy it can provide.

The communal changing rooms are valued as the place where conversations take place and friendships begin, unlike other pools where swimmers are locked into their individual cubicles.

Although the signs at Northbrook say it is 1m (100cm) deep at the shallow end, the pool was built around 1906, so of course Imperial measurements would have been used. It is likely that it is actually 3'6", therefore, ie just under 107cm deep. This means that it hits a sweet spot of being comfortable for adults and children alike: it is better for adults than the small 20m pool at SSP (100cm) and shallower than the main 25m pool for children (variable between 123cm and 135cm). And many of our regular swimmers – being older ladies – are quite short, under 5 foot tall, so they find SSP a challenge.

This could explain one mother's comment that her son has lost confidence in swimming because of being out of his depth at SSP, and she would definitely take him to Northbrook after school if it didn't close at 3pm. Instead, he has stopped swimming.

The main pool at SSP is 25m long, too long for some. We have heard of someone with a heart condition being told by lifeguards to get out of SSP because they could not manage its 25m length and were accused of blocking the lane.

1.2 Opening times and timetabling

Northbrook is open for 41.5 hours a week; SSP is open for 89 hours a week. Unlike SSP, because Northbrook is a small pool, swimmers are not able to use it when club/group activities are going on, so it is available for lane or general swimming for just 23 hours a week. That is less than one-third of the time in which SSP can take income from swimmers.

Swim England has given us some guidance on what would be considered normal opening hours for a well-run swimming pool, although of course every pool is different:

'For example some may open as early as 5am to allow for club use. Usually their opening hours and timetabling are led by public demand as that is what impacts them financially. We have seen some operators reduce opening hours due to cost savings however this is usually fairly minimal.

Opening Hours... may differ depending on club demand but this is considered the norm for pool opening hours:

Monday to Friday: 7am–9.30/10pm

Saturdays: 7am–5pm

Sundays: 8am–5pm (some close later to allow for clubs/private hire).'

In terms of timetabling, Swim England suggests a standard one might look like this:

DAY	TIME	ACTIVITY
Mon-Fri	7–9	Lane swimming, possibly with clubs in some lanes
	9–3.30	Can vary greatly depending on the pool but is generally a mixture of schools, 50+, Aquafit, lunch time lane swims and pre-school swim lessons (0–4 yrs)
	3.30–6.30/7	Swimming lessons
	7–9	Club/public access/Aquafit
	9–10	Adults only
Sat	7–9	Lane swimming, possibly with clubs in some lanes
	9–12	Swimming lessons
	12–2	Lane swim
	2–5	Public swim/Fun session
Sun	7–9	Lane swimming, possibly with clubs in some lanes
	9–12	Swimming lessons/public swim
	12–2	Lane swim
	2–5	Public swim/Fun session
	5–close	Swimming lessons/club/private hire

The Northbrook timetable is attached to this report for comparison – both the current 2025 one and that for early 2020.

Exeter Leisure will point out that changes are made to the timetable in school holiday times, but these are minimal, amounting to just a later closing time (c 5.45), and are very poorly advertised, almost solely relying on social media. We heard in the Consultation Sessions how the equipment and floats at Northbrook have been neglected and are run down. One mother took her children to a holiday session and they found it all rather disappointing and boring, so they have not bothered to go back to the pool.

Swim England has made a recommendation that the those in charge of swimming in Exeter ‘involve our Business Engagement Team to help maximise operations.’

1.3 User numbers

In his Leader’s Budget Speech of 25 February 2025, Cllr Bialyk stated that:

‘there are currently more than 12,000 Exeter Leisure members regularly visiting our centres.’

In council emails drafting and redrafting the announcement of the proposed closure of Northbrook (received subsequent to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request) the only statement we could find was that:

‘there are more than 12,000 leisure members citywide.’

You can see that this isn’t the same as active members regularly visiting the centres.

Only a certain proportion of these people will use the pools – some will go to gyms, or to the spa, or spin classes or play badminton. And we believe people are never deleted from the list, for instance if they are students and have now left Exeter: way back in 2022 one of our supporters created at least two individual accounts for herself, due to admin problems, and now swims under an alias. The existence of these members is never verified, or where they live. Yet this huge fantasy number of active people indulging in differing activities has regularly been compared to the numbers of real people using one individual swimming pool, Northbrook.

In turn, those numbers using Northbrook are identified on site in a very ad hoc manner, by lifeguards carrying out the occasional head count, when and if they feel like it. Unlike SSP or Riverside, people come and go without being electronically registered – the plain fact is that Exeter Leisure doesn't know how many people use our pool, or how often.

The nature of 'memberships' should be explained. There are five types, as follows:

- Pay-as-You-Go membership – ie they visit centres on an ad-hoc basis and don't commit to a monthly fee. That is classed as a 'membership' but we might more naturally call them 'casual' users. So, you will appreciate that if you want to swim you must create an account and will be called a 'member', even if you only ever swim once in your entire life in Exeter.
- In addition, there are four basic types of monthly paid membership available according to the user's main activity:
 - Swim;
 - Gym;
 - Sports; or
 - Group.

An FOI answer given by ECC states that Northbrook has:

83 registered monthly/annual leisure members (ie they will be paying money) and 636 registered casual users (ie PAYG). So a total of **719**

However, after complaints from our members, Exeter Leisure has acknowledged that these figures are inaccurate, and has been updating members' profiles so as to determine the correct number with their 'home' centre as Northbrook. Figures for members (and therefore income) provided previously to us in March (and to the ECC in the *Briefing Report* of 24 January 2025) therefore need to be revised upwards (see **para 3.1**).

So, we dispute Exeter Leisure's figures that there are 12,000 members across the city; but if we use these figures as a starting point Northbrook members form approximately 6% of this total.

On 27 May we made an FOI request for a more detailed recent snapshot of leisure centre use, covering a period of less than 45 months, as follows:

- How many individuals have actually visited any Exeter Leisure centre in this period (this is not how many are registered, or how many times they went, just how many individual people turned up) to use any gym or pool.

These should also be broken down into categories (ie how many individuals have the following types of membership, including any temporarily suspended), as follows:

- Swim (further sub-divided if anyone pays for an adult membership or a child membership);
- Gym;
- Sports; or
- Group.
- Numbers for those swimming as Pay-as-You-Go members across all pools, ie in this instance it should be a total number of visits by all swimmers (both adult and children) who paid for this session.

To this request, we received the following response on 19 June:

‘Unfortunately, I am unable to provide the information requested as it is exempt from disclosure under Section 43(2) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Regulation 12(5)(e) of the Environmental Information Regulations 2004. Releasing the information to you would be likely to prejudice the commercial interests of the Council as it could allow competitors an advantage. It is the Council’s opinion that the public interest arguments for withholding the information outweigh the public interest arguments for releasing the information.

I can advise that in the last 12 months (June 2024 - May 2025 inclusive), the leisure service as a whole had 1,823,348 visits.’

We are therefore unable to give you reliable figures for member income at Northbrook, how many people have a Swim membership city-wide, or the proportion of members who swim at each site. We feel it is difficult to make an informed decision without this information.

1.4 Pay-as-You-Go members (casual swimmers)

ECC has continually put a lot of emphasis on low footfall at Northbrook, and that this is the reason for its failure. This propaganda has been perpetuated every time the story is reported, and has made regulars and locals feel like failures. People have believed the ECC narrative that ‘it’s very costly to run’, and that ‘we don’t use it enough.’ They have believed the line that we are a select band of lucky people who haven’t appreciated what we had, so deserve to have it taken away and that their council tax should be spent on something more worthwhile. We have received abuse on-line and criticism from every corner, even by members of this council at previous meetings. But as we have been attempting to point out the pool isn’t run in a way that encourages swimmers to come.

We have been told by friends, neighbours, even strangers that they would desperately like to support Northbrook but ‘the opening hours just don’t work for us.’ Many parents lament the loss of swimming lessons in such a convenient location, and would love their teenage kids to be able to mess around in the pool on a weekend afternoon, like they did.

In an attempt to show solidarity and that the pool is valued, there has been an increase in attendance recently, and new members have come to Aquafit classes – they previously didn’t know about them but general publicity has raised awareness of Northbrook. As was admitted in the Consultation Sessions, Exeter Leisure doesn’t really do ‘paper advertising’ but relies on posts on social media, such as its own app, individual pool websites and local websites such as Nextdoor, or the Labour Party’s own site. This type of advertising reaches only those who are internet-savvy or actively seeking information about leisure activities. Again more proof that there have not been any ‘extensive efforts to drive income and footfall’ at Northbrook.

We can take a look at one recent Saturday morning, when the pool was packed with families. At about 11am, we counted 14 adults and 15 children. If we were to say that all these people paid on the door as Pay-as-You-Go users, the takings for that session would have been £131.90. By contrast and working on the same basis, on an average Friday afternoon at about 2pm – the last hour before the pool closes – there typically will be 4 adults swimming, with takings of £21.40. We have been assured that staffing costs are the same for both times, but as you can see takings are vastly different, an increase of over 500%. Yet Exeter Leisure persists with a timetable where it is open to families on a Saturday only, for two hours. It is closed on Sundays. It closes before children come out of school.

1.5 Northbrook Trust

The pool is leased from the Northbrook Trust, a charity with its roots in a Victorian trust called the Devon and Exeter Reformatory Farm School for Boys. As such, it continues to have supporting young people under the age of 25 as one of its main tenets.

ECC occupies Northbrook swimming pool under a 99-year lease that commenced on 18 March 1996 and expires on 17 March 2095. So there are just under 70 years remaining.

We understand that at the end of the lease the ECC is required to return the premises in reasonable repair and in accordance with the lease obligations.

When we first contacted the Trust on 10 April it had not had any contact from ECC about the proposed closure. Then we heard in May that it had been decided to apply for planning permission to demolish the original school/gymnasium which is adjacent to the pool, and which has been empty for some years. It used to be the site of the local boxing and karate clubs, which relocated out of the area some years ago.

‘As you know the Gymnasium is in a very poor state of repair and requires considerable structural support to maintain safety. The building was also substantially vandalised when vacated so we now have security in place to try and stop that from re-occurring. These necessary mitigations are very expensive. We secured an estimate to repair the building and sadly it was completely unaffordable both for Exeter City Council (our then tenants) and now for Northbrook. On this basis we are now going through the process of securing permission to demolish the gymnasium building as it is only going to become more of a safety and anti-social behaviour risk.

Once the building is demolished and we are clear on ECC’s decision regarding the swimming pool, we will then consider what to do with the cleared gymnasium site.’

We believe that this application has been approved, and demolition work will begin in August.

2 COSTS OF RUNNING NORTHBROOK

2.1 Regular costs

As you can imagine, we have only received limited and poor quality information, for instance details of income have been provided to us in a block of a 45-month total, not by year. And details of costs relate to 2023/24, the most recent complete financial year available at this point.

We believe that in a previous council meeting, in an answer to Cllr Moore, Cllr Wood has stated that:

‘looking back over the last three years, maintenance costs were £66,845, approximately £22,000 per annum.’

This annualised figure has been repeated to outside agencies and is now being repeated back to us. What hasn’t been made clear to them is that this figure actually covers a period of 45 months, not 3 years. The true amount is £9,017 for 2023/24; or an average over the

period April 2021 to December 2024 of £17,825 per annum. This also does not seem to have been made explicitly clear in the *Briefing Report* of 24 January 2025.

Another figure declared publicly and repeated back to us is that operational costs were £819,444 for the same period. What hasn't been made clear to other parties previously is that more than 50% of this cost (£452,615) is for staff pay. It is arguable that figures for pay should be excluded from consideration, the reason being that we are almost certain that staff will be re-deployed to other sites, to cover shortages and recruitment difficulties at SSP which are well documented. This was confirmed by Cllr Wood in a previous council meeting where he said that 'staff relocation would be considered following the usual process.' **So closing Northbrook will not save the approx. £200,000 pa on staff costs currently forming part of ECC's predicted savings.**

What we would like to point out, however, is that the figures provided in an FOI request for salaries seems quite high – £103,188 in 2023/24 and £136,505 for the first 9 months of 2024/25 – given that we generally have 2 lifeguards on at any one time, and the opening hours are 41.5 hours a week. We don't begrudge people being paid decent salaries, of course, we merely question the accuracy of these figures.

As we said, we have excluded pay here:

Costs for 2023/24 (excluding pay)

Premises	118,273
Supplies and services	2,224
Transport	0
TOTAL	120,497

However, an additional figure of £9,017 – what Cllr Wood called 'maintenance costs' in his answer above – has been given for:

'Total expenditure relating to general maintenance repair at Northbrook Swimming Pool to keep the building operational'

We would have thought this would already have been included in the above category 'Premises' (see points 6.1 and 6.2 in the *Briefing Report*). Anyhow, giving the benefit of the doubt, that is a **TOTAL** of **£129,514** for one year.

The net subsidy Northbrook required in 2023/24 was £187,320, ie less than 8% of the total subsidy across all 6 leisure centres. For comparison, the subsidy for the next cheapest site to run was £262,931 for Wonford gym; and for the next cheapest pool to run it was £478,804 for Riverside. It can be seen that the bulk of the subsidy went towards paying staff salaries (£103,188).

2.2 Cost of repairing the pool

The current state of disrepair at Northbrook is primarily due to a lack of regular preventative maintenance, first by Legacy Leisure and then by Exeter Leisure. This has unnecessarily inflated costs and contributed to a narrative of decline.

This reminds us of an almost identical story from 2018, ie the Pyramids Swimming Pool – see article on *Devon Live* (1 January 2018, <https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/spend-another-million-exeters-pyramids-997629>):

‘On the downside, the Pyramids infrastructure has been poorly maintained for many years with the result that the changing rooms are shabby and difficult to clean and, as the photos in the article show, there are serious structural problems. All of these are the result of Exeter City Council’s failure to fund a proper maintenance programme on the basis that the Pyramids has passed its sell-by date and there will be a far superior pool along in a minute.’

Ultimately, it was reported that ECC proposed to spend £1 million to keep Pyramids leisure centre going until SSP opened in 2022. As you know, it is currently being demolished.

In terms of money required for Northbrook, our FOI request solicited the following prediction of repair needs:

‘Cost to reduce carbon emission by 72%. c £850,000.

Cost to bring the centre up to a reliable and efficient operational industry standard c£700,000 (allowing for inflation).

Cost to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act by providing a disabled changing room and platform lift of £450,000–£550,000.’

We asked Swim England for comment, and two things emerged:

- there isn’t really an ‘operational industry standard’; and
- it is uncertain to which Disability Discrimination Act reference is being made, but the first came into force 30 years ago (1995), so it is unclear why it is felt changes are ‘required’ under the Act now. Access is not ideal for those with mobility issues, Northbrook being on a slope and covering two floors; but these needs must be balanced with the needs of others protected under the much newer Equality Act 2010, eg those with emotional or behavioural issues, such as children at the Ellen Tinkham School.

Details of a bid submitted to Sport England for funding – presumably to address the issue of carbon emissions – have also been provided under FOI:

‘July 2023 – Stage 1 of Sport England Swimming Pool Fund – bid of £91,193 was requested to support with the prevention of closure due to rising utility costs – unsuccessful.

October 2023 – Stage 2 of Sport England Swimming Pool Fund – bid of £894,400 – to support with the installation of PV panels, LED lighting, replace the gas boiler, triple glaze the pool hall, wall upgrade and repair roof and roof lights – didn’t meet the criteria. The correspondence in relation to the advances is not held.’

Councillors have been told by Cllr Wood that approaches to Sport England for funding failed because ECC declined to commit to the pool for a further 15 years; it has been admitted to us that admin errors led staff to believe that the lease had only another 9 years to run, whereas it actually has just under 70 years left. If Exeter Leisure had not made this mistake, perhaps the bid might have succeeded? In which case, if ECC felt justified in contemplating a £1 million spend on the Pyramids for 4 years of life, we cannot see how it would not contemplate supporting Northbrook for a lesser amount for potentially another 15+ years.

2.3 Costs of closing the pool

In council, Cllr Wood has previously said that the cost of closing Northbrook would be in the region of £3,510 – basically the amount required to empty the pool, turn off the boiler and lock the door.

He has since confirmed that ECC may have to pay to transport schoolchildren to their swimming lessons at other locations if Northbrook closes; and in the council meeting of 10 June he stated that:

‘alternative transport options and support schemes are being reviewed to assist residents with mobility or financial challenges.’

There is already some fly-tipping outside the pool, and there is occasional vandalism, possibly because the site is empty from 3pm. Some security measures will have to be put in place if the site closes permanently, and ECC holds the lease until 2095. The Northbrook Trust mentions that it has had to contend with just such costs (see **para 1.5**).

You will know better than us what sort of costs may have been incurred to the council by the Pyramids being empty for three years and the Clifton Hill lying undeveloped for seven, and we imagine Northbrook will cause some similar costs to arise, even if only in relation to the termination of the lease and returning Northbrook in the state required under the terms of that lease. This week’s article in the *Exeter Observer* (19 June 2025) highlights, for instance, that just last week:

‘[The ECC] then approved a budget of £50,000 for “disposal costs (including external agency and legal fees) associated with this sale” [of Clifton Hill].’

During the local council election campaign, it was suggested by a Labour council candidate that – if the pool closes – Northbrook swimmers should consider relocating to the University’s St Luke’s swimming pool. If all members were to do so, that would be a net loss to Exeter Leisure of £30,000+ a year, plus income from casual swimmers who choose to boycott SSP. It also doesn’t look good if Northbrook swimmers decamp to University pools en masse. Consider the optics: University students and clubs enjoying subsidised facilities at SSP whilst local council taxpayers are thrown out of their municipal pool.

There may well be an increase in health issues relating to ex-Northbrook swimmers who drop out of the habit of regular exercise. Arguments relating to these costs, increase in loneliness, dementia etc, and therefore an increase in social care needs, are well known. In addition, we can quote the following report:

‘Falls are the number one reason older people are taken to the emergency department in a hospital. In around 5% of cases a fall leads to a fracture and hospitalisation...

- the total annual cost of fragility fractures to the UK has been estimated at £4.4 billion which includes £1.1 billion for social care; hip fractures account for around £2 billion of this sum;
- short and long-term outlooks for patients are generally poor following a hip fracture, with an increased one-year mortality of between 18% and 33% and negative effects on daily living activities such as shopping and walking;
- a review of long-term disability found that around **20% of hip fracture patients entered long-term care in the first year after fracture.**’

(*Falls: Applying all our Health*, Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, 25 February 2022)

2.4 Impact on SSP

We have expressed concern at how SSP will accommodate the additional schools, and additional Aquafit classes that would replace those currently timetabled at Northbrook. As we have said, Aquafit classes are often over-subscribed and hard to book: as soon as sessions open on the app, they are snapped up.

We have been told there is a shortage of swim instructors. We know that all swimming classes at SSP are currently full, with no vacancies.

When we raised these concerns in Consultation Sessions, Exeter Leisure executives just said that 'We'll work something out'.

2.5 Reputational loss and Swim England

Swim England has provided us with a Water Deprivation Report. This shows that there is already a deficit of swimming pool availability to the Exeter population in the winter months, when Topsham Pool and the University's outdoor pool are closed. If Northbrook closes, this deficit will be an all-year-round deficit and may threaten the delivery of programmes such as the annual learn to swim programme.

Moreover, 3 of the pools included in the report are outside of ECC's control (Topsham, 2 x University pools) so closure or repairs to any of them will affect swimming availability; and 2 of them are open-air pools, so not available all year round.

We wonder also if Riverside will be closed during the extensive updating works that have been approved, and how long this is predicted to last? To remind you, Riverside was closed for nearly four years after a fire in 2017, during which time many people came to Northbrook to swim and do Aquafit classes.

Figures are based on the size of the current population, but we imagine that Exeter will continue to grow, so this deficit will increase.

As Swim England says in its report:

'The observations above highlight the need to consider future facility needs in the City.

Considerations should be made to the seasonal operations of Topsham Swimming Pool and University of Exeter (Streatham Sports Centre) and the restrictions on public provision eg the ability to run an annual learn to swim programme.'

There is also a recommendation to 'involve our Business Engagement Team to help maximise operations'.

For a city which trumpeted its huge investment in a new state-of-the-art pool in 2022, to now have a lack of adequate swimming facilities is not a good look.

3 INCOME

3.1 Generally

Not surprisingly, we have received only limited and poor quality information, for instance details of income received as an FOI answer have been provided to us in a block of a 45-month total, not broken down by year.

We first made an FOI request for details of income in March, but the first answer omitted details of block bookings (£59,913.06). Hopefully this was just a mistake. On making a second request and pointing out the error we have received the following:

Total Income

April 21–Dec 24

Membership	£105,798.56
Adult Swim	£22,256.00
Junior Swim	£3,415.83
Aqua Classes	£8,774.68
Block Booking	£59,913.06
TOTAL	200,158.13

NB: block booking income denotes income from schools, clubs and private hire.

No comparative information has been provided for income taken pre-Covid, when the pool was run by Legacy Leisure, seven days a week. In response to an FOI request for this, we were told that that information is not held.

ECC figures extracted from externally-available accounts show Northbrook income for 2023/24 as follows:

Membership	28,515
Other income	33,140
TOTAL	61,655

However, several points to note:

- We know membership numbers (and hence income from membership) provided at this point were inaccurate – see para 1.3.
- Our block bookings and club hires have been eroded since Exeter Leisure took over in 2021. We have lost 5 separate club hires every week, probably because we are closed on evenings and weekends. We have lost 10 hours of schools hire per week. In addition, all our swimming lessons have been diverted elsewhere and we have lost all income from birthday parties because the pool is closed. We have lost substantial income from swimmers who used to swim in late afternoon and evening sessions; and we have lost 3 evening sessions of Aquafit, which were always popular. We have lost income from weekend swimmers.
- For comparison, 2023/24 figures show that the Arena took only £24,926 from membership subscription – ie less than Northbrook – but it raised £96,801 in ‘other income’ in the same year, which shows what can be achieved when Exeter Leisure chooses to promote a particular centre.

It could be argued easily that if we were open for double the hours – ie similar to the times SSP is open – and were run as a proper functioning swimming pool, we may benefit from double the income, ie be nearer to breaking even against costs.

3.2 Paying swim members

Many of the regulars who swim at Northbrook are Swim members, paying typically £30.70 a month. That's a flat fee, and includes Aquafit classes. Just like Virgin Active or David Lloyd, Exeter Leisure is desperate to push the subscription model to us – regular and predictable income on a monthly basis. And, like those business, they rely on us paying our money but never really going to the gym or pool – but at Northbrook we do, over and over and over again. Because Exeter Leisure has gradually stripped out so much external revenue – from schools, clubs and parties – there is just a small rump of potential income left from daytime casual swimmers.

Under the existing regime, Exeter Leisure cannot see a way to make any more money out of the remaining swimmers. The simple answer that has been recommended to ECC (we suspect) is to just close Northbrook and have those members use SSP or Riverside instead. Their working assumption is they will keep all our membership income with none of the costs.

In fact, some members are cancelling their memberships already; but if we estimate the number of members in April might have been 100, that is an annual income of **£36,840**.

Instead, we believe there should be an acknowledgment that it is a unique pool in the Exeter Leisure portfolio, a recognition of the huge impact it has on the health and wellbeing of many residents, and an urgent re-evaluation of the way in which Northbrook is run.

3.3 Swimming lessons

There are no longer any swimming lessons offered at Northbrook. Parents have lamented their loss, because children liked the pool and it was quick and easy for parents to drop them there, Northbrook being situated in a residential area. To quote one 'getting to SSP is a bit of a logistical nightmare, and we tend to go by bike now because of the parking situation, but it's a very busy place to get your children to.'

Weekly swimming lessons are provided at SSP every evening from Monday to Thursday:

Monday	4–8.15pm
Tuesday	4–7pm
Wednesday	3.30–6.30pm
Thursday	4–6.30pm

Full capacity is 10 to 12 children per lesson. Each lesson is half hour for younger children, and an hour for older children; junior membership is paid by direct debit at £30.70. As a very rough calculation, that might be 200 children per week being taught, creating an income of £6,140 per month, or **£61,400** over a school year (roughly 10 months).

We have contacted SSP this week (w/c 16 June) enquiring about swimming lessons and they are currently all full with no vacancies. This is one of the reasons we are confident that current Northbrook lifeguards will be redeployed at SSP or Riverside, so closing Northbrook will not save the approx. £200,000 pa on staff costs currently forming part of ECC's predicted savings.

Swim England has been in contact with a lady who has expressed interest in setting up a swim school at Northbrook. Presumably she must realise that it can be profitable.

3.4 Schools

In 2020, schools hired the pool for 22 hours a week in term-time; in 2025 schools hire the pool for 12 hours a week. Estimated loss of income to us is $10 \times 38 \times £35 = \text{£13,300 pa}$.

Of course, it is hoped that the schools which have moved (presumably to SSP) find the new location more convenient.

It should be noted, however, that schools using Northbrook are able to use their own teaching staff, but when using SSP they must use SSP instructors. This explains why the hourly rate is more (at £45 per hour). On paper, this makes SSP seem to be drawing in more income and therefore more profitable; but actually the additional £10 per hour surely doesn't cover the cost of that employee, and therefore overall the school hire must be less profitable for Exeter Leisure than when Northbrook is hired.

In addition, we know there is a shortage of instructors at SSP so moving the remaining 5 schools from Northbrook to SSP will cause logistical problems. This is one of the reasons we are confident that current Northbrook lifeguards will be redeployed at SSP or Riverside, so closing Northbrook will not save the approx. £200,000 pa on staff costs currently forming part of ECC's predicted savings.

3.5 Clubs

In 2020 we had 6 clubs hiring the pool on a regular basis; we have lost all those except WEFTE (Water Exercises for the Elderly), which is also under threat (see **para 3.7**). Mostly these clubs have been moved to SSP or Riverside.

NAME OF CLUB	HOURS PER WEEK	2020 LOCATION	2025 LOCATION
Age UK	2	Northbrook	Now WEFTE, Northbrook
Canoe Club	1	Northbrook	—
Diving Club (ie sub-aqua)	2	Northbrook	Riverside
ECSC	1.5	Northbrook	SSP
Larches Swim Club	1	Northbrook	—
Triathlon	2	Northbrook	SSP

You can see Northbrook has lost 7.5 hours of income per week for the weeks that these clubs would hire (ie some might hire according to school terms or for the winter only). Conservatively we might estimate that lost income is $7.5 \times 30 \times £35/\text{hr} = \text{£7,875 pa}$.

It should be pointed out that income from two clubs is lost from the Exeter Leisure portfolio altogether, because of Northbrook's opening hours. We contacted the *Exeter Canoe Club*, which used to hire the pool for an hour every Friday evening. They said:

'Unfortunately, whilst we loved using the pool, post-Covid, when they eventually reopened, it was on shorter hours and didn't include Friday nights which meant we had to try and source alternative solutions. We would welcome the pool staying open and hopefully allowing us back again though! They could only offer us slots in the times they were allowed to open which was generally during the day when most of our members and coaches were at work. We used to have a slot on a Friday evening October to end of March. I'm not sure how much we paid, but have moved from pool to pool trying to find something suitable since, including pools in Teignbridge, Newton Abbot/Kingskerswell and Chudleigh. None of which are overly convenient. We normally only use a pool over the winter, and are currently joining another club I think at Cofton Manor.'

Income has been lost from *Larches Swim Club*, a naturist club which used to hire the pool for an hour every Saturday evening.

3.6 Aquafit

In 2020 we had 6 sessions of Aquafit (aqua aerobics) every week – 3 daytime and 3 evening sessions. We now have only 2 daytime sessions and none in the evening (because the pool is closed).

The classes have always been popular and well attended, both before and after Covid. The Tuesday 9.30am session was particularly popular and always oversubscribed, with a waiting list of 6 people or so. Last year, this class was moved to a Friday lunchtime at 1pm: the reason given was that the instructor was needed on a Tuesday to cover Reception at other sites. The new time really doesn't suit most Aquafit regulars – being generally retired ladies who want to exercise and then get on with their day – and attendance has dropped off.

If the change was designed to appeal to working people, nobody seems to have put much effort into advertising the new timeslot to attract new members.

We believe it was done either because of poor staff management, or as a conscious ploy to lessen attendance at one of the remaining activities in Northbrook.

Regulars complain that Aquafit classes at SSP are often full and have a waiting list. The evening sessions needs to be booked a week before to guarantee a place. How will Northbrook regulars be accommodated?

In addition, we question Exeter Leisure's business acumen in relation to the pricing and number of Aquafit classes. They are always popular at every site, require only one instructor for up to 25 swimmers, and therefore should be very profitable. The cost at Exeter pools is only £4.65, ie less than a normal swim, which doesn't make any sense to us; at Exmouth it is £8.50, ie £2 more than a normal swim.

You can see it better represented in the following table:

ACTIVITY	EXETER POOLS	EXMOUTH, HONITON, SIDMOUTH
Adult swim	£5.35	£6.50
Aquafit class	£4.65	£8.50

So, for every 100 people paying for an Aquafit class, Exeter Leisure would take £465, whilst in Exmouth takings would be £850.

For comparison, the cost of a standard yoga class in Exeter is £8–£10.

Across Exeter there are a total of 7 Aquafit sessions per week, as follows: 2 at Northbrook, 3 at SSP and 3 at Riverside. This is only 2 more than Legacy Leisure used to run at Northbrook alone, pre-Covid. As a commercial operator, they obviously realised that Aquafit classes can be a real income booster.

3.7 WEFTE (Water Exercises for the Elderly)

These classes are designed for older less confident swimmers, or those suffering with health issues.

We have 2 sessions at Northbrook, each of 1 hour, and they have replaced the slots which used to be taken by AgeUK in 2020.

Richard Ilsley runs the sessions at Northbrook, hiring the pool at a cost of £32.40. Swimmers pay £4 a session, and on average 14 people attend each session. He does not charge anything for his time, so on average the income taken is £56. He pays the fee and any surplus to Exeter Leisure.

Over time he has had many problems with paying his money to Exeter Leisure. At one point he had £7,000 to pay but the admin department didn't understand how to bank his contribution, so it remained outstanding for 18 months. If he were a less honest man, he could have just kept it. As it is, it reveals a lack of proper systems in admin and finance at Exeter Leisure.

Whilst Exeter Leisure has confirmed that they don't really do physical advertising/leaflets – preferring to rely on social media – the leaflet below is the one piece of advertising at Northbrook. It sits on the Reception desk, so users cannot fail to see it. As you will note, it advertises WEFTE classes at SSP. Hence, a casual user would assume you would have to go to SSP for the classes, and remain ignorant of the fact that WEFTE classes are also available at Northbrook twice a week.



By comparison, there are several leaflets at SSP, including one advertising the extensive water polo sessions at SSP.

3.8 Birthday parties

Pre-Covid, the timetable allowed for 1 party booking on a Saturday and 1 on a Sunday. We have a fairly large function room for this purpose. We no longer have parties because the pool is closed; and even if we did, Exeter Leisure dictated that this room should be used for staff breaks. It is overwhelmingly the case that we have just 2 lifeguards on duty at any one time – 1 is poolside whilst the other is on Reception, cleaning etc or in their office.

Presumably under Legacy Leisure, lifeguards took their breaks in the office, so we question why lifeguards employed by Exeter Leisure need a large function room for that purpose?

We don't know how many parties there were at Northbrook or how profitable, but we can see that SSP and Riverside both still offer birthday parties as an option, so they must be considered worthwhile. Parties at SSP are charged in the region of £80 per hour, plus an extra £20 if you want inflatables in the pool. If we offered parties again on the same basis as before, that is a maximum potential income of **£10,000 pa**.

We believe the function room has been used for lifeguard training in the past; and it would make an ideal space for small classes such as yoga or pilates.

4 SOURCES OF FUTURE POTENTIAL FUNDING

The 2025/26 budget approved in February required a cut of £586,000 to the leisure budget, despite an earlier public budget consultation in which only 30% of respondents agreed with the council's proposal to 'reduce the subsidy on the six council run leisure facilities.' That means two-thirds of people wanted to keep leisure services funded as they had been previously.

We have concluded that the closure of Northbrook will contribute only a very small proportion of this saving; indeed, the saving is tiny – if any – when balanced against the loss of income to Exeter Leisure, and increase in expenditure in other areas, such as school transport, building security, legal/admin costs, increased social care and so on.

You were told that the budget was not reliant on the closure of Northbrook; but there now seems to be no Plan B to keep it open.

We have been informed that ECC's 2024/25 Leisure revenue budget expenditure came in at £1.9 million which was £874,000 less than the £2.8 million budget set at the beginning of the year. In addition there was £646,000 of unbudgeted income from an HMRC VAT refund and salary costs were £200,000 lower than expected because of recruitment difficulties; income also exceeded budget by £290,000.

We are led to believe that the VAT refund windfall has been put into a reserve without making clear what the reserve is for.

The £874,000 saving from last year, therefore, more than adequately covers the £586,000 cut made to this year's leisure budget.

That leaves £288,000, which would be a good amount towards funding Northbrook – principally paying for the staff – in the short-term. In the longer term, Exeter Leisure could revise the timetable and run the pool properly, reinstating the types of income we have highlighted and which it draws into SSP so effectively. We believe income could be doubled quite easily, which would cover our basic costs.

Sport England could be re-approached for funding for the substantial building works required, this time using the correct information about the time left on the Northbrook lease. The Water Deprivation Report which we have prompted Swim England to provide should also help in this regard.

In addition, Exeter Leisure should re-evaluate its charging structure. As we have highlighted, charges for swimming, classes etc are lower than in surrounding towns. We have been denied details of how many members Exeter Leisure actually has (see **para 1.3**), so we cannot make accurate predictions; but – to repeat what we have said before – if 50% of the reported members Exeter-wide have a monthly membership (ie 6,000) and that amount matched the amount paid by users in Exmouth, Honiton or Sidmouth pay that would equate to an increase in Exeter Leisure's income of £597,600 per year. Again this more than covers this year's budget cut of £586,000.

There are even more sources of funding available to ECC. SSP has benefited from CIL money in the past, so there is a precedent for spending it on leisure services. Willow Grange, currently being constructed in Beacon Heath about one-third of a mile from Northbrook, is due to deliver £818,772.47 to ECC in CIL money. In requesting information on this money, the FOI answer was:

'In accordance with the principle of establishing CIL, the levy is collected and the majority spent on strategic infrastructure for the city. It has not been allocated in advance of receipt.'

According to the ECC's *Annual Infrastructure Funding Statement 2024* (published in 2023/24 but apparently still valid) CIL money is being hoarded against the future expenditure on a Sports Village at Exeter Arena, to include 'a community swimming pool to replace the Northbrook Swimming Pool'. In all the recent publicity about Northbrook, this has never once been raised by ECC as a possible solution; indeed we hear that it is considering selling the Arena. What on earth is this CIL money being kept for and when will it be spent?

Money allocated to the Pinhoe Hub has remained unused for several (7?) years, and is still sitting in ECC's accounts. There is CIL money sitting doing nothing from the Harrington Quarry development.

The new developments at Morrisons, Willow Grange and Harrington Quarry – all within a mile of Northbrook – will also generate council tax revenues, and part of a council's remit is to look after the welfare and health of its residents.

Grants that have been earmarked for other projects could be reviewed, for instance money spent on Exeter Wellbeing projects (we have heard that previous grants may have been as much as £340,000). We are a successful 'wellbeing project' here at Northbrook, please continue to support us.

We read of the *This Girl Can* campaign, trumpeted in the latest edition of the Exeter Citizen. In the recent swimming pool consultation, 75% of respondents were female, and it was overwhelmingly the ladies who find the prospect of getting to another pool a daunting one. We know many don't drive and currently rely on lifts from friends to get to Northbrook, a support system which they understand will disappear when their friends choose not to go to SSP. How about supporting older 'girls' who would also like to 'do'?

And in supporting younger girls, it should be realised that there are already very few activities for them in the Beacon Heath area. The Skatepark is a fantastic facility and we applaud it; but visit at any time and you will see that it is used overwhelmingly by boys and

young men. We've seen one or two little girls with their dads using it, but never, ever teenage girls – they are always sitting on their phones, watching the boys. Instead, get them into swimming pools, maybe with girls-only sessions at Northbrook. Use some imagination!

You have so many choices when it comes to funding Northbrook. If the decision is made to close it, we as local taxpayers and voters can only conclude that there is something else we are not being told. Coming on top of so many poor decisions about other leisure centres – the Pyramids and Clifton Hill – it will erode our belief in future ECC decisions even further.

5 THE FUTURE

Exeter City Council's recently published *Corporate Plan 2025–28*, which includes the *Exeter Vision 2040*, it declares that ECC will have seven key areas of focus, including that Exeter will become the 'most active city in the UK', measured by various factors including by 'year-on-year increase in residents taking up Exeter Leisure membership and use of leisure centres'.

We submitted this question to council on 10 June:

'Concerning the *Exeter Vision 2040*, in ECC's current *Corporate Plan*, what is your strategy for achieving the aim of having a 'year on year increase in residents ... [using] leisure centres' when St Sidwell's Place is running at nearly full capacity and you propose to close Northbrook Swimming Pool?'

To which Cllr Wood:

'While swimming pools occasionally reach capacity during peak periods, particularly school holidays, our leisure centres as a whole are not operating at full capacity.

Our broader objective will allow for increased participation by ensuring efficient use of facilities, expanding programme offerings, and maintaining accessibility across all sites.'

Does that clarify the strategy?

We also question what is meant in the report by emphasising resources will be put into 'priority neighbourhoods'. If Northbrook closes, we can only conclude that Beacon Heath is definitely not a priority neighbourhood.

What research has been undertaken by the ECC to explore the leisure/sport needs of East Exeter in the future? It has grown by c 8,000 people in recent years – what is the projected growth?

If Northbrook closes, is there a strategy to prevent an increasing deficit in swimming pool availability?

When people think of the Plymouth they think of its world class diving school; when they think of Exeter they will think of its total lack of strategy for swimming.

Facilities Report

Exeter City Council (Reviewed)

The following report has been produced by the Swim England Facilities Team for the development of aquatic facilities in Exeter. The following observations have been made based on Sport England Active Places data and the list of swimming pools in the City, included in the text below.

Findings

There are 6 facilities that serve the Exeter area:

- Northbrook Swimming Pool: 166m²
- Topsham Swimming Pool: 250m² (Lido)
- St Lukes Sports Centre: 207m²
- University of Exeter (Streatham Sports Centre): 313m² (Lido)
- St Sidwells Point Leisure Centre: 425m² + 160m²
- Riverside Swimming Pool 325m² + 91m²

* Only publicly accessible facilities are used to determine the findings

- There is currently a water provision surplus of **300m² (1937-1637=300)**

*For comparison, a 6 lane x 25m pool would equate to 312.5m²

- Population: **136.4 k (2025 Estimate)**
- Target Water Space (to meet 12m² per 1000 population): **1637m²**
- Supply in of public water: **1937m²**

*Total water supply

- Average year built of public sites: **1979-2022 (2000)**

Topsham Swimming Pool and the University of Exeter (Streatham Sports Centre) are both lidos and open seasonally. When these are closed the water provision reduces to **1374m²** making a water deprivation of **-263 m²**.

In the event of the closure of Northbrook Swimming Pool there will be a surplus water provision of **134m²** during the months where Topsham Swimming Pool and University of Exeter (Streatham Sports Centre) are open and a deficit of **-429m²** when they are closed.

Clubs

- Exeter City Swimming Club: 802 members
- Exeter Water Polo and Swimming Club: 234 members
- Exe Masters: 83 members
- Exeter Uni Water Polo: 15 members

Comments

- The City as a whole shows its water provision to be a surplus of **300m²** the recommended 12m² per 1000 population at this current time when all pools are available.
- The observations above highlight the need to consider future facility needs in the City.
- Considerations should be made to the seasonal operations of Topsham Swimming Pool and University of Exeter (Streatham Sports Centre) and the restrictions on public provision. e.g. The ability to run an annual learn to swim programme.

Links to facilities included in the report

- Northbrook Pool
<https://www.exeterleisure.com/centres/northbrook-swimming-pool/>
- Topsham Pool
<https://topshampool.co.uk/>
- St Lukes Sports Centre
<https://sport.exeter.ac.uk/facilities/stlukessportscentre/>
- University of Exeter (Sports Park)
<https://sport.exeter.ac.uk/facilities/sportspark/>
- St Sidwells Point Leisure Centre
<https://www.exeterleisure.com/centres/st-sidwells-point-leisure-centre/>
- Riverside Swimming Pool
<https://www.exeterleisure.com/centres/riverside-leisure-centre/>

Recommendations

- Future water provision should look to have open community access, making the water space even more accessible to the local population.
- Facility mix in the future needs to consider the versatility of its water space and the use of movable floor/boom system
- Involve our Business Engagement Team to help maximise operations

Water Provision inclusion / exclusion criteria

- Include all Operational Pools available for community use i.e. pay and play
- Exclude all pools not available for community use i.e. private use

*Methodology

- Population ÷ 1000 = P
- P x 12(m²) = Target Water Space
- Water provision = Public Water Space - Target Water Space

Rob Hardy
Technical Facilities Officer
Swim England
rob.hardy@swimming.org

Ruth Edwards
Business Engagement Manager
Swim England
ruth.edwards@swimming.org