

As the 2012-conscious Government pumps £140m in community swimming and closure by cash-strapped councils. Is there a contradiction there somewhere? It

FREE & EASY

Those who take a passing interest in swimming news could be forgiven for being a little confused. On the one hand, the Government appears to be throwing money at the sport with its forthcoming £140m handout for free swimming and pool refurbishment. On the other, hardly a week goes by without some new story of a pool closure or closure threat, giving rise to a perception that financial and other obstacles are making it difficult for some local authorities to keep pools open. It's a perception which the ASA chief executive David Sparkes believes is erroneous yet it's also one which has been exercising brains in both local and national corridors of political power.

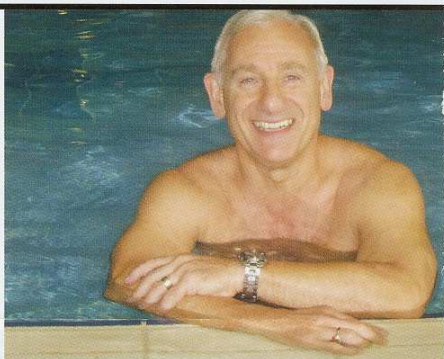
In a recent question and answer session in the House of Commons, no less than three MPs questioned Andy Burnham, Secretary of State

when he told the House he was 'about to buy a new pair of trunks' in response to the free swimming announcement when he realised his problem in Fylde would be in 'accessing a pool'. 'The financially hard-pressed borough is committed to closing one of its two municipal pools,' he said. 'The borough is not isolated in the pressures it experiences in maintaining publicly available swimming facilities.'

Mr Jack told *Swimming Times* the council had originally intended to close both its remaining pools – at Kirkham and Lytham St Annes – but Kirkham may now be saved and run by a community trust. He blamed a combination of Government funding constraints and an 'element of financial mismanagement' by the council. 'The Government have constrained funding

'Accessibility is clearly a problem for the Government's target groups, a high proportion of whom have to rely on public transport. The failure to provide proper swimming facilities for children is nothing less than a crime. It denies them an effective means for them to get and stay fit and the opportunity to learn to swim well – an ability which may one day save lives'

Dr Geoffrey Seeff



Keen swimmer and Lib Dem spokesman **Geoff Seeff** says denying children the chance to swim is a crime

for Annes pool and don't have the money to pay the running costs let alone the maintenance costs. Kirkham is an old pool that would have required massive expenditure to bring it up to scratch or replace it. Swimming not being a statutory duty, the council said this pool had to close.'

There is certainly a party political aspect to the issue, as underlined by Ann Cryer, Labour MP for Keighley. She asked Mr Burnham if he was aware that 'Conservative-led Bradford District Council proposes the closure of four pools'. She said one of her constituents had 'expressed her dismay'. She had been taking her daughter for swimming lessons at Bingley pool for 30 weeks but if the pool closed, these would cease. 'Will my right honourable friend make representations to Bradford and persuade it not to close those pools?'

Another hotspot of discontent is Redbridge and

Ilford in Essex, where a deputation from the Ilford Swimmers Association recently met Mike Gapes, the Labour and Co-op MP for Ilford, to express their concern about Redbridge Council's proposal to close the 77-year-old Ilford pool in December. Mr Gapes, who swam in the pool himself as a child, asked Mr Burnham: 'What advice can the Secretary of State give to the more than 100,000 people in my constituency who will no longer have a pool because of Conservative council incompetence?'

Mr Gapes told *Swimming Times*: 'There is a big campaign by local swimmers, who are absolutely incensed. The closure will mean the whole borough has only one pool. I agree there's a contradiction between this situation and the Government's announcement on free swimming. But it's because it's not central government that builds and maintains pools but local councils.'



Michael Jack MP (centre) attends an Everyday Swim launch with Olympic medalists Duncan Goodhew (left) and Steve Parry

for Culture, Media and Sport, about pool closure issues in their constituencies. Michael Jack, Conservative MP for Fylde in Lancashire, summed up the conundrum

increases on councils like Fylde, a small district council with only 70,000 people and a budget of £12m a year,' he said. 'The council have never realised the potential of the Lytham St

pool maintenance and refurbishment, stories abound of pools under threat of depends who you speak to. **Roger Guttridge** looks at the politics of swimming

? NOT QUITE!

Mr Gapes said that in 2003 Redbridge Council were offered £10.5m in PFI funding for a new pool. But in 2005 they changed their minds and tried to get the money transferred to another project – a £35m 'flagship leisure development' including a 50m pool. 'They failed to get the funding for it and have now ditched that,' he said. 'Now they have said the Ilford pool will close on safety grounds and the schools and clubs have no idea what they are going to do. The swimmers are saying to me that the Government are giving away all this money for swimming and I am saying: "Good idea. Can you get the council to bid for it?" But the answer is no because they are closing the pool. The council have screwed it up and I'm very frustrated by their incompetence.'

One incensed swimmer is



Ann Cryer MP: Constituent is dismayed at pool closures

Dr Geoffrey M Seeff, who also happens to be the Liberal Democrats' Parliamentary spokesperson for neighbouring Chingford and Woodford Green.

'While welcoming the Government's announcement on free swimming, I am strongly



Mike Gapes MP: 'Swimmers are incensed'

critical of both Redbridge and Waltham Forest Councils over the paucity of swimming amenities for the constituency's 80,000 residents,' said Dr Seeff, who swims three or four times a week. 'Accessibility is clearly a problem for the Government's target groups, a high proportion of whom have to rely on public transport.'

Dr Seeff is 'particularly angry' that Redbridge Council missed an opportunity to build a new community pool at South Woodford. He said their proposals for an Olympic-sized pool in Seven Kings were 'unnecessary', given the proximity of the soon-to-be-built Olympic Aquatics Centre.

'The failure to provide proper swimming facilities for children is nothing less than a crime,' he said. 'It denies them the simple pleasure of just splashing around in water. It denies them what is probably the most effective means for them to get and stay fit. Most importantly, it denies them the chance to learn to swim well – an ability which may one day save their own life or that of another.'

Free swimming: it's up to the councils to bid, says Secretary of State Burnham

If free swimming for the over 60s and the under 16s does not come to a pool near you over the next couple of years, you'll know who to blame. And it's not the Government or the asa. In recent statements about the Government's £140m pledge for free swimming and pool refurbishment, Andy Burnham, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, made it clear that the onus is on local authorities to claim the money and spend it. He told the House of Commons: 'The idea is that the council is in the driving seat. We want councils to make swimming as available as possible and to remove the barriers. Whatever people say, for many families throughout the country, entry charges are still a significant barrier to going to the pool. We want to be as flexible as possible in helping councils throughout the country to come with us on this journey of removing entry charges for swimming.'

The £140m package applies only to England and includes three distinct elements. Two of these concern free swimming, and the Government has allocated £80m of the package to separate funds to allow local authorities to introduce free swimming for people over 60 and to promote swimming for children under 16. The remaining £60m is in a capital fund and local authorities will be able to bid for grants towards the renovation and maintenance of their pools (including school pools) in support of their free swimming schemes. The package will also support initiatives such as the provision of free lessons for adults who cannot swim and the introduction of swimming co-ordinators to maximise and sustain uptake.

The Government stressed that there is 'no new entitlement' to free swimming because no council will be forced to enter any element of the scheme. The statement added: 'No grant will be made unless the authority undertakes to provide arrangements corresponding to those specified.' The package covers the period to 2011.

Answering Michael Jack's question about pool closures in Fylde (see opposite), Mr Burnham said: 'Local authorities must make a judgement about providing enough pools for the local population. His council must take its own decisions on that. The scheme that I announced

gives incentives to councils that are prepared to do the most to make swimming more accessible to people, including giving them the opportunity to access capital funding to support their pool stock. I hope he will talk to Conservative colleagues on his local council so that they can come up with proposals to get more people into pools rather than let them decline.'

Answering Ann Cryer's question, he added: 'The whole idea of the scheme is to stop councils managing a process of decline in swimming – in pools, stock and use – and to get them thinking more positively about the contribution swimming can make to people's sense of well-being, happiness and activity. I have made the judgment that swimming is universally popular – something that everyone can imagine themselves doing and that different generations of families can do together.'

David Sparkes, the asa chief executive, described the £60m allocated for pool



Andy Burnham MP: 'Councils in the driving seat'



David Sparkes: 'Massive step in the right direction'

refurbishment and maintenance as 'a massive step in the right direction'. He said that with a third of pools being over 30 years old, there are bound to be some that need refurbishment or replacement. 'Swimming provision is like painting the Forth railway bridge – it needs constant attention and is something you can never relax on,' he said. 'The challenge for us all is to continue to invest in swimming provision. I believe the £60m will stimulate the bringing of some of the older pools up to modern-day standards. But I believe there is a responsibility on local authorities to undertake strategic planning for pool provision and not to adopt a piecemeal approach. Bristol and Rotherham are examples of a good strategic approach.'