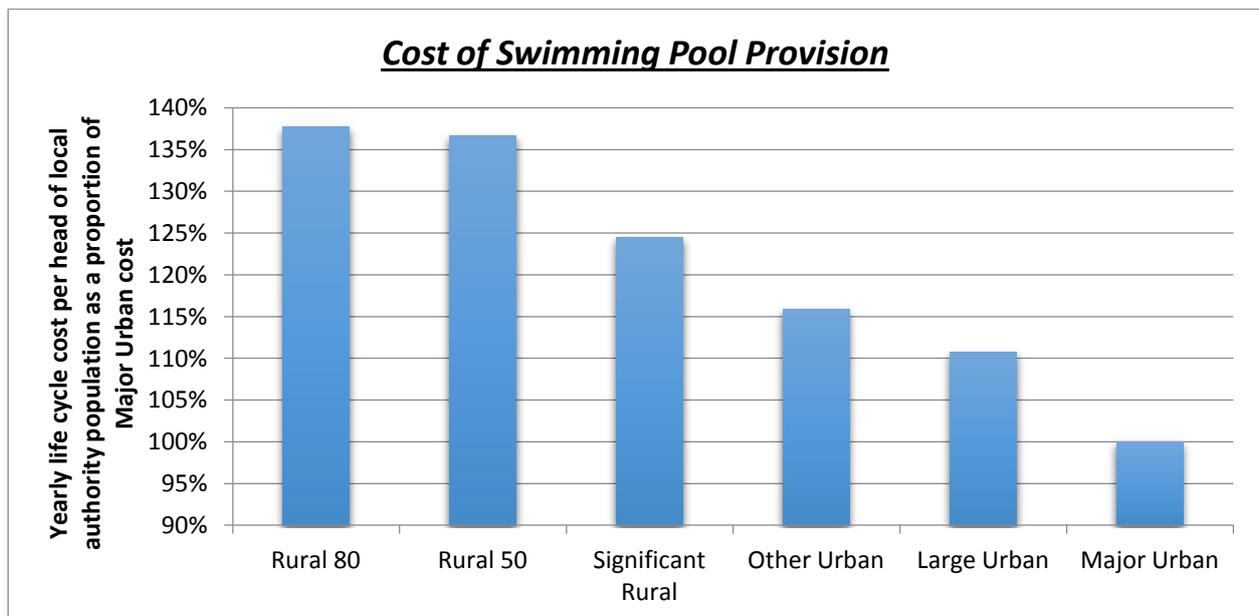


The Cost of Providing Swimming Facilities in Rural Communities

As a discretionary local authority service, leisure facilities such as swimming pools are obviously under pressure for efficiencies and ultimately survival.

Given the importance placed on swimming both for children (all schools must provide swimming instruction either in key stage 1 or key stage 2) and for the wider public in its health benefits (with consideration to the public health role of local authorities), the decisions faced by local authorities in funding affordable, accessible swimming facilities are difficult.

With this in mind, the following bar chart showing a crude estimate of the average cost per head of the facilities alone, for local authorities in each of the six rural/urban classifications was developed. The bar chart shows the yearly life cycle cost per head as a proportion of the costs calculated for Major Urban local authority areas (having the lowest calculated cost per head). The calculations were based on Sport England figures for the construction and ongoing costs of affordable swimming facilities, and an ASA recommended benchmark guide for swimming pool area per head of population.



It is intuitively obvious that for rural areas where population centres are far apart, to offer a similar level of service to urban areas would cost more per person. It is important however to put these assumptions to the test. It is important to offer a clear demonstration that for an equivalent swimming pool availability, rural areas that naturally require a broader spread of swimming pool facilities over a number of population centres, have to shoulder a greater burden of costs associated to this provision.

As a result of these higher costs, rural local authorities generally pay a higher subsidy to the leisure facility operator, and those using the facilities have to pay more additionally to having to travel further to reach the swimming pool.

The hard question that rural local authorities, and the Government in funding those authorities need to ask is whether these cost pressures justify putting the most vulnerable rural residents at a disadvantage in terms of living a full, varied and healthy lifestyle, and at the most extreme, putting children at risk of not being competent swimmers.

Method:

ASA provide a benchmark guide of 11 square metres of pool per 1,000 population for local authorities in urban locations. For equivalence, this was adopted for all local authorities. Using this guide and Census 2011 population figures, total benchmark swimming pool provision was calculated for each local authority. Sport England provides a guide to sports facility development costs (Q4, 2013) and percentage life cycle costs, which were then used to calculate life cycle costs per head. Sport England sports facilities development costs broke down the costs for six different swimming pool sizes. An assumption was made that for each authority classification, with increasing urbanity the next large swimming pool size cost was used since the swimming pool would serve a higher population density.