

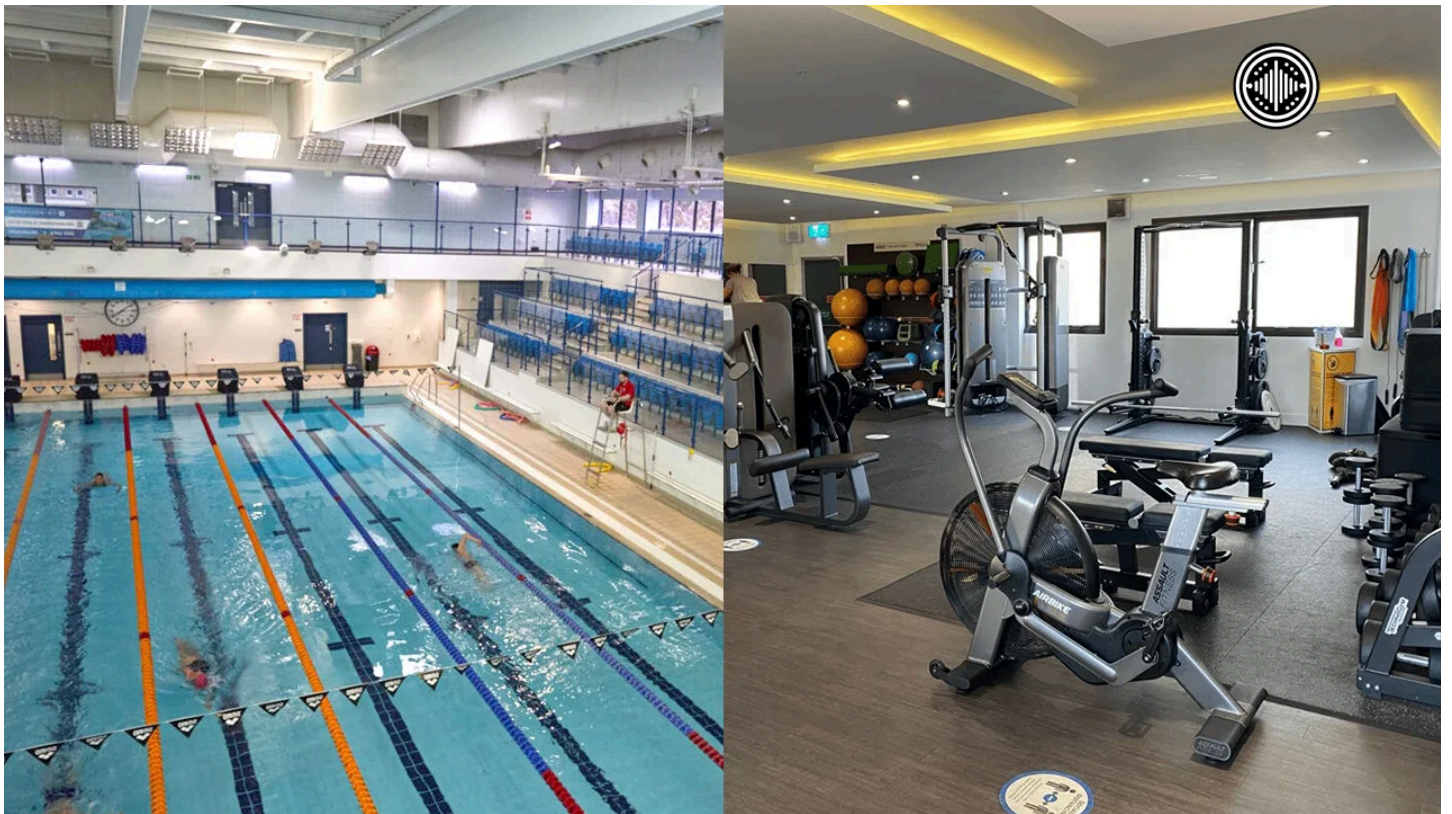
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Council Gym Perks for Asylum Seekers Draw Criticism as Local Residents Pay Full Price

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While working families across London continue to shoulder rising living costs, some local councils are granting free or heavily discounted leisure access to asylum seekers—leaving many taxpayers questioning the fairness of such priorities.

In the borough of Richmond upon Thames, migrants categorized as “sanctuary seekers” are eligible for free Richmond Card memberships. This card provides full access to gym facilities, swimming pools, and group exercise classes across five local leisure centres. A simple letter from the Home Office or an Asylum Application Registration Card is sufficient to claim the benefit. In contrast, working residents pay up to £52.50 per month for the same services, and even those receiving state benefits or acting as carers are only given a 60 percent discount.

Beyond fitness, the Richmond Card extends discounts to activities such as French and Spanish language lessons, pilates, hypnosis for stress, paddle boarding, and even some dining establishments. Kingston Council offers a similar perk through its “Active Kingston Card,” providing asylum seekers with 50 percent off access to six borough leisure centres, including courts for badminton, squash, and tennis.

Meanwhile, Wandsworth Council has been reported to offer asylum seekers discounts on cultural events and recreational classes, ranging from pottery to theatre outings. These benefits are also made available to other groups, including pensioners, carers, and people on benefits, but without the full exemption some asylum seekers receive.

The policy has sparked backlash among residents and political figures alike. Shadow Immigration Minister Chris Philp criticized the initiative, calling it “a slap in the face” to hard-working families who are expected to pay full price for the same services. “Labour has the wrong priorities,” he wrote on X (formerly Twitter), reflecting growing public frustration over what many see as an imbalance in resource allocation.

In Birmingham, a city that declared itself effectively bankrupt in 2023, asylum seekers reportedly continue to receive subsidized access to activities like martial arts and trampolining—further inflaming debate over public spending and council accountability.

In a related development, the Home Office recently introduced the “Failure to Travel” policy, which requires asylum seekers to relocate from hotels to other housing when offered suitable alternatives. Those who refuse without valid reasons risk losing state support, a move the Government says is essential for protecting public funds and restoring integrity to the immigration system.

With public services under strain and tax burdens rising, many residents are left asking whether these benefits reflect a fair and balanced use of taxpayer money.