

ITEM 11 REVIEW - DAPTO AND CORRIMAL POOL TRIAL SCHOOL HOLIDAY VOUCHER PROGRAM

This report is to provide an update on the Council Resolution resolved unanimously within the Council meeting of 16 December 2024 to trial a voucher system for free entry to Dapto and Corrimal swimming pools for children aged 5 to 16 years during the summer NSW School Holiday period. This report also explores options for expanding the program to people from a refugee background.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council adopt Option A – continue to trial a digital voucher system at Dapto and Corrimal swimming pools for 5 to 16-year-olds at the beginning of the summer NSW School Holiday period, looking to enhance the program through pre-registration and targeted promotion.

REPORT AUTHORISATIONS

Report of: Mark Berriman, Manager Sport + Recreation
 Authorised by: Kerry Hunt, Director Community Services - Creative and Innovative City

ATTACHMENTS

There are no attachments for this report.

ACRONYMS USED IN REPORT

Abbreviation	Meaning
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
IMS	Illawarra Multicultural Services
LGA	Local Government Area
MCCI	Multicultural Communities Council of Illawarra

BACKGROUND

At its meeting on 29 July 2024, Council resolved to prepare an options paper and detail the cost to Council to implement a voucher system, or other options, which provide free entry to Dapto and Corrimal swimming pools for children aged 5 to 16; initially during the NSW summer school holiday period. The resolution also included investigating funding opportunities to support water-based recreation as part of a proposed Summer Swim Program.

Wollongong City Council operates eight community swimming pools. Six are seasonal and offer free entry, while Dapto and Corrimal pools are heated and operate year-round. Entry fees at these two facilities are applied to help offset the higher costs associated with year-round operation.

At its meeting on 16 December 2024, Council endorsed a trial of a digital voucher system for children aged 5 to 16 at Dapto and Corrimal pools during the summer school holidays. The system utilises Council's existing facility management software and cashier services to streamline access, improve customer experience and enable effective data collection for program evaluation.

Council unanimously resolved to:

1. Adopt Option D – implementing a digital voucher system at Dapto and Corrimal swimming pools at the beginning of the NSW School Holidays for Corrimal pool (commencing from Monday, 23 December 2024) and upon the reinstatement of entry fees at Dapto Memorial Swimming Pool from Monday, 6 January 2025).
2. Consider in the review of the trial, an expansion of the trial, to include people of all ages from a refugee background for future schemes.

PROPOSAL

The trial was conducted from Monday, 23 December 2024 to Thursday, 30 January 2025. To access the program, a parent or guardian was required to collect a 10-visit pass, verify the child's date of birth and present photo identification confirming residency within the Wollongong Local Government Area (LGA).

Vouchers were valid exclusively for recreational swimming activities at Corrimal and Dapto Pools. They were not applicable for:

- Programmed commercial activities (e.g. learn-to-swim and squad lessons)
- Aqua aerobics classes
- Adult or concession pass holders
- Spectator fees for supervising parents or guardians.

Trial Voucher Program Review – Attendance Figures

During the trial, a total of 2,305 10-visit vouchers were distributed at Corrimal Pool and 902 at Dapto Pool. This equates to a potential 32,000 subsidised visits across both facilities, representing an estimated subsidy value of approximately \$125,000.

Despite the scale of the subsidy, attendance figures did not show a significant increase during the trial period. Below is a comparative analysis of attendance data over the past few seasons:

Pool	Month	Average Attendance (FY2022–FY2024)	FY2025 Attendance	Change
Corrimal Pool	December	13,458	14,591	+1,133 visits
Corrimal Pool	January	18,571	18,631	+60 visits
Dapto Pool	January	10,305 (No data for 2024)	10,662	+357 visits

Corrimal Pool experienced a modest increase in December attendance during FY2025 compared to the three-year average, while January attendance remained relatively stable. Notably, there was a visible bump in attendance during the first week of the voucher program at Corrimal Pool. However, this initial surge did not translate into sustained increased participation for the remainder of the school holiday period.

Dapto Pool, where the voucher program began on 6 January 2025, saw a slight increase to attendance compared to the two-year average. While there was an initial bump in attendance figures, these figures suggested that while the voucher program had strong initial engagement and uptake, it did not significantly boost overall visitation during the school holiday period.

Feedback

Initial anecdotal feedback suggests the School Voucher Program trial was positively received by the community. Contract partners operating the frontline cash services at Corrimal and Dapto aquatic facilities reported the presence of new patrons who may not have previously accessed these services. This suggests that some Wollongong residents, who might typically use other local swimming pools, were encouraged to visit Corrimal and Dapto due to the free access provided through the program.

Both contract partners also reported that they experienced increased operational costs during the first fortnight of implementation, primarily due to the need for additional staffing to accommodate for the distribution of passes. A possible future solution would be to allow community members to sign up for the program 2–3 weeks prior to its commencement. Extending the lead time for registration and promoting the initiative through targeted messaging could help manage the customer experience more effectively, reduce the need for reactive staffing increases and potentially drive higher participation numbers through early engagement.

While a small number of individuals expressed concerns about being excluded from the voucher program, these instances were limited and did not appear to be concentrated within any particular demographic group. Importantly, no negative feedback was received from refugee or Culturally and

Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities regarding access to Corrimal or Dapto pools. This may be attributed to the inclusive nature of the current trial, which did not exclude children from CALD or refugee backgrounds, as all children aged 5 to 16 years residing in the LGA were eligible to participate.

Further context provided by Council's Community Development Team, who work closely with multicultural communities, suggests that geographic accessibility likely influenced the lack of feedback from CALD communities. Dapto Pool is less likely to attract newly arrived migrants, as many settle in central and southern suburbs (such as Berkeley; Warrawong and Cringila) and may not have access to private transport. Corrimal Pool, while slightly more accessible, still presents challenges.

Refugee Community and Water Safety

Refugees and migrants are considered at high risk of drowning due to a combination of cultural, social and environmental factors. Many come from backgrounds where swimming is not a common recreational activity and water safety education may not have been prioritised.

The trial voucher program promotes equitable access to Wollongong's community pools, but fee-free entry alone is not the most effective way to support communities at higher risk of drowning, particularly refugees. Six supervised pools across the LGA already offer free access, yet facilities like Dapto Pool are less accessible to newly arrived migrants who often settle in central and southern suburbs and may lack private transport. More impactful are targeted water safety education and subsidised learn-to-swim programs, which build essential skills and awareness. In 2025, McKeon's Swim School and Northern Stars Swim School were appointed to deliver such programs, funded by the NSW Office of Sport, for multicultural and disadvantaged communities. Council's involvement in initiatives such as the Multicultural Water Safety Day further highlights the importance of tailored, hands-on education in empowering at-risk communities to safely engage with aquatic environments.

Verification Documents

Council officers initially explored two primary options for verifying eligibility of people with a refugee background, if the trial voucher program were expanded to refugee groups:

- ImmiCard – issued by the Australian Government to confirm immigration status, particularly for asylum seekers and resettled refugees.
- Valid foreign passport accompanied by an Australian visa – used to identify individuals who may be newly arrived.

While these documents initially appeared to offer a practical solution for confirming refugee or migrant backgrounds, several limitations were identified. Not all refugees or migrants possess an ImmiCard, particularly those on specific visa subclasses, which could result in the exclusion of eligible individuals. Similarly, foreign passports with Australian visas do not reliably confirm refugee or humanitarian status, as they may also apply to individuals on other migration pathways.

To address these challenges and improve accessibility, Council has been working with the Australian Red Cross, Illawarra Multicultural Services (IMS), Multicultural Communities Council of Illawarra (MCCI) and its own Community Development Team to explore more inclusive and practical verification options for the program, including a redemption card to be handed out by these organisations to better verify refugee status.

Options for Trial Voucher Program – 2025/2026 Season

A summary of the options that were considered are tabled below:

Option A – Continuation of School Holiday Voucher Program	Option B – Expansion of Voucher Program to include all individuals from a refugee background	Option C – Discontinuation of Voucher Program
- The current program targeting 5 to 16 year olds remains the most equitable approach, ensuring inclusion of children from refugee backgrounds. - Promoting the program earlier and enabling voucher redemption prior to its start could enhance the customer experience and improve attendance. - Opportunities exist to promote the program in collaboration with multicultural partner organisations.	- Consider expanding the program to include individuals over the age of 16 from refugee backgrounds. - Verification includes photo ID, proof of residency, proof of refugee status. - Complications due to redemption process (requires card to be deployed via third party, then redeem voucher at different location) and lack of water safety or programming that would better serve this high-risk group.	- Current attendance numbers don't support significant impact. - Corrimal and Dapto Pools are open 12 months of the year and are heated year-round. Despite the entry fees in place, they remain Council's two highest subsidised community pools. - Can look to better promote the program to drive participation.

Option A – Continuation of the School Holiday Voucher Program (Recommended)

This option proposes continuing the existing trial 10-visit voucher program for children aged 5 to 16 years during the summer NSW School Holiday period. It is considered the most equitable and inclusive approach, as it supports all children within the age range, including those from refugee and CALD backgrounds. Enhancements such as earlier promotion, pre-program registration and stronger partnerships with multicultural organisations (eg IMS and MCCI) could improve participation, especially amongst migrant communities and streamline operations.

Option B – Expansion of the Voucher Program to all individuals from a refugee background (Not recommended)

This option would extend the program to include refugee-background individuals over the age of 16. While it aims to address a high-risk group, it introduces significant complexity, including the need for third-party verification through Australian Red Cross, Illawarra Multicultural Services (IMS), or Multicultural Communities Council of Illawarra (MCCI), as well as distribution of redemption cards and dual-location voucher distribution (need to verify refugee status at a third party location, then collect voucher at the pool). Moreover, this approach lacks integration with water safety education, which is a more effective strategy for reducing drowning risk.

Option C – Discontinuation of the Voucher Program (Not Recommended)

This option suggests ending the voucher program due to modest attendance increases during the trial. However, rather than discontinuing, there is a case for refining and better promoting the program in its second year. Feedback from contract partners and Council's Community Development Team indicates that earlier communication, targeted outreach and improved registration processes could enhance uptake.

CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Consultation with internal stakeholders included Lifeguard Services and Community, Culture and Engagement. Consultation also occurred with Red Cross, IMS and MCCI. Consultation with Council's contract partners has indicated their support of the continuation of the voucher program on a trial period.

PLANNING AND POLICY IMPACT

This report contributes to the delivery of Our Wollongong Our Future 2035 Goal 4 'We have a healthy, respectful and inclusive City'. It specifically delivers on the following:

Community Strategic Plan 2035	Delivery Program 2025-2029
Strategy	Service
4.2 Provide a variety of quality and accessible public spaces and opportunities for sport, play, leisure, recreation, learning and cultural activities in the community	Aquatic Services

RISK MANAGEMENT

There is a financial risk in continuing subsidised entry at Council's two fee-based swimming pools. Entry fees are in place at these pools to subsidise the heating systems and associated utility costs. Fees collected during peak periods at these facilities allow subsidisation of the cost to run these pools year-round.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Creating a subsidised voucher program will see a loss in revenue for Council. During the 2024/2025 trial period, a total of 3,207 ten-visit vouchers were distributed across Corrimal and Dapto Pools, resulting in an estimated subsidised value costing \$128,280. Without the specific individual attendance for each time a voucher was redeemed, the actual opportunity loss of revenue is unknown.

It should also be noted that the operational costs associated to Council's community pools equated to \$6,754,710 for the 2024/25 financial year. Dapto Pool operated at a loss of \$1,109,000 in the last financial year and Corrimal pool incurred an operating loss of \$828,000 for the same period. The financial impact of waiving fees at Dapto Memorial Swimming Pool for the period September 2023 to September 2024 has been a reduction of approximately \$250,000 in revenue for Council.

CONCLUSION

Continuing the voucher program for children aged 5 to 16 years during the summer NSW School Holiday period provides a further opportunity to explore increase utilisation and activation of the heated swimming pools. With improved promotion and early registration, the program can build on its initial success and further support access to Corrimal and Dapto Pools for all eligible children, including those from refugee and CALD backgrounds.