

ITEM 2

TRIAL OF SCHOOL HOLIDAY VOUCHER PROGRAM - DAPTO & CORRIMAL SWIMMING POOLS

This report is to provide an update on the Notice of Motion resolved unanimously within the Council meeting of 29 July 2024 to investigate the feasibility of a voucher system or other options to provide free entry to Dapto and Corrimal swimming pools for children aged 5 – 16 years during the summer NSW School Holiday period.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council 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).

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.

BACKGROUND

At its meeting of 29 July 2024, Council resolved to prepare an option paper and detail the cost to Council to implement a voucher system or other options to provide free entry to Dapto and Corrimal swimming pools for children aged 5-16 initially during the summer NSW School Holiday period, while also investigating funding opportunities to subsidise water-based recreation opportunities as part of a Dapto and Corrimal Summer swim program.

Wollongong Council operates eight community swimming pools, with six pools being seasonal and free of charge for entry, and two pools heated year-round at Dapto and Corrimal. Both heated pools have an entry fee to offset the costs involved in providing a year-round facility and service. At present, entry fees are applicable to only Corrimal pool as the entry fees for Dapto Memorial Swimming Pool were waived commencing from September 2023 due to heating issues. The consideration of a voucher program for the summer school holiday period for Corrimal and Dapto pools takes the reintroduction of fees at Dapto Pool into consideration.

The indoor swimming pool located at Beaton Park Leisure Centre is operated in line with commercial leisure facilities and is not considered as part of this report or included within this proposed voucher program.

Entry fees for Dapto pool

Entry fees to Dapto Memorial Swimming Pool have been waived since September 2023 due to the failure of the heating system at the site causing unreliable heating of the pool. Due to the uncertainty of key infrastructure replacement, it was considered appropriate to waive fees until such time that repairs were made and water temperature returned to a consistent 26 degrees. At this time, this facility remains fee-free for entry.

New gas boilers have been commissioned for use in October 2024 and the final handover of documentation for the electronic heat pumps to reinstate appropriate levels of heating is scheduled to occur on Friday, 13 December 2024. Since the commissioning of the gas back up system and the current seasonal warmer weather, the pool at Dapto has maintained a consistent temperature for the community.

It is proposed to recommence entry fees at Dapto Memorial Swimming Pool from 6 January 2025.

Cash collection services

As both Corrimal and Dapto pools ordinarily have an entry fee applicable for patrons, contractors are engaged for cash collection services at point of entry. The cashier collection and kiosk contracts have been awarded at both Dapto and Corrimal pools however, the service at Dapto is currently on hold until fees are reinstated at the pool.

The current fee structure at our community pools are as follows:

- Children under 5 are Free - Parents supervising children under 5 is \$2.90
- Child / concession \$4.00
- Family \$20.00 (2 adults, 2 children)
- Spectator fee \$0.60

Voucher Criteria

Council would need to create a voucher system and process to track the financial impact of the program, as well as create some level of governance surrounding the program to decrease fraudulent activity (for example duplicating vouchers, or entry into other fee-paying activities at the pools including fitness activities, aqua and swim programs etc.)

A voucher system would also need to be accessible to all who live within the Wollongong Local Government Area (LGA), and ensure children remain supervised while entering the facility as required in the Royal Life Saving Society Australia (RLSSA) Keep Watch Guidelines, which state that children aged 14 and under need to be fully supervised by a guardian. Ensuring controlled entry occurs to swimming pools during a trial voucher program will support Council staff and our contract partners in ensuring children are entering the pool grounds supervised.

PROPOSAL

Council considered four approaches with the recommendation to implement a 10 visit-pass trial program at Corrimal and Dapto swimming pools (Option D). This option will allow almost 2 visits per week for children and families to attend over the summer school holiday period, as well as controlling the costs of the voucher program. The trial voucher program would be valid during the summer NSW School Holiday period (Monday, 23 December 2024 to Thursday, 30 January 2025).

A parent or guardian will be required to take receipt of the 10 visit-pass, to confirm the date of birth of the child, and to show proof of address to confirm residency in the Wollongong LGA through photo identification. Vouchers would only be valid for child entry for the purpose of recreational swimming activities at Corrimal and Dapto swimming pools and would be:

- Not valid for children attending programmed commercial activities (learn to swim and squad lessons)
- Not valid for aqua aerobics classes
- Not valid for adults/concession pass holders
- Not valid for spectator fees for supervising parents/guardians.

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

Option A – Library/Community Centre voucher	Option B – Inclusion of voucher within Rates Notice	Option C – No Voucher at Dapto and reinstatement of Dapto fees after school holidays	Option D – Digital voucher system at Corrimal and Dapto pools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paper-based system, cost to print, easy to duplicate as Aquatic facility computerised system is specialised and not accessible to libraries. No digital database for verification. Poor Customer experience having to collect voucher in one location and redeem in another. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 x family passes per each Council rates notice issued. Timing doesn't align with school holidays. Paper-based system, easy to duplicate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fees waiver already a significant cost to Council. Potential additional loss of revenue. Potential increase of anti-social conduct, and children being left unattended at facility. Risk of contract dispute or additional financial risks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can track and verify vouchers used through existing digital operating system. Controlled entry (supervision). Administratively heavy initially which will apply pressure on contract partners and Customer experience.
Not recommended	Not recommended	Not recommended	Recommended

Table 1: Subsidised Voucher Options

Option A – Library/Community Centre Voucher Option (Not recommended)

Council officers explored running a paper-based voucher system from the local library/community centres at Dapto and Corrimal. This option would incur a cost to print, a potential waste of unused vouchers, potential inaccessibility issues by having collection and redemption of vouchers at differing sites and could also be easy for individuals to duplicate. It was noted that having one singular location to conduct the voucher transaction in its entirety would be of most benefit for residents.

Option B – Inclusion of voucher within Rates Notice (Not recommended)

Consideration was given to providing two family passes within Council issued Rates Notices for Wollongong residents, however the dates for the mail out of the rates did not align with the summer school holiday period. This option also carries the same risk of Option A with a paper-based system that may be easily duplicated.

Option C – No voucher at Dapto pool, reinstatement of Dapto pool fees after school holiday (Not recommended)

While the heating system is fully operational and with the Christmas period approaching, an option of not reinstating fees at Dapto Memorial Swimming Pool until after the summer school holiday period was considered. However, there has already been a significant financial impact to Council with the waiver of fees at Dapto which would be further extended during the pool's busier months. By delaying the reinstatement of fees at Dapto Memorial Swimming Pool, it would further jeopardise the contract that is currently on hold for cashier collection and kiosk services being implemented as it was initially planned to have the heating fully operational by October 2024.

Option D – Digital voucher system at Corrimal and Dapto pools (Recommended)

Utilising Council's existing facility management software, a 10 visit-pass for children could be created to be redeemed at both Corrimal and Dapto swimming pools at point of entry. Access would be controlled via the cashier collection service, where Council's contract partners would sight photo identification of the parent or guardian for proof of address within the Wollongong LGA and redeem the visit-pass in the same manner as existing memberships/visit-passes utilised at the pools.

Utilising an existing digital database would create a smoother customer experience and ideal reporting capabilities when reviewing the financial impact of the voucher system, as well as communicating with visitors regarding their experience with Council services. It is acknowledged however that the implementation of this voucher program may initially place additional pressure on our contract partners administratively.

While the voucher program would begin at Corrimal pool on Monday, 23 December 2024 the entry fees at Dapto Memorial Swimming Pool would be reinstated on Monday, 6 January 2025. The reinstatement of fees to Dapto would be supported by a comprehensive communication campaign that would occur before 6 January and would continue after this date, promoting the kiosk reopening, consistent pool temperatures, and voucher system.

CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Consultation with internal stakeholders included Lifeguard Services, Library Services and the Financial Services team. Consultation with Council's contract partners has indicated their support of the voucher program on a trial period.

PLANNING AND POLICY IMPACT

This report contributes to the delivery of Our Wollongong 2032 Goal 5: 'We are a healthy community in the liveable City' in the 2032 Community Strategic Plan.

Community Strategic Plan 2032	Delivery Program 2022-2026
Strategy	Service
5.4 Provide a variety of quality and accessible public places and opportunities for sport, play, leisure, recreation, learning and cultural activities in the community.	Aquatic Services

RISK MANAGEMENT

There is a financial risk in introducing or 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 (gas, electricity, etc), and 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. Last season in December and January, 22% of Corrimal pool's overall revenue was generated for the year. The estimated cost that the voucher program could have to the current Aquatic Services' budget is approximately \$50,000 to \$60,000 in reduced revenue.

It should also be noted that the operational costs associated to Council's community pools equated to \$6,623,154 for the 2023/24 financial year. Dapto pool operated at a loss of \$1,142,000 in the last financial year, and Corrimal pool incurred an operating loss of \$930,000 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

Providing a fee-free option for children aged 5 – 16 years to enter both Corrimal and Dapto swimming pools over the summer period will provide much-valued entertainment and enjoyment for our youngest residents. The option for a trial of a digital voucher system for free entry for children aged 5 – 16 years to Corrimal and Dapto swimming pools during the summer NSW School Holiday period is proposed to be endorsed by Council in response to the Notice of Motion of 29 July 2024.