



COVID-19 Pandemic and the Case for Re-opening Aquatic Centres and Swim Schools

Disclaimers:

- **This position is current as at 4pm (AEST) on 30 April 2020**
- **Our position must be considered against our remit as a national peak body, with a key focus on reducing drowning and promoting safe aquatic participation**

Royal Life Saving continues to closely monitor the COVID-19 Pandemic through official sources, including the Australian Government Department of Health, and State/Territory Government Departments of Health.

The questions on everyone's mind

Royal Life Saving has been approached by many who are seeking advice and reassurance that aquatic centres and swim schools would soon re-open, as well as some clarity regarding plans and ideas for recovery.

Typically, these enquiries relate to four broad questions:

- When do you estimate that aquatic centres and swim schools will re-open?
- What adjustments will they be expected to make to meet a COVID-19 world?
- What is our position in relation to short, medium- and long-term recovery measures?
- Will more children drown because of pool closures?

The following outlines Royal Life Saving's views in relation to these questions, noting that such decisions are likely to be made by National, State and Territory, and Local Government jurisdictions, as well as those facilities and their associated business owners.

Framing our position

In framing this position:

- Royal Life Saving notes the economic impacts of COVID-19 on aquatic centres and swim schools continue to be significant. Royal Life Saving estimates that more than 1,077 aquatic facilities, the majority of which are owned by local councils, and more than 1,176 swim schools, including many small businesses, have been closed.
- Royal Life Saving estimates that approximately 67,000 frontline workers have been affected, almost half are casual employees, three-quarters are female and 40% are between the ages of 18 to 24 years.
- The JobKeeper supplement has been a lifesaver for many business, charities and employees in the sector. Although some gaps remain, with concerning impacts on council employed staff and students not covered by the scheme.
- Royal Life Saving estimates that the financial impacts of a six-month closure are approximately \$900m in lost revenue, and \$430m in lost wages.

The health and social impacts of closing aquatic centres and swim schools are significant.

- Royal Life Saving estimates that more than 1.5 million children aged 0 to 14 years participate in organised swimming (lessons, coaching) outside of school programs every year, and there are more than 106 million individual swimming pool visits annually.
- The reported benefits of swimming are extensive and include increased cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength and endurance, as well as reduced stress and anxiety.

Balancing public health measures and economic considerations with our love of swimming and strong desire for a roadmap back to aquatics is challenging. There are few in our industry that do not want a return to normal operations in the weeks ahead.



Insights from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee

In discussing the potential for re-opening aquatic centres and swim schools, lessons must be drawn from the period leading up to their closure. This includes:

- This period was heavily informed by the statements of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), and subsequent positions adopted by the COVID cabinet.
- An analysis of the AHPPC statements, and their relationship to aquatic centres and swim school closures is outlined below.
- It highlights the importance of flattening the curve, risk management and public health measures, including social distancing, personal and venue hygiene.

Swimming pool specific advice from the AHPPC

In terms of the potential for re-opening, perhaps the most significant of these AHPPC statements was made on 17th March 2020. This statement provided specific advice to aquatic centres in the context of flattening the curve measures relating to community sport. In relation to swimming pools the AHPPC stated:

- There is no evidence that the virus will survive in well managed and maintained pools chlorinated in accordance with Australian standards and guidelines.
- People should
 - Minimise time spent out of the pool
 - Comply with the social distancing and protective measures when in the changing rooms and outside the pool
 - Shower with soap before attending the facility
 - Recreational water facilities (water slides, surf parks) should also comply with social distancing and protective measures
- In reference to facilities, the AHPPC stated that they should:
 - Regularly clean and disinfect surfaces and objects
 - Provide/promote hand washing guidance
 - Provide sanitising hand dispensers in prominent places, particularly in entry or high-use areas such as the front desk, changing rooms, toilets or kiosks
 - Promote exclusion of ill people

Government COVID-19 suppression strategy

Having been successful in flattening the curve, the Government strategy for re-opening areas of the economy and removing restrictions will rest on the health system's success in:

- Controlling or suppressing the number of cases
- Managing cases and quarantining new cases
- Monitoring and isolating new cases and any outbreaks
- Efficient and effective contact tracing
- Measuring and monitoring the situation at State or regional levels

Adapting public measures in aquatic settings

A key component of any justification for re-opening aquatic centres and swim schools relates to the question of how well they can adapt and contribute to these and other requirements of COVID-19 public health measures.

In exploring this question, Royal Life Saving has extracted such measures from various AHPPC statements, and analysed those measures against the questions of:

- What is the public health requirement?
- How can the measure be adapted or managed in the context of aquatic centres and/or swim schools?
- What is the feasibility of such a measure being implemented by industry?



The analysis, shown below in Appendix 1, covers personal hygiene, social distancing and venue sanitation. It shows that:

- The adoption of personal hygiene measures, such as the re-engineering the venue, staff and customer protocols, is highly feasible.
- Many social distance measures, such as minimising non-essential attendance and maintaining social distancing (1.5m) for incidental venue use and recreational swimming, is highly feasible.
- Social distancing measures, such as maintaining 1.5m in the context of lessons, is moderately feasible for competent swimmers, but requires more careful attention and probably much lower student:teacher ratios in non-swimmers and preschool aged early swimmers.
- Minimising physical contact through adjustment to teaching techniques and ratios may make this approach more feasible for those learners. However, we note the economic impacts of adjustments to student:teacher ratios may make these lessons close to private tuition and therefore more costly to provide.
- Other measures, including venue sanitation and closure of non-essential areas, are highly feasible.

In addition to system-wide changes, it will be vital for all facilities to conduct individual risk assessments. Each facility is unique and different public health measures may be required. Assessments should not be limited to in-water activities but also include walkways, changing rooms and other shared spaces.

Health system capacity for effective contact tracing to respond to outbreaks is an essential requirement for further reduction of restrictions. In this respect, aquatic centres and swim schools may be well placed to assist by maintaining a register of users, preferably in an electronic format. This may require adjustment to centre registration systems, and could be a strategy to mitigate any impacts on services of a COVID-19 positive worker/user attending a venue.

Royal Life Saving has also issued [advice on the implications of COVID for resuscitation and first aid](#) delivered by first responders, including pool lifeguards.

Economic and governance barriers to re-opening aquatic centres and swim schools

Stating that aquatic centres and swim schools can make appropriate adjustments to meet the requirements of COVID-19 public health measures is only one part of the challenge. The economic and governance realities of such decisions are much more challenging.

Just as we saw with the process of closures, we can expect Federal or State Government to formulate policies allowing for the re-opening of facilities, but see fragmentation in implementation across communities as local government and business owners conduct risk assessments and make decisions based on multiple factors.

This fragmentation may be compounded by differences in approaches by States and Territories who may adopt slightly different strategies and at staggered timelines. However, this does provide industry with an opportunity to learn lessons from those States and Territories who choose to re-open soonest.

Specific Government assistance required

Economic considerations include the fact that:

- Family budgets are likely to be impacted by loss of, or reduced, employment.
- Council budgets will be impacted by loss of income (rates, levies), reduced investment performance, and financial pressures related to retaining key staff.
- Small and medium business operators have had to underwrite capital, fixed, energy and some workforce costs during this period of inactivity.

Royal Life Saving expresses its concern that the sector will require further assistance in order to achieve the transformation required to be successful in a post-COVID-19 environment. Specifically, our concerns relate to the following key questions:



- How do we best ensure that communities have facilities that meet their needs for fun, fitness and good health?
- How do we ensure that children and vulnerable populations have improved access to swimming and water safety education?
- How do we support a workforce that provides those services?

Royal Life Saving's early responses to these questions calls on Government(s) to consider the recommendations below.

- Ramp up services throughout winter to ensure that aquatic centres and swim schools are fully operational in mid-spring and well before summer 2020/21. This involves:
 - **Providing short-term funding if required in areas such as maintenance.** This includes possible subsidies to cover costs, such as energy, as users may be slow to return, and the operational costs of swimming pools are largely fixed irrespective of the number of users. We expect that this will be a significant issue in regional areas, and in aquatic centres that have known and longstanding problems (eg, leaks or inefficient energy systems).
 - **Supporting swim schools.** Specifically by helping to offset a period where expenses exceed any income through winter/early spring.
 - **Retraining employees in areas of COVID management, social distancing, cleaning protocols.**
- Stimulate a return to structured swimming and water safety activities by:
 - **Ensuring schools have the budget to restart school swimming programs.** Schools will be under pressure due to curriculum and budget pressures. State Governments should ensure that schools have the budgetary means to prioritise swimming, and in some cases catch-up on lessons lost to the period of closure.
 - **Investing in swimming and water safety vacation programs.** These programs are longstanding in NSW, VIC, SA, WA, TAS and provide an important, community-focused and cost-effective swimming and water safety education. Expanding their reach, perhaps by establishing a September program, may be an effective strategy to reach significant volumes of children in a short period of time.
 - **Investing in sport vouchers for swimming and water safety.** Several State and Territory Governments have used community sport vouchers to subsidise the cost of participation in sport. Few sports have the lifesaving consequences that come with a failure to participate in swimming and water safety, so we ask for a swimming-specific set of vouchers to stimulate the industry and reconnect children with their swim school. Royal Life Saving research indicates that this is best directed at primary school aged children, but this may vary from state to state.
- Develop strategies to support the Aquatic Workforce by:
 - **Ensuring a quick return to the industry for employees.** This refers specifically to younger employees who may have been excluded from accessing JobKeeper or JobSeeker, and who may otherwise be lost to industry.
 - **Developing programs to leverage aquatic and recreation centres.** For example, by using these venues for leadership development, early career growth and development.
- Stimulate investment in community aquatic centres and swim school infrastructure by:
 - **Providing opportunities for a coordinated approach to aquatic centre and swim school development.** The current adhoc approach leaves many communities in desperate need of updated or re-modelled aquatic centres. Smaller scale, modular centre design may present communities with an opportunity for rapid development.

Royal Life Saving expects to work with industry and add to these measures in the coming weeks and months. It is essential that such advocacy recognises jurisdictional responsibilities and sector collaboration.



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Final word on drowning prevention

Finally, Royal Life Saving seeks to maintain a community focus on water safety and drowning prevention. This includes:

- Ensuring no child misses out on swimming and water safety education because of COVID-19 Pandemic measures or impacts
- Increasing lifeguard services, signage and warnings at recreational swimming locations, particularly given the phased re-opening of national parks and open water locations, in the context of local aquatic centres being closed

We love aquatics, are committed to industry and believe community safety is paramount.

Justin Scarr

Chief Executive Officer

30th April 2020

Appendix 1 - Public Health Measures for Aquatic Centres and Swim Schools (Draft at 30th April 2020)



Appendix 1

Public Health Measures for Aquatic Centres and Swim Schools (Draft at 30th April 2020)

The table below outlines some aquatic adaptations to COVID-19 public health measures. Measures have been extracted from AHPPC Statements covering public health, community sport and swimming pools.

These must be considered in the context of:

- Venue and activity risk assessment
- Staff training, customer briefing on protocols

AREA	REQUIREMENT	AQUATIC ADAPTATION	FEASIBILITY
Personal Hygiene	Frequent hand washing	Provision of sanitising hand dispenser at point of entry, high use places, toilets	HIGH
	Cough etiquette	Signage, customer communications, staff protocols	HIGH
	Exclude symptomatic	Signage, customer communications, staff training	HIGH
Social Distancing	Essential attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclude spectators • Limit parents watching lessons for children aged under five years 	HIGH
	Maintaining 1.5m (incidental)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct venue risk assessment for all walkways, concourses. • Install measures to include floor markings and barriers to maintain distance High level of confidence for regular users	HIGH
	Maintaining 1.5m (lap swimmers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct activity risk assessment. • Lane and program management High level of confidence for lap swimmers	HIGH
	Maintaining 1.5m (coaching)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct activity risk assessment. • Lane management. High level of confidence for expert swimmers	HIGH
	Maintaining 1.5m (lessons)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct activity risk assessment. Teaching techniques and ratio adjustments may be needed Moderate level of confidence for competent swimmers Low level confidence for non-swimmers and/or preschool early swimmers	MODERATE TO LOW
	Minimise physical contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct activity risk assessment. Teaching techniques and ratio adjustments may be needed High level of confidence for competent swimmers Moderate level confidence for non-swimmers and/or preschool early swimmers	HIGH to MODERATE
	Less than 100 indoors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct activity and venue risk assessment. Ratios may need adjustment, and therefore a premium price may need to be charged. • Non-essential attendance enforced 	HIGH
	Less than 500 outdoors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct activity and venue risk assessment. Expected to be manageable until summer period	HIGH
Venue Sanitation	Cleaning regimen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase cycle for cleaning and disinfectant surfaces and objects 	HIGH
	Close non-essential, higher transmission risk areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain closure of spas, saunas • Closure of changing rooms or kiosk. • Promote showering at home 	HIGH
Equipment	Avoid sharing of equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal of teaching aids and swim devices from the process, or cleaning protocols in place 	HIGH
Contact Tracing	Assist in mitigation outbreaks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a register of users, preferably in electronic format; this may require adjustment to centre registration system. Strategy may mitigate impacts of COVID positive worker/user • Promote use of the CovidSafe App 	HIGH