

PROJECT ELEVATE:

Royal Life Saving NSW mid-point evaluation of the Learn to Swim for At Risk Communities Program

Report prepared for Royal Life Saving Society – New South Wales by Dr Amy Peden, School of Population Health, UNSW Sydney and Craig Roberts - General Manager, Drowning Prevention

Document Management

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Acknowledgement of County

Royal Life Saving acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters across Australia, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise that First Nations peoples have cared for rivers, lakes, creeks, and coastlines for tens of thousands of years, and that water holds deep cultural, spiritual, and practical significance.

As an organisation dedicated to water safety, we honour this enduring connection and commit to learning from and working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. By respecting traditional knowledge and strengthening partnerships, we aim to protect lives, celebrate culture, and ensure safer waterways for all.

We honour the enduring connection of First Nations peoples to land and water, and commit to safer waterways for all

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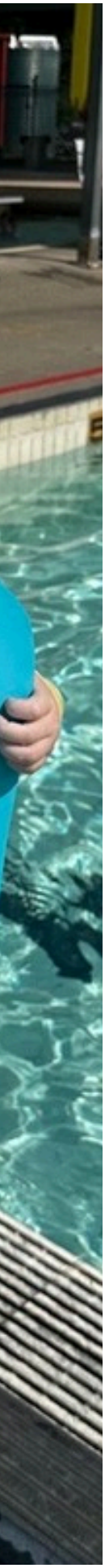
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Learning
THE SKILLS


ROYAL LIFE SAVING
NSW | ACT | TAS
Learning
THE SKILLS
to enjoy a
Swim and SURVIVE


Shallow Water
No Diving
1.0m


Make a splash with
Swim and SURVIVE



Introduction

Royal Life Saving NSW mid-point evaluation of the Learn to Swim for At Risk Communities Program

Background

Drowning is a serious public health and safety issue in Australia causing significant economic and societal harms associated with premature, yet preventable mortality and morbidity (Peden et al, 2021). Nationally, 357 people drowned in Australian waterways in the 2024/25 financial year, 27% higher than the 10-year average and the highest on record (Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, 2025). To date for Summer 2025/26, a total of 79 deaths have occurred across Australia (Royal Life Saving Australia, 2025).

New South Wales (NSW), for the 2024/25 financial year, recorded 129 drowning deaths, an increase of 30% on the 10-year average. NSW has two regions in the top 10 for highest drowning rates per 100,000 people, the Mid North Coast and Far West NSW. Sydney and South Eastern Sydney also appear within the 10 metro regions with the highest drowning rates. Drowning in NSW typically occurs among males (85%), those born overseas (27%) and at rivers/creeks (35%) and the beach (19%) while swimming and recreating (22%) (Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, 2025).

Beyond fatalities, non-fatal drowning also impacts families, communities the health system. Nationally, it is estimated that for every one drowning fatality, three people are admitted to hospital to be treated for a non-fatal drowning (Peden et al, 2018). In the pre-hospital setting, in NSW, research has shown that for every one drowning fatality, 15 non-fatal drownings are attended to by NSW Ambulance (Mead et al, 2024).

Declining swimming skills and barriers to accessing swimming lessons including access and cost (Ananthapavan et al, 2024; Willcox-Pidgeon et al, 2021) have been identified as factors contributing to rising drowning deaths. To address those communities at highest risk of drowning, the NSW Government committed $6million for a learn to swim program.

The NSW Government Learn to Swim for at Risk Communities initiative provides free learn to swim and water safety lessons to people from low socioeconomic groups, multicultural communities, First Nations people and people in regional and remote areas (NSW Government Office of Sport, 2025). As one of fifteen learn to swim providers across NSW awarded funding under this initiative, Royal Life Saving New South Wales are delivering learn to swim and water safety lessons via four programs under Project Elevate.

357
People drowning in 2024/25

27%
higher than the 10-year average

About Project Elevate

Project Elevate provides over 50,000 free swimming lessons to children and adults from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, low socio-economic communities, First Nations Peoples, and regional and remote communities (Royal Life Saving NSW, 2026). This Learn to Swim Program is structured into four key programs, ensuring tailored delivery for each stage of life:



Program 1: SwimVAC

Aligned to the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework and Swim & Survive program, SwimVAC programs encompass nationally recognised swimming and water safety benchmarks teaching swimming and personal safety skills to children of all skill abilities.
Royal Life Saving NSW is proud to deliver free learn-to-swim lessons as part of the NSW Government Learn to Swim for At-Risk Communities initiative. SwimVAC, is designed for children aged 3 to 14 years, with a particular focus on achieving the national swimming and water safety benchmarks for 6 and 12 year olds.



Program 2: Primary School students

Delivered in cooperation with the NSW Department of Education's Sports Unit and primary schools across the state, this program will provide comprehensive swimming lessons and water safety education to primary school students. The program is aligned to the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework, ensuring that school students develop the competencies needed to stay safe in and around water.

The target group for Program 2 is primary school students, primarily in Year 2. The program spans 10 sessions, with each session running for 45 minutes and will operate throughout the year across the 4 terms. To accommodate bus travel costs and the cost of living, Royal Life Saving NSW will work with individual schools and the department to offer flexible formats based on students' needs and costs.

"Many of the children would not have been able to attend swimming lessons if there had been a cost. Offering the program for free allowed those who needed it most to participate. Thank You"



Program 3: High School students

Program 3 aims to address gaps in swimming competency for teenagers who may not have received prior swim education, incorporating advanced water safety techniques and peer-led learning. The High School Swimming Program lessons are structured to cater to varying skill levels, ensuring participation is enjoyable and non-competitive, focusing on personal development. The target group for Program 3 is high school students, primarily in Years 7 to 8.

The program spans 10 sessions, with each session running for 45 minutes and will operate throughout the year across the 4 terms. To accommodate bus travel costs and the cost of living, Royal Life Saving NSW will work with individual schools and the department to offer flexible formats based on students' needs and costs.



Program 4: Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Adults

Program 4 offers swimming and water safety education to adults who face barriers due to a lack of prior access or cultural challenges, helping ensure confidence, safety, and inclusion for all. The program spans 10 sessions, each lasting 45 minutes. Sessions will be offered at varying times, including mid-week and some evening sessions, based on specific community needs.

Aims of the Current Report

The current report aims to examine program coverage and impacts at the midpoint (Terms 3 and 4, 2025). Recommendations are made to inform future iterations of the program or future funding decisions regarding learn to swim in New South Wales.

Methods

This midpoint evaluation report details findings from analysis of data from Term 3, 2025 and Term 4, 2025, representing the first half of the funded activities.

Data collection method(s)

Data are collected from a variety of sources, notably enrolment records (number of lessons attended); swim teacher assessments (level commenced at, level at final lesson) and pre and post program participant surveys (previous experience with swimming lessons, barriers to access, value placed on swimming lessons, intention to continue). For participants under the age of 18, surveys were completed by their parent or caregiver.

Data cleaning, coding and analysis

De-identified data were organised in Excel spreadsheets by Royal Life Saving NSW staff. Pre and post participant surveys and attendance and achievement data were linked together using a unique ID code for each participant.

Descriptive statistics were performed for a range of outcome measures including:

- Participant demographics (gender, age, cultural background, language other than English the primary language at home, First Nations Peoples)
- Proportion of lessons attended (out of a possible 10)
- Participation by those without prior formal lessons
- Barriers for those who had not had prior formal lessons
- Parental/participant satisfaction of program
- Parental self-reported improvement in child's swimming ability or participant self-assessment of improvement in own swimming ability
- Parental/participant assessment of importance of learning to swim

Data were received by the report author and downloaded into SPSS for analysis (IBM Corp, 2020). Age in years was calculated by deducting the reported year of birth from 2025 (the year the program ran). Age in years was then coded into age groupings.

Skill attainment was examined by analysing start and end level, as well as number of levels gained between the two time points. Skill attainment was further analysed by benchmarked achievement to the 6 years swimming and water safety framework benchmark level (Level 3) and the 12 years swimming and water safety framework benchmark level (Level 7) (Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, n.d.) (Figure 1).

Cost Benefit Analysis

This evaluation was undertaken using a cost–benefit analysis (CBA) framework consistent with NSW Treasury and Commonwealth public sector appraisal guidance. The analysis adopted the NSW referent group perspective and assessed program costs and benefits over a defined long-term horizon to reflect the sustained impact of swimming competency on drowning risk exposure. Program delivery costs were treated as occurring at the time of implementation, while benefits were modelled as accruing over time and discounted to present value using a real discount rate in line with Treasury practice. Sensitivity analysis was conducted to test the robustness of results under alternative discount rates and risk assumptions.

Benefits were quantified by modelling the expected reduction in fatal and catastrophic non-fatal drowning incidents attributable to structured swimming and water safety instruction. Established national valuation parameters, including the Value of a Statistical Life and accepted estimates of long-term disability costs, were applied to monetise avoided harm. Baseline drowning risk and non-fatal to fatal ratios were drawn from national reporting, and conservative assumptions regarding program-attributable risk reduction were tested across multiple scenarios. A supplementary Social Return on Investment (SROI) lens was applied to capture broader distributional and system effects, presented separately from the core Treasury-aligned CBA results in accordance with public sector economic evaluation conventions.

Ethics approval

Ethics approval for this research was provided by the UNSW Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee under approval number iRECS8735.

Figure 1: Swim and Survive Levels and key competencies



Program Results

Royal Life Saving NSW mid-point evaluation of the Learn to Swim for At Risk Communities Program

Results

At the midpoint, Project Elevate has provided swimming lessons to 7,407 children and adults across New South Wales. The average age of participants in the programs ranges from a low of 6.33 years in program 1 SwimVAC to a high of 12.96 years for the high school program. Adult participants in program 4 were of an average age of 39.06 years. (Table 1).

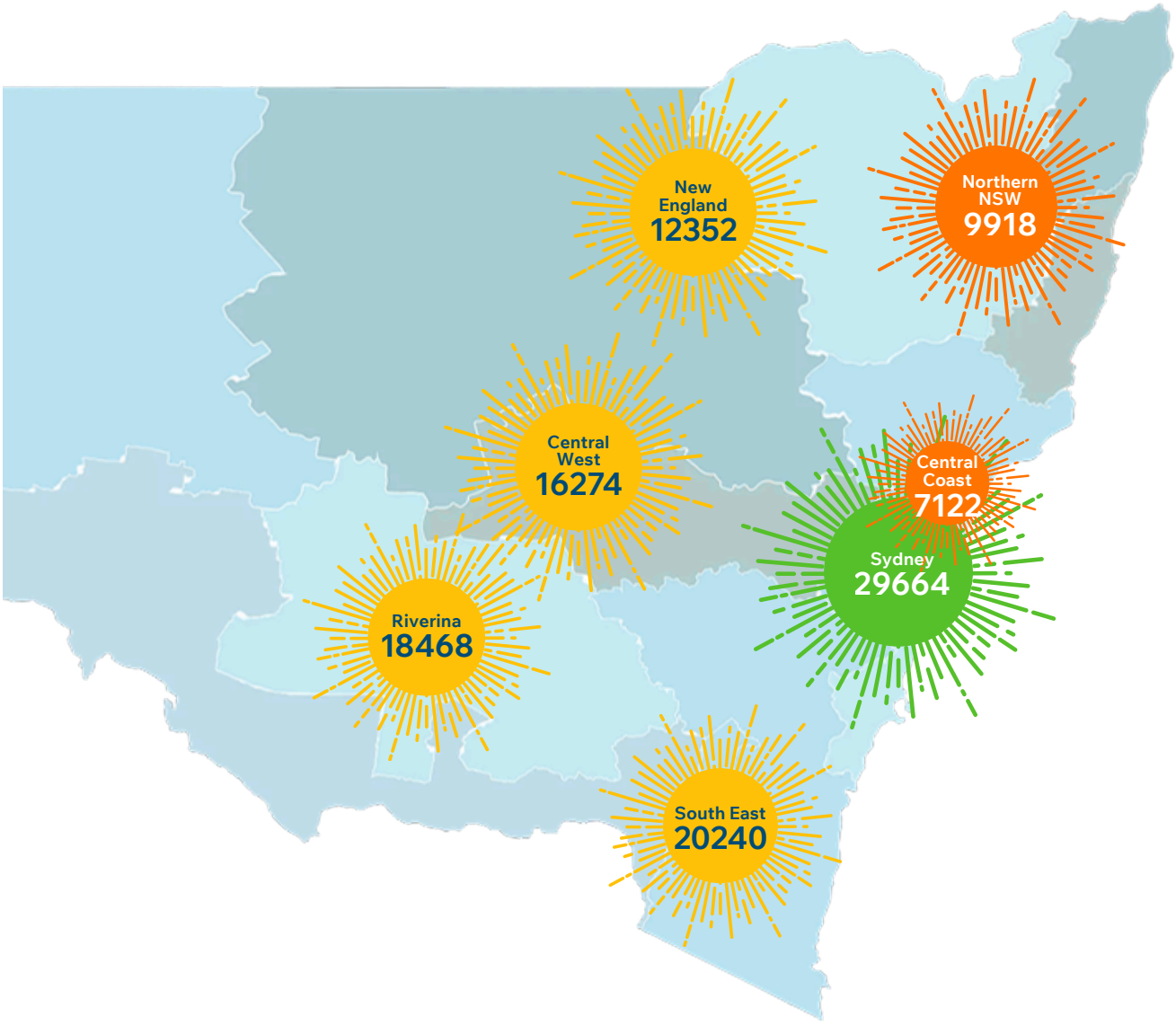
When examining achievement against the benchmarks, 79% of SwimVAC participants could achieve the 6 year benchmark, rising to 82% for high school students. Just 10% of high school program participants could achieve the 12 year benchmark despite being of an average age of 13 years. For adults (program 4), 33% could achieve the 6 year benchmark by the end of their program, but no participants could achieve the 12 years benchmark. (Table 1)

Program	Term 3, 2025	Term 4, 2025	Total	Average age	% achieved 6 year benchmark	% achieved 12 year benchmark
Program 1: SwimVAC	23	2,368	2,391	6.33 years	79%	1%
Program 2: Primary	443	2,041	2,484	8.89 years	71%	0%
Program 3: High school	352	1,004	1,356	12.96 years	82%	10%
Program 4: Culturally	469	707	1,176	39.06 years	33%	0%
TOTAL	1,287	6,120	7,407	-	-	-

Table 1: Number of participants by term and program, average age of participants and % who can achieve 6 year and 12 year benchmarks respectively

The Total Impact

as of June 30



Total Students and Lessons

Royal Life Saving NSW will deliver over 110,000 Lessons to 11,410 students

Program 1: SwimVAC

In total, 2,391 children participated in Program 1 – SwimVAC; 1% in Term 3 and 99% in Term 4, 2025. Seventy three percent (73%) of participants attended all 10 lessons.

Demographics

The gender split of participants was even, with 51% of participants being male. The largest proportion of participants were aged 4-5 years (33%), followed by 6-7 year olds (26%). The average age of participants in program 1 was 6.33 years.

The program involved participants from 32 unique cultural backgrounds. The most commonly represented cultural backgrounds were Indian (23%), Chinese (11%) and Nepalese (10%).

For 2% of participants a language other than English was the primary language spoken at home. Eleven percent of participants (11%) identified as First Nations.

Achievement

Half of all participants started the program at Level 3 (50%), the 6 years benchmark. A further 28% commenced the program at Level 2 and 22% at Level 1. The most common level to complete the program on was Level 4 (31%), followed by Level 3 (30%). On average participants gained 1.13 levels during the 10 lesson program.

When assessed against the National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks, 79% of participants could achieve the 6 years benchmark and

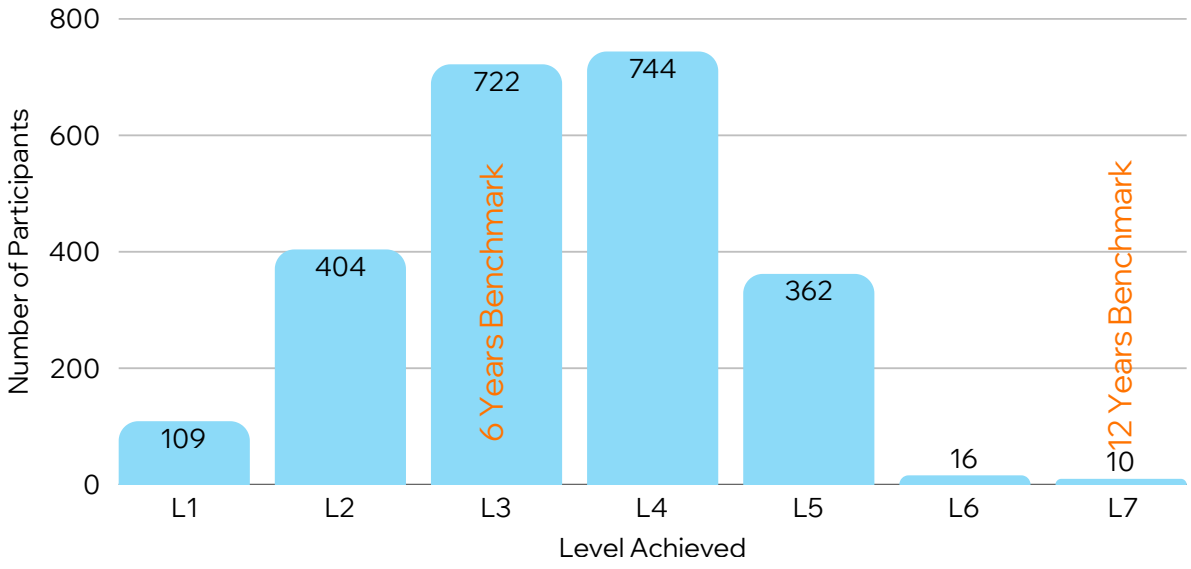


Figure 2: Program 1 participants by level achieved at end of program, including 6 and 12 year benchmarks (N=2,391)

Program satisfaction

The vast majority of participants who responded to the post-program survey (95%) reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with the program. (Figure 3).

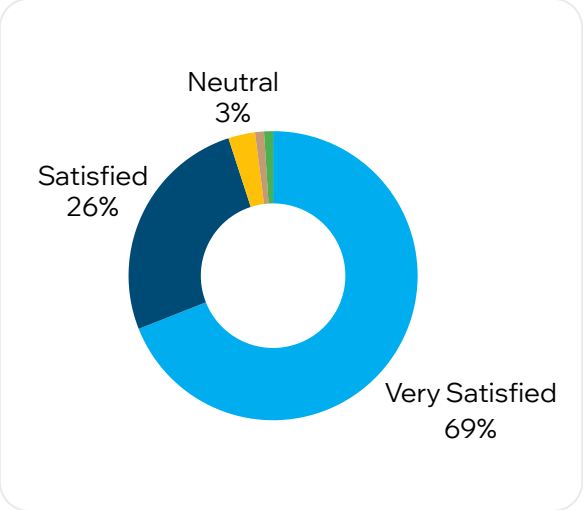


Figure 3: Program satisfaction

As participants of program 1 were children, parents were also asked about their child's enjoyment of the program. Parents reported that 62% of children enjoyed the program all of the time, with 32% enjoying the program most of the time. (Figure 4)

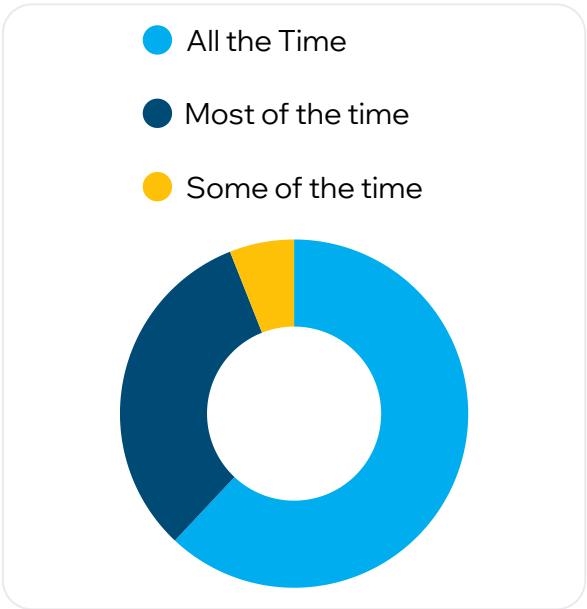


Figure 4: Child's program enjoyment

Staff satisfaction

The vast majority of respondents rated the swimming teachers who delivered the program as very good or good (96%). (Figure 5)

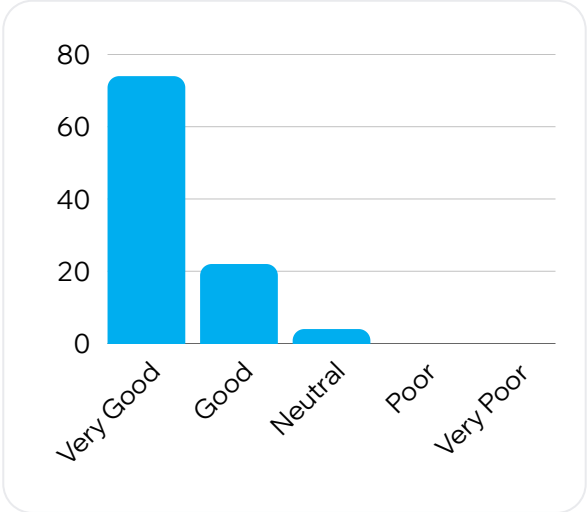


Figure 5: Assessment of swimming teachers

Aquatic facility staff were assessed as being very good or good by 96% of respondents. (Figure 6)

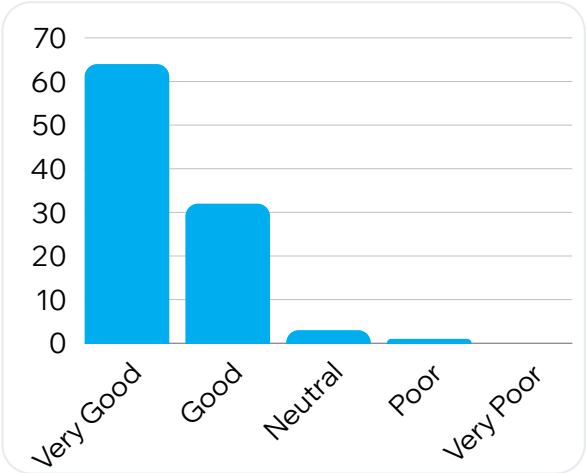


Figure 6: Assessment of aquatic facility staff

Facility Satisfaction

The swimming pool environment was also assessed as very good or good by 96% of respondents. (Figure 7)

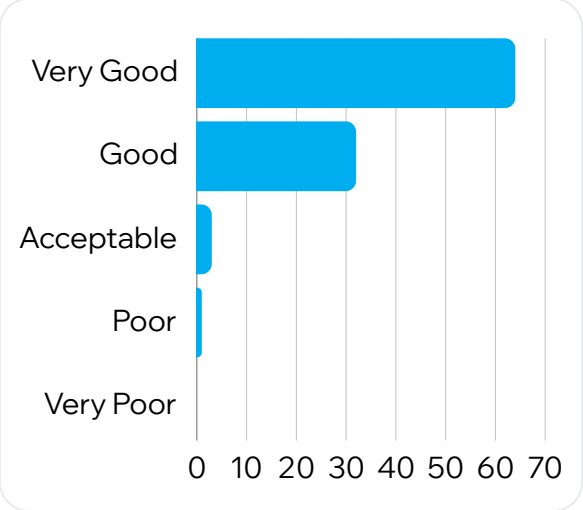


Figure 7: Assessment of swimming pool environment

Ninety eight percent of respondents rated the customer service experienced while taking part in the program as good or very good. (Figure 8)

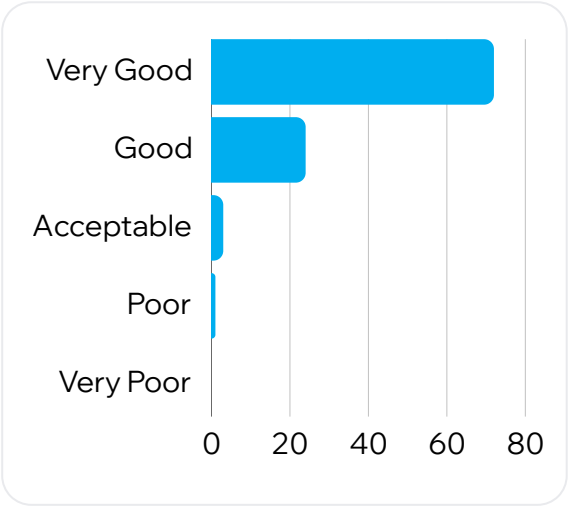


Figure 8: Assessment of customer service

Perceptions of ability and future intentions

When asked to reflect on changes in their child's swimming ability after completing the program, parents reported most commonly seeing a large improvement (73%) or a small improvement (24%). Just 3% of respondents reported seeing no change in their child's ability. (Figure 9)

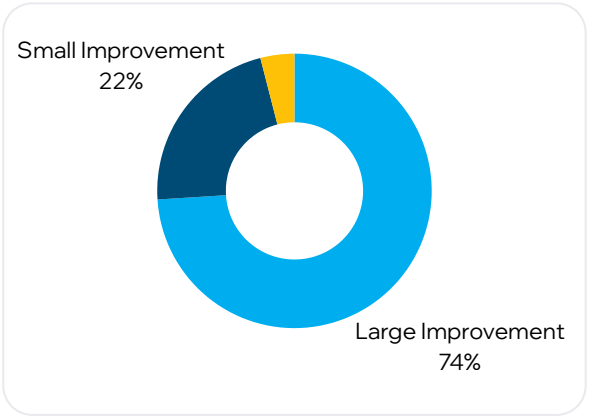


Figure 9: Self-assessed change in swimming ability post-program participation

After having completed the program parents were asked how important they thought learning to swim was. Most respondents indicated it was extremely important (71%). (Figure 10)

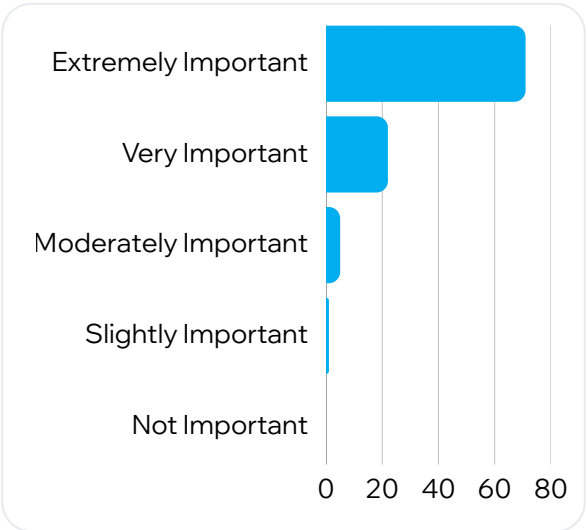


Figure 10: Post-program assessment of the important of learning to swim

Case Study



Sue and Marg – Bringing Swimming and Water Safety to Jindera

For experienced swim teachers Sue and Marg, teaching swimming has always been about more than strokes and techniques—it is about helping children build confidence and lifelong safety skills.

Their journey to the regional NSW town of Jindera began during the COVID period when disruptions to school swimming programs left them without their usual teaching opportunities. Rather than stepping away from the water, they looked for ways to continue sharing their expertise.

“Marg suggested we apply to teach in Jindera,” Sue recalls. “It’s a small rural town near her daughter’s home and we thought it would be a great way to keep doing what we love.” - Their enthusiasm was clear. “We actually listed Jindera as our first, second and third preference,” Marg laughs. “When we found out we got it, we were thrilled.”

From the moment they arrived, Sue and Marg were warmly welcomed by the community. Parents quickly saw the difference the lessons were making, often commenting on how quickly their children were building confidence in the water. Over the years, they have had the privilege of watching children grow from hesitant beginners into confident swimmers.

“There’s something special about the moment a child takes their feet off the pool floor for the first time and realises they can float,” Sue says. “You can see the confidence appear instantly.”

One story in particular stayed with them. A parent later shared that during a beach holiday her son had unexpectedly fallen into the water but remained calm and returned safely using the skills he had learned in lessons.

“That moment reminded us why these lessons matter,” Marg says. “These aren’t just swimming lessons—they’re life-saving skills.”

For Sue and Marg, returning to Jindera each year has become a highlight.
“Watching children gain confidence in the water and achieve things they didn’t think were possible is incredibly rewarding,” Sue says.
“These skills stay with them for life.”

Program 2: Primary School students

In total, 2,484 children participated in Program 2 – Primary school students; 18% in Term 3 and 82% in Term 4, 2025. Ninety two percent (92%) of participants attended all 10 lessons.

Demographics

The gender split of participants was even, with 50% of participants being male or female respectively. The largest proportion of participants were aged 8 years (45%), followed by 7 year olds (18%). The average age of participants in program 2 was 8.89 years.

The program involved participants from 53 unique cultural backgrounds. For 7% of participants a language other than English was the primary language spoken at home. Eighteen percent of participants identified as First Nations.

Achievement

The largest proportion of participants started the program at Level 1 (38%). A further 33% commenced the program at Level 2 and 24% at Level 3 (the 6 years benchmark). The most common level to complete the program on was Level 3 (41%), followed by Level 2 (27%). On average participants gained 1.14 levels during the 10 lesson program.

When assessed against the National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks, 71% of participants could achieve the 6 years benchmark and 0.1%[AP1] could achieve the 12 years benchmark by the end of the program. (Figure 11)

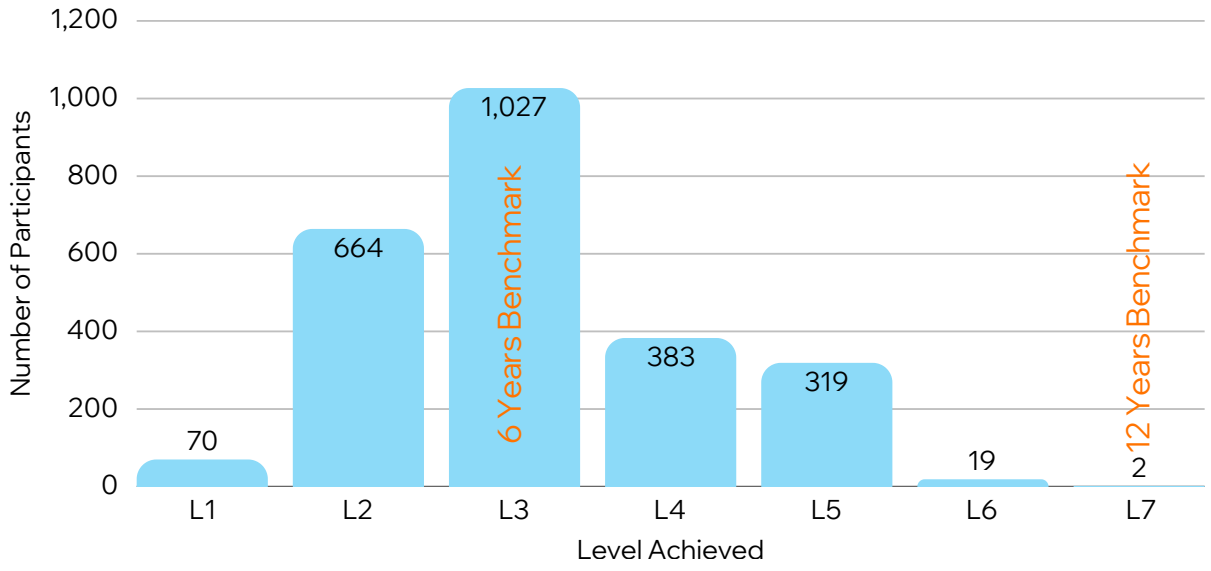


Figure 11: Program 2 participants by level achieved at end of program, including 6 and 12 year benchmarks (N=2,484)

Program satisfaction

The vast majority of participants who responded to the post-program survey (90%) reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with the program. (Figure 12).

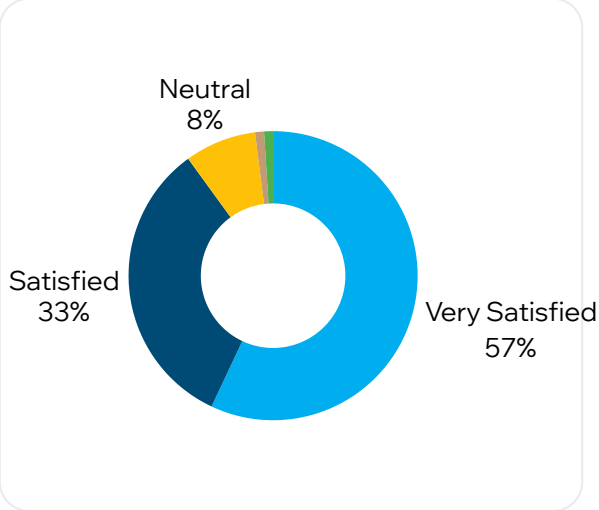


Figure 12: Program satisfaction

As participants of program 2 were children, parents were also asked about their child's enjoyment of the program. Parents reported that 73% of children enjoyed the program all of the time, with 22% enjoying the program most of the time. (Figure 13)

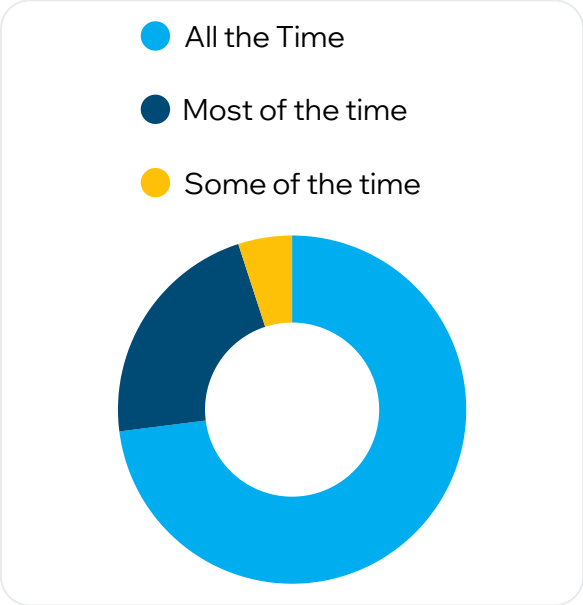


Figure 13: Child's program enjoyment

Staff satisfaction

The vast majority of respondents rated the swimming teachers who delivered the program as very good or good (93%). (Figure 14)

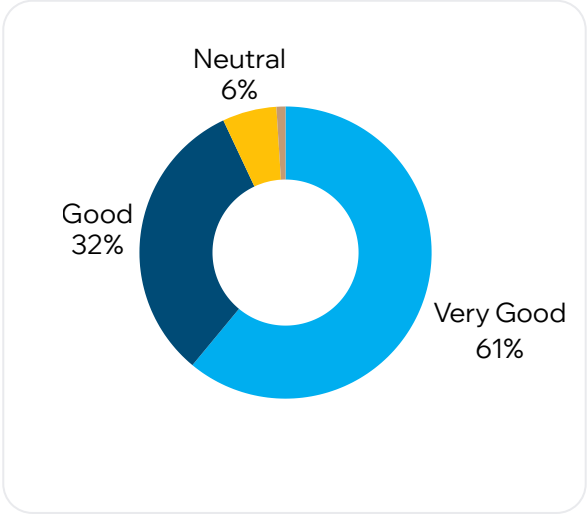


Figure 14: Assessment of swimming teachers

Aquatic facility staff were assessed as being very good or good by 92% of respondents. (Figure 15)

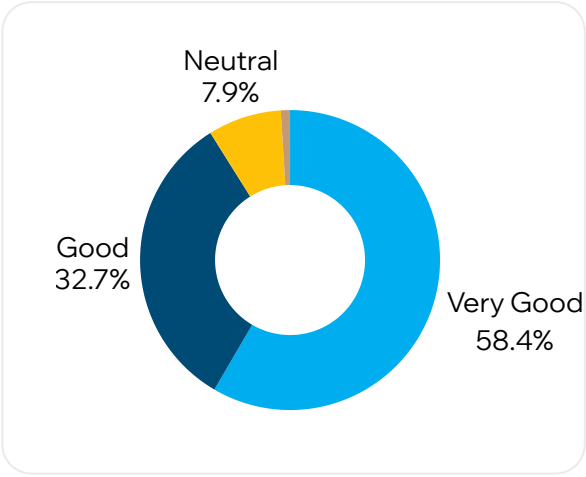


Figure 15: Assessment of aquatic facility staff

Facility Satisfaction

The swimming pool environment was also assessed as very good or good by 92% of respondents. (Figure 16)

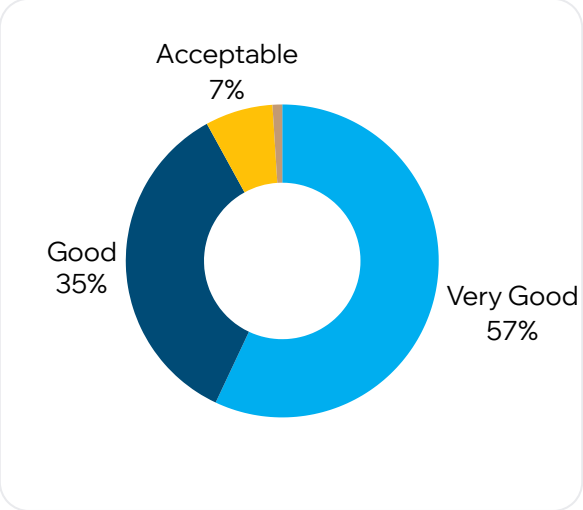


Figure 16: Assessment of swimming pool environment

Ninety two percent of respondents rated the customer service experienced while taking part in the program as good or very good. (Figure 17)

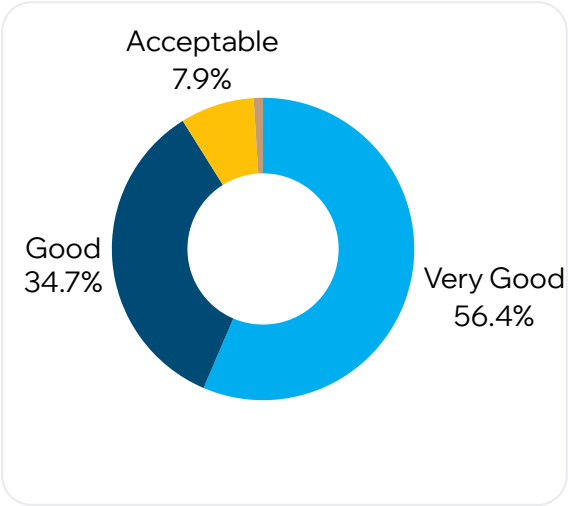


Figure 17: Assessment of customer service

Perceptions of ability and future intentions

When asked to reflect on changes in their child's swimming ability after completing the program, parents reported most commonly seeing a small improvement (51%) or a large improvement (39%). Ten percent of respondents reported seeing no change in their child's ability. (Figure 18)

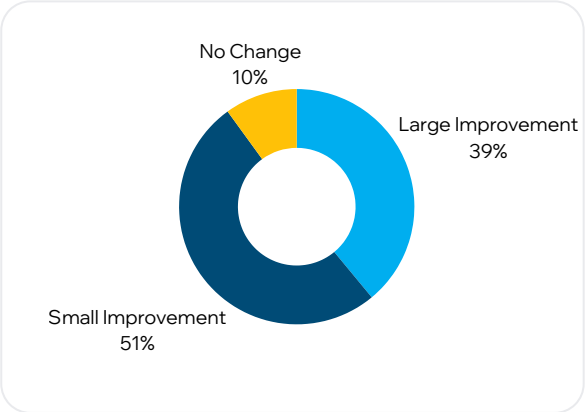


Figure 18: Self-assessed change in swimming ability post-program participation

After having completed the program parents were asked how important they thought learning to swim was. Most respondents indicated it was extremely important (60%) or very important (33%). (Figure 19)

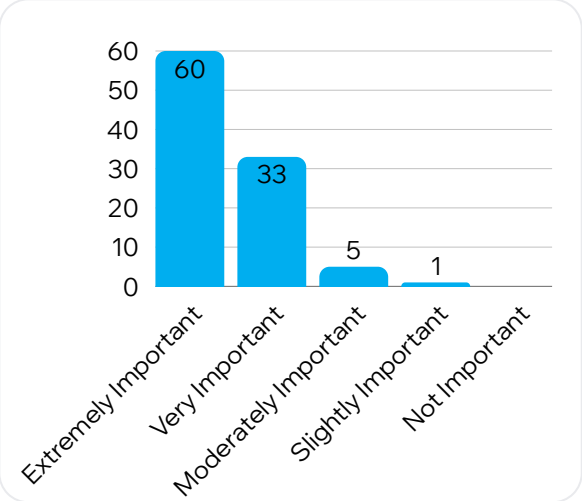


Figure 19: Post-program assessment of the important of learning to swim

Case Study



Irene Worrell – Baradine Learn to Swim Teacher

“I wanted children to learn in our local pool back in 1984. My goal was simple: I just wanted everyone to enjoy the water and be safer. My reward has always been seeing each child develop more each year and gain confidence in the water.”

The development of each child is, or should be, the aim of every teacher. To see them happy and learning to be safe around water is my sole reason for teaching. Many of the students I’ve taught have progressed well through school swimming programs, and quite a few have even gone on to state-level competitions.
Over the years, I’ve taught infants, toddlers, children with disabilities, and even adults. The community in Baradine is very conscious of the importance of swimming skills and knowing how to behave safely at the beach, rivers, dams, or any other waterway.

I am now teaching the grandchildren of my original learners. Some families have returned to Baradine from Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney, giving me the chance to help a new generation of children learn to swim. Baradine Pool is an ideal location for lessons, with varying depths that allow children to gain confidence in shallow water before progressing to deeper areas. This gradual approach has a huge impact on building water confidence.

Because we are a seasonal pool, we can’t offer lessons year-round. Many people in the city don’t realize how challenging this is for country communities. Six months without swimming lessons can set children back significantly, meaning we have to rebuild their skills each summer. Country pools are also not as well equipped as those in the city. Over time, the programs I’ve worked with have helped provide some of the equipment needed to teach effectively, and I’ve also gathered my own to ensure I can deliver these important lessons.

I am very fortunate to have the support of this community and feel truly blessed that they trust me to teach ongoing generations. My focus is always on teaching with care, knowledge, and consistency, helping each child learn essential skills while enjoying their time in the water.

SwimVAC teachers like Irene are at the heart of a Learn to Swim program’s success. Their long-term commitment, local knowledge, and passion for water safety ensure regional children gain the skills and confidence they need

Program 3: High School students

In total, 1,356 children participated in Program 3 – High School Children; 26% in Term 3 and 74% in Term 4, 2025. Eighty two percent of participants attended all 10 lessons.

Demographics
Males accounted for 61% of participants. The largest proportion of participants were aged 13 years (56%), followed by 12 year olds (26%). The average age of participants in program 3 was 12.96 years.

The program involved participants from 32 unique cultural backgrounds. The most commonly represented cultural backgrounds were Indian (22.5%), Chinese (11.2%) and Nepalese (10.2%). For 23% of participants a language other than English was the primary language spoken at home. Seven percent of participants identified as First Nations.

Achievement
Just over one third of all participants started the program at Level 2 (35%), followed by Level 2 (27%) (the 6 years benchmark). The most common level to complete the program on was Level 3 (31%), followed by Level 4 (21%). On average participants gained 1.35 levels during the 10 lesson program.

When assessed against the National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks, 82% of participants could achieve the 6 years benchmark and 10% could achieve the 12 years benchmark by the end of the program. (Figure 20)

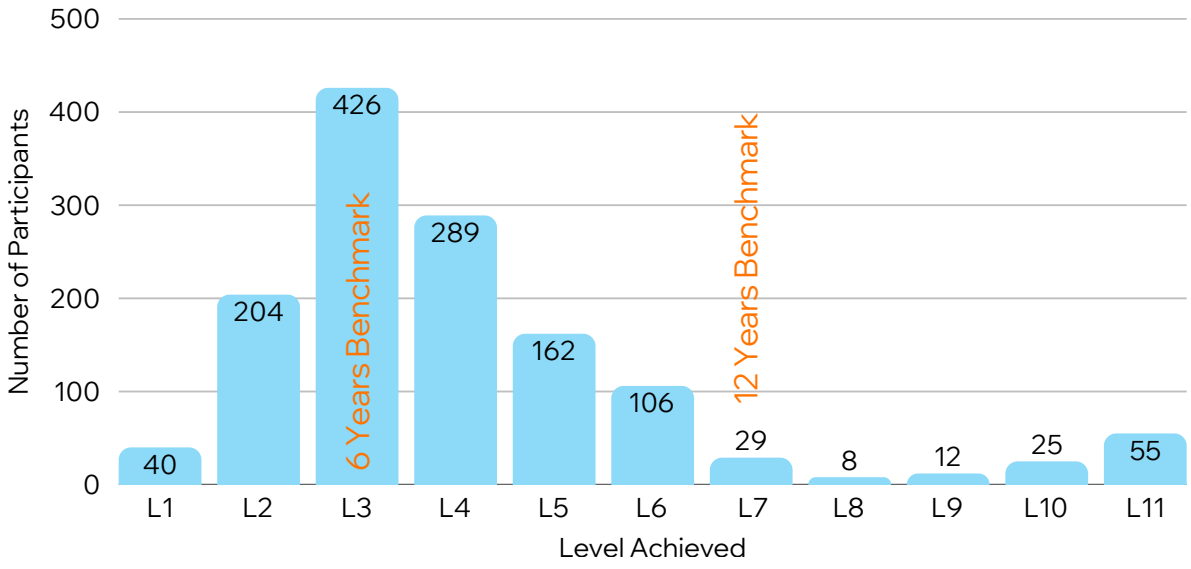


Figure 20: Program 3 participants by level achieved at end of program, including 6 and 12 year benchmarks (N=1,356)

Program satisfaction

The vast majority of participants who responded to the post-program survey (84%) reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with the program. (Figure 21).

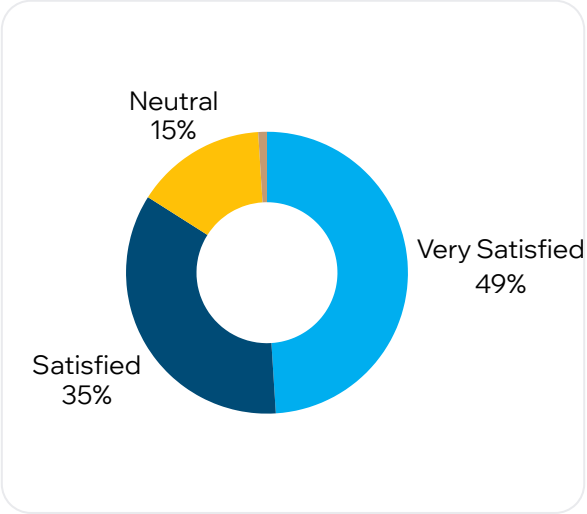


Figure 21: Program satisfaction

As participants of program 3 were children, parents were also asked about their child's enjoyment of the program. Parents reported that 49% of children enjoyed the program all of the time, with 42% enjoying the program most of the time. (Figure 22)

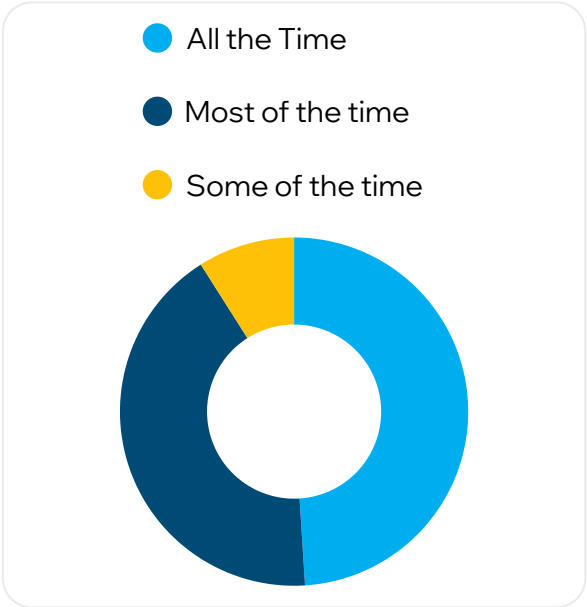


Figure 22: Child's program enjoyment

Staff satisfaction

The vast majority of respondents rated the swimming teachers who delivered the program as very good or good (97%). (Figure 23)

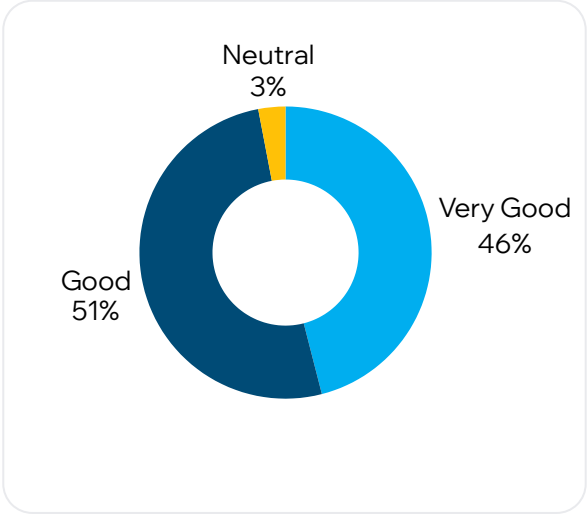


Figure 23: Assessment of swimming teachers

Aquatic facility staff were assessed as being very good or good by 96% of respondents. (Figure 24)

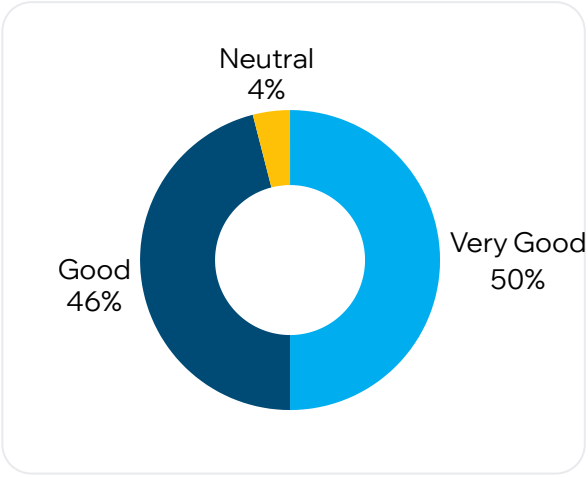


Figure 24: Assessment of aquatic facility staff

Facility Satisfaction

The swimming pool environment was also assessed as very good or good by 94% of respondents. (Figure 25)

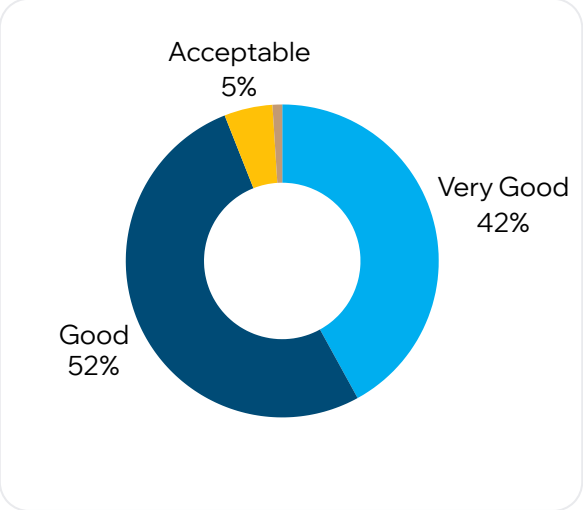


Figure 25: Assessment of swimming pool environment

Ninety seven percent of respondents rated the customer service experienced while taking part in the program as good or very good. (Figure 26)

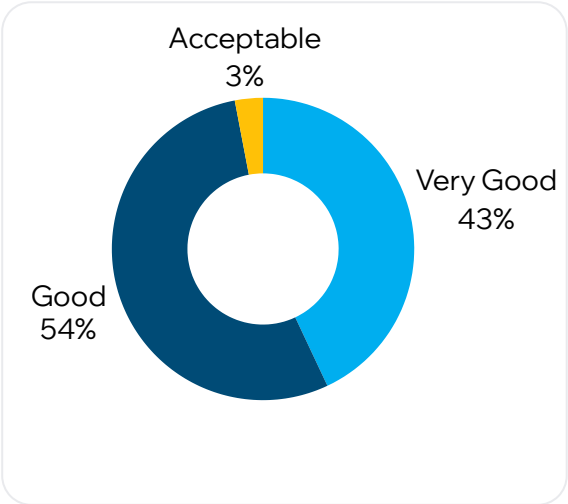


Figure 26: Assessment of customer service

Perceptions of ability and future intentions

When asked to reflect on changes in their child's swimming ability after completing the program, parents reported most commonly seeing a small improvement (53%) or a large improvement (33%). Fourteen percent of respondents reported seeing no change in their child's ability. (Figure 27)

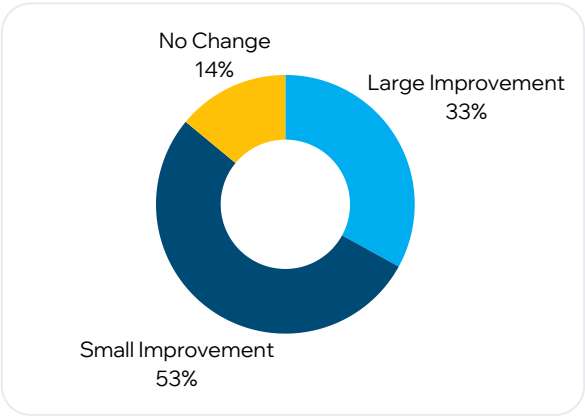


Figure 27: Self-assessed change in swimming ability post-program participation

After having completed the program parents were asked how important they thought learning to swim was. Most respondents indicated it was very important (46%) or extremely important (34%). (Figure 28)

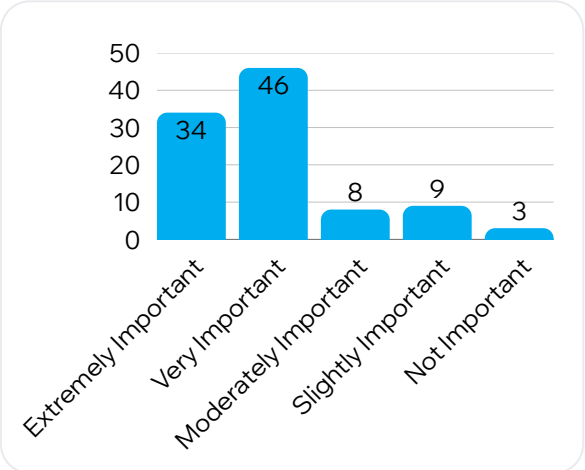


Figure 28: Post-program assessment of the important of learning to swim

Program 4: Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Adults

In total, 1,176 culturally and linguistically diverse adults have participated in Program 4; 40% in Term 3 and 60% in Term 4, 2025. Sixty eight percent (68%) of participants attended all 10 lessons.

Demographics

Just over two thirds of participants were female (n=805; 69%). The largest proportion of participants were aged between 35-44 years (41%), followed by the 25-34 years age group (28%) (Figure 29). The average age of participants in program 4 was 39.06 years. The program involved participants from 89 unique cultural backgrounds. The most commonly represented cultural backgrounds were Indian (23%), Chinese (11%) and Nepalese (10%). For 79% of participants (79%) a language other than English was the primary language spoken at home.

Achievement

The vast majority of participants (86%) started the program at level 1, the lowest level in the program. The most common level to complete the program on was Level 2 (41%), followed by Level 3 (33%). On average participants gained 1.04 levels during the 10 lesson program.

When assessed against the National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks, 33% of participants could achieve the 6 years benchmark by the end of the program. No adults achieved the 12 years benchmark. (Figure 30)

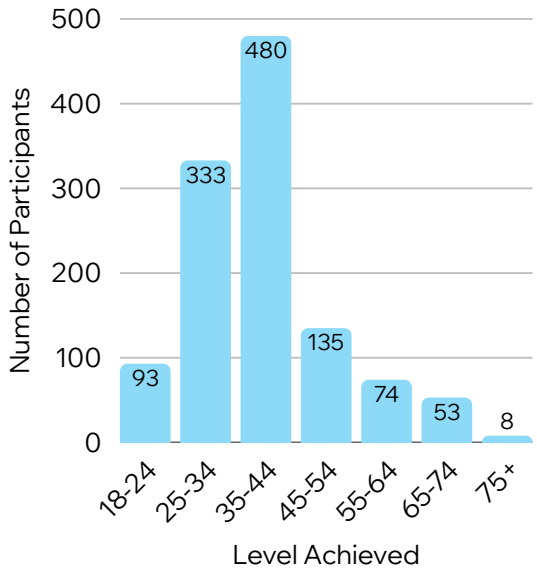


Figure 29: Number of participants in program 4 by age group (N=1,176)

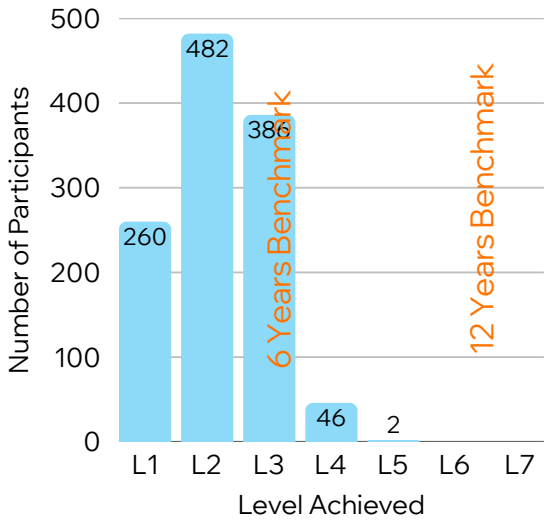


Figure 30: Program 4 participants by level achieved at end of program, including 6 and 12 year benchmarks (N=1,176)

Program satisfaction

The vast majority of participants who responded to the post-program survey (91%) reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with the program. (Figure 31).

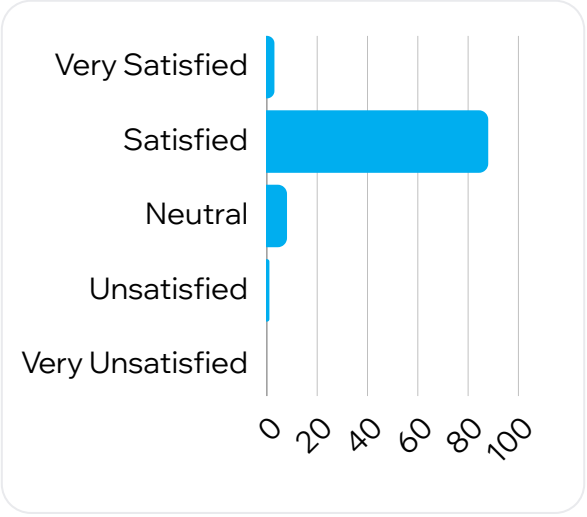


Figure 31: Program satisfaction

The vast majority of participants enjoyed the program all of the time or most of the time (95%). (Figure 32)

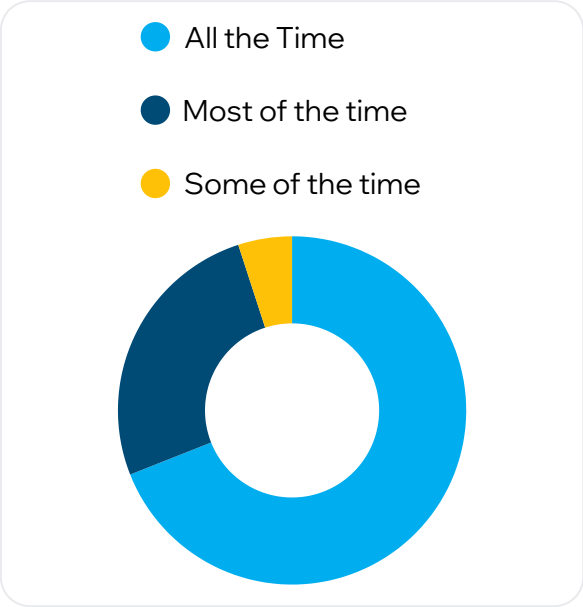


Figure 32: Frequency of program enjoyment

Staff satisfaction

The vast majority of respondents rated the swimming teachers who delivered the program as very good or good (96%). (Figure 33)

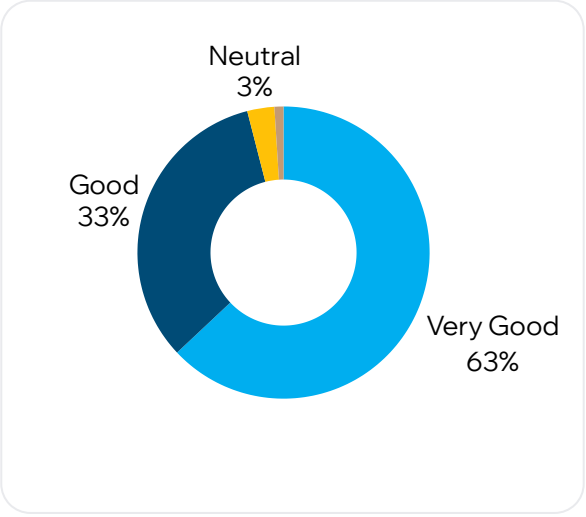


Figure 33: Assessment of swimming teachers

Aquatic facility staff were assessed as being very good or good by 96% of respondents. (Figure 34)

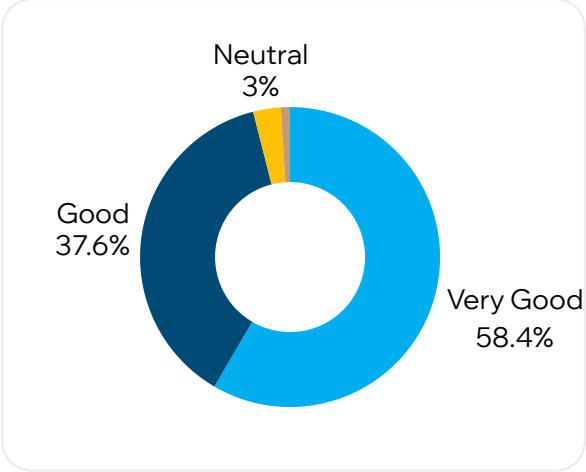


Figure 34: Assessment of aquatic facility staff

Facility Satisfaction

The swimming pool environment was also assessed as very good or good by 88% of respondents. (Figure 35)

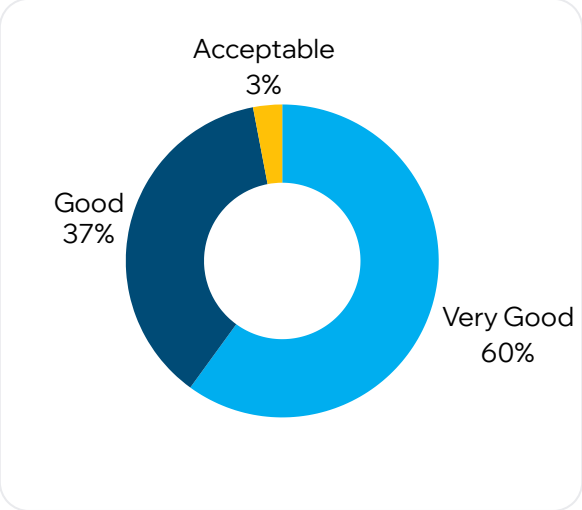


Figure 35: Assessment of swimming pool environment

Ninety two percent of respondents rated the customer service experienced while taking part in the program as good or very good. (Figure 17)

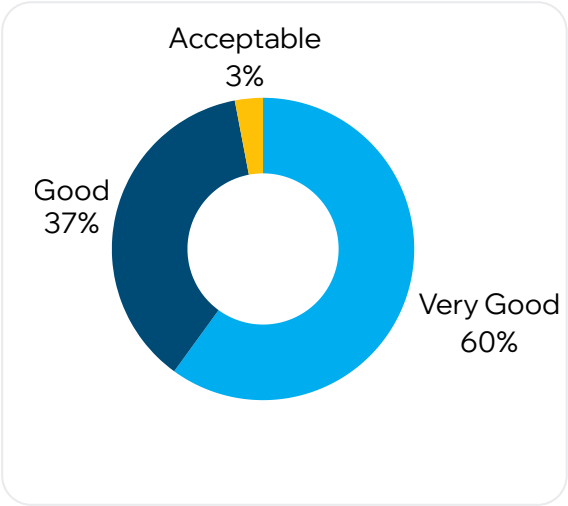


Figure 36: Assessment of customer service

Perceptions of ability and future intentions

When asked to reflect on changes in their swimming ability after completing the program, participants of program 4 reported seeing improvements, either a large improvement (60%) or a small improvement (37%). Just 3% of respondents reported seeing no change in their ability. (Figure 37)

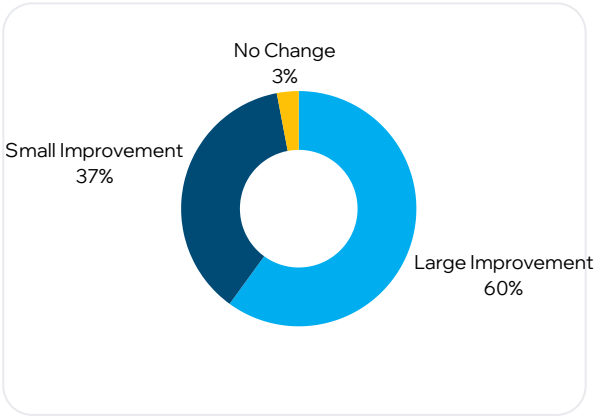


Figure 37: Self-assessed change in swimming ability post-program participation

Asked after having completed the program how important they thought learning to swim was, most respondents indicated it was very important (84%). (Figure 38)

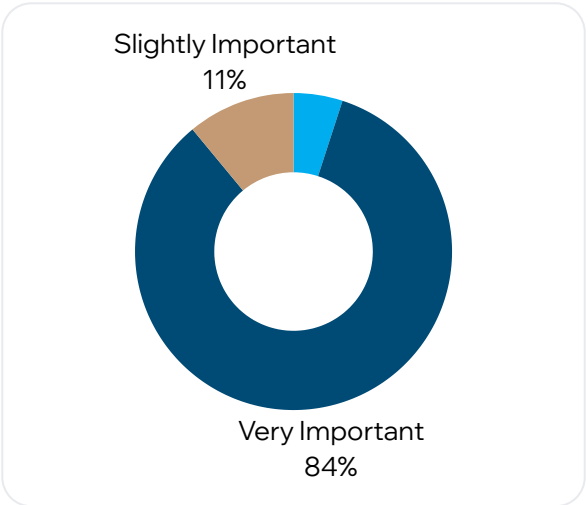


Figure 38: Post-program assessment of the important of learning to swim

Case Study



Prachi Goyal - Wagga Wagga

I'm a 26-year old from Wagga, and before this program, I had never had a single swimming lesson. For years, swimming felt completely out of reach for me. I think a big part of that was not having enough motivation or support around me to take the first step. It always felt easier to just avoid it altogether.

After hearing so many positive things about the Learn to Swim program, I finally decided to give it a go. Even so, I almost talked myself out of it. I was incredibly nervous before my first lesson and honestly didn't believe I would ever be able to learn. The water felt overwhelming, and I kept thinking that I was starting too late in life.

But something started to change after those first few sessions. With time, patience and lots of encouragement, I began to build confidence. I still can't quite believe how far I've come, I can now actually swim, even if it's still with some assistance. It really proves that Rome wasn't built in a day, and that everything in life takes time and practice.

One of the best parts of the program has been learning alongside my friends and colleagues. Being surrounded by people who were all on a similar journey made such a big difference. It helped me realise that you can learn to swim at any age and at any stage of life, it's never too late to start.

Some of my favourite moments have been the laughter we shared during our lessons and having Amie as our instructor. She is not only an amazing teacher but such a genuine and supportive person. She always believed in me, even on the days I doubted myself, and I'll always be grateful for the confidence she gave me.

To anyone in the community who feels scared or unsure about learning to swim, I would say: give it a chance. Go at your own pace, be patient with yourself, and remember, slow and steady wins the race.



Cost Benefit Analysis

Royal Life Saving NSW mid-point evaluation of the Learn to Swim for At Risk Communities Program

Executive Overview

This section provides a Treasury-aligned Cost–Benefit Analysis (CBA) and broader Social Return on Investment (SROI) assessment of Project Elevate's delivered cohort using:

- Australian Government Value of a Statistical Life (VSL): $5.87 million
- Catastrophic non-fatal drowning valuation: $6.91 million per incident
- A 20-year benefit horizon
- 5% real discount rate (central case)
- Evidence-based drowning incidence ratios

When broader social, workforce and health spillovers are incorporated — including regional swim teacher workforce expansion, sustained lesson supply capacity in high-risk communities, physical activity participation benefits, and access equity impacts — **Project Elevate generates approximately $2.69 in total social and economic value for every $1 invested.**

For the delivered interim cohort of 7,404 completed participants at a total cost of $1,873,971, this equates to an estimated $5.04 million in total social value, representing a net social surplus of approximately $3.17 million to the NSW community.

Projected across the full program scale of 11,410 participants at a cost of $2,901,352, total social value is estimated at approximately $7.80 million, generating a projected net social surplus of approximately $4.90 million.

Under the strict Treasury-aligned economic lens — measuring only avoided fatal and catastrophic drowning outcomes — the modelling remains strongly positive. The central-case Benefit–Cost Ratio is 2.22, meaning that even before broader spillovers are included, every $1 invested returns $2.22 in direct welfare benefit. For the interim cohort, this produces a Net Present Value of +$2.30 million, with a break-even threshold of only ~0.27–0.32 statistical lives over 20 years.

This means the program needs to prevent only a fraction of a single drowning death over two decades to fully justify its cost. Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that Project Elevate more than doubles its cost under conservative Treasury assumptions and generates materially higher returns when broader system-level impacts are recognised. The evidence supports continuation under strict economic criteria and provides a compelling foundation for program extension at scale.

A $6 million investment in Learn to Swim for At-Risk Communities is projected to generate more than $13 million in direct economic benefit and over $16 million in total social value to NSW, while requiring the prevention of fewer than one drowning death over 20 years to fully justify its cost.

Program Delivery Profile

Project Elevate is Royal Life Saving NSW's structured statewide delivery platform under the NSW Government's Learn to Swim for At-Risk Communities initiative. The program is designed to remove financial and access barriers to swimming and water safety education for high-risk cohorts and is delivered through four defined streams targeting different life stages and community needs:

- Regional and Remote Children (ages 3–14)
- Pre-School Cohorts
- Primary and High School Students
- Adults from CALD backgrounds and individuals with no swimming ability

Cost Profile and Efficiency
Total expenditure attributable to the completed cohort was: $**1,873,971**

Derived efficiency indicators:

- Average cost per completer: ~**$253**
- Average cost per lesson: ~**$25**

These costs include travel and transport in relevant delivery streams, reflecting genuine access barriers in disadvantaged and regional communities. The inclusion of these inputs strengthens the program's equity impact while maintaining cost efficiency.

From a public finance perspective, the per-participant cost is modest relative to the economic value of avoided fatal and catastrophic drowning events, forming the foundation of the positive benefit–cost results outlined in subsequent sections.





Economic Valuation Framework

Introduction to Valuation Approach

This section outlines the economic parameters used to quantify avoided harm in accordance with Australian public sector appraisal practice.
The modelling isolates two high-consequence outcomes:

1. Fatal drowning
2. Catastrophic non-fatal drowning resulting in long-term disability

This conservative approach avoids inflating benefits through inclusion of minor injuries or unverified spillovers.

Valuation of Fatal and Catastrophic Non-Fatal Harm

Value of a Statistical Life (VSL)
The Office of Impact Analysis (Commonwealth Government) sets the 2025 Value of a Statistical Life at: $5.87 million

This represents society's willingness to pay to reduce mortality risk and is the accepted standard in both Commonwealth and State Treasury CBAs.

Catastrophic Non-Fatal Drowning
Non-fatal drowning generates substantial lifetime cost.

Evidence indicates:

- Approximately three non-fatal drowning incidents occur per fatal drowning.
- Around 5% of non-fatal cases result in long-term catastrophic disability.
- These catastrophic cases account for approximately 88% of total non-fatal drowning burden.
- Average lifetime cost per catastrophic case ≈ **$6.91 million.**

Accordingly, for each fatal drowning prevented, the model incorporates proportional catastrophic non-fatal avoidance of:

0.15 catastrophic incidents (3 × 5%).

This ensures that avoided morbidity is incorporated without overstating minor injuries.

Treasury-Aligned Cost–Benefit Analysis

Analytical Structure and Economic Rationale

This CBA adopts the NSW Treasury referent group perspective.

Core modelling parameters:

- Time horizon: 20 years
- Discount rate: 5% real (central), 3% and 7% sensitivity
- Costs treated as Year 0
- Benefits accrue evenly across horizon
- Non-fatal to fatal ratio fixed at 3:1
- Catastrophic share fixed at 5%

The 20-year horizon reflects the long-term safety effect of swimming competency acquired in childhood and adolescence. This is conservative relative to lifetime exposure modelling.

The program affects risk by:

- Increasing survival skill
- Increasing hazard awareness
- Increasing safe behaviour
- Reducing panic response probability

The modelling therefore applies assumed risk reductions (10%, 25%, 50%) tested via sensitivity.

Central Case Results

Central assumptions:

- Baseline fatal risk = 2 × population average
- Risk reduction = 25%
- Costs = base case

At 5% discount:

- PV Fatal Benefits: $3.55 million
- PV Catastrophic Non-Fatal Benefits: $0.62 million
- PV Total Benefits: $4.17 million
- PV Costs: $1.874 million
- Net Present Value: +$2.30 million
- Benefit–Cost Ratio: 2.22

Interpretation:
Under realistic targeting assumptions, the program generates more than twice its cost in direct welfare benefits.

Sensitivity and Break-Even Analysis

Sensitivity testing demonstrates how targeting and effectiveness drive economic viability.

Risk Reduction × Baseline Risk (5% discount)
If baseline risk equals population average:

- 25% reduction → BCR 1.11
- 50% reduction → BCR 2.22

If baseline risk equals 2× population average:

- 10% reduction → BCR 0.89
- 25% reduction → BCR 2.22
- 50% reduction → BCR 4.45

This demonstrates:
Targeting elevated-risk communities materially reduces required effect size for economic viability.

Break-Even Threshold
At 5% discount:

- Fatal-only break-even = 0.32 statistical lives
- Fatal + catastrophic included = 0.27 statistical lives

Across 7,404 at-risk participants over 20 years, this threshold is modest.

Central Case Results

Central assumptions:

- Baseline fatal risk = 2 × population average
- Risk reduction = 25%
- Costs = base case

At 5% discount:

- PV Fatal Benefits: $3.55 million
- PV Catastrophic Non-Fatal Benefits: $0.62 million
- PV Total Benefits: $4.17 million
- PV Costs: $1.874 million
- Net Present Value: +$2.30 million
- Benefit–Cost Ratio: 2.22

Interpretation:
Under realistic targeting assumptions, the program generates more than twice its cost in direct welfare benefits.

Broader Social Return and Workforce Impacts

Project Elevate generated measurable workforce outcomes, with program data indicating 50 new swim teachers employed and a further 250 additional employment outcomes associated with delivery.

These outcomes are particularly significant for regional and remote NSW, where drowning risk is higher and access to swimming lessons is often constrained by limited instructor availability. Regional communities frequently experience longer waitlists, reduced lesson frequency, and fewer providers compared to metropolitan areas.
Workforce shortages in these locations act as a practical barrier to participation, particularly for low-income families who cannot travel to alternative facilities.

By expanding the swim teacher workforce in areas of elevated risk, Project Elevate strengthens local delivery capacity beyond the directly funded cohort. This increases the effective supply of lessons available to communities that historically face both affordability and availability constraints. In economic terms, this represents a partial relaxation of a structural access constraint in high-risk regions.

For grounding, the Fitness Industry Award (Level 3A) lists a base adult hourly rate of $28.12 per hour (from 1 July 2025). Based on estimated lesson delivery volumes, the program generated approximately 9,255 instructor hours, equating to an indicative payroll impact of approximately $0.26 million.

When these workforce and conservative health participation spillovers are incorporated into the broader Social Return on Investment framework, the estimated return increases from the core safety Benefit–Cost Ratio of 2.22 to approximately $2.69 per $1 invested.

In regional NSW in particular, workforce expansion is not merely an employment outcome — it is an enabling mechanism for sustained drowning prevention.

Full Program Cost Benefit Analysis

Royal Life Saving NSW (11,410 students | $2,901,352 cost)

Based on these interim figures, if the full Royal Life Saving program is delivered at 11,410 students with a total cost of $2,901,352 under the same central-case assumptions:

- PV Total Benefits: ~$6.43 million
- PV Costs: $2.901 million
- Net Present Value: ~+$3.53 million
- Benefit–Cost Ratio: 2.22
- Break-even threshold: ~0.42–0.50 statistical lives over 20 years

Learn to Swim for At-Risk Communities | $6,000,000 Investment

Based on the established central-case assumptions:

- Baseline risk = 2× population average
- Risk reduction = 25%
- 20-year horizon
- 5% real discount rate
- Fatal + catastrophic non-fatal included

If total program investment = $6,000,000

Using the established BCR of 2.22:

- PV Total Benefits: ~$13.32 million (6.0m × 2.22)
- PV Costs: $6.00 million
- Net Present Value: ~+$7.32 million
- Benefit–Cost Ratio: 2.22
- Break-even threshold: ~0.86–0.96 statistical lives over 20 years

Interpretation:
The full $6 million program would need to prevent fewer than one statistical drowning death (or equivalent fatal + catastrophic combination) over 20 years to fully justify its cost.

In Summary

If the NSW Government invests $6 million into the Learn to Swim for At-Risk Communities program:

- **The direct economic return (fatal + catastrophic only) is approximately $13.3 million**
- **The net economic gain to the community is approximately $7.3 million**
- **When broader workforce, participation and equity impacts are included, total social value rises to $16.1 million**
- **The net social surplus increases to approximately $10.1 million**



Discussions and Recommendations

Royal Life Saving NSW mid-point evaluation of the Learn to Swim for At Risk Communities Program

Discussion

Project Elevate addresses a structural inequity in drowning risk that is both well-evidenced and persistent. The program's policy alignment is unusually strong because it directly targets the precise risk gradients identified in NSW and national water safety data: socio-economic disadvantage, regional and remote location,

First Nations over-representation, and lower swimming competency among culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Evidence consistently demonstrates that drowning risk is not evenly distributed:

- Regional and remote drowning rates are approximately 1.6 to 2.5 times higher than metropolitan rates.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience drowning rates approximately twice the national average, with even higher rates in some inland regions.
- National analysis indicates that around 40 per cent of children leave primary school unable to swim an Olympic pool length, and 23 per cent of adults report weak or no swimming ability.
- The most vulnerable cohorts are least likely to access private lessons, with cost-of-living pressures compounding access barriers.

The NSW Government's framing of the Learn to Swim for At-Risk Communities initiative explicitly links free lessons to both life-saving outcomes and cost-of-living relief, identifying overseas-born communities and highly disadvantaged populations as priority groups. Project Elevate's delivery model is structured precisely around these cohorts and barriers.

At the mid-point of the program, Project Elevate has delivered 74,070 swimming lessons to 7,407 children and adults across New South Wales. Participants were drawn from culturally diverse backgrounds, low socio-economic communities, and regional and remote areas — populations known to be at increased risk of drowning (Peden et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2020; Willcox-Pidgeon et al., 2021).

The majority of participants improved their swimming skills, advancing at least one level across the 10-lesson program. Parent/caregiver and participant surveys indicated strong self-reported improvements in swimming ability and recognition of the importance of learning to swim. Satisfaction levels were high across swim teachers, pool staff, pool environments and customer service delivery.

The use of a single provider and a standardised, evidence-based program of instruction (Swim and Survive) enables consistent assessment of participant achievement against nationally recognised benchmarks for safe aquatic participation (Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, n.d.). This strengthens program integrity and allows outcome tracking against defined competency standards.

However, outcome data also highlights areas requiring continued attention.

For programs where the average participant age was below 12 years (6.33 years for SwimVAC and 8.89 years for primary school students), it is appropriate to assess achievement against the 6-year benchmark. Notably:

- 21% of SwimVAC participants and
- 29% of primary school students

were unable to achieve skills required to be performed by a 6-year-old child.

For programs where average age exceeded 12 years (12.96 years for high school students and adults in Program 4), assessment against the 12-year benchmark is appropriate.

Of concern:

- Only 10% of high school students achieved the 12-year benchmark by program completion.
- 18% of high school students were unable to achieve the 6-year benchmark.
- Among culturally and linguistically diverse adults, only 33% achieved the 6-year benchmark and none achieved the 12-year benchmark.

These findings confirm that while the program produces measurable improvement, many participants begin from very low competency baselines and require sustained or longer-duration support to achieve minimum safety benchmarks.

Importantly, the program's emphasis extends beyond stroke development to include confidence building, survival skills and risk awareness. This is economically relevant. National drowning evidence confirms that drowning risk is influenced by the interaction of competency, exposure and behaviour. Improving foundational survival skills and risk literacy addresses all three determinants simultaneously, strengthening the long-run prevention pathway.

From an economic standpoint, the return on investment is strong under central modelling assumptions aligned to NSW Treasury guidance. The core Cost–Benefit Analysis demonstrates a Benefit–Cost Ratio of 2.22, meaning that direct quantified welfare benefits from avoided fatal and catastrophic drowning outcomes alone exceed program costs by more than double. When conservative health and workforce spillover effects are incorporated, the broader Social Return on Investment increases to approximately $2.69 per dollar invested.

The distinction is important:

- Economic Return on Investment (CBA) refers to net welfare gain to the NSW community, measured through avoided mortality and catastrophic injury valued using the Australian Government's Value of a Statistical Life framework.
- Social Return on Investment (SROI) incorporates additional distributional and system effects, including improved access for disadvantaged communities, strengthened regional workforce capacity, participation-related health spillovers and cost-of-living relief.

Under both measures, continuation of the program is justified. Under the broader social lens, extension becomes strategically compelling.

The scale of eligible at-risk populations in NSW substantially exceeds current funded capacity. National learn-to-swim analysis highlights systemic access gaps, particularly among children in disadvantaged communities. Without continued funding, participation among these cohorts would likely contract, widening skill gaps and increasing long-term exposure to drowning risk.

Withdrawal of funding would therefore risk:

- Reversal of access gains in regional and disadvantaged communities
- Reinforcement of socio-economic swimming competency gaps
- Increased long-run exposure to high-consequence drowning events
- Loss of measurable economic and social returns

Cost and access remain significant barriers to participation (Ananthapavan et al., 2024; Willcox-Pidgeon et al., 2021), as confirmed in evaluation surveys. A co-contribution model has not yet been explored and may be considered in future iterations; however, any modification must be rigorously evaluated to ensure vulnerable groups are not excluded.

Evaluation feedback also identified limited awareness among some parents, caregivers and culturally and linguistically diverse adults regarding the importance of swimming lessons.





Recommendations

01 Continue full subsidy funding for Learn to Swim for At-Risk Communities to address documented structural access barriers and prevent regression in participation among high-risk cohorts.

02 Expand program duration or provide follow-up rounds for participants who do not achieve minimum 6-year or 12-year benchmarks, particularly high school students and culturally diverse adults.

03 Commission longitudinal research examining skill progression from baseline through multiple rounds of participation to better understand dose-response effects.

04 Maintain a standardised, benchmarked delivery model (Swim and Survive) to preserve outcome integrity and enable consistent evaluation across cohorts.

05 Strengthen community education efforts targeting parents, caregivers and culturally and linguistically diverse adults to improve awareness of the importance of swimming competency for drowning prevention and lifelong participation.

06 Explore carefully designed co-contribution models in the future, subject to rigorous evaluation to ensure that access equity is not compromised.

With record drowning deaths nationally and in NSW, and swimming competency remaining unevenly distributed across socio-economic gradients, inaction is likely to be costly — both economically and socially.

Given the modest per-participant cost, the low break-even threshold, the documented inequity in drowning risk, and the demonstrated economic and social returns, continuation of Project Elevate is economically justified.

Extension of the program at scale is strategically and socially prudent.

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