

Women's Only Swimming Program - City of Stirling



Settlement
Council
of Australia

AT A GLANCE

Target participants: Women and girls of all ages, mostly of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and those interested in swimming in a safe, women's only environment.

Aim of program: This program seeks to support women from CALD communities to exercise and improve their swimming capabilities, health, wellbeing and fitness. It also aimed to enhance social cohesion by engaging with women from other communities and to increase their confidence in accessing the City's services.

Organisations involved / partnerships: Stirling Multicultural Advisory Network (SMAN) Royal Lifesaving Association WA, Leisurepark Balga.

Location: City of Stirling, Wanneroo and Swan in Western Australia

Funding: Participants paid for sessions at a cost of \$65 for the 10 sessions (a special rate from the Royal Lifesaving Association WA).

The idea of the Women's Only Swimming program was birthed by a member of Stirling Multicultural Advisory Network (SMAN). The primary purpose of (SMAN) is to actively support the City's Multicultural Framework development, including the implementation of actions, tracking, progress and reporting. They also provide feedback and suggestions in relation to the Multicultural Framework's implementation.

At the SMAN meeting in June 2019, one of the members from the Somali Community stated that their community would appreciate if swimming pool opening hours could be extended for women only sessions. They asked whether the Leisurepark Balga swimming pool could remain open after hours to cater for women-only swimming classes to enable access for women who couldn't use the facility with males present. At the same time, the City of Stirling was developing their first Health and Wellbeing Plan and they were consulting SMAN members as leaders in the CALD community.

With assistance from the City of Stirling Multicultural Project Officer, a letter from SMAN was sent to the Service Lead, Aquatic Services requesting for women only swimming opportunities. Before the program could be initiated, Recreation Services requested that a trial swimming night be organised to measure the level of interest for this kind of program in the community. The facility had never been opened for extended hours, let alone closed off to public and only opened for women. This event would target women and girls from CALD backgrounds to swim comfortably in a safe private space.



Source: City of Stirling

On 2nd November 2019 the first Women's Only Swimming Night was held and was attended by over 170 women and girls. Everyone at the Centre was female including Stirling Community Services staff and Balga Leisure Lifeguards. Their presence was to ensure that the environment was safe and productive. This is the first time such an event had taken place.

The majority of participants came from Dianella, Balga, Westminster, Mirrabooka and Yokine (City of Stirling). Others travelled from City of Swan (Bennet Springs, Beechboro and Ballajura), City of Wanneroo (Koondoola, Gnangara, Landsdale) and City of Bayswater (Morley). This demonstrated that we were responding to widespread need across different LGAs. The program brought women from across all districts together, helping to fulfil our social inclusion and cohesion objectives as well as providing opportunities for women to swim in a culturally and physically safe space.

Many of the women were not born in Australia, and the top five countries represented were Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Iran. 44% of the respondents were between 25 and 44 years of age, 28% were between 15 and 24 years old and 25% were 45-64 years old (3% other). This meant a wide spread of demographics was achieved.

POINT OF DIFFERENCE

- This program had not been available to women previously in our area.
- The pool had not previously opened its doors to women only, and SMAN, the Royal Lifesaving Association WA and Leisurepark Balga ensured that women only staff and instructors were on hand for this program after hours and closed to the general public.

CHALLENGES

Some of the challenges included:

- As the program started to take off, the COVID pandemic hit, and this presented significant challenges. Staff worked hard to keep interest levels up and it eventually re-started later in 2020.
- We needed to elicit strong partnerships with Royal Lifesaving Association WA and Leisurepark Balga, as well as with our team to implement the program out of normal working hours, and to ensure that only women provided the services.
- Deciding on which day to hold sessions was difficult due to conflicting preferences. We ended up facilitating the program on Saturdays one term and on Sundays the other term.
- Due to religious and cultural reasons, the cut off for boys attending with their mothers was an issue as some are single parents. After debate, we all agreed on 5 years old as the cut off.
- Ensuring the space was culturally safe and that men could not enter the centre was a challenge. Some fathers or partners wanted to enter the centre to pick up their female family members. We ensured privacy and safety by placing a sign at the door saying "No men allowed. Women ONLY swimming sessions".

OUTCOMES

SMAN members were empowered to advocate for the women in their community in line with Outcome 4 in the Multicultural Framework: "Our newcomers are empowered – Strong multicultural associations respond to the settlement and integration needs of newcomers, creating pathways to participation in the broader community".

The City of Stirling also recognised that it was important to provide all community members access to Citywide services, meeting Outcome 11 in the Multicultural Framework: "Our Organisation is Responsive – "Our customers from multicultural backgrounds receive services that meet their needs". The women only swimming program was a positive example of this.

Swimming ability levels were surveyed at the first session, and this highlighted the need for swimming classes for these women. At the first session:

- 10% said they were very confident swimmers
- 26% said they were confident
- 64% said they were not confident and needed support
- 92.59% said they would be interested in a 10-week swimming program after the first session

Results from end of program surveys collected in 2021 illustrated that:

- more than 75% of participants found that their capabilities in the pool had improved drastically
- over 60% of participants stated that they were extremely satisfied with the program
- over 38% of the women found that their independence had increased since joining the program
- Feedback about the program has been positive indicating that the swimming program has not only improved participants' skills in the water but also their overall physical health and mental wellbeing, and their social connections.
- Due to such positive responses received from the community, the City of Stirling alongside Royal Life Saving WA were able to re-offer this initiative during February and April 2022.

KEY LEARNINGS

- It is vital that a culturally safe and sensitive environment was provided for the program. This took a lot of organising and collaboration.
- In future programs, it has been suggested that we hold information sessions at Balga Leisurepark so that potential female participants can be shown the pool area to help increase confidence.
- In future programs, blinds will be organised to cover the windows with the exception of the two emergency doors, to increase privacy and safety.
- We need to explore how we can assist people on low incomes with swimming fees through possible sponsors, such as the Royal Life Saving Association.

For more information visit-

<https://www.stirling.wa.gov.au/leisure-and-culture/arts-and-events/events-calendar/women-s-only-swimming-session>

Welcome Hub: welcomhub@stirling.wa.gov.au

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