

Pool Services Delivery Model
Newcastle City Council
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Submission: Newcastle City Council Pool Service Delivery Model

I would like to thank Newcastle City Council and Council staff for the opportunity to comment on the Pool Service Delivery Model. I appreciate the intent of council to actively seek feedback on the Model. I offer this submission in the interests of working proactively with council to get the best possible outcomes for our community.

I am writing this proposal based on my personal experience and knowledge of the suburb as a resident of 20 years, as a local community worker and as co-chair of the Mayfield Community Forum. As a parent of 3 children (aged 8, 14, 18) and as a member of the local community who lives and works alongside local families, I have a good understanding and awareness of the needs and concerns of the local community.

I would like to strongly oppose the removal of Mayfield pool as proposed by the Newcastle City Council - Pool Service Delivery Model because I believe the pool closure will have a significant negative impact on the quality of life and social and recreational needs of the people of Mayfield (and adjoining suburbs) now and well into the future.

I would like to present a case to Newcastle City Council to retain the pool under three broad headings:

1. Why the proposal to close the pool is unjust
2. Why keeping the pool will uphold council's commitment to building community cohesion.
3. Supporting a plan for improving and not removing the pool

1. Why the proposal to close the pool is unjust

I am aware that Newcastle City Council has prepared a range of social planning documents which clearly outline the social demographics and community needs of the Mayfield and adjacent planning districts, yet the proposal does not appear in any way to acknowledge the social impacts of the proposed pool closure.

I base my strong concerns and opposition to the proposal on the following information (in italics below) taken from current Newcastle City Council community planning documentation. (Community Plan and Background Papers 2006-10)

** Couple families with children are more common in Mayfield (52.5%) than the local government area (LGA) average. Lone person households account for 36% of all households in Mayfield significantly higher than the LGA (30.6%)*

Comment: There are also many single parent families. Families and individuals need places in the local community to meet, socialise and recreate. The pool is the ideal place and is currently a local community hub.

** 24% of households had no motor vehicle compared with 16.4 % average in the LGA*

Comment: People will have to rely on public transport to access alternatives to the local pool such as Lambton Pool and Newcastle Ocean Baths. Many parents will not let their younger children travel unaccompanied to Lambton or to the ocean baths. Mayfield residents will have to catch 2 buses in each direction getting to and from these venues. The time involved will be significant, the cost of public transport combined with admission will be beyond the reach of my family and of many in our community who are currently struggling to manage with limited resources.

** Within the LGA the Inner North planning district has the highest proportion of people receiving disability benefits in June 2003 followed by the Mayfield planning district. Both of these planning districts are significantly above the LGA average*

Comment: Access and participation is especially important for people with disabilities. We need to retain a local pool to minimise travel and inconvenience due to lack of services, and limited recreational and social activities and resources. In fact, the pool as it stands currently should have disabled access.

** Slightly more overseas born people live in Mayfield planning district than the LGA average*

Comment: Mayfield has the highest proportion of African refugees and the Muslim community have recently established a community presence in Mayfield. It is important that current residents of Mayfield (and surrounding suburbs) and residents from emerging culturally and linguistically diverse communities have a local recreation and meeting place, which is accessible and affordable and enables people to mix and build connections within the local community. Removal of the pool will diminish the opportunity for interaction, participation and social cohesion.

** More indigenous people living in the planning district (2.4%) compared to the LGA 1.8%)*

Comment: The pool at Mayfield is a community recreation and social hub, particularly for children and young people and for families who don't have access to private transport or the resources to access alternative recreational activities. As with other marginal and socially disadvantaged groups, Indigenous people should not be further disadvantaged by any decisions made by Newcastle City Council.

** In the Newcastle LGA the inner north and Mayfield planning districts have the highest proportion of people receiving Newstart payments (NCC 2003)*

Comment: Those on low incomes in the Mayfield community will be hard hit if the local pool is closed and will have an unfair burden in increased costs in travel, and higher entry prices if they have to travel to alternative venues for their recreational and social needs in summer.

** As at 2001, 24.5% of the population of Mayfield were under 19.*

Comment: The above ground water play area proposed in the PSDM may complement the existing pool, however, without the pool, appropriate community use of the facility will most likely be limited to very young children and their parents.

** Currently, the pool is used without parental supervision by many pre-teens and young teens and it is an important place for them to build relationships. To feel part of a community, it is crucial that young people have locally accessible and appropriate places to socialise. The Mayfield pool is a community space that meets the needs of many local young people during our long hot summers and school holidays. N.C.C documentation also shows that parents in the planning district are concerned about the lack of activities for young people.*

In addition to the demographics quoted above, it should be noted that Mayfield has the lowest level of open space per head in the local government area (Newcastle City Council Community Plan 2006 -10 - Mayfield and Inner North Background Paper).

The above comments clearly illustrate that the community will be subject to further social disadvantage in terms of increased travel times, increased travel costs, reliance on public transport, increased admission prices, ability for local children to attend without parents, lack of private vehicles etc.

To defend such a proposal, it may be argued that Newcastle Council is subject to cost shifting from other levels of government, however, given the broad range of assets in council ownership it seems completely unfair to attempt to save funds by closing a facility in a planning district that is clearly subject to social disadvantage when compared to other areas in the LGA.

There is no doubt that a closed pool will restrict or prevent access to a swimming facility for many in our community and will therefore impact on the health and quality of life of community members. The proposed model appears to miss an opportunity to use the improvement of the pool as an effective social planning exercise that will help prevent social problems into the future.

Putting it bluntly, from the perspective of a Mayfield resident, the proposed model appears to redirect valuable council resources and financial investment from a local government area which is subject to a range of social disadvantage to an area which is significantly more affluent and better resourced.

Why keeping the pool will uphold council's commitment to building community cohesion.

Mayfield pool is a significant cultural meeting place. It is of cultural and historical significance. The pool is attended by people from many different backgrounds, by existing community members and members of new and emerging communities. It is clear that the pool is a valuable public space treasured by those who use it.

As a resident I value the pool as a place where my family can mix with people from different cultures and begin to develop relationships that cross cultural and socio economic backgrounds.

As a community member, I am also aware that Newcastle City Council has documented their commitment to social cohesion and social capital in a range of documents. I have quoted from some of these documents below because if the statements are genuine then the retention of Mayfield swimming pool provides a fantastic opportunity to translate these stated council policies into real benefits for the local community.

Social Capital has been identified as a significant issue by N.C.C. As part of the Community Plan, a specific background paper has been prepared by council on the subject that contains the following definition from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

Social capital is defined by the OECD (2001) as "Networks together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation with or among people."

In the same paper, N.C.C then relates the advantages of developing Social Capital:

- * Provides the cultural will to solve community problems collaboratively
- * Maintains and enhances the value of public assets

* Increases a community's productive potential - it promotes joint ventures, faster information flows and business networking.

(NCC Social Capital - discussion paper for community plan 2006-10, p99)

The value of participation in recreation and leisure activities to increasing a health and wellbeing is recognised by N.C.C and reference is made to benefits including a "sense of community and community building through community interaction" (N.C.C Community Plan Recreation Background Paper, p91, 2003)

Building social capital is of particular relevance to our local community mainly because the pool is a local cultural icon.

The pool is a place where pre-teens and young teens first get to venture out on their own. It is a place where families take their children and where children learn to swim. By attending the pool you can see and hear that it is a place that is used by people of many different cultural and linguistic backgrounds including indigenous, islander and African youth and their families.

With Council clearly stating its commitment to building community and relating the values of increasing health and wellbeing through recreation it is hard to understand why council would decide to close a pool in a geographic area which has arguably been subject to more social disadvantage and isolation than any other local government area.

There is a great opportunity to retain the pool and maximise the benefits to the local community and to council

3. Supporting a plan for improving, not removing the pool.

A decision to retain and improve the pool would enable a practical, local focus on key council strategies including aspects of the Community Plan and Recreation Plan. A commitment to improving the pool would directly involve local people and organisations in developing a stronger sense of community while looking at the most effective usage of this local swimming and recreation facility.

The establishment of a Mayfield Pool community management group has been mentioned In the Pool Service Delivery Model and is a positive aspect of the Model. This "steering group" may not set themselves up as experts but rather as facilitators of a process to involve and engage other groups and individuals.

The community management group could look at building alliances with a range of relevant associations and organisations including:

- * The local community and all involved in seeking to retain and improve the pool;
- * The Mayfield pool swimming club;
- * Local Community Forums to share information and seek ideas;
- * The Mayfield Mainstreet Committee for promotion and support;
- * Local business and industry for project sponsorship and support;
- * Not for profit organisations for family friendly, multicultural and whole of community events;
- * Local schools, youth groups e.g. PCYC, Loft youth venue;
- * Senior citizens centre, Rotary and other organised seniors groups;
- * Newcastle City council including social planning, youth, recreation and other key contacts, other levels of government and relevant portfolios.

The relevance of having a broad range of groups involved is to increase capacity and to create ownership of the project.

While recognising the pool would remain in public ownership (with the day to day operation of the pool as a council responsibility) the role of a Mayfield Pool community management committee could include:

- * Bringing together a range of groups and individuals on the pool management group;
- * Developing a long term strategic plan for improving sustainability and community involvement (with reference to population forecasts, state plans etc);
- * Exploring the possibility of gaining funding from industry and other levels of government for initial planning and for additional facilities and activities;
- * Exploring funding opportunities for a community events calendar with assistance from community business, government and non-government agencies;
- * Exploring increased pool usage by local schools;
- * Undertaking research into sustainable and environmental improvements;
- * Regularly involving community in planning and seeking active involvement;
- * Exploring the potential for whole of Dangar Park recreation plan

Summary

In closing, I would like to draw attention to the unprecedented public outcry that has occurred because people can see how unfair the proposal is and because they want to keep their pool This outcry has included several public meetings (with attendance of several hundred at the council feedback session) and the development of a blogsite as evidence of the level of commitment and activity.

People are saying that they want their council to represent their views. This is an opportunity to give us real faith in democracy and emphasise the value of participation in council process. It is an opportunity to provide us with an ongoing involvement in a local asset. It is an opportunity to contribute to a vibrant, cohesive community.

The question to leave you with is: Does council wish to risk contributing to further social disadvantage in the local community or does it want to work alongside the community and make a social investment for the future?

I urge you to retain the pool and build on work done to date by investing in our local community.

Sincerely

Bill Robertson
30 October 2007