



# Sustaining Remote Swimming Pools in the Northern Territory

A Strategic Imperative



**ROYAL LIFE SAVING**  
AUSTRALIA

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**Royal Life Saving Society - Australia is a public benevolent institution, established in 1894, and dedicated to bringing people together to eliminate drowning and empower communities to be safe around the water. As a leading national drowning prevention and water safety organisation, we believe drowning is preventable, being able to swim is a human right, and access to safe places to swim builds healthier, more connected communities.**

Our strategic approach focuses on eliminating drowning, empowering communities, strengthening safety, and succeeding together. We use our leadership, research, advocacy and education to foster inclusion, build resilience, and develop lifelong skills, so that every Australian can enjoy the water safely.

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Australian Government

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Royal Life Saving Society - Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians and Elders past and present across Australia, with particular acknowledgment to the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional owners of the lands where our offices are located. We pay our respects to Australia's First Nations cultural and spiritual connections to water, and acknowledge the land where we work, live and play always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

## Overview

Remote swimming pools in the Northern Territory are not luxury items - they are life-saving, community-building, and health-promoting infrastructure. When run well, they act as a key community hub for sport, recreation, wellbeing and social connection across all life stages. Yet, many are at risk of closure or unsafe operation due to funding shortfalls, workforce shortages, and environmental constraints.

This report, compiled by Royal Life Saving Northern Territory (RLSS-NT) with support from Royal Life Saving Society – Australia (RLSSA) summarises the findings from a multi-year audit and operational review, highlighting the need for systemic investment and coordination. It provides key insights and recommendations for all levels of government, drawing on data from safety assessments, workforce evaluations, and operational case studies across 19 remote swimming pools.

## The Case for Action

### High Drowning Risk

The NT has Australia's highest drowning rate per capita, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experiencing much higher rates than the total population. In many communities, remote pools are often the only safe place to swim, as 14 out of 19 are located near waterways that are either inhabited by crocodiles or prone to dangerous flooding.

### Ageing, Isolated Infrastructure

9 of 19 pools are over 30 years old. Many are in extreme environments - subject to flooding, dust storms, poor water supply, and digital isolation. Sadly, due to a range of avoidable factors, three of the pools have been closed for more than three years, with others at regular risk of service interruption.

### Unsustainable Operating Models

Most pools (68%), are owned by regional councils who are often under-resourced for the role, have high staff and executive management turnover and limited swimming pool specific technical capacity. Some councils have contracted pool management to YMCA NT, but arrangements are often poorly funded, relative to true costs, and are further impacted by workforce stability.

### Unmeasured Social Value

While 60% of remote pools offer free public entry, their public health, safety and social impacts are not fully recognised or value in infrastructure or activity funding programs. These facilities support child safety, can drive school attendance, social inclusion and community cohesion, and wellbeing across all life stages.

## Background

Between 2011 and 2025 RLSS-NT conducted 72 aquatic facility safety assessments across remote and regional swimming pools in the NT. The findings below summarise key themes emerging from these audits.

## Key themes

### 1. Infrastructure

Facilities suffer from plant room degradation, barriers limiting accessibility, and design flaws that often render pool components unsuitable for the climate. Despite these challenges, where pools are consistently managed - such as in Maningrida and Nhulunbuy - they deliver high value at relatively low cost, strong community engagement, and provide for stable employment and youth leadership development. All pools require Asset Management plans that are reviewed and updated as a minimum standard.

### 2. Workforce

Generally, there are no workforce development plans and staff are often not qualified or inducted and trained to perform their workplace requirements. Half of all facilities lack staff qualified in the current skill set for Aquatic Technical Operators.

### 3. Programming

Absence of structured swimming and water safety programs limits impacts for swimming, water safety, drowning prevention and wider child-health benefits. This has been challenged in 2025 as the NT Government have implemented compulsory school swimming and water safety lessons for all NT primary school students in grade 1 to grade 6, inclusive. This programming requires community activation and accessible community hubs be established to support the programming needs.

### 4. Emergency Procedures

Gaps in emergency planning and rehearsal are widespread and high-risk.

### 5. Signage

Signage was inadequate or missing in nearly all audits, which is an easily rectified but persistently low-performing area.

## Workforce Assessment

Annual first aid and lifeguard training is available in-community (free for Indigenous participants), but gaps persist in technical operations and swimming, water safety, and lifesaving instructional roles.

Currently no pool operates with a structured backfill system for staffing; meaning manager absences often result in prolonged pool closures.

Workforce development opportunities exist to:

- Expand VET in Schools pathways to support youth employment in aquatic roles and boost leadership and personal development.
- Enable locally employed Sport and Recreation Officers and Sport Education Teachers to cross-qualify as Swim Teachers and or Lifeguards, to assist with community programs and school programs.
- Establish a mentoring / support program for remote pool managers, develop or trial a labour hire program to stabilise the remote pool workforce.
- Engage with Royal Life Saving Australia and Royal Life Saving Western Australia to establish a mutual partnership for Remote Pools in the Northern Territory.

## > RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Fund Workforce Development and Mentoring

Support a dedicated workforce strategy including, Royal Life Saving NT to:

- > Work with all tiers of Government to create and implement workforce development plans, providing for local training and qualification subsidies for all
- > Engage with Industry experts and networks to facilitate annual NT-wide workshops for pool managers and other pool staff
- > Engage with Vet Providers and Senior Schools to deliver VET in Schools programs linked to NTCET points and employment pathways for youth

### 2. Establish a Territory-wide Coordinated Operational Support Model

NT Government to work with Royal Life Saving NT to create a system and or policy for central or regionally coordinated management support for swimming pool operations. This would develop workforce capability and create sustainable pools. This would enable the:

- > Employment of permanent Pool Managers and local lifeguards in each community, supported by expert administration and technical support for pool operations
- > Systematic approach to the backfill of staffing and consistency of technical support
- > Application of consistent standards across remote swimming pools

### 3. Create a Remote Pool Safety and Infrastructure Fund

Establish a mechanism to increase investment into remote pools in the Northern Territory. This may be a matched funding model (e.g. capped at \$250,000 per pool/year) to support:

- > The operational gap currently being experienced by owners of the remote pools, that limits community access and the realisation of all potential benefits
- > Safety rectification, including to ensure signage, chemical safety, and other features protect staff and community members who use these pools
- > Medium to long term approaches to asset management planning and maintenance
- > Strengthened business planning and implementation

### 4. Recognise Remote Pools as Essential Infrastructure

Advocate for the recognition and inclusion of remote aquatic facilities in:

- > Federal and Territory infrastructure programs
- > Closing the Gap, Regional Development, and NT health initiatives
- > Water safety investment plans and social impact evaluations
- > Learn to swim and program activations across the Northern Territory

### 5. Evaluate and Embed Social Return

Support further research into the social, economic, and health impacts of remote pools - especially where access to alternative recreational infrastructure is non-existent. This includes the Australia Sports Commission framework for inclusive sport and linking social impact to school attendance, crime, program participation and health and wellbeing outcomes.

## Conclusion

Remote pools in the Northern Territory are essential to community safety, cohesion, and survival. Without urgent, coordinated investment in workforce, infrastructure, and operational models, more pools will close—and the burden of drowning, heat injury, and social isolation will increase.

Leadership is required across all levels of Governments, non-governments organisations and the NT business community to shift these facilities from fragile often closed assets into foundational community services.

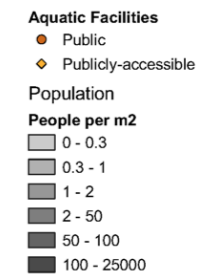
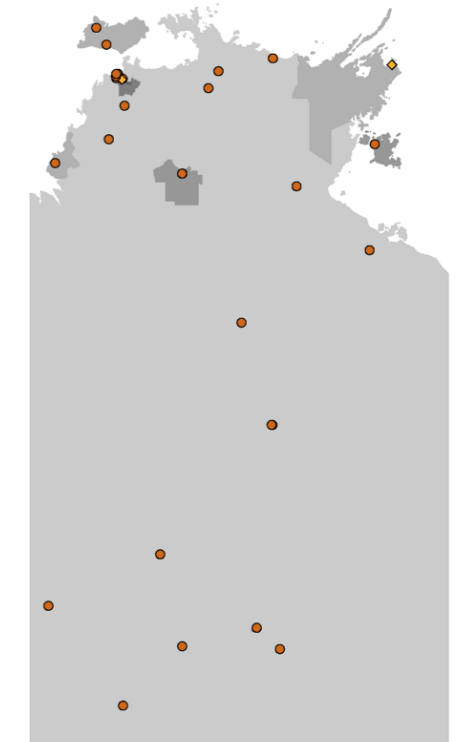


Image: Ngukurr Pool, source: ABC



## > NORTHERN TERRITORY WATER SAFETY STRATEGY

The Northern Territory has the highest drowning rate per capita in Australia (2008–2020), an average of 2.98 drowning deaths per 100,000 population.

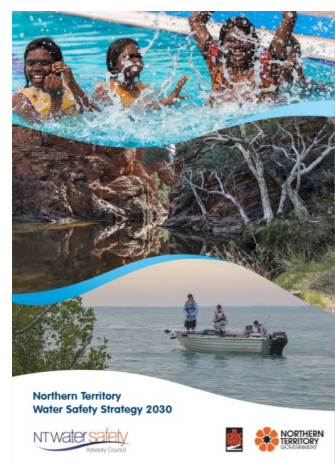
The Goal of the NT Water Safety Strategy 2030 is to reduce drowning and build water safe communities.

The guiding principles of the strategy are inclusion, safe participation, targeted advocacy, empowering communities and taking action. The NT Water Safety Strategy has five priority areas: People, Populations, Places, Activities, Risk Factors.

Remote pools – when open and functioning well - contribute to water safety and drowning prevention in each of the following priority and focus areas from the NT Water Safety Strategy (table 1).

Table 1: NT Water Safety Strategy Focus Area, Priorities and Remote Pool Contributions

Focus Area	Priority Areas	Remote Pools Contribution	Contribution (high-med-low)
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children 0–4 years</li> <li>Children 5–17 years</li> <li>Males 17–34 years</li> <li>Older people 45+</li> </ul>	Pools offer safe access to programs such as early childhood swimming, school-based swimming and water safety, youth recreation, employment, and health and wellbeing activities for older adults.	High
Populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples</li> <li>Multicultural communities</li> <li>Regional and remote populations</li> </ul>	Remote pools are often located in Aboriginal communities and serve as inclusive, culturally sensitive hubs for skill-building, recreation and community connection.	High
Places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beaches, ocean &amp; coastal</li> <li>Waterholes, rivers &amp; lakes</li> <li>Aquatic facilities</li> </ul>	Pools provide a safer alternative to high-risk open water environments such as rivers, waterholes, and the ocean, especially where these are close to community settlements.	High
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boating and watercraft</li> <li>Recreational swimming</li> <li>Fishing, camping</li> </ul>	Pools are training grounds for safe water practices and aquatic competence, building transferable skills for safer participation in boating, fishing and camping.	Medium
Risk Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Low water safety skills</li> <li>Risk-taking behaviour</li> <li>Exposure to crocodiles and marine animals</li> </ul>	Pools provide structured learning environments and safer alternatives to open water, reducing unsupervised, risky behaviour and wildlife exposure.	High



## > KEY FACTS AND FIGURES ALL NT POOLS

Based on Royal Life Saving Australia research into the state and profile of the aquatic industry, the below is the estimated profile of public pools (including remote pools) in the NT for 2024 (Table 2). Note that these figures reflect archetypal pool profile, so staffing and visitation numbers may vary in the NT when compared to a national average.

Table 2: All Pools in the NT – summary of facts and features, Extract from RLSSA State of Aquatic Industry Report 2025

Total No. of aquatic facilities	No. outdoor pools	No. aquatic centres	No. swim schools / other	Total annual visits	No. of FTE	NT Aquatic Industry No. of FTE Lifeguards	No. of FTE fitness staff	No. FTE Swim Teachers	Workers
29	22	5	2	5,810,253	570	138	42	211	896

Table 3: Remote Pools in the NT – summary of staffing, health and social value

Major Incidents	Lifeguard Rescues	Lifeguard / Staff Abuse Incidents	Annual Health Benefits (\$) (inflation adjusted to Jan 25)	Annual Social Value – All Pools (\$) (inflation adjusted to Jan 25)	Annual Social Value - Average Facility (\$)
205	108	34	\$177,212,706	\$177,099,293	\$6,106,872

Swimming pools generate a significant social value based on national modelling (table 3), but it is likely that in fact the social value is much higher in remote communities. One study (referenced below) indicated the social return on investment for remote pools could be as high as \$25 for every \$1 invested. There are still significant challenges with safety incidents, rescues and violence and aggression towards lifeguards, requiring ongoing government and community support.

## › REVIEW OF SOCIAL AND HEALTH BENEFITS OF SWIMMING POOLS

RLSSA research staff conducted a review of evidence related to the health, social and other benefits of community swimming pools. It found that beyond recreational value, a range of peer reviewed academic studies and industry reports have shown that swimming and swimming pools have substantial health, social, and economic benefits to communities and those that participate.

Large scale meta-analyses, which combine the results of several published studies together, have shown that swimming and aquatic exercise is associated with a lower risk of all-cause mortality (Oja et al., 2024), statistically significant improvements in mood and anxiety symptoms (Tang et al., 2022), and have benefits for specific health conditions such as osteoarthritis (Bartels et al., 2016) and high blood pressure (Igarashi and Nogami, 2018). In addition to the individual physical and mental health benefits of swimming and aquatic activity, other research has identified social benefits (Moffat, 2017) including important social learning and development in adolescence (Light, 2010; Light et al., 2013) and how group programmes enhance health benefits due to social factors (Heckel et al., 2025).

Safe places to swim are critical for realising these benefits and recent research has characterised the benefits of swimming pools, as opposed to studies examining effects and outcomes for individuals. A Royal Life Saving Australia report (Barnsley, Peden & Scarr, 2017) examined the health benefits with physical activity and social connection associated with an individual visit to a swimming pool, which found that each visit to a pool generated \$26 in health benefits to society.

**Additionally, in 2021, Royal Life Saving Australia, in collaboration with PwC Australia, published The Health, Social and Economic Value of the Australian National Aquatic Industry which found that Australia's aquatic industry:**

- › Employs 33,600 full time employee adding \$2.8 billion to GDP
- › Generates annual health benefits of \$2.5 billion via reduction of disease, improved mental health outcomes, reduced absenteeism, and fewer childhood drowning incidents
- › Provides \$3.8 billion's worth of social benefits such as enhancing an individual's leisure time, creating increased life satisfaction, bringing people together, supporting vulnerable groups, and facilitating early learning.
- › For every \$1 invested in operating a pool there is a \$2.18 social return on investment (in regional Australia)

These findings are supported by additional work by Yeomans et al. (2024) which characterises Australian aquatic facilities as social infrastructure, that is, as spaces to build relationships, provide social support, and foster trust and connection with community. Importantly, this research identified people as critical components of the overall impact an aquatic facility has on the communities it serves; both staff and empowered community members play essential roles in developing social value (Yeomans et al., 2024).

Research has also evaluated the health and social impact of swimming pools in remote Aboriginal communities. A systematic review by Hendrickx et al. in 2016 looked at twelve studies to evaluate evidence that swimming pools improve health and wellbeing in remote Aboriginal communities. The review found that all studies on skin infections showed access to swimming pools was associated with a reduced skin sore prevalence, while studies on ear and eye health showed mixed results - some small-scale studies suggesting benefits and others found no conclusive evidence.

**Other health and community-related benefits identified in the review included:**

- › Pools offering children an alternative to swimming in polluted or dangerous locations such as dams or rivers
- › Children being more physically active due to the availability of a swimming pool
- › Decreases in children presenting to the clinic with respiratory infections
- › The role of swimming pools as a community hub where children and families can come together and interact in a safe, supervised environment
- › Improved school attendance through 'No-school-no-pool' initiatives
- › Opportunities for swimming lessons and water safety education,
- › Professional development opportunities

More recent research by The University of Western Australia and Royal Life Saving Western Australia explored the social impact of community pools in the Pilbara (O'Shaughnessy, et al., 2024). The mixed-methods evaluation of a range of programs at remote pools in the Pilbara found, in line with previous research, that community pools tend to function as social hubs and are especially important in remote communities where they promote prosocial behaviour, provide recreation options in hot locations, and improve health in areas with high rates of skin and eye conditions, provide a vehicle for water safety education and employment opportunities, all of which are particularly relevant for closing the gap and empowering community. Their report recommends continued investment in infrastructure and program resourcing, noting that the program is centrally administer by Royal Life Saving Western Australia on behalf of the Western Australian Government.

Finally, Royal Life Saving Australia has undertaken some unpublished research (2023) which indicates the social return on investment of swimming pools in remote communities is much higher, as high as \$25 for every \$1 invested, however, more research and peer review may be needed to validate these findings.



## › Status against previous recommendations

The 2010 report titled *A Review of Swimming Pools in Remote Areas of the Northern Territory*, compiled by RLSSA, provided a comprehensive examination of the challenges and opportunities associated with swimming pools in remote NT communities. Commissioned by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the report focused on 18 pools servicing over 19,000 residents, predominantly in Indigenous communities.

### Key Findings (2010)

- › **Infrastructure and Safety:** Many pools were found to be non-compliant with safety standards, lacking appropriate signage, emergency planning, and supervision strategies. Several facilities were over 20 years old, with some exceeding 35 years, highlighting the need for significant infrastructure investment.
- › **Management and Planning:** There was a widespread absence of business or risk management plans. Workforce development strategies were also lacking, leading to challenges in maintaining consistent and qualified staffing.
- › **Funding and Sustainability:** The report identified fragmented funding responsibilities among local, Territory, and Federal governments, leading to under-resourced facilities. Ad hoc funding approaches were deemed counterproductive to long-term sustainability.
- › **Social and Health Benefits:** While there was evidence of health benefits, particularly for Indigenous children, the report called for more research to quantify the social and economic impacts of remote swimming pools.

### Recommendations (2010)

The report made recommendations across four key areas:

1. Sustainability and Funding:
  - Develop a coordinated approach among governments and stakeholders for sustainable management.
  - Reclassify swimming pools as core community services in planning and budgeting processes.
  - o Conduct cost-benefit analyses to assess the social and health impacts of swimming pools.
2. Management and Planning:
  - Create templates and processes for business and operational planning that are accessible to communities with varying literacy levels.
  - Implement annual Aquatic Facility Safety Assessments and improvement plans.
  - Investigate innovative water and energy-saving technologies to reduce operational costs.
3. Infrastructure:
  - Develop asset management planning systems and training for Shire Councils.
  - Allocate funding to bring all existing pools up to designated safety standards.
  - Establish specific guidelines for the management, design, and construction of swimming pools in remote areas.
4. Social Capacity:
  - Facilitate networking and knowledge-sharing activities to promote good practices.
  - Encourage local boards to take an active interest in pool utilisation to meet community needs.
  - Collaborate with community development service providers to integrate swimming pools into broader social programs.

The report underscores the necessity for a coordinated, well-resourced approach to managing remote swimming pools, recognising them as essential infrastructure for community health, safety, and cohesion. NT Government Departmental leadership, local Government leadership and financial investment is required to ensure these pools can function both seasonally and into the future.



### Current status of recommendations

The current review of remote pools was initiated to consider the shortfalls from the 2010 report. Consider what has been done to address the 19 recommendations and review the adoption from all tiers of Government. The NT Water Safety Advisory Council meets quarterly and reports to the Minister of Sport regarding the risk management of NT Swimming Pools and the reporting to the NT Water Safety Strategy 2030. The Local Government Association (LGANT) also has a membership of councils and the remote pools are within their asset management portfolio. The lack of an implementation plan from the 2010 report and clear lines of responsibilities has hindered the sustainability of remote pools in the Northern Territory.

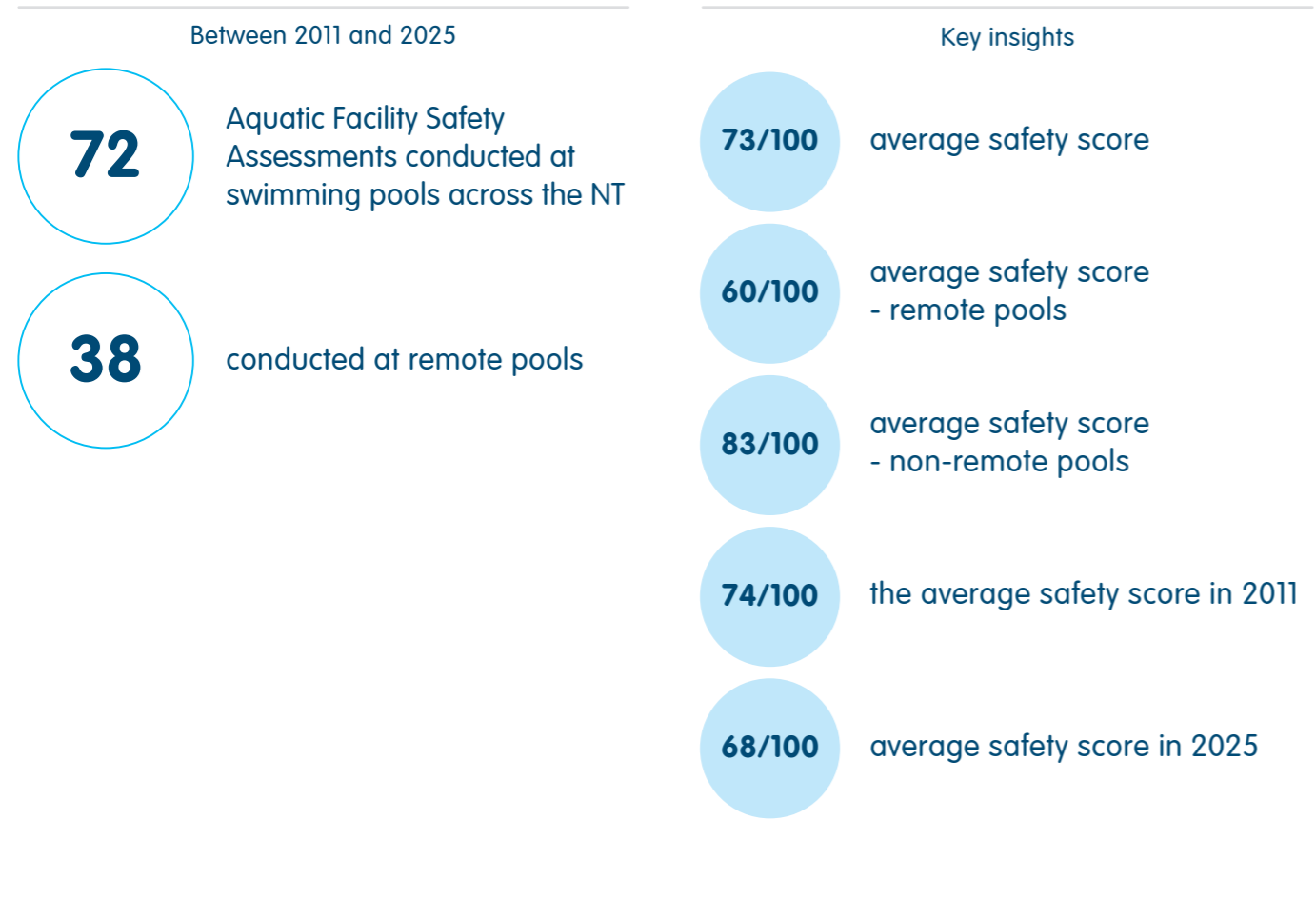
Table 4 contains an analysis of the status of the 2010 recommendations. The status has been compiled considering a range of inputs including data collected from the safety audits, interviews with council staff and remote pool managers, and a survey of councils.

#	Recommendation	Status Summary	Progress
1	Develop coordinated, sustainable management of remote swimming pools involving all levels of government and stakeholders.	No formal coordination group has been (funded &) established. Cross-agency collaboration remains limited.	No or declining progress
2	Shire Councils (now Regional Councils) to recognise pools as core community services in planning and budgeting.	Councils face high staff turnover and resourcing pressures. Pools are not consistently prioritised.	No or declining progress
3	Territory and Federal governments to identify funding for capacity-building and pool use promotion.	Leadership and funding commitments remain lacking.	No or declining progress
4	Conduct a cost-benefit analysis of social and health impacts of remote pools on public expenditure.	National-level data exists, but no NT-specific economic or health impact study has been conducted.	No or declining progress
5	Develop user-friendly operational planning templates that overcome literacy barriers.	GSPO templates are available, but underutilised; planning capacity varies significantly.	Limited progress
6	Require business/operational plans for all Councils managing pools.	Some early efforts (2010 workshops) occurred, and recent networks (e.g. NT Aquatic Industry Network) have re-engaged this topic.	Limited progress
7	Conduct annual Aquatic Facility Safety Assessments and improvement planning.	14 assessments completed since 2018; however, some pools remain unassessed and overall safety scores are mixed.	Limited progress
8	Investigate innovative technologies and community education to reduce pool operating costs.	Examples such as free entry during school holidays have been trialled; broader innovation remains limited.	Limited progress
9	Develop asset management systems and pool-specific training for Regional Councils.	Implementation is unclear; there is no confirmed systemic support for asset planning at pool level.	No or declining progress
10	Allocate funding to upgrade existing pools to meet design and safety standards.	No targeted funding program has been established for upgrades and maintenance.	No or declining progress
11	Develop specific operational guidelines for swimming pool management in remote areas.	Requests made to NAIC to adapt GSPO sections for remote contexts; some guidance exists but is not tailored. This could be furthered with a small amount of additional funding.	Limited progress
12	Develop remote-appropriate design and construction guidelines.	Some progress has occurred through LGANT and Statewide collaboration.	Limited progress

13	Establish a panel of approved suppliers to streamline procurement and reduce costs.	This recommendation remains unaddressed.	No or declining progress
14	Link pool funding to compliance with safety benchmarks and facility standards.	No operational funding is currently linked to benchmarks.	No or declining progress
15	Facilitate networking to share practice and build peer support.	The NT Aquatic Industry Network operated between 2020–2023; coordination remains intermittent.	Limited progress
16	Strengthen local governance and community engagement in pool operations.	15 of 19 pools have been operational with visible community use.	Limited progress
17	Collaborate across services to deliver targeted programs (e.g. youth, disability, aged care).	Royal Life Saving NT and YMCA NT actively deliver multi-cohort programs across communities.	Significant progress
18	Undertake further research on social and economic benefits using best-practice methods.	This review contributes initial steps, but broader research investment is still required.	Limited progress
19	Develop workforce strategies to maximise local employment and succession planning.	Workforce capacity has declined significantly, with no backfill staff and limited management coverage.	No or declining progress



> Key insights from 15 years of safety assessments



While safety standard scores have lifted, NT remote pools continue to fall further behind in achieving compliance in key safety standards. Analysis of safety assessments at remote pools over the period 2011-2025 reveal several key themes of non-conformance.

**Below is a thematic analysis focused on:**

1. Frequency of deficiency
2. Relative risk posed to safety
3. Ease of rectification

Table 5: Key Themes from Remote Aquatic Facility Safety Audits

Theme	Issue Summary	Frequency	Risk Level	Ease of Rectification	Comments
1. Safety Signage	Inadequate, non-compliant, faded, or missing signage related to hazards, depth, supervision, or emergency procedures.	<b>Very High (present in nearly all audits)</b>	<b>Moderate to High</b>	<b>High</b>	A clear and cost-effective opportunity to improve baseline safety. Rectification is simple and affordable, but signage alone does not substantially improve behavioural safety. Still, addressing this reduces legal exposure and improves visibility of risk controls.
2. Emergency Procedures	Absence of documented Emergency Action Plans (EAPs); inconsistent drills or staff familiarity.	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	A critical deficiency that compromises incident response. Requires better planning, documentation, and regular training. Recurring gaps found across audits indicate the need for stronger operational systems and staff preparedness.
3. Programming and Supervision Planning	Limited or absent aquatic programming (e.g. swim lessons, community sessions); weak engagement with schools.	<b>High</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Variable</b>	Effects both safety and social impact. Lack of learn-to-swim or structured activities limits drowning prevention outcomes. Success depends on staffing capacity, planning, and community partnerships. High potential return if addressed.
4. Lifeguard and Staff Training / Accreditation	Outdated or undocumented qualifications; inconsistent WHS induction; lack of rescue or CPR refreshers.	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	Directly impacts capacity to prevent and respond to emergencies. A critical area for investment. Solutions include enhancing access to accredited training (especially remote delivery) and regular audit-linked staff support. An annual workshop for all remote pools managers inclusive of update courses, technical training, would be an effective intervention, relatively simple to deliver and was a successful model in the past.
5. Chemical Safety and Water Quality	Unsafe chemical storage and labelling, inconsistent PPE use, and variable water testing records.	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	High-risk exposure for staff and patrons. Issues often relate more to procedures and training than infrastructure. Improved chemical handling protocols, technical training, and procurement standards would mitigate these risks.
6. Infrastructure Condition and Maintenance	Ageing plant rooms, corrosion, ventilation issues, structural damage, and accessibility limitations.	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Low</b>	Many facilities suffer from long-term underinvestment. While serious defects pose safety risks, solutions require capital works funding and long-term planning. Facilities would benefit from asset management plans and upgrade support. A central model is most likely to solve the systemic challenges facing NT's regional councils.

› Remote pool infrastructure

Table 6: Summary of remote pool infrastructure

Community#	Population Census 2021	No. of staff	Name of swimming pool	Year Pool Opened	Age of Pool
Wadeye	1924	2	Wadeye Swimming Pool	2024	1
Peppimenarti	190	0	Peppimenarti Pool	2006	19
Jabiru	755	1	Jabiru Pool	1982	43
Borrooloola	755	2	Borrooloola community swimming pool	2009	16
Ngukurr	1088	2	Ngukurr Swimmiung Pool	1998	27
Wurrimiyanga	1417	0	Wurrimiyanga Pool	2001	24
Pirlingimpi	317	0	Pirlangimpi Pool	1995	30
Maningrida	2518	2	Maningrida Pool	2007	18
Batchelor	396	1	Batchelor Swimming Pool	1956	69
Tennant Creek	3080	3	Tennant Creek Swimming Pool	1967	58
Santa Teresa	708	2	Ltyentye Apurte Swimming Pool (Santa Teresa)	1972	53
Areyonga	236	2	Utju (Areyonga Pool)	1999	26
Kintore	420	0	Yuntju Pulikatjarra Pool (Kintore Pool)	2008	17
Nhulunbuy	3350	3	Nhulunbuy Aquatic Centre	1971	54
Alyangula	751	0	Groote Eyelandt Swimming pool	1970	53
Yuendumu	759	2	Yuendumu Swimming Pool	2008	17
Gunbalanya	1177	0	Gunbalanya Sports & Social Club Swimming Pool	1995	30
Mutitjulu	296	2	Mutitjulu Tjurpinytjaku Centre (Mutitjulu Swimming Pool)	2013	12
Naiyu Nambiyu	350	0	Naiyu Nambiyu Pool	1988	37
Yulara	853	3	Yulara Recreation and Aquatic Centre	1984	41

\*Assessment based on observations of RLS NT over multiple visits to each pool, results from the Council / pool operator survey responses, known capital works and maintenance and safety audits at the venue. # Blue shaded pools are remote community pools. Brown shaded pools are located in mining towns, and receive support from the mining sector.

Management	Responsibility Infrastructure	Current state of facility scale 1 to 10*	Infrastructure improvements in last 5 years
YNT	West Daly Regional Council	7	Brand new Myrtha pool opened December 2024 4.8M
Council - May be closed	West Daly Regional Council	0	none
Council	West Arnhem Regional Council	5	
YNT	Roper Gulf Regional Council	5	none
YNT	Roper Gulf Regional Council	5	
CLOSED 2021	Tiwi Islands Regional Council	0	none
Closed 2023	Tiwi Islands Regional Council	0	none
Council	West Arnhem Regional Council	6	none
Council	Coomalie Community Government Council	4	none
Council	Barkly Regional Council	5	yes
YNT	MacDonnell Regional Council	5	none
YNT	MacDonnell Regional Council	5	none
Closed Drowning 2.12.2020	MacDonnell Regional Council	0	none
NCL	Nhulunbuy Corporation Limited	7	new plant room
GEMCO	Groote Eyelandt Mining Company (GEMCO)	6	
YNT	Granites Mine Affected Area Aboriginal Corporation (GMAAAC)	6	none
GSC	Other	5	
Casa Leisure	Central Land Council	6	none
GRAC	Green River Aboriginal Corporation	5	
Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia	Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC)	7	various

## › Workforce Needs in Remote Aquatic Facilities

A capable, qualified, and stable workforce is central to the safe and effective operation of swimming pools in remote and regional Northern Territory communities. While some progress has been made in supporting local employment and training, systemic workforce gaps continue to constrain the delivery of services and compromise safety standards.

### Current Workforce Capacity

Most pools have access to annual in-community training for First Aid and Pool Lifeguard qualifications. These courses are subsidised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, enabling valuable local employment pathways and reducing the need for fly-in staff. However, participants outside these cohorts must pay full course fees.

Despite this foundation, many aquatic facilities remain critically understaffed, particularly in technical and instructional roles:

- Aquatic Technical Operators are in short supply across the sector. Staff without the required SISS500131 Aquatic Technical Operator skillset (introduced in December 2022) should not be handling chemicals or operating plant rooms. In several cases, existing staff hold outdated qualifications or lack formal credentials altogether. This risks significantly compromising the health and safety of participants and staff and is considered the minimum industry qualification as outlined in the Guidelines for Safe Pool Operations.
- Swim Teachers are also scarce. Few pools are formally registered as Swim Schools, limiting their capacity to deliver lessons locally or support the NT Government-funded school swimming and water safety program for students in Grades 1–6.

### Barriers to Recruitment and Retention

The high cost of labour hire in remote areas is a major barrier to workforce sustainability. Travel, accommodation, and on-ground transport costs significantly inflate the expense of bringing qualified staff into community. Many councils cannot absorb these costs on a recurring basis, resulting in closures, limited opening hours, or operational risk due to underqualified personnel.

There is currently no structured backfill system for full-time pool managers, increasing burnout and limiting leave flexibility.

### Strategic Workforce Opportunities

Several practical strategies could help strengthen the workforce pipeline and address key gaps:

- Mentoring Programs: A structured mentoring scheme across council and private facilities would support skill transfer, supervision, and retention, particularly for emerging Aboriginal staff. This could be coordinated centrally and include on-the-job shadowing, upskilling, and supervisory coaching.
- Cross-qualification of Sport & Recreation Staff: Sport and Recreation Officers or Sport Education staff could add value by obtaining Pool Lifeguard and/or Swim Teacher qualifications, enhancing their ability to support programming and safety at the pool.
- VET in Schools Pathways: Introducing accredited VET in Schools programs to deliver Lifeguard or Swim Teacher qualifications to secondary students could provide a localised workforce pipeline. Students would receive both recognised training and NTCET points, creating dual education and employment benefits.
- Swim School Registration Support: Targeted assistance to help facilities register as approved Swim Schools would expand access to existing government-funded swimming programs, create more employment opportunities, and increase participation in structured aquatic education.

### Summary

Remote NT pools urgently require a coordinated approach to workforce development. Addressing qualification gaps, enabling local training, supporting mentoring and backfill, and building school-to-employment pathways will improve not only operational viability but also the health, safety, and social outcomes for community members who rely on these facilities.

## › Stakeholder Insights: Operator and Council Perspectives

To supplement audit data and workforce analysis, direct engagement was conducted with pool owners, regional councils, operators, and managers to understand how NT remote and regional aquatic facilities are performing on the ground. A total of 19 responses were received, offering valuable qualitative insights into infrastructure condition, management practices, and operational challenges.

### Key Findings

#### Access and Community Use

- › 78% of pools do not charge an entry fee, reinforcing their role as public infrastructure for community health, recreation, and safety rather than revenue-generating assets. However, this also highlights their financial vulnerability and reliance on external support.

#### Operational Status and Support Needs

- › 32% of pools are open but reported needing additional help to maintain operations or staffing.
- › 21% of pools were identified as requiring major works—either due to ageing infrastructure or critical plant issues.
- › 63% have not received any significant infrastructure investment in the past 3–5 years, compounding maintenance backlogs and increasing the risk of unexpected closures.

#### Management and Planning

- › 58% of swimming pools are managed by a third party, such as the YMCA NT or contractors. Of these, 82% do not have a business plan in place, suggesting limited long-term planning or governance oversight.
- › Among the 42% of pools managed directly by councils, planning remains inconsistent—only half reported having a current business plan.

### Common Issues Identified

When asked to identify the most pressing concerns, respondents consistently pointed to:

- › Plant room and filtration issues (5 mentions)
- › Ageing infrastructure and major leaks—with several pools described as approaching “end of life” (4 mentions)
- › Inadequate or deteriorating amenities, particularly change rooms and toilets (5 mentions)

### Summary

The responses reflect a sector under pressure—marked by passionate local management, strong community use, but significant underinvestment in infrastructure and strategic planning. The lack of business planning across the majority of third-party managed pools is particularly concerning, as it undermines long-term sustainability and complicates funding applications or capital works planning.

These findings reinforce the need for coordinated support across governance, infrastructure, and workforce development—especially for facilities that remain open but require urgent assistance to continue operating safely and effectively.

## › Operational Models for Remote Swimming Pools in the Northern Territory

### Background

Sustaining safe, consistent, and professional operation of these facilities remains a significant challenge. Most pools are currently managed directly by local government authorities, often with minimal staffing, limited operational funding, and no centralised support. While some Councils have trialled outsourcing to organisations such as the YMCA, the funding levels are generally insufficient to ensure sustainable workforce and service standards.

There is increasing recognition that the current patchwork of operational models is not fit for purpose. Recent incidents—such as the closure of Wadeye Pool following workforce shortages and the tragic drowning at Kintore—highlight the urgent need to re-evaluate operational governance, funding, and support structures. By contrast, other jurisdictions such as Western Australia operate under more centralised, coordinated models. In WA, the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries funds a state-wide remote pool management program delivered by Royal Life Saving WA. This model provides consistent staffing, coordinated training, clear expectations, and targeted infrastructure support. This model is widely lauded as successful and objectively validates as achieving a high level of social and community impact.

## › Emerging Operational Options

The following table (Table 9) outlines potential operational models for remote pools in the NT, with key features, risks, benefits, and options for further support. Note, the report makes no recommendation here but provides the table as a tool for further investigation and discussion.

Table 7: Potential operational models

Model	Description	Current Status	Key Risks / Weaknesses	Advantages	Resource Requirement (indicative)	Support Strategies
1. Supporting in-house Council management	Council directly manages the pool, often with minimal external support.	Most common model in NT.	Workforce shortages, weak safety track records, poor asset management, inconsistent service delivery, low retention, closures.	Local control and community embeddedness.	Low to moderate. Often under-resourced.	Provide dedicated asset and operational grants, workforce support and development schemes (including annual workshop for pool managers), and technical & safety support.
2. Management contractors	Council outsources to an external operator (e.g. YMCA).	Used in some NT locations.	Contracts often underfunded, challenges with workforce attraction, asset constrains, variable service standards.	External expertise, standardised systems, marginally higher compliance levels.	Moderate, but insufficient unless funding improved.	Increase contract values; provide dedicated asset and operational grants, workforce support and development schemes; include incentives for local employment.
3. Regional hubs	Councils collaborate to co-manage facilities and share resources.	Rarely used in NT but seen elsewhere.	Requires inter-Council coordination and shared governance.	Efficiency through economies of scale; peer support.	Moderate to high startup costs.	Pilot cooperative models; co-fund shared resources (e.g. mobile managers, plant technicians).
4. Whole-of-Territory model	Pools centrally operated by a state-funded agency or contracted non-profit (e.g. RLSNT).	Not implemented in NT. Exists in WA.	Requires major governance shift; inter-agency buy-in.	Consistency, central workforce model, standardisation, single point of accountability.	High (e.g. \$5M/year for workforce ops).	Federal/state funding partnership; establish NT Remote Pool Management Entity.
5. FIFO & labour hire schemes	Temporary staff deployed to fill short-term gaps or provide mentoring.	Proposed.	Workforce continuity risks; expensive if poorly coordinated, likelihood of success is low due to difficulty in attracting workers to remote communities.	Relief cover; supports local upskilling.	Variable. May complement other models.	Establish centrally coordinated labour pool; offer incentives for mentoring, annual workshops for workforce.
6. Departmental transfers (Education, Tourism, etc.)	Pools managed by departments other than councils.	Not currently pursued.	Misalignment with core purpose; unclear accountability; resource constrains in education sector.	May align with tourism or curriculum access.	Variable.	Assess feasibility in specific contexts; not likely to be a system-wide solution.

## > Opportunities for Reform

Reform efforts could build on the following elements:

### > Pilot and Evaluate:

Trial regional and centralised models in select communities and compare outcomes with council-led models.

### > Workforce Support Package:

Establish a centrally managed workforce development scheme, which may include pool manager professional development workshops, accredited training, and establish labour hire scheme to backfill positions, mentor new staff, and upskill locals.

### > Funding and Governance Reform:

Introduce a matched funding program (e.g., \$250K cap per pool/year) to support workforce operations and critical repairs.

### > Centrally Resourced Entity:

Consider establishing a dedicated NT-wide pool operations entity—potentially contracted to Royal Life Saving NT or another not-for-profit—with support from all levels of government.

A shift to a more coordinated approach offers the potential to improve safety, consistency, and sustainability—ensuring remote pools continue to deliver drowning prevention and community value across the Territory.

## > Case Studies: Remote and Regional Aquatic Facilities in the Northern Territory

These case studies highlight the diversity of operating models, community contexts, and challenges associated with remote and regional swimming pools in the NT. They underscore the critical role these facilities play in community safety, health, and cohesion—while also revealing the operational fragility and systemic barriers to sustainability.



### Maningrida

- > Population: 2,518
- > Pool Age: 18 years
- > Operator: West Arnhem Regional Council

Since opening, the Maningrida pool has been consistently managed by full-time external Pool Managers, supported with on-site housing—Ron (10 years) followed by Loki (8 years). The Council also employs a 0.68 FTE local Aboriginal lifeguard, Leeroy, who is also a qualified swim teacher. Over the past 18 years, several other community members have been employed.

The pool operates Wednesday to Sunday with consistent use by lap swimmers, families, and children after school. Hours are extended during school holidays, and entry is free. When the pool is closed, children often swim in the nearby ocean—despite known crocodile risks.

**Comment:** The Maningrida pool is a valued, well-utilised facility supported by stable staffing and strong community engagement. It exemplifies the importance of housing, local employment, and consistent management in sustaining safe aquatic access.

Image: Maningrida Pool Managers Loki and Leeroy



### Nhulunbuy

- > Population: 3,350
- > Pool Age: 54 years (major upgrade 5 years ago)
- > Operator: Nhulunbuy Corporation

Serving as a regional hub for East Arnhem Land, Nhulunbuy's 50-metre pool is operated professionally as a full aquatic facility. Two qualified Pool Coordinators rotate on a week-on/week-off basis and are supported by casual lifeguards. Entry is fee-based, and a swipe card system allows out-of-hours access—supporting hospital and mine shift workers.

The facility hosts:

- Travelling Tadpoles Swim School for local and remote families
- Gove Barra Swim Club, supporting junior competition pathways

**Comment:** The pool demonstrates how mining towns and regional centres can sustain full-service aquatic facilities. Corporate investment and local governance through the Nhulunbuy Corporation have enabled operational excellence and broad community access.

Images: Nhulunbuy Pool, source: Nhulunbuy Corporation



### Tennant Creek

- > Population: 3,080
- > Pool Age: 58 years (partial upgrade 13 years ago)
- > Operator: Barkly Regional Council

Tennant Creek’s 25m L-shaped pool supports town residents and the wider Barkly region, including hosting the annual Barkly Regional Swimming and Lifesaving Carnival. A local Pool Coordinator and casual lifeguards operate the facility, which is widely used for lap swimming, school programs, and recreation—particularly during extended school holiday hours.

While the pool was upgraded in 2010s, the wet-deck design has proven problematic in this desert environment, with wind, dust, and plant room issues (particularly around the splash pad and dosing system) persisting. Entry fees remain a barrier for some families.

**Comment:** Tennant Creek’s experience underscores the importance of design suitability for regional climates and the impact of operational costs on community access. Strategic upgrades and subsidised access could enhance equity.

Images: Above – RLS NT delivers lifesaving programs at Tennant Creek pool on behalf of the NT Education Department. Below – images of the pool while empty. Source: RLS NT & Department of Education.



### Wurrumiyanga (Tiwi Islands)

- > Population: 1,417
- > Pool Status: Closed since 2021
- > Operator: Tiwi Islands Regional Council (previously Sport & Rec team-led)

Previously considered one of the most successful remote pools in the NT, Wurrumiyanga’s facility thrived under an externally employed Pool Manager who trained local Aboriginal staff as lifeguards and pool operators. It hosted a range of programs: lap swimming, school groups, AFL team recovery sessions, and the Tiwi Turtles Swim Club.

After the departure of the Pool Manager, and with compounding factors like budget cuts, employment shortages, and persistent plant breakdowns, the facility closed. The Council has struggled to reopen the pool amidst competing service delivery demands.

**Comment:** This case highlights how critical staffing continuity and technical reliability are to the viability of remote pools. Once disrupted, even strong programs can unravel quickly.

Image: Wurrumiyanga Pool



### MacDonnell Regional Council

- > Facility Profile: Operates three pools – Santa Teresa, Areyonga (seasonal), and Kintore (closed)
- > Operator: Contracted to YMCA NT (Santa Teresa and Areyonga); Council retains ownership

Kintore Pool has remained closed since the tragic drowning of a toddler in December 2020. Despite this, the Council continues to incur fixed costs, including utilities and repairs due to vandalism and environmental damage.

Prior to the incident, all three pools had external managers with housing, and a significant casual local workforce. However, the financial burden of operating multiple pools is increasingly contested by other communities within the Council area who perceive funding for aquatic facilities as diverting resources from their own service needs.

**Comment:** The case of MacDonnell Regional Council illustrates the funding and equity dilemmas faced by councils managing multiple remote facilities. It raises important questions about how to fairly distribute resources while maintaining critical safety infrastructure.

Image: Santa Teresa Pool

## › Recommendations and Next Steps

An implementation plan must be developed by all tiers of Government and Royal Life Saving Australia to address the sustainability of remote swimming pools in the Northern Territory, using the 2010 recommendation and the current review as the reference points and actions required. This would enable the NT Government and Federal Government to fairly, appropriately and diligently consider the investment required for the pools individually and as a collective.

### 1. Workforce Capability and Retention

#### Issue:

Remote pools often operate with minimal staffing, lack technical qualifications (especially in aquatic operations), and sometimes rely on costly short-term labour hire solutions. There is also no pathway for youth to become certified through VET-in-schools or structured mentoring programs.

#### Recommendations:

- Establish a funded annual Remote Pool Managers Professional Development Workshop, offering practical training, updates, and peer learning.
- Support a Remote Aquatic Workforce Mentoring Program for new and existing Aboriginal staff, drawing on successful legacy models.
- Expand access to remote delivery of nationally accredited training in aquatic technical operations (SIS5500131), lifeguarding, and swim teaching.
- Fund the development of VET-in-schools pathways for lifeguards and swim teachers, linked to the NTCET.
- Encourage dual-qualification of Sport and Recreation Officers and Sport Education Teachers as lifeguards and swim teachers to add value to their community-facing roles.

### 2. Infrastructure Condition and Asset Lifecycle Management

#### Issue:

Many pools are ageing (47% are over 30 years old), with outdated plant rooms, damaged linings, water quality issues, and poor filtration. Three pools have been closed for over three years, and many report being at end-of-life.

#### Recommendations:

- Develop and fund a Territory-Wide Remote Pools Master Asset Management Plan, prioritising renewal or refurbishment based on age, condition, and risk.
- Allocate specific capital funding for critical infrastructure replacement — including filtration systems, pool liners, chemical dosing units, ventilation, and plant safety systems.
- Provide interim support for facilities currently closed due to plant failure (e.g. Wurrumiyanga, Kintore) to assess feasibility and cost of reopening or repurposing.

### 3. Safety and Emergency Preparedness

#### Issue:

Audits highlight major gaps in emergency planning, signage, and safety procedures. These elements are consistently among the lowest-performing across all audits, with many pools lacking documented EMPs or signage compliant with safety guidelines.

#### Recommendations:

- Fund the development and implementation of Emergency Management Plans (EMPs) and Standard Operating Procedures at all remote pools.
- Provide a centralised resource hub and signage kit, aligned to the Guidelines for Safe Pool Operations, to address high-frequency issues with faded or non-compliant signage.
- Fund regular aquatic facility safety assessments (e.g. annual) to support a continued and focused effort on improving risk management and compliance monitoring.

### 4. Program Delivery and Social Impact

#### Issue:

A lack of structured programming (e.g. swim lessons, school visits, aquatic sports) reduces the safety, educational and community value of pools. This limits return on investment and community engagement.

#### Recommendations:

- Support remote pools to become registered swim schools, enabling delivery of the NT Government-funded primary school swim and water safety program.
- Provide resourcing and partnership support to reintroduce structured aquatic programming, including school visits, swim clubs, and after-school activities.
- Recognise and capture the social, health, and economic contribution of pools through improved data collection and impact reporting, supporting the case for sustained investment.

### 5. Governance, Business Planning and Management Support

#### Issue:

Many councils lack business plans for their pool operations. Where pools are managed by third parties, oversight, planning, and reporting structures are inconsistent or absent.

#### Recommendations:

- Develop a Remote Aquatic Facility Governance Framework, including templates and guidance on business planning, contract management, and performance reporting.
- Provide targeted support for regional collaboration or shared services models among councils, reducing duplication and improving workforce and asset sharing.
- Explore long-term models for centralised support and management (e.g. regional hubs, centrally resourced entity, or not-for-profit delivery), building on successful examples from other jurisdictions (e.g. WA).
- Fund the development of bespoke operational guidance tailored to remote pools context (e.g. Guidelines for Safe Pool Operations) that considers the constraints and operating circumstances of remote pools in the NT.

## › Next Steps

- › Convene a working group of council representatives, NT Government departments, Australian Government and sector experts to prioritise recommendations and develop a funding and implementation roadmap.
- › Pilot immediate actions with high feasibility and impact — such as workforce workshops, signage kits, and EMP templates — in collaboration with interested councils.
- › Ensure ongoing monitoring and review mechanisms are embedded in all future investments, linked to facility assessments and reporting by operators.

## > CONCLUSION

Remote swimming pools across the Northern Territory play a vital and often irreplaceable role in the health, safety, and wellbeing of regional and remote communities. They are more than infrastructure — they are hubs for swimming, water safety drowning prevention, social connection and cohesion, youth engagement, and safe recreation in environments where alternative swimming locations are either unsafe or inaccessible.

This review confirms that while the commitment of councils, pool staff, and local community members remains strong, the system that underpins these facilities is under considerable pressure. Ageing infrastructure, inconsistent operational capacity, limited workforce pathways, and gaps in safety procedures have converged to create significant risks - not just to service continuity, but to lives.

At the same time, the opportunities are clear. Targeted investment in workforce development, safety systems, structured programming, and asset renewal would have immediate and measurable benefits. Several councils have shown what is possible with the right support: facilities that are well-used, well-managed, and deeply embedded in community life.

To protect these gains and extend them across the network, a coordinated, system-wide approach is needed - one that reflects the unique challenges of the Territory's geography, climate, and governance structures. This includes valuing pools for their preventative health, educational, and social impact - not just as cost centres.

With collaborative leadership from all levels of government, and input from the sector and community, remote pools can be positioned not as liabilities, but as critical community infrastructure worthy of long-term strategic support. This report provides a roadmap toward that outcome.



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