



# THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL AQUATIC INDUSTRY

Prepared as a Collaboration between  
**Swinburne University of Technology,**  
and **Royal Life Saving Society - Australia**



**ROYAL LIFE SAVING**  
AUSTRALIA

**Swinburne Sport Innovation Research Group** is an internationally recognised research group that creates and facilitates high-quality, industry-shaping research collaboration for the benefit of both researchers and partner organisations.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background and Aims

Australia’s public aquatic facilities and commercial swim schools generate significant benefits to the community. In total, there are over 2100 aquatic facilities and swim schools across the country, with 89% of Australians living within 20 minutes drive to their local swimming pool (RLSSA & PwC, 2021). Over half (58%) of these facilities are located outside of major cities and attract over 330 million visits per year (AusPlay, 2020).

In understanding and conceptualising the benefits of these venues, economic, health and social impacts are noted to total over \$9 billion in value annually (RLSSA & PwC, 2021).

- From an economic perspective local economic activity, tourism, improvements in property values, local tax base, employment and vocation benefits are cited (Barnsley, Peden, & Scarr, 2017; RLSSA & PwC, 2021)
- From a health perspective aquatic facilities provide positive impacts on physical and mental health at the individual and community level, as well scope for reduced absenteeism, improved health care system impact, and provision of a safe and supervised setting to familiarise and build experience in aquatic safety skills, with related effects on reduced drowning (Australian Water Safety Council, 2021; Barnsley et al., 2017; Peden, Scarr & Mahony, 2021; RLSSA & PwC, 2021).
- From a social perspective, enjoyable patron experiences and an increased sense of community and social capital are among the known benefit areas. Positive impacts on wellbeing, sense of community, increased social connection, and educational benefits are also accrued (Barnsley et al., 2017; Karg et al., 2021)

While the financial value of the quantifiable economic and health benefits are more tangible and defined, a detailed understanding of the more difficult to quantify social impacts created by the aquatic industry, and the infrastructure, workforce and programming that supports increased social outcomes are less well known.

As such, this report was commissioned to inform a deep understanding of the social impacts that eventuate from engagement with aquatic facilities and swim schools, as well as presenting key foundations and optimal conditions for their delivery. Specifically, this report focuses on social impact, and provides a framework of social impact infrastructure inclusive of people, places, policies and programs – all of which are critical to the continued and sustainable delivery of social impacts.

## Method

In line with the RLSSA and PwC report undertaken in 2021 to assess the economic value of the aquatic industry sector, we have defined activity in the aquatic industry as the following places or groups:

- Council-owned pools: aquatic and recreation facilities, public outdoor pools, public hydrotherapy pools and spas, public waterslides, outdoor pools, lap pools, learn to swim program pools.
- Publicly-accessible privately owned pools: commercial learn-to-swim centres, fitness centres and gyms, clubs with pools, universities and schools.

To identify and report on social impacts, this study was conducted in two stages:

### Aquatic Industry Survey/Audit

An online aquatic industry survey / audit tool was developed and distributed to identified sites or programs across a nationally representative sample. This survey collected operational information from 78 sites across Australia to identify types of programming, facilities, members, casual users, and other business and community level data relevant to aquatic facilities and swim schools. This data was analysed to establish and profile different archetypes across the industry as well as provide analysis of places, programs and activities that align with different industry impacts and benefits.

### Qualitative Social Impact Interviews

Twenty-eight individual participants were interviewed from across Australia representing over 110 facilities, including facility owners, facility management and facility users. The qualitative research approach was developed to assess and contextualise detailed narrative case studies of social value and social impact, and identify the people, places, programs and policies central to aquatic facility infrastructure provided by these facilities and their communities.

## Summary

The study underpinning this report aimed to explore and report on the perceived social benefits, value and impacts of aquatic facilities including provision of narratives of the experiences of facility users. It then develops a framework of infrastructure for social outcomes, and positions facilitators and barriers, as well as conditions and practices to maximise social impacts.

Our findings suggest a need for focus not only on the physical facilities that provide for social outcomes, but also surrounding components of social infrastructure that create and support these outcomes. It is hoped this report provides a foundation to understanding not only the impact of such centres, but also a detailed explanation of the role of facilities in their community, and a framework and guidance by which these social impacts can be conceptualised and achieved.



# HIGHLIGHTS

## The Social Impact of the National Aquatic Industry

### 1. SOCIAL IMPACTS

Five major categories of social impact were identified:

- 

**Health and Wellbeing**

Improvements to users including mental, physical, and functional health.
- 

**Social Connection**

Reducing feeling of loneliness and social isolation, organised clubs and groups, families.
- 

**Safety and Education**

Water safety, reductions in drownings, learn to swim, a safe space for the local community to play or in times of crisis.
- 

**Social Cohesion**

Diverse multicultural communities, learning about difference, opportunities to meet other community members.
- 

**Employment**

Access and inclusion, supporting local economy, developing youth, and flexibility for parents and carers.

### 2. INFRASTRUCTURE FOR SOCIAL IMPACTS OF AQUATIC FACILITIES



- People**
- People refers to staff and volunteers as well users and stakeholders. A person-centred approach to design, delivery, programming and policy creates greater social impact.
- Programs**
- Programs refers to the different types of activities or events that are organised and delivered by the aquatic facilities. The programming should reflect the make-up and needs of the local community.
- Policy**
- Policy refers to the mechanisms to set standards, processes and ensure quality training and delivery for all staff and activities in aquatic facilities. Policy and procedures can both encourage and inhibit social impact.
- Places**
- Places refers to the physical infrastructure of the facilities. Although a high-quality facility is desirable, much of the social impact created by aquatic facilities is “facility agnostic”.

### 3. MANAGING FOR SOCIAL IMPACTS

For social value to be maintained and enhanced, owners and operators need to focus on managing aquatic facilities in a way that privileges the community, and focuses on the 4-Ps of place, programs, policy and people.

Significant social impact is created by aquatic facilities in Australia, stemming from the creation of unique opportunities for community members to interact and develop social bonds and relationships. Unlike many other types of social infrastructure, a swimming pool, in all of its various forms, provides a safe social space - a gathering place - for all different members of the community to participate in a way that best meets their needs.

We have developed a framework for social impacts for each of Place, Programs, People and Policy that articulates how aquatic facilities and swim schools can work to achieve the greatest social value and social impacts. This framework outlines expected, targeted and excellence in social impact for aquatic facilities.

	Expected	Targeted	Excellent
Place			
Programs			
Policy			
People			

# BACKGROUND

## Aquatic Facilities in Australia

Aquatic facilities play a critical role in the lifestyles and lifecycles of Australians. According to a recent RLSSA & PwC report (2021), there are over 2100 aquatic facilities across the country, with 89% of Australians living within 20 minutes’ drive of one of them. Over half (58%) of these facilities are located outside of major cities and attract over 330 million visits per years. In addition, over 60,000 employees work nationally in service/customer facing, program delivery, policy or operational roles (RLSSA, 2019a).

The aquatic industry, its workforce, and the community have been heavily impacted by the health order-mandated closures of aquatic facilities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The aquatic industry employs a predominantly young workforce with about half the workforce working casually (RLSSA, 2019). Each mandated closure has meant these casual workers have been stood down and

each time facilities were able to open they have suffered from worker shortages as workers have fled to other more secure sectors. This has also led to the loss of over 12 million swim lessons over this period (RLSSA, 2021). Compounding this is that the predominantly young workforce and young families who need swimming and water safety lessons for their children are last to be vaccinated and young children are currently not eligible for vaccination in 2021.

Somewhat paradoxically, aquatic facilities and swim schools, will likely be critical in Australia’s recovery across social, health and economic outcomes, especially in realising the lifelong benefits across the community that safe aquatic participation can bring after each child achieves the swimming and water safety national benchmarks outlined in RLSSA’s National Swimming and Water Safety Framework (RLSSA, 2019).

The forms of facilities are diverse and range from standalone aquatic facilities with a single pool, through to larger multi-faceted facilities comprising gyms and health centres, indoor and outdoor courts, and other commercial or public spaces or amenities. There are also an array of ownership and operational management frameworks evident across the industry. Ownership and management models include:

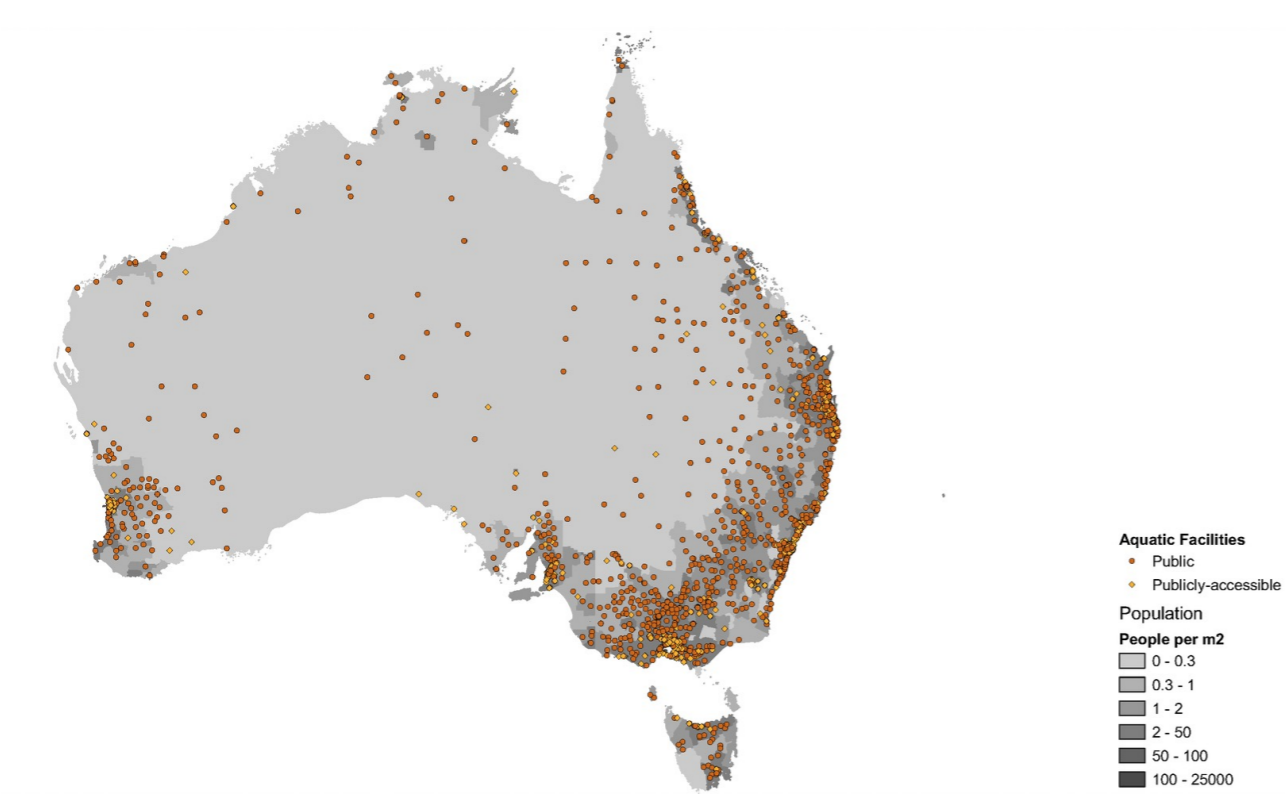
- Commercially owned (e.g., including franchise/schools/learn to swim centres)
- Council owned, but management is contracted or outsourced (fee for service)
- Council owned, but management is contracted or outsourced (lease for service)
- Council owned and operated
- Other (including volunteer or committee of management operated, state or federal government owned facilities and/or school pools)

The services offered are likewise diverse, ranging from recreation, lap swimming (fitness), learn to swim programs, and water play spaces and programming. Regardless of their design or management, it is clear from their scope and operations that they, alongside other sport and active recreation spaces, form a critical part of public infrastructure (Infrastructure Australia, 2021; Karg et al., 2021).

## Value and Impact of Aquatic Facilities

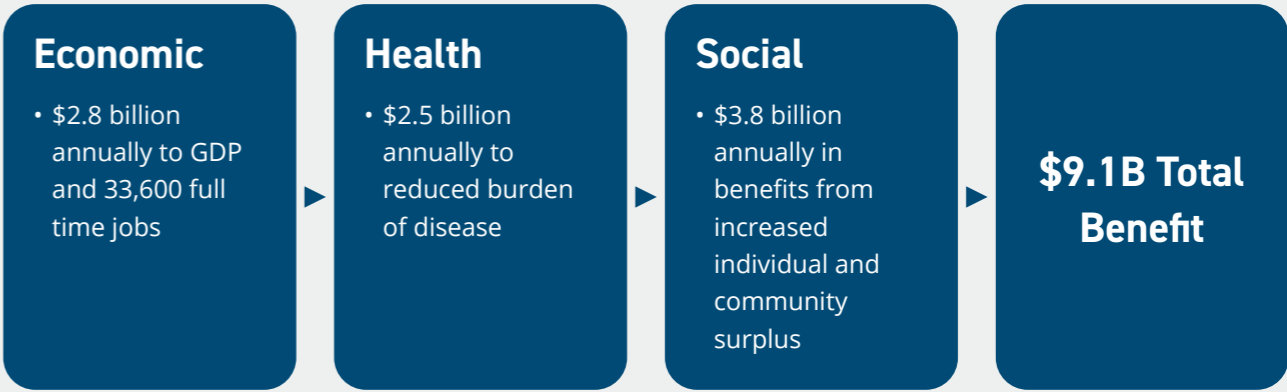
Research has identified that aquatic facilities contribute to the economic, health and social value of the Australian community. A recent study suggested \$9.1 billion of total benefit occurred annual from the aquatic industry (RLSSA & PwC, 2021).

Figure 1: Australian Aquatic Facilities and Swim Schools



Source: RLSSA & PwC, 2021

Figure 2: Economic, health and social impact of Aquatic Industry in Australia



Source: PwC (2021)

Further, the RLSSA Economic Benefits Report calculated health savings of \$26.00 per pool visit.

However, given the scope of aquatic facilities across Australia, it is important to not only quantify the economic benefit but also to better understand the social value and social impact created by these facilities for their local communities, Governments, and the sector more broadly.

The RLSSA identified in 2017 that economic approaches do not “attempt to measure the less tangible social and community benefits of a public pool, nor the potential improvements in water safety, environmental amenity, option value or property value benefits experienced by local residents even if they are not patrons. The exact values of these less direct benefits are difficult to calculate, but they are likely to be significant” (Barnesley et al., 2017).

Significant research has been conducted into the quantifiable social benefits of aquatic facilities and swim schools as well as the state of the physical infrastructure as it exists today. While this research has been important in understanding what exists now, it does not necessarily deliver insights into what could be, or equally importantly, how to maximise social outcomes within existing infrastructure constraints.

*“Most previous research has focused on ‘what is’ and not ‘what could be’ - which is equally important.”*

This report seeks to identify and articulate how aquatic facilities and swim schools can fully realise their maximum social impact potential and also provides a framework for social infrastructure that can be leveraged to support physical infrastructure.

Social infrastructure, explained further below, refers to the workforce composition, programming and administrative support that can be deployed to support the physical infrastructure that pools and recreation spaces provide in aquatic facilities

As such, **this research focuses specifically on the social value created by and social impact of aquatic facilities with and for the Australian community.**

## Social Value and Social Impact

**Social value** describes the wider social, economic, and environmental benefits that derive from an organisation’s work or from the commissioning of services or the purchasing of goods. For example, an aquatic facility may create social value through the multiple micro-interactions between the users of the facility and the programs, staff or other members of the community. For example, these micro-interactions may create value through activities such as water safety education for a young family, providing a safe space to cool off during a heat wave, or developing new friendships for an elderly widow at the aqua aerobics program.

**Social outcomes** refers to the delivery of benefits to society as an outcome of a specific activity. It can include improvement of issues affecting a specific community or location, or more broadly across the wider population.

**Social impact** is the change that happens to people, the community or the environment as a result of activities or services. It is the conversion of social value into longer-term impacts such as prevention of drowning, improved health outcomes for individuals, or reduced loneliness and social isolation for at-risk or disadvantaged members of the community.

Recent research by PwC in partnership with the RLSSA identified that the \$3.8 bn of social value of the aquatic industry are driven by four primary factors, with each factor creating multiple outcomes:

- An aquatic facility’s ability to enhance an individual’s leisure time or create increased life satisfaction when a person attends for leisure or physical activity.
- An aquatic facility’s role as a community space providing increased amenity and bringing people together.
- An aquatic facility’s role in providing jobs for young people and regional communities.
- The aquatic industry’s role in society supporting early learning.

Similar findings have been identified in research undertaken on social impact in the sport sector,

where it has been identified that sport is an effective tool to engage disengaged communities, to create social, mental and physical health outcomes, for safety and social cohesion and for employment and education outcomes (Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe, 2016).

## Social Infrastructure

While physical, or place-based, infrastructure can be observed and objectively categorised and measured, social infrastructure emerges as an important component of social service needs that are “essential services that create the material and cultural living conditions for an area” (Davern et al., 2017, p.195). Recent research identified that 38% of the physical places that have been shown to facilitate social connection are recreation, sport and leisure-based (Karg et al., 2021). Aquatic and recreation facilities were a prominent component of this statistic.

Social infrastructure can be related to: health; education; childcare; community support agencies; sport and recreation; parks and playgrounds, community development services; housing; employment and training, legal and public safety emergency services; public and community transport; arts and cultural institutions, senior citizen centres or “anywhere that brings people together” (Davern et al., 2017; Temple and Reynolds 2007).

In this context then, social infrastructure refers not to the physical swimming pools or buildings, but rather the role of these places in bringing people and their communities together via delivery of services and creation that creates the social value, outcomes and impact.



# WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF AQUATIC FACILITIES AND SWIM SCHOOLS?

## OVERVIEW

This study, through the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, sought to identify the social impact associated with aquatic facilities and swim schools and better understand what kind of assets - both physical and intangible - could be leveraged to support increased social impact.

Overall, the aquatic facilities studied provided diverse community members the opportunity to interact and engage with other people in their community, providing opportunities to foster social connections and relationships, which significantly improves the health and wellbeing of their users.



**Health and Wellbeing**

Improvements to users including mental, physical, and functional health.



**Social Connection**

Reducing feeling of loneliness and social isolation, organised clubs and groups, families.



**Safety and Education**

Water safety, reductions in drownings, learn to swim, a safe space for the local community to play or in times of crisis.



**Social Cohesion**

Diverse multicultural communities, learning about difference, opportunities to meet other community members.



**Employment**

Access and inclusion, supporting local economy, developing youth, and flexibility for parents and carers.



## Theme 1: Health and Wellbeing

This theme related to the various benefits to people's health and wellbeing, including: mental, functional, and physical health, created through participation in activities at the facility – both physical and social.

### Qualitative data highlights:

*"Community connection, [and] mental health, would probably be the biggest [benefits], ... we have a nice clean venue and you get people that come and interact, if it's being run efficiently and correctly. You know we're able to provide an environment that is safe where there's always someone to help you if there's a problem. It gives you exercise, your health benefits, but then lets you interact with the whole community."* - **Staff member, multiple facilities**

*"We really, really think it's a wellbeing service within the community, and so, from my perspective, what I believe is that [what] we provide is social connectivity for various populations that utilise the facility, alongside learning and development, so skill learning in a safe environment".* - **Staff member, Local Council-run aquatic facility**

*"It's just that community feel, that community hub, that's my vision for the centre is to be the community hub, where we can be healthy, we can promote a healthy lifestyle, we can provide activity in a safe space."* - **Staff member, community aquatic centre**

*"we look at the community, if this was that one place, that site, that was there during that drought time, and that was the one place to go and we've now taken that away from them, what have we done to their sense of wellbeing?"* - **Staff member, multiple facilities**

### Analysis

Our analysis identifies that aquatic facilities and their programs provides places and programs that encourage all types of health – physical, mental and functional. In addition to the obvious physical fitness that can be created by programs such as aqua aerobics and lap swimming, targeted programming for specific groups, such as people with a disability, can extend these benefits to those who may be less able to participate in traditional lap swimming.



**Recommendation:** All aspects of health should be considered when developing and implementing programs and activities. It is important to cater to all abilities, including people with a disability, those new or returning to exercise, and older adults. It is also important to understand the role that the facility can play in functional health for those unable to undertake land-based exercise, or as a place of respite in periods of hot weather.



## Theme 2: Social Connection

This theme related to the various opportunities to connect with other people through and at the facility, fostering relationships and social support, especially for vulnerable members of the community.

### Qualitative data highlights:

*"We all thought that the seventy-year-old lady, was going to be too scared to come back after the first lockdown... they were knocking on the door, because this is their life. Our facility has a morning tea after aqua [class] and that's always the best part of the day [for the participants]. And after each and every lockdown, they're [the aqua participants] the first ones back, they say 'what am I doing now that I don't have this', it is where they see their friends, every day, this is where they get their exercise every day. It's a disaster at the moment for that for that group."* - **Staff member, multiple privately-run facilities**

*"So one of the other things that we really try and do out there is, we really try and focus on okay, who might be having a hard time, so we, we also have teachers that speak to the mums. We don't tend to put up walls between us and our clients, I guess that's how we find out who needs help ...to provide that social support".* - **Manager, privately-run facility**

*"I guess the older ones who live alone, that are that bit older, that aren't able to attend due to the lockdowns, this is often their only outlet so in these lockdown periods when they do come back, they are overjoyed and just being able to engage with other adults, whether it be socially distanced or not. It does make a massive impact - clearly on their health and mental wellbeing, so we hear those stories every time we come out of lockdown. And each time we do go into lockdown when they call, and like everybody else, they are incredibly disappointed."* - **Staff member, Local Council-run facility**

### Analysis

Our analysis identifies that aquatic facilities and their programs can play a critical role in creating social connection and reducing social isolation for at-risk members of our community. For some aquatic facility users, the pool or program may be their only opportunity for regular and genuine social interaction.



**Recommendation:** Opportunities and places for social connection should be extended beyond the program or facility. This may be achieved by ensuring that there is a welcoming space available in a café for parents of young children or older adults to gather before or after a program, by providing a community noticeboard (physical or virtual) for groups to promote opportunities for engagement, and to support informal groups, such as the Aqua-girls example below, in activities, fundraising and events.

### Case Study: Health

The Broadmeadows Aquatic and Leisure Centre is a local hub for the Broadmeadows community and provides a safe and welcoming place for its diverse community. In addition to learn to swim programs and lap swimming, the Broadmeadows facility also provides targeted physical activity programs for bariatric patients from a nearby health facility and works closely with older members of their community to engage in their water-based programs. These programs focus not only on physical fitness, but also ensure the functional fitness for these at-risk populations in their day-to-day activities who would be unable to participate in more traditional gym or land-based activities.



Source: Hume Council Website

**"Aquatic facilities and their programs provides places and programs that encourage all types of health –physical, mental and functional."**





## Theme 3: Safety and Education

This theme related to the social impacts created through learn to swim programs and education, and what this meant for those in the community.



### Qualitative data highlights:

*"A river runs right through the town and it's one of the highest risk rivers identified by Royal Life for drownings and so forth, so our role here is very big in the community in aquatic education with the schools."* -

**Staff member, Local Council-run facility**

*"In a multicultural society where you've got a lot of people coming in and it's surrounded by water, that they [pool users] can come in and they can learn skills and being in water environment with less risk associated with it, because you've got lifeguards on or you've got organized programs, helping them to learn to swim."* -

**Staff member, Local Council-run facility**

*"We also get lots of stories from adult learn to swim classes on wanting to feel as though they're living the Australian dream, they all want to go to the Gold Coast for the school holidays, they want to be able to go to the barrier reef. So, lots of stories of those adults, who have said, you know, we've actually helped them make their dreams come true by feeling like they are really Australian now, that they've learned to swim."* -

**Staff member, Privately-run facility**

**Recommendation:** Aquatic facilities and swim schools need to know their local communities. As part of this, they should ensure that programming is catered to local contexts including vulnerable population groups or any local features, such as dams or a river, which carry inherent hazards. The aquatic facilities and swim schools should also ensure that staff are aware of how to provide appropriate advice and referral to local community support services for those in need. In addition local governments should work with and support aquatic facilities to provide programming that can support local municipal water safety outcomes.

### Analysis

Aquatic facilities and swim schools prepare the community for many of the wider aquatic experiences that form part of the Australian way of life. Without learning to swim in a safe environment, Australians do not have the opportunity to build swimming and water safety confidence and competency. Aquatic facilities can also play a role in providing a safe space for those needing help or assistance, and can act as a community hub for access to other community services (e.g. health practitioners, council programs, emergency relief).

### Case Study: Social Connection

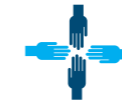
For many aquatic facilities, the aqua-aerobics programs not only provide an opportunity to stay fit and healthy for older cohorts and those with physical mobility challenges, but also to support the creation of life-long friendships and encourage important social connection. Pauline, a regular aqua-aerobics participant, spoke for many when she explained how so many of her fellow participants are widowed or divorced, and the "aqua-girls" have provided her with a strong connection back into the community that was missing after the loss of a partner. These social connections extend beyond the pool and develop into a strong social network of support, advice, and friendship – "There's 65 of us on a WhatsApp group, so we're sharing stuff in the group, which keeps us going, keeps the morale up right now".



Source: Hurstville BlueFit

**"For some aquatic facility users, the pool or program may be their only opportunity for regular and genuine social interaction."**





## Theme 4: Social Cohesion

**This theme related to the impact on social cohesion within communities, whereby diverse community members learned about others, promoting cohesion and citizenship towards others.**

### Qualitative data highlights:

*"The reality of the situation is it, yes, sometimes it is just a refuge because it's so hot, and you know it's a place where people can go, like mums can go to take the kids swimming".* - **Staff member, multiple privately-run facilities**

*"It is hard to get some of the parents involved, because some of them don't speak English, but we have lots of visuals, so we have to work out some ways to do things and it's just different to way that other people do it, and we're allowed to do that because a lot of our staff have come from broken homes, from divorces, have mental health issues at the moment, and a lot of them bring their experience to help people in the community."* - **Staff member, privately-run facility**

*"All the furniture gets rearranged and there would be 20 or 30 of us sitting around having a coffee, exchanging movies, food recipes, book exchanges. It's got everything, even got the book exchange people swapping over who needs this and who needs that, like it's quite amazing and it's really filled the gap for me, it's really great for me, because my work is pretty full on."* - **User, privately-run facility**

### Analysis

These results show that aquatic facilities and swim schools are important in fostering social cohesion. They create public spaces where people of different culture and backgrounds can mix and interact in a positive environment, centred around community. These micro-interactions between staff and the community, and between the community members themselves, works to create new and stronger connections between people who may not otherwise meet or engage with each other. Each of these interactions works to increase understanding of difference, between ages, abilities, language, culture and more. As a place for social connection, aquatic facilities and swim schools provide a common place to create stronger communities

### Case Study: Safety and Education

All aquatic facilities focus primarily on water safety and learn to swim education, and the aquatic facilities in the Moira Shire managed by the YMCA are no exception. Based in regional Victoria, the focus on water safety is particularly important for this community, many of who are based on rural properties with farm dams, creeks and rivers. Swimming pools and learn to swim programs delivered across their 5 different pools not only provide education for children and adults alike to learn how to be safe in the water and mitigate the risk of drowning, but also provide an essential role in providing a safe space for recreation and respite on a hot day, or refuge in times of crisis such as a bushfire. For country communities, particularly during times of drought, the local pools can provide the only place to cool off and relax.



Image: Cobram Seasonal Outdoor Pool

***"Without learning to swim in a safe environment, Australians do not have the opportunity to build swimming and water safety confidence and competency."***



**Recommendation:** Aquatic facilities and swim schools need to work with their LGA to identify target groups in their community. Once identified, facilities and swim schools should provide programs and activities within local communities that both support targeted groups (e.g. Muslim women swimming programs), and also provide opportunity for all members of the community and staff to interact and engage together to create a shared sense of community and understanding (e.g. spaces for groups to gather informally after programs, and celebrations of culturally significant days, or multicultural events such as Harmony Day).

#### Case Study: Social Cohesion

The City of Parramatta in Western Sydney manages a number of aquatic facilities and is now in the process of building a new facility for their rapidly growing community. As a diverse population, with large numbers of new arrivals and international students, providing a space that is safe, welcoming and inclusive is incredibly important. This diversity in the community is reflected in the employment of diverse staff, who work together with their local community to facilitate a place of health, fun, safety and learning. The Parramatta facilities provide a variety of programs for international students to teach water safety, and ensure that their staff undertake cultural awareness training to provide a safe and respectful experience for all.



Source: Epping Aquatic Centre: City of Parramatta

***“Micro-interactions between staff and the community, and between the community members themselves, works to create new and stronger connections between people who may not otherwise meet or engage with each other.”***



## Theme 5: Employment

The final theme related to the positive benefits to staff members within facilities, and the associated impacts to the local economy and community.

#### Qualitative data highlights:

*“We run a traineeship program where these individuals will start off in an administrative role and then some evolve into a lifeguard or learn to swim position, and some of these individuals have not ever known how to swim so, they are learning how to swim and the look of joy and achievement on these traineeships. These training individuals when they can actually achieve a milestone, as they are almost coming into adulthood, it is amazing, so yes that’s certainly a social impact that I see as being, I guess, a school for life, that we’re offering with our training.” - Staff member, Local Council-run facility*

*“So I think the benefit from a staff perspective, yes, they understand the community that they probably interact at various degrees with, and learning that you can interact with a child at this age and then you can also interact with a ninety-year-old woman that’s coming in, and sometimes you’ll make someone’s day that little bit better, and I think that that’s a really nice effect back on staff.” - Staff member, Local Council-run facility*

*“But it’s really good to hear when you know regular Members put forward their kids to work at your facilities. Because you know they’re trusting you to look after them to guide them through their first employment.” - Staff member, multiple privately-run facilities*

**Recommendation:** Aquatic facilities and swim schools should identify the key individual, roles and

#### Analysis

The aquatic facilities provide a valuable source of employment for a variety of people. Many high school and university students work within these centres as lifeguards or learn to swim teachers to gain casual or seasonal income to support them in their studies. The majority of the workforce are casual, often part-time or one of multiple jobs who are members of community, live locally, and place value on working in a team (National Aquatic Industry Workforce Profile, 2019). Additionally, the aquatic facilities also play a valuable role in providing employment opportunities for older Australians, or for parents and carers who need work flexibility. The range of skills, expertise and education required and often provided by the aquatic sector creates value for the facilities, but also important life skills for their staff.



needs within their team. This includes providing flexible work for those who may be studying, or those with young or school aged children. There is also a significant opportunity to ensure that the staff cohort matches the diversity of the local community (e.g., language groups). As the workforce is traditionally seen as young and transient, it would be useful for aquatic facilities and swim schools to map out career pathways for those starting out or new to the sector.

### Case Study: Employment

Mai Davies at Yarra Leisure started as a lifeguard 2017 and quickly became a go-to lifeguard for many Duty Managers, and a known leader amongst the team. Mai got involved in the Yarra Leisure Women Making Waves (WMW) program and continues to work as both a lifeguard and Specialist Duty Manager in the program and encourages other female staff to get involved. In addition, Mai was a member of a winning team at the Annual Lifeguard Challenge, has been recognised as staff member of the month, and more recently stepped up to the role of Duty Manager. Mai won the Aquatics and Recreation Victoria Pool Lifeguard of the Year in 2019 in recognition of her excellence.

Although starting as a young woman lifeguard, Mai demonstrated that she is supremely competent, a great team player, incredibly reliable, vigilant and attentive and is someone who sets a very high personal standard in everything she does and her actions lead the team to a higher level. These award not only highlights the exemplary work undertaken by Mai, but the overall quality and standards of the entire team at Yarra Leisure.



Source: Yarra City Council

***“Recommendation: Aquatic facilities and swim schools should map out career pathways for those starting out or new to the sector.”***

## INFRASTRUCTURE FOR SOCIAL IMPACTS OF AQUATIC FACILITIES

As outlined above, our research identified that aquatic facilities create social value and social impacts across health, social connection, social cohesion, education and safety, and employment. We have developed the following framework of infrastructure for social impact that identifies four key components that contribute to social impact:

- people
- programs
- places and
- policies.

It is also important to note that the social impact is created with and for community, as it is the local community that co-creates the social impacts in partnership with the aquatic facilities.



**Source:** Data provided and referenced in this framework is from the survey and interview material from this study.







## PEOPLE

People refers to those who deliver (staff, volunteers) as well as important connectors in the community (users and stakeholders).

Staff, volunteers, and coaches were instrumental in facilitating and creating a safe and welcoming space for social value to be created, over and above the physical facility itself. Survey responses noted hiring practices recognised a need for diverse workforces.

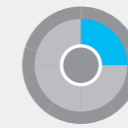
**50% noted hiring of individuals with a disability and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, while 77% employed individuals with language skills beyond English. Training and education was cited as provided for nearly all facilities (98%).**

-  **98%** Provide staff training and education
-  **77%** Hire individuals who speak languages other than English
-  **51%** Hire Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people
-  **49%** Hire individuals with a disability

People can be viewed as related to but distinct from programming, as many opportunities for social impact occur in the incidental interactions, moments of thoughtfulness and kindness, or a sense of being respected and understood. A common theme throughout the interviews with aquatic facility users was the essentially important role that the front-line staff – such as receptionists and lifeguards – play in creating a safe and welcoming environment. The ability of a staff member to speak in a user's own language, or to check if they are okay, or to notice if they have been away, are highly valued by those who attend the facilities. In addition, 'connectors' can emerge as members of community (who are not employees) who may play central or critical roles in building connections between individuals and groups. In cases where these can be identified, developing and leveraging these individual (formally or informally) as resources provides opportunities for social connection outcomes.

***“The greatest opportunity for the creation of social value rests with the micro-interactions between staff and users and between users themselves.”***

By centring the social impact framework around the community and ensuring that the aquatic facilities takes a person-centred approach to design, delivery, programming and policy, aquatic facilities have the greatest ability to create social impacts that reach far beyond the facility walls.



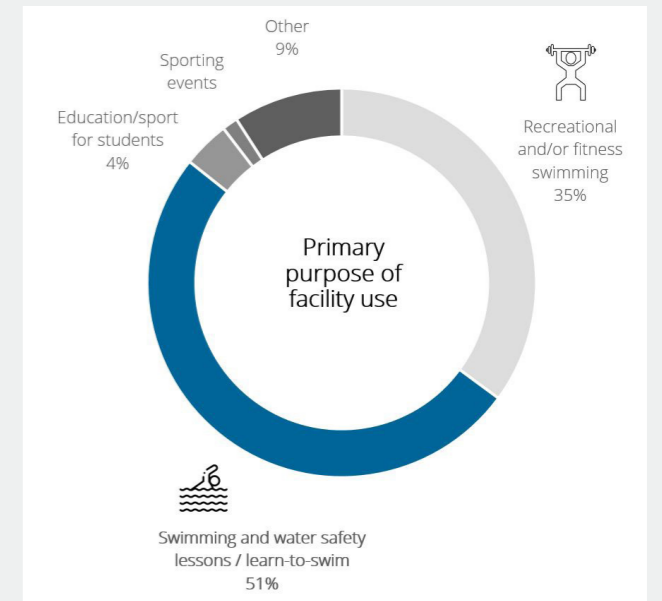
## PLACES

Places refers to the physical infrastructure of the facilities.

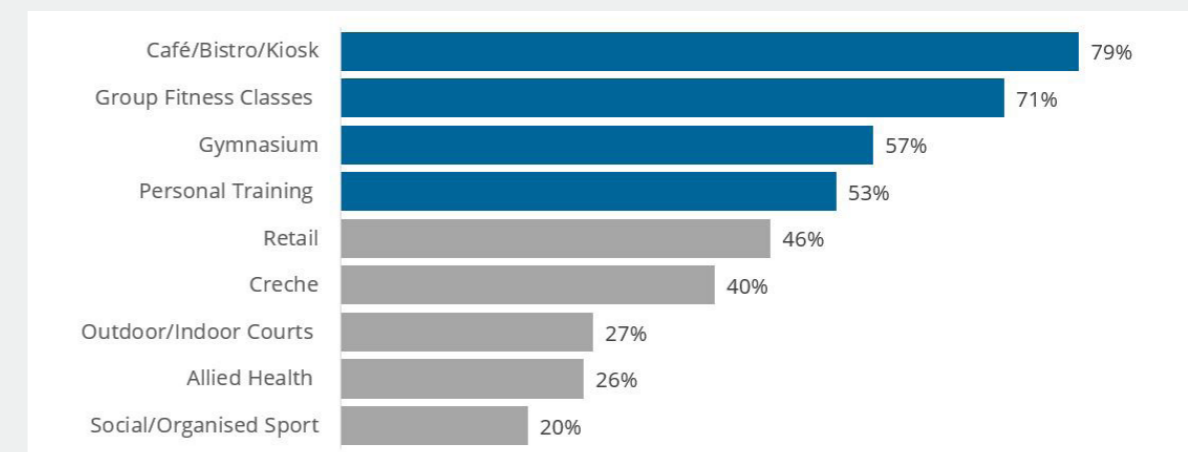
In understanding the nature of aquatic facilities as places, council-owned facilities make up the majority of sites, with the vast majority of aquatic facilities having more than one aquatic space including heated amenities, indoor and outdoor offerings and recreational swim facilities.

**Our survey results noted that managers saw the primary purpose of their facility as being for water safety or learn to swim purposes (51%) while 33% cited recreational swimming as the core purpose.**

Importantly the majority of facilities provide consumers with services beyond their aquatic offering.



***“Much of the social impact created was facility-agnostic”***



**The most popular of these services are Café/Bistro/Kiosk (79%), Group Fitness Classes (71%), a Gymnasium (57%) and Personal Training (53%). As well as leveraging and extending physical aquatics spaces for wider health and wellbeing benefits, these are critical as they create informal or 'bumping' spaces for respondents, an important precursor to social connection outcomes.**

Research interviews noted that although a high-quality facility is desirable, that with many facilities reporting high levels of social impact being relatively old, or requiring further investment. Additionally, aquatic facilities were seen as safe spaces for the community, not only due to the water safety focus and appropriate expert staffing, but also as a place where the community is cared for and respected, and where at times of crisis, those in need could seek help and support.

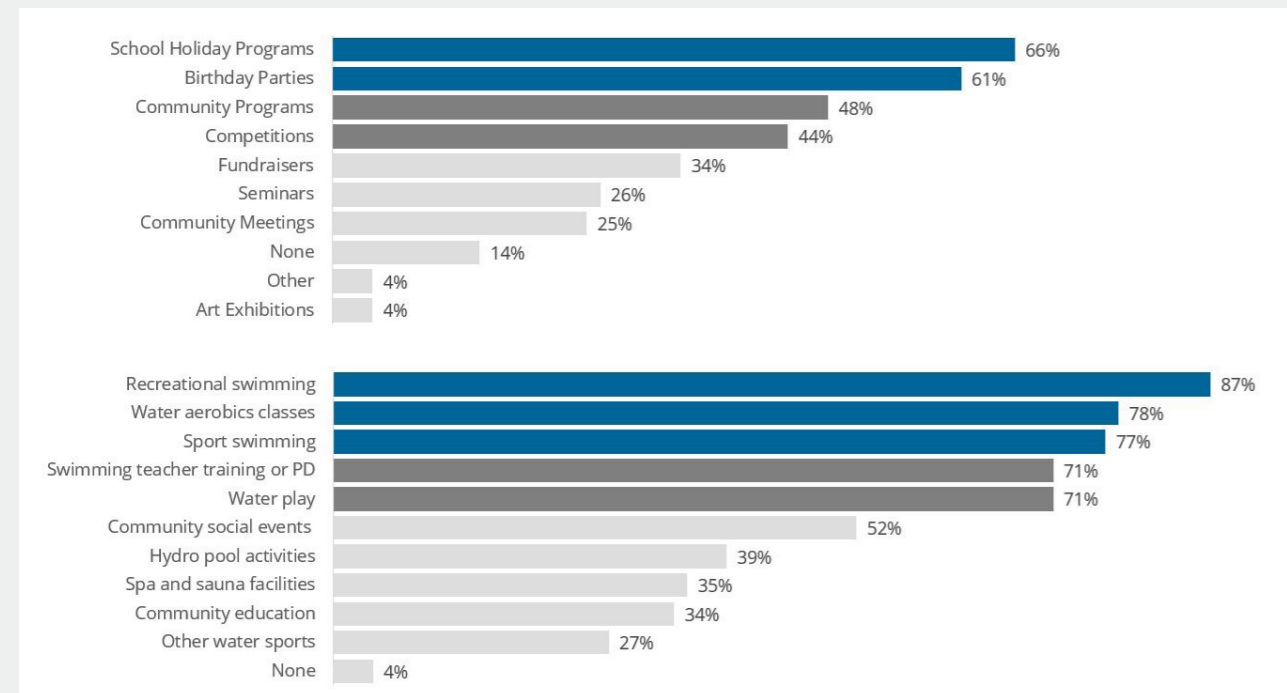


## PROGRAMS

Programs refers to the different types of activities or events that are organised and delivered by the aquatic facilities.

Survey results noted that the majority of respondent sites indicated offering aquatic events and programs common to aquatic and leisure facilities. These included school holiday programs and birthday programs as well as competitions and events, often distinct to specific community groups or populations.

**In terms of aquatics specific programming, the majority of aquatic facilities and swim schools delivered recreational swimming (87%), water aerobics (78%), sport swimming (including squads) (77%), water play and swim teaching training (71%). Events were often aided through external partnerships, whereby facilities reported associating with schools (77%), sport clubs (64%) and community groups (60%).**



While the majority of facilities offer aquatic programs and events, a lesser number of facilities provide broader social opportunities or have examples of targeted programs and activities for identified community groups at-risk or marginalised groups.

Research interviews identified that programming is an important aspect for social cohesion and social connection, by ensuring that different members of the community felt valued and had programs targeted towards their specific needs.

***“Programming should reflect the make-up and needs of the local community.”***

It is also important to note however that one of the primary social values created was the ability to use pools for unstructured play and recreation, either with friends or family, either as a place to spend a hot day with their children, or a safe and welcoming place for youth to gather.

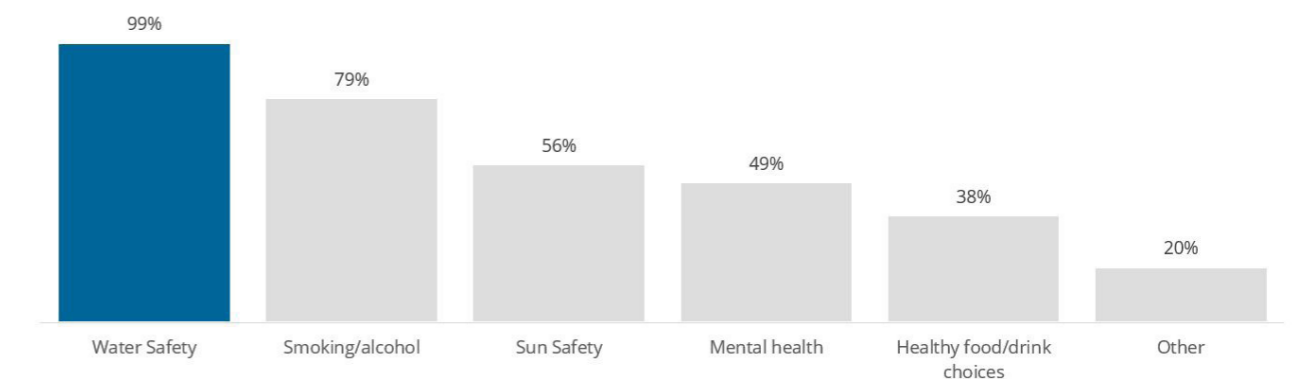
Both the surveys and interviews noted that there are some groups in the community that are not receiving the same levels of programming as others, for example people with a disability, low-SES communities, or the LGBT+ community, and these provide areas for future focus and improvement.



## POLICY

Policy refers to the mechanisms to set standards, processes and ensure quality training and delivery for all staff and activities in aquatic facilities. Some areas of policy are legislated by Government, or standardised by the sector, and others may be set by facility owners or operators as internal guidelines.

**From the survey, the majority of facilities recognised the presence of only general policies including: water safety (99%), smoking/alcohol (78%) and sun safety (56%) policies. Mental health (50%) and healthy food and drink policies (38%) were further areas recognised.**



Both the survey and interviews identified a limited policy focus on inclusion and diversity, and ensuring a community and/or person-first approach to decision making.

***“Policies and procedures can both encourage and inhibit social impact and should focus on community and/or person-first approaches to decision-making.”***

# ENABLING SOCIAL IMPACTS IN AQUATIC FACILITIES

For social value to be maintained and enhanced, owners and operators need to focus on managing aquatic facilities in a way that privileges the community, and focuses on the 4-Ps of place, programs, policy and people.

Our research identifies the significant social impact created by aquatic facilities in Australia, stemming from the creation of unique opportunities for community members to interact and develop social bonds and relationships. Unlike many other types of social infrastructure, a swimming pool, in all of its various forms, provides a safe social space - a gathering place - for all different members of the community to participate in a way that best meets their needs. When attending a typical day at a public aquatic facility, there will be programs for young children, older adults, individuals swimming for fitness, families playing and any number of specialised or targeted programs, all using the same place at the same time. Swimming pools provide opportunities for health, recreation and social connection for groups requiring adapted or accessible health and recreation such as people with a disability and older adults, that is not as readily available in other land based activities.

Additionally, with aquatic facilities and swim schools closed for many weeks and months across the country due to COVID-19, communities have felt a genuine sense of loss and grief at not being able to access their local pool, as keenly illustrated in the following quote “When you lose access to something like a swimming pool, it takes a huge toll; it is a significant loss from your life,” he says. “But now pools are opening and we can contemplate the return of other freedoms across NSW ... it is a glimmer of hope, like a butterfly emerging from the chrysalis” (SMH, 2021).

The following section of the report identifies the key enablers for social impact in aquatic facilities and swim schools.

## PLACE AND PROGRAMMING: Acknowledgement of role as community centre

Aquatic facilities are a key social hub and meeting point for communities across Australia, where relationships, social support, and civic trust is fostered and created. Aquatic facilities need to be aware of their role in creating social value in local communities; many stakeholders were unaware of the extent and importance of the social value fostered and created from their facility and staff. The connection to community can be supported and enhanced by meaningful community consultation and feedback via community groups or co-design processes. These mechanisms also provide an opportunity to staff to develop understanding and feel confident in engaging with diverse communities.

Social impact is relatively facility agnostic – that means that we identify aquatic facilities and swim schools with high levels of social value and social impact, that would be perceived by many as providing only basic physical infrastructure, or in need of improvement. Aquatic facilities and swim schools should not rely solely on the built environment to create social impact.

However, when considering a redevelopment of an aquatic facility, or design of a new facility, the role of physical pools and spaces should consider how best to enhance social impact. This may be varied within the constraints of facility type and scale, however where possible, planning and design should consider:

- spaces and requirements of older adults and people with a disability
- spaces for youth and young children – both learn to swim and play
- spaces for sport and fitness
- spaces for diverse communities to participate and gather.

The programming for an aquatic facility or swim school should understand and aim to meet the needs of its community via both targeted programming and events, but also via the provision

of informal spaces for families and groups to spend quality time together. Facilities should avoid over-programming so the important access to free space to play and relax is retained. These informal spaces are most important for those pools that are used as respite during hot weather.

## PEOPLE: Critical nature of people

Staff, volunteers, and coaches were instrumental in facilitating and creating a safe and welcoming space for social value to be created, over the physical facility. Empowering members of communities to engage as community connections can play a critical role in engaging a wider subset users more deeply. Further, leveraging the central role of the community may also support a user focussed or human centred design perspective to the design or redesign of programs within centres. By placing the community and those who use and work in the swimming pool central to decision making, greater social outcomes and impacts will be achieved.

## POLICY: training and education

Facilities should ensure staff and volunteers receive ongoing training and education, with a focus on customer care and understanding the diverse needs and requirements of people within their local communities. Ensuring staff have cultural competency around the needs of the community groups who use and engage with their facility, will ensure that any social benefits will be maximised.

## POLICY: Reporting and responsibility

With many aquatic facilities managed on behalf of councils or by commercial operators, these

management contracts have the capacity to play a greater role in driving visibility of social outcomes as part of the strategic and operational outcomes of facilities.

The majority of respondents indicated monthly reporting (at least) internally (82%) or to council (74%). However, the focus of reporting was highly operational in nature, with almost all respondents indicating reporting of attendance, safety, membership and operations (all 80% or higher). It is noted these are operational outputs or data, with little focus or processes for gathering or providing information to stakeholders on the social impacts generated by centres or the industry.

*“As a result of COVID-related pool closures, communities have felt a genuine sense of loss and grief at not being able to access their local pool.”*



# EXPECTED, TARGETED AND EXCELLENT FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL IMPACTS

The following model articulates how aquatic facilities and swim schools can work to achieve the greatest social value and social impact across each of the 4Ps. The model highlights where aquatic facilities and swim schools can achieve greater impact by moving from left to right in social impact maturity.

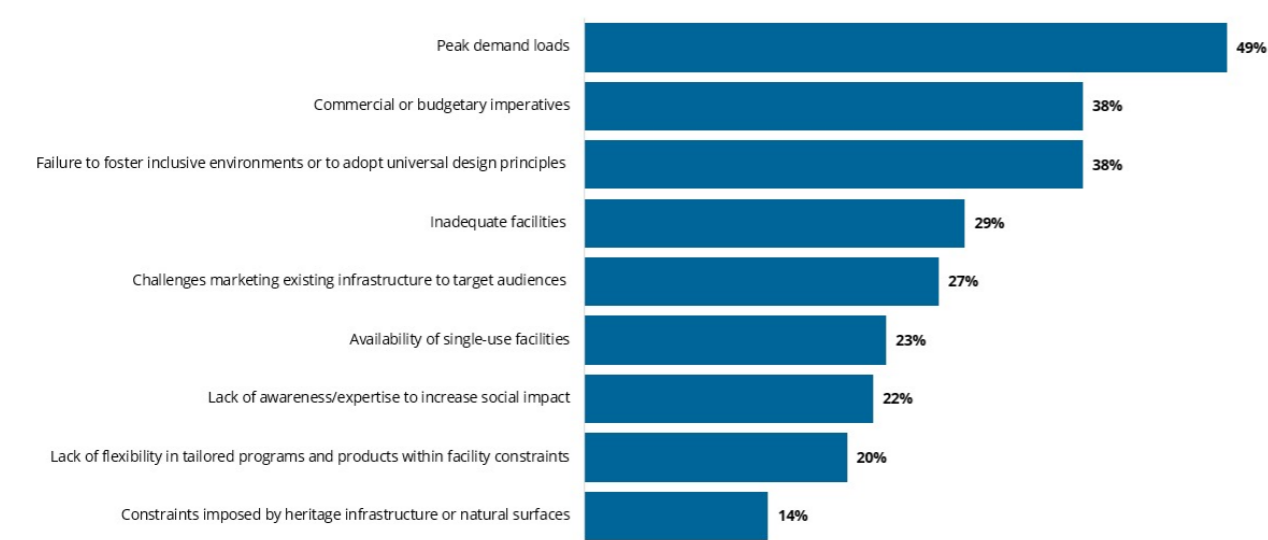
	Expected	Targeted	Excellent
Place	<p>Provide physical spaces and pools that meet the requirements of the Australian Water Safety Strategy and the Guidelines for Safe Pool Operations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilities should be planned and delivered to maximise social impact for all members of their community.</li> <li>Planning for infrastructure which maximises social impact should involve analysis of the makeup of the community including the identification of target population groups. This may include demographic analysis both current and projected.</li> </ul>	<p>Ensure spaces – both as ‘bumping’ spaces within the facility and in the pool itself – are available for informal community play and gathering.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to space on the pool deck or surrounds for parents with prams, people with accessibility needs, and friends and family to gather informally. This may include a more relaxed approach to shared space usage such as cafes for parent groups or older adults to meet after programmed activities</li> </ul>	<p>Provide spaces and places for communities to engage in aquatics for those with particular needs, such as family, disability and gender-neutral change rooms. Different communities may also require spaces for prayer (for staff and users), breastfeeding, and sensory overload for example.</p>
Programs	<p>Understand the socio-demographics of the local community to better inform the programs on offer and that may be developed as outlined in the Australian Water Safety Strategy. Programming breadth would be dependent on the type of facility and its ownership or management structure.</p>	<p>Provide targeted programs and activities for identified community groups. Consider the particular needs of each diverse community – accessibility, language and cultural requirements, equipment, scheduling, and specialist staffing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess current program and event offers and ask – who from our community is currently not catered for?</li> <li>Adapt existing program and event offers to meet the needs and expectations of different community group.</li> <li>Identify opportunities to establish new programs or events for groups in the community that are underserved.</li> </ul>	<p>Identify at-risk or marginalised groups in your community that may need greater focus and support to overcome barriers to attend.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Proactively reach out to users, community clubs, organisations and advocacy bodies to co-design new program and events that are safe, welcoming and inclusive.</li> <li>Identify groups that may need their own time and place in the pool for out-of hours scheduling of programs and events (e.g. Muslim women, or members of the trans community).</li> <li>Identify events and celebrations that can profile diverse communities and bring these communities and the broader community together (e.g., Queer Soiree event held at the Carlton Baths).</li> <li>If managing across a number of aquatic facilities and swim schools within one organisation or LGA, identify how different facilities within the same catchment area may be able to specialise in different program offers. One facility may become a centre of excellence for the CALD community, whereas the other provides more specialist programming for people with a disability.</li> </ul>

	Expected	Targeted	Excellent
Policy	<p>Ensure each facility has the appropriate policies and procedures required by the Australian Water Safety Strategy and the Guidelines for Safe Pool Operations. These minimum expectations may differ depending on ownership and management structures of each facility.</p>	<p>Review current policy areas and identify areas for improvement or further development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify areas of access, equity and diversity that may require revised or new policies (e.g. cultural competency training and education for staff, LGBT+ inclusion and communication, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural communication and safety).</li> <li>Provide opportunities for staff to engage in meaningful professional development training that extends beyond the minimum role requirements.</li> <li>Identify opportunities for reporting on social outcomes in annual or management reports, in addition to traditional financial and OH&amp;S reporting.</li> </ul>	<p>Work with lead agencies and advocacy bodies to identify areas of improvement in policy and procedure for diversity, inclusion and safety.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify and deliver advanced training opportunities for managers and staff to best support their community</li> <li>Ensure all documentation and communication for staff and users is accessible, this may include providing documentation in languages other than English, plain language and/or using audio-visual aids</li> <li>Identify partner organisations for referrals for community members identified as at-risk or who may reach out for support</li> <li>Consider development of a reporting framework for social impact measures, in addition to operational measures that currently form the major reporting scope of centres</li> </ul>
People	<p>Understand the critical role that staff and the community of users and stakeholders play in creating and co-creating social value and social impact through the daily micro-interactions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure all staff are selected and managed to develop a caring and thoughtful approach to interactions with all users.</li> </ul>	<p>When considering staffing requirements, also consider the specific skills, abilities and attributes that can enhance the social value created such as ability to speak a second language, or prior relevant education or work experience (e.g. health, social work).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop staff training that goes beyond customer service and moves towards a person-first approach to engagement.</li> <li>Understand that facility users co-create social value, and provide opportunities for users to engage in the social infrastructure of the aquatic facility, for example via community advisory groups, feedback processes, and recognition programs.</li> </ul>	<p>Identify and facilitate opportunities for users and community to create their own social connections and social impact.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide space and time for groups to gather to meet and share in an organic and unprogrammed way</li> <li>Ensure an experience- or user-centred approach using human-centred design principles for any new developments, programs or initiatives in the facility</li> <li>If informal groups are identified within the facility – such as in the Aqua Girls case study – provide support for their activities, such as fundraising, celebrations and recognition of milestones</li> <li>Provide targeted identification and formal and informal support for ‘community connectors’ (non employees) who play a critical role in building connections and integrating individuals and groups</li> </ul>

# OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO SOCIAL IMPACT

In addition to understanding how best to manage aquatic facilities to create social value and social impact, it is also important to understand the barriers to creating social impact. Facility owners and operators identified the following barriers to engaging with this important social impact work.

Figure 3: Barriers to creating social impact (% of centres noting as a barrier)



Source: RLSSA Social Impact Study.  
Question: For your centre, to what extent will the following be barriers to delivering social impact in the next two years?

Similarly, interview respondents noted that inadequate facilities have been both a barrier to delivering the programming or activities to the community that they would desire, but this also created opportunities to be innovative.

Outside of structural barriers such as and physical spaces and budgets, an identification of the presence of common barriers including fostering inclusive environments and adequately understanding and targeting audiences for programs provide scope to prioritise training, funding, policy and grant initiatives across the aquatic industry.

# CURRENT AND FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR AQUATIC FACILITIES

Currently, water safety, enjoyment, health and wellbeing, community and staff training/education and connection are seen as important outcomes generated by aquatic facilities. A number of these areas of priority have been identified as being important enablers of social impact. However, both the survey and interview data identified opportunities to engage more strategically in considering the full breadth of social impact infrastructure in future endeavours.

Our research also identified a number of areas of opportunity for aquatic facilities and swim schools to enhance the social impact of their facilities and programs. Managers (via the survey) noted a range of priority areas for aquatic facilities in upcoming years. Increasing participation in centre programs

and activities, developing and sharing innovative solutions, addressing inclusion, and increasing capacity are priority areas.

Within these there are clear and evident links to partnering or co-resourcing potential improvements. The common priority areas focus on increasing participation (88% noting as high priority) and addressing diversity and inclusion in both policy (68%) and workforce (64%) are encouraging, and suggest that social impact priorities are well aligned with the priority areas of managers. The research also identified a need to adapt facilities as the opportunities arise for more engaging and accessible spaces, in addition to encouraging innovation in the co-design of programs, events and experiences for social impact.

Figure 4: Manager perceived future priority areas (% of centres noting as high priority)



Source: RLSSA Social Impact Study.  
Question: Considering the Aquatic Industry, how important will the following areas be for you in the next two years?



There is a clear opportunity to increase awareness and cultural competency around diverse and vulnerable community groups, for example LGBTIQ+ groups, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inclusion. Our research identified very limited, if any, focus on creating social outcomes, or targeted programming for these two communities. The research has identified the importance of people, policy and programs in the creation of social value, if aquatic facilities can ensure that all staff are appropriately trained in cultural competency for multicultural communities, person-first approaches for people with a disability, and better understanding gender-diversity, the opportunity to ensure safe, welcoming and inclusive places for all community members will be enhanced and improved. This will subsequently create additional opportunities for communities to develop social connections and social cohesion, in addition to the more tangible outcomes of health, education and employment.

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# APPENDIX 1: Summary of Survey Results:

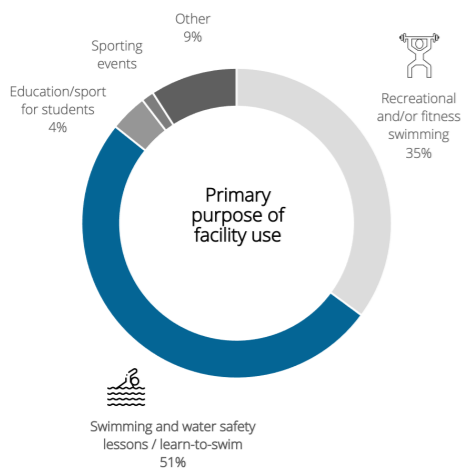
The following provides a summary of survey results supporting the development of the frameworks in this report.

Results are from the RLSSA Social Impact Study (2021) Conducted by Swinburne University of Technology and RLSSA for this report.

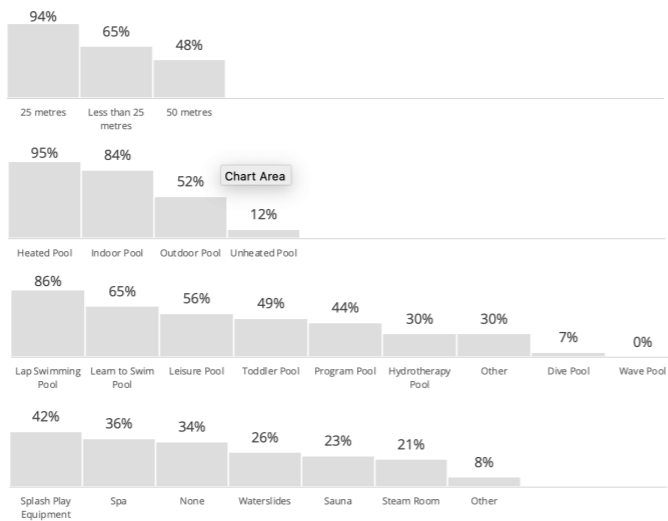
## PLACES:

Facilities primarily provide swimming and water safety or recreation and/or fitness swimming. The primary purpose for 51% is water safety/learn to swim while 33% cited recreational swimming as the core purpose. The majority of facilities have multiple offering. For example, 79% had cafés, 57% included gyms, 46% had retail service and 20% offered social or organised sport.

Primary Purpose of Aquatic Centers

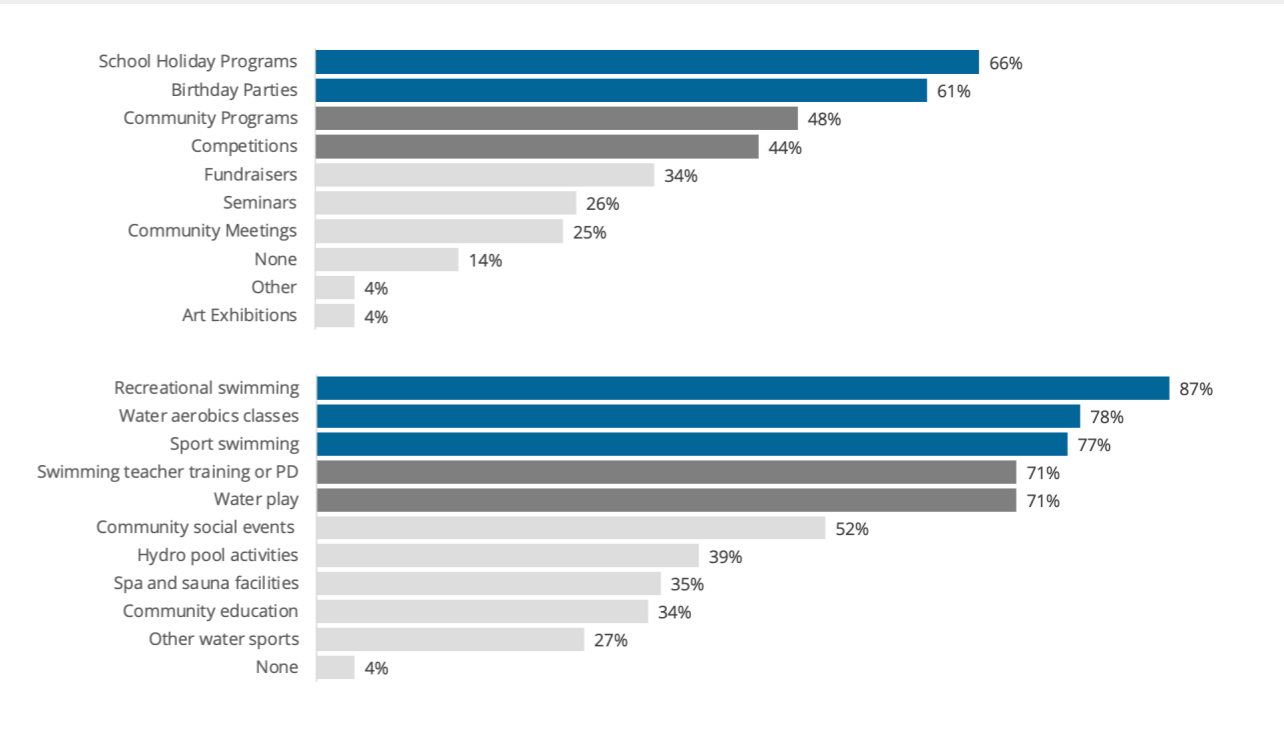


Aquatic Facilities Offered



## PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

Survey results noted that the majority of respondent sites indicated offering aquatic events and programs common to aquatic and leisure facilities. These included school holiday programs and birthday programs as well as competitions and events, often distinct to specific community groups or populations.

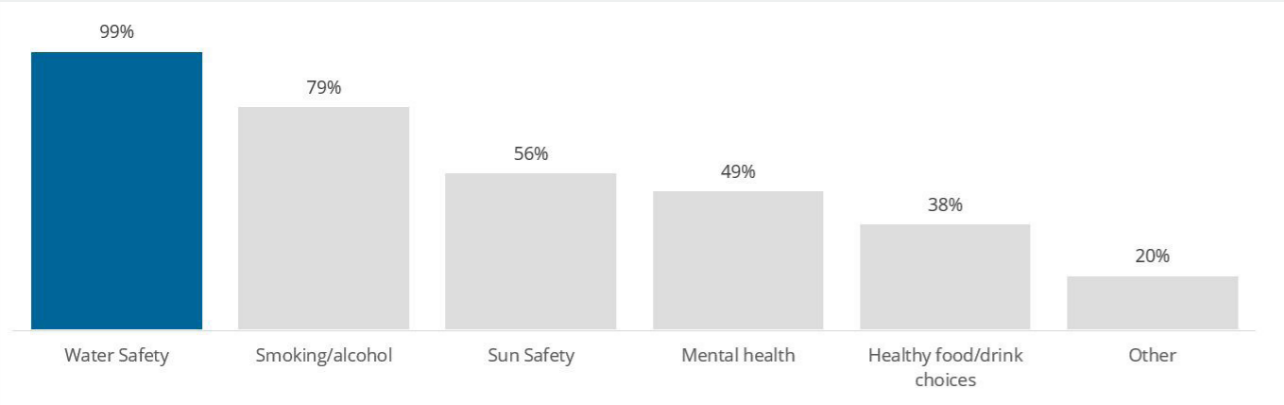


## POLICIES AND REPORTING

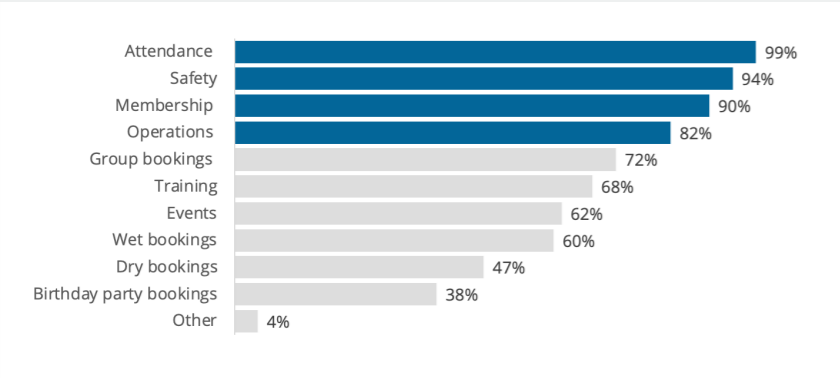
Majority of facilities provide water safety and smoking/alcohol policies, among others. 99% have water safety policies, while between 38 and 56% have sun safety, healthy food and mental health policies/guidelines.

Facilities report across many (operational) business areas with the majority reporting attendance, safety, membership and operations (82% plus for all). 82% require internal reporting while 74% have reporting to council as a requirement.

Policies implemented



Forms of reporting

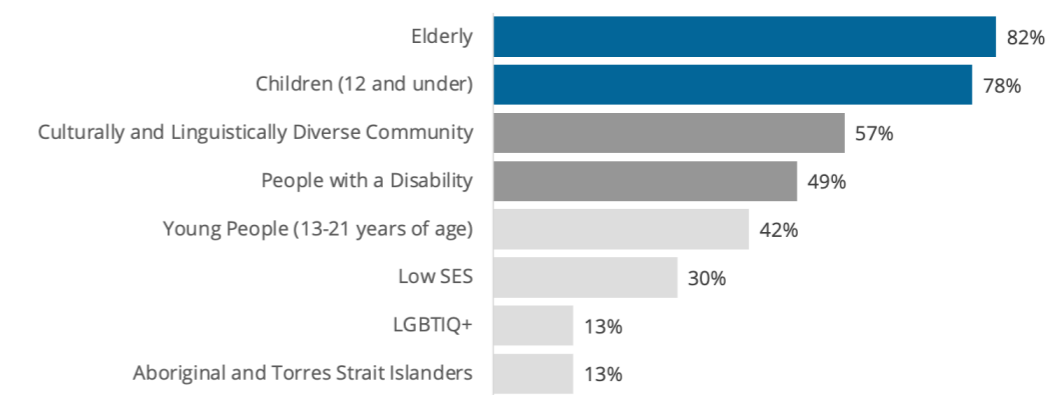


PEOPLE

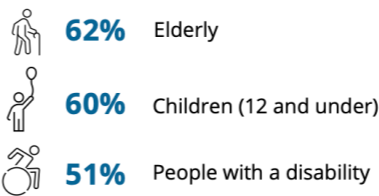
4 in 5 facilities identify elderly and children (under 12) as key population groups. CALD community groups (57%), PWD (49%) and Low SES (30%) groups were identified within population and user groups.

Regarding targeted programs, 90% offered a specific programing for population groups. Over half of responding centers indicated that their facility offers specific programming for people with a disability, children (12 and under) and the elderly. Far fewer reported offering programs specific to CALD groups, low SES, LGBTIQ+ or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups. Within workforce and hiring practices, 97% provide education and training, while 77% hired individual who spoke languages other than English.

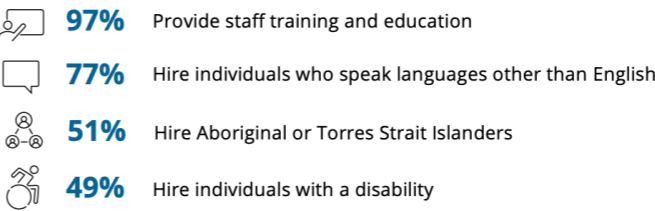
Significant Population Groups within Facility Users



Major Program Offerings



Workforce and Training Practices of Aquatic Centres



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