

# Exploring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion across the Aquatic and Leisure Ecosystem in Victoria

## Summary Report

### Introduction

Aquatic and leisure facilities play a vital role in community well-being, contributing to physical health, mental wellbeing, social connection, and local economies. Collectively, the aquatic and leisure ecosystem encompasses facilities, governing bodies, peak organisations, community partners, and service providers responsible for delivering inclusive and safe experiences for all.

While the benefits of aquatic and leisure services are well established, these benefits can only be fully realised when diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are embedded throughout the ecosystem. DEI principles ensure that people of all backgrounds, abilities, and identities can participate meaningfully and safely. However, despite growing awareness and commitment, DEI implementation remains inconsistent across the sector.

### Purpose and Scope

The research was undertaken in collaboration with industry, leveraging the principles of translational research. To ensure broad sector representation and meaningful input, the research team established a project advisory group. This research investigates how DEI is being operationalised within Victoria's aquatic and leisure ecosystem. Guided by Washington's (2022) DEI Maturity Model, it examines the developmental stages of DEI integration (from initial awareness through to full strategic maturity) and identifies opportunities to strengthen inclusion at the facility and sector levels.

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### Research Questions

The research questions for this project were:

- What are the current levels of **DEI engagement** across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem?
- What are the current **DEI practices** across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem?
- What current **DEI challenges and opportunities** exists across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem?

### Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, incorporating:

- Quantitative surveys (n = 322 facilities)
- Qualitative interviews (n = 16) and focus groups (n = 3)
- Observational site visits (n = 15)
- Review of digital and policy resources

**Five key community groups were explored:** First Nations peoples, LGBTIQA+ communities, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) populations, women and girls, and people with disabilities.

### Key Findings

Four interrelated themes emerged:

- 1. Commitment** – Facilities demonstrate strong intent and enthusiasm for DEI, but this is often constrained by limited funding, inconsistent internal support, and organisational resistance to change.
- 2. Implementation** – DEI initiatives tend to be ad hoc and externally focused (e.g., programs or events) rather than systematically embedded into policies, workforce practices, and culture.
- 3. Gender Equity** – Structural and cultural barriers faced by women persist across leadership, staffing, and participation, despite progress in awareness.
- 4. Leadership** – Senior leaders play a crucial role in driving DEI outcomes, yet many lack strategic frameworks or capability-building mechanisms to embed inclusive practices organisation-wide.

Overall, DEI efforts are fragmented and vary significantly across community groups. Engagement with disability and multicultural communities is relatively strong, but meaningful inclusion of First Nations and LGBTIQA+ communities remains limited. Workforce capability is also constrained by a lack of dedicated DEI training, resources, and clear accountability structures.

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**There is an enormous level of passion around DEI and creating inclusive and accessible centres.**

**The tricky part is, I don't know to what degree that DEI is entrenched and embedded in an organisational wide approach and the financial point is, there is still a fiscal responsibility.**

### DEI Maturity Model

To contextualise these findings, the research team utilised Washington's (2022) DEI Maturity Model, which outlines five progressive stages:

- 1. Aware:** Initial recognition of DEI's importance.
- 2. Compliant:** DEI is primarily driven by compliance with legal and regulatory standards.
- 3. Tactical:** DEI is linked to specific business initiatives in isolated areas.
- 4. Integrated:** DEI is systematically embedded across all internal and external organisational practices.
- 5. Sustainable:** DEI is continuously improved, representing best-in-class sector practices.

### Sector Maturity

Overall, this research found notable but inconsistent engagement with DEI across the aquatic and leisure ecosystem. While many staff demonstrated genuine enthusiasm and commitment, implementation of DEI programs and practices was frequently described as a "lucky dip", lacking strategic direction, clarity, and consistency. A major barrier identified was the absence of structured policies, clear leadership, and sufficient training and support to enable effective daily DEI integration. As a result, participants, employees, and community members are likely to have very different experiences depending on the facility. The quality of these experiences is critical to fostering a sense of inclusion, safety, and ongoing participation in aquatic and leisure environments.

Applying the DEI Maturity Model, the Victorian aquatic and leisure ecosystem is assessed at Stage 1: Aware. At this level, organisations recognise the importance of DEI but lack the systemic integration, data collection, and leadership coordination required to advance to higher maturity stages.

### DEI Roadmap

To support translation into practice, a seven-step DEI Roadmap is proposed:

- 1. Knowledge:** Understand your community and customer demographics.
- 2. Workforce Capability:** Build cultural competence and workforce diversity awareness.
- 3. Design:** Develop inclusive strategies, robust policies, and meaningful community engagement plans.
- 4. Communicate:** Clearly articulate DEI vision and commitments internally and externally.
- 5. Educate:** Provide ongoing DEI education and training, supported by community partnerships.
- 6. Implement:** Institutionalise DEI in daily practices with clear targets and accountability.
- 7. Sustain:** Regularly evaluate and document DEI outcomes, adapting strategies for continuous improvement.

### Recommendations

Advancing DEI within the aquatic and leisure ecosystem requires a coordinated, system-wide approach. The report recommends:

Recommendation Area	Example Actions	Priority Timing
Strengthen Gender Equity Efforts	Example: Conduct gender audits, implement targeted leadership workshops focusing on bias reduction, and revise hiring practices to promote equal opportunities.	Short-term
Establish Ecosystem-Wide Strategic Commitment and Governance	Example: The National Aquatic Industry Committee establishes a working group to define clear goals and coordinated actions to enable greater DEI maturity, providing opportunity for key stakeholders to engage and provide input.	Short-term
Develop a Coordinated DEI Policy and Strategy Framework	Example: Introduce policies on inclusive language and facility signage, with templates adapted from organisations like Welcoming Australia or Proud2Play.	Short-term
Integrate DEI into Programs and Service	Example: Collect, analyse, and act on demographic and participation data. This should also involve community and user consultations throughout program development, and consideration to intersectionality.	Medium-term
Build Workforce Capability Through Training and Education	Example: Proud2Play could co-deliver training to increase understanding of LGBTIQA+ inclusion in aquatic spaces.	Medium-term
Improve Communication and Visibility	Example: Conduct regular digital audits of websites, social media, and public communications to assess whether DEI values are visible, consistent, and reflective of community diversity.	Short-term
Foster Collaboration and Shared Learning	Example: Welcoming Australia and Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA) co-facilitated a peer-learning forum that enabled facility managers to reflect on their digital communications and improve inclusive language across websites and promotional materials.	Medium-term
Monitor, Evaluate, and Sustain Progress	Example: An LGA implements targets for membership and employment of diverse community members aligned to local community demographics. Progress towards these targets is then captured and reported.	Long-term

