

South East Queensland Water Safety Forum

Event Summary Report 2025



Facilitated by:



ROYAL LIFE SAVING
AUSTRALIA

Supported by:



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➤ BACKGROUND

Australian Water Safety Strategy Mid-point Review

The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 (AWSS 2030) sets the national direction for drowning prevention and water safety, providing a shared framework to guide policy, planning and investment across Australia. Royal Life Saving Australia, with support from the Australian Government, is committed to delivering on the Strategy's objectives and to ensuring that national ambitions translate into meaningful change in communities where people live, work and recreate around water.

The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 has just undergone a midpoint review which confirms that Australia is not yet on track to achieve the aspirational goal of a 50% reduction in drowning by 2030, and calls for renewed focus and collective effort. In this midpoint refocus of the AWSS 2030, three National Imperatives identify critical areas where bold, sustained action is needed to drive systemic change and reverse the fatal drowning trend from the last five years.

Three National Imperatives are:

- 1) Swimming and water safety skills for all;
- 2) Localise water safety efforts; and,
- 3) Align policies and partnerships.

Localising Water Safety Efforts to South East Queensland

The South East Water Safety Strategy and Forum are fundamentally aimed at achieving the second and third national imperatives, targeted to this region. South East Queensland (SEQ) is a rapidly growing and diverse region that attracts a significant amount of migrants and visitors, and has strong social, cultural and economic connections to pools, rivers, lakes and beaches, and a correspondingly complex profile of drowning risk. The South East Queensland Water Safety Strategy 2023–2027 is one of the key mechanisms through which the AWSS 2030 is localised and implemented at a regional level.

Building on this platform, Royal Life Saving Australia, supported by Royal Life Saving Queensland and Surf Life Saving Queensland, convened the second South East Queensland Water Safety Forum to bring together partners from across government, industry, emergency services, community organisations and research.

The Forum was deliberately structured around the AWSS 2030 midpoint imperatives, providing a space to reaffirm our collective commitment to reducing drowning, strengthen collaboration and partnerships, and identify opportunities for systems-level change in SEQ. Participants reviewed regional drowning data, reflected on progress to date, and explored how swimming and water safety skills for all, localised action, and better aligned policies and partnerships can be advanced across the region.

This report synthesises the evidence and insights generated through that process. It first presents an overview of drowning in South East Queensland, and then draws together the key themes, priorities and opportunities identified at the Forum. In doing so, it seeks to show how South East Queensland can be an exemplar of how the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 can be implemented through coordinated regional action.



➤ FOREWORD

Waterways and aquatic facilities are vital contributors to the social, economic and health outcomes of our communities. Supported by all levels of government, emergency services, the water safety sector and the aquatic industry, these environments enable residents and visitors to participate in recreation and leisure, attract tourism, and provide essential foundations for aquatic survival skills.

Despite these benefits, drowning continues to have a profound impact across South East Queensland. More than 325 people have drowned in the region over the past decade, with 28% occurring in inland waterways, 27% on beaches and 18% in swimming pools. Each tragedy represents the loss of a father, mother, sister, brother, child or grandparent, with far-reaching consequences for families, communities, first responders and local economies. While every drowning is devastating, we know that almost all are preventable.

The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 sets an ambitious national goal to reduce drowning by 50 per cent by 2030. Achieving this target requires more than individual effort. It requires a unified, cross-sector commitment. Community groups, industry, government partners and the public all have critical roles to play in reducing drowning, promoting safer behaviours around water and enabling safe enjoyment of aquatic environments. No single organisation can prevent drowning alone. Collaboration, alignment and shared responsibility are essential to driving sustained, systems-level change.

It is for this reason that more than 60 individuals from over 40 organisations came together for the second South East Queensland Water Safety Forum—to connect, share knowledge, align priorities and strengthen our collective approach to water safety. The forum reinforced the value of collaboration and the impact achieved when we work together.

I extend my sincere thanks to all participants for their commitment and leadership. I also acknowledge the support of Royal Life Saving Australia, the Australian Government, Queensland Police, and our co-hosts Surf Life Saving Queensland and Sunshine Coast Council. Their partnership was instrumental in making this forum possible.

Together, we can eliminate drowning and empower communities across South East Queensland to enjoy the water safely.

PAUL BARRY

Executive Director,
Royal Life Saving Society Queensland

The South East Queensland Water Safety Forum represents the power of collaboration. Bringing together government agencies, emergency services, councils, research institutions, community organisations, and industry partners, this forum reaffirmed our shared commitment to reducing drowning and creating safer aquatic environments for all.

The 2025 National Drowning Report reminds us why this work matters. Queensland recorded 90 drowning deaths in the past year a 36% increase on the ten-year average with beaches and rivers remaining the highest-risk locations. Older adults and high-risk male cohorts continue to feature prominently in these statistics, underscoring the need for targeted, evidence-based interventions.

The priorities identified through this forum including sharpening and aligning safety messaging for the people at greatest risk, making safer environments the default, and strengthening systems, policy, partnerships and data. These priorities reflect the collective wisdom of more than 40 organisations working together. These priorities will guide our efforts to ensure that prevention remains at the heart of water safety strategies across South East Queensland.

On behalf of Surf Life Saving Queensland, I extend sincere thanks to Royal Life Saving Queensland and Royal Life Saving Australia for their leadership and collaboration, and to every stakeholder who contributed their expertise and energy to this process. Your commitment is what makes progress possible.

Together, we can turn these insights into action and move closer to our shared vision: zero preventable drowning deaths.

DAVID WHIMPEY

CEO,
Surf Life Saving Queensland

➤ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Royal Life Saving Australia, in partnership with Royal Life Saving Society Queensland (RLSSQ), Surf Life Saving Queensland (SLSQ), the Queensland Government and Sunshine Coast Council, convened the second South East Queensland Water Safety Forum on 16 October 2025. Bringing together more than 60 participants from over 40 organisations, the forum reaffirmed the region's shared commitment to eliminating drowning and empowering communities to be safer around water.

South East Queensland remains a national drowning blackspot. Over the past decade, 325 people have drowned across the region—an average of 33 lives lost every year. Males continue to account for three-quarters of all drowning deaths, with one in four fatalities occurring among adults aged over 65 years. Rivers and creeks (28%) and beaches (27%) remain the leading locations for drowning, followed by swimming pools (18%), particularly backyard pools.

The forum provided an opportunity for leaders from government, emergency services, local councils, research institutions, peak bodies, community organisations, and industry to reconnect, align regional efforts, and collectively reimagine drowning prevention strategies for South East Queensland. Participants reflected on progress against the South East Queensland Water Safety Strategy 2023–2027, discussed changes in the regional risk environment, and workshopped priority actions to ensure ongoing alignment with the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030.

The forum presents three key priorities to reduce drowning across SEQLD:

Priority 1: Sharpen and align safety messaging for the people and places at greatest risk

Priority 2: Make safer environments and services the “default” choice across the region

Priority 3: Strengthen systems – policy, partnerships and data – to sustain impact



› METHODS

This report draws on two complementary sources of information: analysis of regional drowning data and synthesis of discussions held at the 2025 South East Queensland Water Safety Forum.

Drowning data

Fatal drowning data were extracted from the Royal Life Saving National Fatal Drowning Database, which collates information from the National Coronial Information System, State and Territory Coronial Offices and media monitoring. Drowning deaths arising from suicide, homicide, natural causes, shark and crocodile attacks, or hypothermia were excluded; only cases where drowning was a contributory cause of death were included. The analysis focuses on incidents occurring within the 12 Local Government Areas that make up South East Queensland and covers financial years from 2011/12 to 2021/22, with an updated 10-year descriptive summary presented for 2015/16 to 2024/25. Data were current as at 26 April 2023. Descriptive analyses were undertaken by year, age group, sex, location type, activity prior to drowning and proximity to home to identify patterns and priority populations.

Forum presentations, panels and workshops

Qualitative findings in this report are derived from the South East Queensland Water Safety Forum, held on 16 October 2025 on the Sunshine Coast. The forum brought together more than 60 participants from over 40 organisations, including government agencies, local councils, emergency services, community organisations, industry and research institutions. Forum content included keynote presentations, a regional drowning data update, panel discussions and small-group workshops structured around the objectives of reconnecting stakeholders, reviewing the South East Queensland Water Safety Strategy 2023–2027, exploring challenges and opportunities, and confirming collective priorities for action. Inputs were captured through presentation materials, facilitator notes, workshop templates and interactive polling. These materials were subsequently reviewed and synthesised by Royal Life Saving Australia staff using a thematic approach to identify recurring issues, examples of good practice and strategic priority directions. The three regional priorities and associated implications presented in this report represent a consolidated summary of those discussions rather than verbatim proceedings.

› ABOUT THE FORUM

The forum was held on 16 October 2025 on the Sunshine Coast. It was an initiative co-hosted by Royal Life Saving – Queensland and Surf Life Saving – Queensland, supported by the Sunshine Coast Council and facilitated by Royal Life Saving – Australia through the Australian Government’s Inland Communities Water Safety Program.

There were more than 60 participants from 40 different organisations across South East Queensland.

Forum Objectives:

- 1. Reconnect and collaborate** – Strengthen relationships and align efforts across the regional water safety ecosystem.
- 2. Review and reimagine** – Reflect on the South East Queensland Water Safety Strategy and workshop updates to ensure relevance and impact.
- 3. Understand and prioritise** – Explore key challenges and opportunities.
- 4. Empower and commit** – Confirm collective priorities for localised action.



➤ OPENING REMARKS & STRATEGIC FRAMING

The forum commenced with welcoming remarks from:

- Paul Barry, Executive Director, RLSSQ
- Greg Cahill, Chief Operating Officer, SLSQ
- A/Chief Superintendent Janelle Andrews, Queensland Police Service

RJ Houston, General Manager – Capability & Industry, RLSSA, provided a strategic overview of national developments shaping drowning prevention actions, including:

- AWSS2030 Mid-Point Review
- National Drowning Report
- Swimming and Water Safety Skills Roundtable and National Six Lane Plan
- National Alcohol and Water Safety Roundtable
- Multicultural Communities Water Safety Roundtable
- National Aquatic Infrastructure Symposium & Framework

➤ REGIONAL DROWNING DATA UPDATE

Presenter:

Lauren Miller, Senior Research Officer, RLSSA

Key insights included:

- 325 drowning deaths (2015–2025)
- 33 average deaths per year
- 75% of drowning victims are male
- 25% aged 65+
- Leading locations: Rivers/creeks (28%), beaches (27%), swimming pools (18%)
- Gaps remain around non-fatal drowning, medical factors, and multicultural populations.

Participants engaged via Mentimeter to discuss emerging data trends and surprising insights.



> SOUTH EAST QUEENSLAND DROWNING SUMMARY: 10-year analysis 2015/16 to 2024/25

325

drowning deaths
between 2015/16
to 2024/25

↓ 4%

decrease from
2012/13 to 2021/22

33

drowning deaths
10-year average

THE HIGHEST NUMBER
OF DROWNING DEATHS
OCCURRED DURING
2021/22; AROUND THE
END OF COVID.

75%

WERE MALE



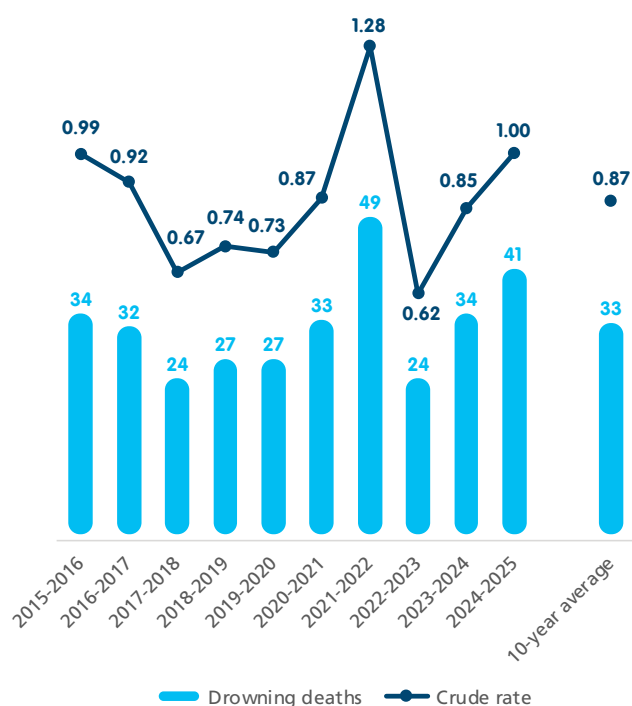
23%

WERE AGED 65+ YEARS

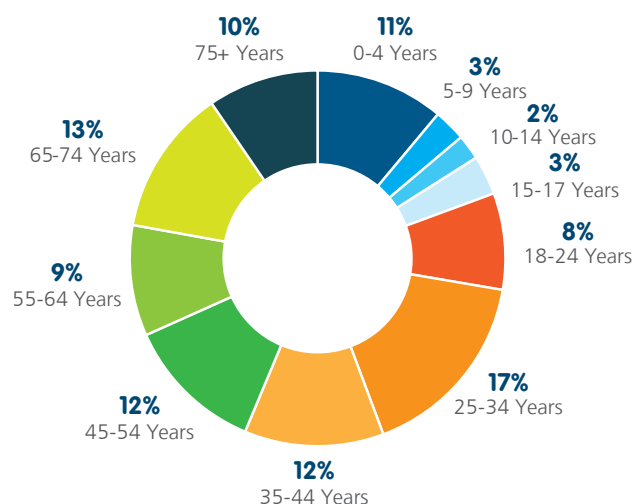
17%

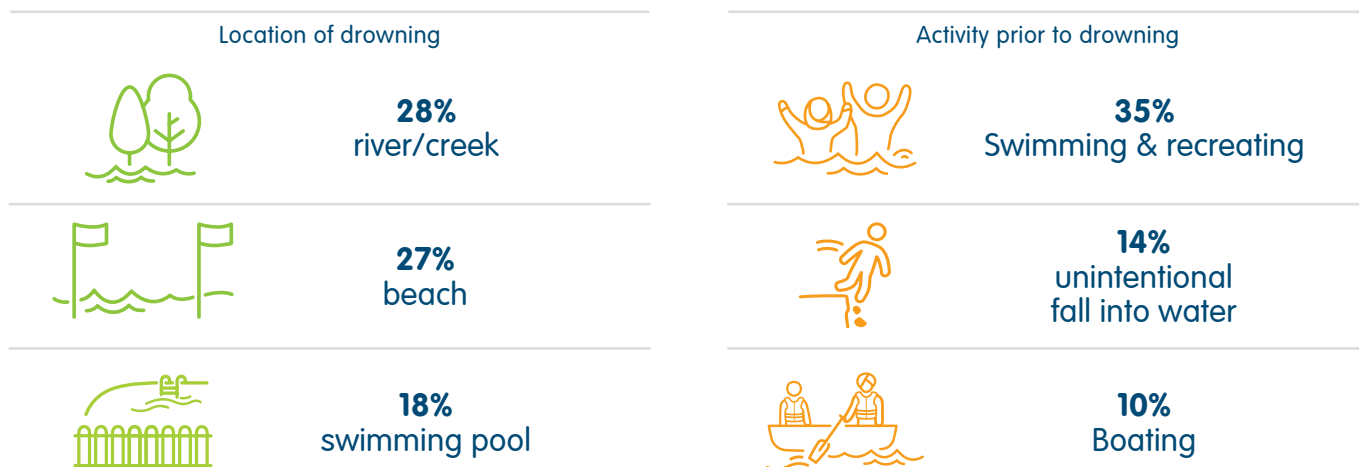
WERE AGED 25-34 YEARS

Drowning deaths and Crude Rates



Age breakdown

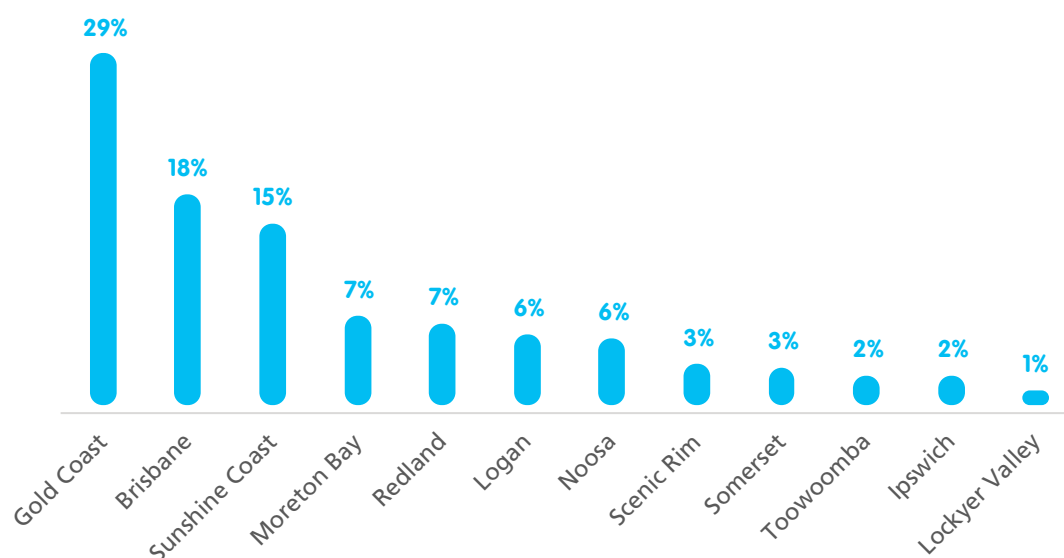




Of which, 69% were private pools (primarily single dwelling domestic pools)
 22% were communal pools (hotels, motels, resorts, holiday apartment complexes)
 9% were public pools (council owned pools, school and university pools, commercial learn to swim centres)

Age group	Location	Primary activity	Distance from home
0-4 Years	Swimming pool	Fall	Home
5-9 Years	Bathtub/Lake/Dam/River/Creek	Fall	Home & 0-5km
10-14 Years	Swimming pool	Swimming/Recreating	Home & ≥100km
15-17 Years	River/Creek	Fall/Swimming/Recreating	0-5km & 21-30km
18-24 Years	River/Creek	Swimming/Recreating	51-100km
25-34 Years	River/Creek	Swimming/Recreating	0-5km
35-44 Years	Beach	Swimming/Recreating	30-50km
45-54 Years	River/Creek	Swimming/Recreating	≥100km
55-64 Years	Beach	Swimming/Recreating	≥100km
65-74 Years	River/Creek	Swimming/Recreating	Home property
75+ Years	River/Creek	Swimming/Recreating	Home property

Location of Drowning by LGA



➤ PANEL INSIGHTS: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunities

Panel discussions highlighted progress, challenges and opportunities across aquatic facilities, community-led programs, inland and land manager leadership, and coastal and marine safety perspectives.

Key themes included:

- Integrating safety into everyday operations
- Leveraging technology
(AI, drones, geo-targeted messaging)
- Place-based and culturally responsive programming
- Land management complexities and multi-agency responsibilities
- Coastal visitation pressures and multilingual communication needs

➤ WORKSHOP: Streamlining the Strategy

Following the presentations, research and panel insights, participants were asked to workshop the actions that would make the most difference in driving down drowning. Actions cover policy makers, the water safety sector, community and industry groups.



➤ SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

The 2025 South East Queensland Water Safety Forum confirmed strong regional support for the South East Queensland Water Safety Strategy 2023–2027 and for the broader direction set by the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030. Workshop discussions across six focus areas (rivers and creeks, beaches, swimming pools, older adults, risk factors and migrants/visitors) highlighted that, while the settings and stakeholders vary, the most impactful actions cluster around a small number of common levers.

Participants identified three unifying regional priorities to guide local water safety planning, policy and investment decisions across South East Queensland for 2026 and beyond.

Priority 1: Sharpen and align safety messaging for the people and places at greatest risk

Forum participants consistently emphasised the need for targeted, evidence-informed and culturally responsive communication focused on the places and populations at greatest risk of drowning. This includes rivers and creeks, unpatrolled beaches and backyard and communal pools, as well as older adults, migrants and visitors, people with pre-existing medical or mental health conditions, and high-risk male cohorts.

Key directions include co-designed campaigns, pictogram and multilingual signage, tourism-linked messaging, social media influencers, and integrating drowning risk messages into health and community settings.

Implications for: Policy makers

- Support regionally consistent messaging frameworks and avoid competing or duplicative campaigns on similar risks.
- Ensure public health, ageing and multicultural policy settings recognise drowning as a preventable cause of injury and death.

Water safety sector

- Coordinate regional campaigns that are place-based and community-informed, with clear alignment to the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030.
- Provide tools, templates and guidance to support councils, services and community organisations to deliver consistent local messaging.

Community and civil society

- Work with cultural ambassadors, local leaders, community groups and health providers to co-design and deliver messages that resonate with local values, languages and lived experience.
- Strengthen peer-to-peer and intergenerational role-modelling of safe behaviours around water.

Industry and operators (aquatic facilities, tourism, recreation, marine and boating)

- Embed consistent, evidence-informed water safety messages into customer journeys (bookings, check-in, on-site signage, digital engagement).
- Use staff training, visual cues and digital channels to reinforce simple, high-impact safety messages at the point of risk.



Priority 2: Make safer environments and services the “default” choice across the region

The forum highlighted the importance of making it easier for people to choose safer locations and activities, and harder to engage in high-risk behaviours. This requires sustained investment in infrastructure, design, operational standards and technology across aquatic facilities, inland waterways and coastal environments. For rivers and creeks, this includes barriers and access controls, designated safer entry points, public rescue equipment and risk-based signage.

For beaches, participants emphasised the need for a comprehensive approach to unpatrolled beaches, informed by people-movement and visitation data, and supported by appropriate surveillance and response capabilities.

For swimming pools, there was strong support for hub-and-health models, independent design reviews, adoption of appropriate new technologies (including AI), and strengthened alignment with contemporary supervision and safety standards.

Implications for: Policy makers

- Prioritise capital and maintenance funding that improves safety at known blackspots and high-use locations.
- Embed drowning risk considerations into planning, development and infrastructure decision-making, particularly around inland waterways, coastal developments, retirement living and aged care.

Water safety sector

- Provide practical guidance and tools (e.g. risk assessment frameworks, design principles, safety audit tools) that support councils and operators to implement safer environments.
- Share good practice case studies and evaluate innovative approaches, including technology solutions.

Community and civil society

- Advocate for safer local environments and support councils in community engagement processes around changes to access, infrastructure and local rules.
- Encourage use of patrolled beaches, supervised aquatic facilities and safer designated swimming locations.

Industry and operators

- Implement risk-based design and operational controls, including public rescue equipment, clear signage, supervision systems and safe access arrangements.
- Explore appropriate use of emerging technologies (e.g. AI-enabled detection, drones, geo-targeted alerts) with clear governance, training and evaluation.
- Engage with water safety bodies and undertake assurance activities.

Priority 3: Strengthen systems – policy, partnerships and data – to sustain impact

Participants underlined that sustained reductions in drowning will depend on the strength of the underlying systems that support local action: clear responsibilities, coherent policy and legislation, robust partnerships and better use of data, research and evaluation.

This includes legislative and regulatory reform (for example around lifejacket wearing, depth and design controls, and supervision requirements), formalised regional partnerships across land and water managers, councils, health, tourism and community organisations, and more systematic use of data – including non-fatal drowning, medical factors, multicultural populations and visitation patterns – to guide decisions.

Implications for: Policy makers

- Review and, where appropriate, strengthen legislation, codes and standards that underpin evidence-based risk controls (e.g. lifejacket use, aquatic facility supervision and design, access to high-risk waterways).
- Support ongoing investment in regional data collection, sharing and evaluation to inform local water safety planning.

Water safety sector

- Facilitate regional governance arrangements that clarify roles and support shared planning across agencies and jurisdictions.
- Lead or support research and evaluation to address key data gaps (non-fatal drowning, medical risk factors, multicultural communities) and translate findings into practical guidance.

Community and civil society

- Participate in local water safety planning processes and contribute local knowledge, lived experience and community data to inform priorities.
- Partner in evaluation of community-led initiatives and share lessons widely.

Industry and operators

- Contribute operational data (e.g. incidents, visitation, program participation) to support local and regional decision-making.
- Align internal policies and procedures with contemporary standards and regulatory expectations, and participate in regional forums and partnerships.

➤ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Royal Life Saving Australia, Royal Life Saving Queensland & Surf Life Saving Queensland thank all speakers, partners, and attendees for their commitment to improving water safety across South East Queensland.

The 2025 Forum was delivered with support from the Australian Government, RLSSQ, SLSQ, Queensland Government and Sunshine Coast Council.

The following groups attended the forum and contributed to the strategic workshop:

Australian Swim Schools Association – ASSA
Belgravia Leisure
BlueFit
Brisbane City Council
City of Gold Coast
City of Moreton Bay
Coroners Court of Queensland
Council on the Ageing (COTA) Queensland
Caravan Parks Association Queensland (CPAQ)
Department of Agriculture and Fisheries
Department for Education
KARI Foundation
Kidsafe Queensland
Logan City Council
Marine Rescue Queensland
Maritime Safety Queensland
Police Citizen Youth Club Queensland
Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service
Queensland Ambulance Service
Queensland Police Service
Redland City Council
Royal Life Saving Australia
Royal Life Saving Queensland
Central Queensland University
Sunshine Coast Council
Sunwater
Surf Life Saving Australia
Surf Life Saving Queensland
SWIM Coaches & Teachers Australia
The Aqua English Project Ltd
University of Queensland
Workplace Health and Safety Queensland
YMCA

The following groups were invited to contribute to the outcomes of the day; however, were unable to attend the forum:

AUSTSWIM
Autism Swim
St John Ambulance
James Cook University



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