

Background

On the 27th April, 11th May, 7th June, 10th June, 20th and 27th July 2021 Royal Life Saving Australia (RLSSA) convened the National Aquatic Industry Committee (NAIC) to review and discuss the strategic direction of the committee and the Guidelines for Safe Pool Operations (GSPO) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and a renewed membership of the committee following the conclusion of the previous term of membership. The committee met and workshopped a strategy and resolved to take action in the following areas on behalf of the national aquatic industry:

Reviewed 2020 activities, research reports and emerging issues

RLSSA provided several briefs for the NAIC on a number of research and other projects that had been undertaken or were about to commence. This included the Workforce Report as part of the National Aquatic Industry Workforce Development Project, The National Swimming and Water Safety Framework and the Health, Social and Economic Value of the National Aquatic Industry research projects. The Committee also workshopped research, advocacy and industry guidance priorities over the next 2 years.

Beyond the advocacy support required due to the pandemic, two key strategic projects agreed by the committee and Royal Life Saving to embark on were Guidelines for Fit-for-Purpose Aquatic Facilities and a National State of Industry Report, with a view to revisiting sustainability (environmental), safety awards and workforce issues in 2022.

Additionally, RLS committed to respond to member and industry feedback as to finding information in the GSPO more easily and committed to a transition to a searchable GSPO tool / format and the ability to have a more streamlined bulk-subscription process.

COVID-19

It was discussed and noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has had severe impacts on the National Aquatic Industry. Aquatic facilities were often the first venues to be mandated to close and often the last able to re-open to almost pre-pandemic levels. It has been noted that as at the time of this communique Victorian aquatic facilities have to date been mandated to close five times and metro Sydney facilities are in an extended lockdown. Compounding the issues faced by industry is that financial support did not support local government employees in 2020 who make up approximately 50% of the industry's workforce and that casual workers (approx 50% of the workforce) have been severely impacted. These factors have resulted in an exodus of both qualified and experienced staff from the industry in some jurisdictions.

Advocacy

The NAIC was provided with an executive summary of external expert health advice on the four-stage Australian reopening plan. The committee decided that an advocacy project should be initiated with regards to stages B and C of the plan. Feedback was sought as to the effects on industry and drowning rates within the community if learn to swim lessons are not able to be available to the community during phases B and C. The committee moved for the sake of industry viability and community safety, advocacy is needed to ensure no child misses out on swimming lessons during the later stages of the reopening plan.

Re-accreditation and re-licensing requirements for swim teachers, lifeguards and aquatic program instructors

At various stages through the first half of 2021, nearly all jurisdictions have experienced some form of lockdown mandating the closure of aquatic facilities. This has had the effect of cancelling re-accreditation training for pool lifeguards in many cases and/or has impacted the income of staff members up for payment of re-licensing. The committee at various stages has issued a series of position statements that give effect to overriding the applicable sections of the Guidelines for Safe Pool Operations (GSPO) and apply grace periods following lockdowns to enable staff to re-license and/or re-accredit as well as work when facilities are able to reopen. These extensions have been applied as a national industry standard intended to satisfy the 'reasonable and practicable' provisions of applicable Work Health and Safety legislation as well as risk management policy given the extenuating circumstances of the pandemic.

Guidelines for Safe Pool Operations

The NAIC were presented with information relating to changes to units of competency that form part of the minimum qualifications for key roles in the aquatic industry. The committee elected to update the relevant GSPO guidance to include both old and new units of competency for Provide CPR and Provide first aid, which for the purposes of working as a pool lifeguard or swim teacher have been deemed equivalent by the committee.

The committee discussed that an updated version of the pool lifeguard skill set was likely to be released mid-2021 to reflect the updated units of competency.

It was also noted that RLSSA has received numerous instances of feedback on the difficulty of finding information within the guidelines and that a project had been undertaken to make the guidelines easier to read and interpret through a fully searchable online format. This notice, while an operational decision for RLSSA, received no adverse or negative feedback from the NAIC and was implemented in late July 2021.

National Industry Issues

It was discussed by members that the NAIC represents a representative national slice of industry / sector leadership and that the NAIC should continue its work in advocating a bigger, better and safer national aquatic industry. Additionally, where issues of national industry importance arise, it was felt by members that this committee is a sufficiently representative forum to address issues and facilitate coordinated industry approaches to their resolution.

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