

BULOKE AQUATIC STRATEGY

SEPTEMBER 2026



Photo Source: Buloke Shire Council

Acknowledgments

Project Acknowledgment

Otium Planning Group would like to acknowledge the staff, user groups and community from the Buloke Shire Council that have provided their expertise and input to the **Buloke Aquatic Strategy**.

Their valuable insights and feedback have been instrumental in shaping the strategic directions for this Strategy, which has been prepared by Buloke Shire Council and Otium Planning Group in partnership with the Victorian Government.

Wominjeka

Acknowledgment of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia, Jupagulk people and Dja Dja Wurrung people as the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live. We pay our respect to their Elders both past, present and emerging.

We acknowledge Aboriginal people as the original inhabitants of the land and their long and continuing connection to Country.

We are committed to national reconciliation and respect for indigenous peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land and waters, and their rich contribution to society.

Lake Tyrrell is the largest inland salt lake in Victoria. This lake is a significant Aboriginal site of cultural and spiritual value known as Direl. It is a place of reflections in the night sky used to experience the Dream Time. It is also a place of ceremony, gathering and trade.

Figure 1: Lake Tyrrell

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1. THE PROJECT

The Buloke Aquatic Strategy is a ten-year strategy that will guide decision making and investment priorities by developing a framework for future strategic direction, infrastructure development and operational enhancement of swimming pools across Buloke Shire.

The Strategy has involved the following steps:



2. WHY DO WE NEED AN AQUATIC STRATEGY?

Swimming pools in Buloke Shire have played a key social and recreation role for our rural communities, whilst offering a safe, regulated place for people to swim and keep cool. This is important when experiencing high temperatures and there are unregulated and unsupervised places to swim, such as rivers, creeks, lakes, dams and water channels.



Participation in aquatic and leisure activities is an ingredient to improving community health and wellbeing. In Buloke, we have significant health concerns, and access to swimming pools and programs can help reverse this trend. However, our facilities and programs don't support our community's needs very well.



This Aquatic Strategy is an opportunity to increase the use of swimming pools to support the health and wellbeing outcomes of rural communities.



Council is committed to healthy communities, and to quality, safe and accessible swimming pools and aquatic services. But we need to do this in a financially sustainable way. These strategic objectives are outlined in Council's Building Buloke 2030 and the Council Plan. This Strategy builds on the Buloke Aquatic Strategy 2014-2024.



Buloke's swimming pools are ageing assets, and a strategic approach that maps out improvements that meet community needs and addresses asset condition issues is required.



The Buloke community has changed significantly since the swimming pools were built 70 years ago. Understanding the community's needs today and into the future may change the aquatic facilities and services required to meet those needs.



The local swimming pools are the heart of many townships and have been for generations. The community value them highly.



Our communities travel long distances for services. Having a local pool is one Council service that brings the community together.



A strategic approach that aligns with local, regional and state-level strategies will help the Council leverage external funding.

The Benefits

\$9.1B

RLSA 'The Social, Health and Economic Value of the Australian National Aquatic Industry Report' found the industry delivers \$9.1B annually in economic, health and social benefits.



Health Benefits

The aquatic industry **\$2.5B** annually in reduced burden of disease in Australia.



Economic Benefits

The aquatic industry supports **\$2.8B** annually to gross domestic product.



Social Benefits

The aquatic industry is a key driver of social benefit for Australians. **\$3.8B** annually in benefits from increased individual and community surplus.



Social return on investment of \$2.18 for every \$1 spend on aquatic facility operations in regional Australia.



3. OUR COMMUNITY

Demographic snapshot

The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census, Victoria in Future Report 2023, and Loddon Malle Public Health Unit Buloke Data Profile 2024 have been used to inform the demographic snapshot.



5,995
Current Population
(2021)



5,960
Future Population
(2036)



52 years
Median Age



51.6%
Male Population



48.4%
Female Population



1.5%
Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islanders



8.9%
People with Disability



22 out of 79 LGAs
SEIFA (Social Disadvantage)

Buloke is a rural council area within the Loddon Mallee region. The large (main) townships are Birchip, Charlton, Donald, Sea Lake and Wycheproof. These are supported by smaller townships of Berriwillock, Culgoa, Nandaly, Nullawil, and Watchem.

The Buloke community is ageing and in decline. The current population of 5,995 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021) is predicted to decline to 5,721 by 2036 (Victoria in Futures Report, 2023). A smaller population will mean the Council will continue to rely on State and Federal Government to fund services and renew and improve assets.

The Buloke community is ageing with a higher proportion of older adults 60 years and older than the rest of Victoria, and a lower proportion of children and young people aged under 18 years. This will increase the need for social and therapy-based programs, intergenerational play and fitness opportunities and universally accessible aquatic facilities.

Within the region, there is a higher rate of people indicating they are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in Buloke when compared to the rest of Victoria. Developing culturally sensitive aquatic facilities and programs will be important to encouraging our Traditional Owners to access these services.

The median income for individuals, families and households is below the Regional Victoria average. This means providing affordable participation opportunities at Buloke swimming pools will be important to attract users.

The swimming pools designed 70+ years ago no longer support the programs and services needed to improve community health and wellbeing outcomes. Therefore, strategic investment into diversifying aquatic, fitness and community experiences at our swimming pool is needed to deliver community health outcomes.

This is particularly important because there is a need to encourage Buloke residents to move, which will improve the health and wellbeing of the community and address higher rates of cancer, diabetes, dementia, heart disease, mental health conditions and stroke compared to the rest of Victoria.

Access to places and services like aquatic facilities that facilitate and encourage people to be active is critical to reversing an alarming health statistic that sees higher rates of obesity in Buloke Shire compared to Regional Victoria.

4. OUR POOLS

A network of swimming pools services the Buloke community and includes:



Council-owned aquatic centres (outdoor swimming pools).



Facilities/services available from the **private sector** (e.g. fitness centres and personal training studios).



Sub regional and regional aquatic and leisure centres located in regional cities within the adjoining municipalities of Swan Hill Rural City Council (Swan Hill Aquatic and Leisure Centre), Horsham Rural City Council (Horsham Aquatic Centre) and Greater Bendigo City Council (Gurri Wanyarra Wellbeing Centre).

Within Buloke, Donald, Charlton, Birchip, Wycheproof and Sea Lake are the major service townships with the largest population catchments. Most residents can access a pool within an approximately 15-to-30-minute drive. There are overlapping catchments between:

- « Birchip and Watchem swimming pools
- « Charlton and Wycheproof swimming pools
- « Sea Lake and Berriwillock swimming pools.

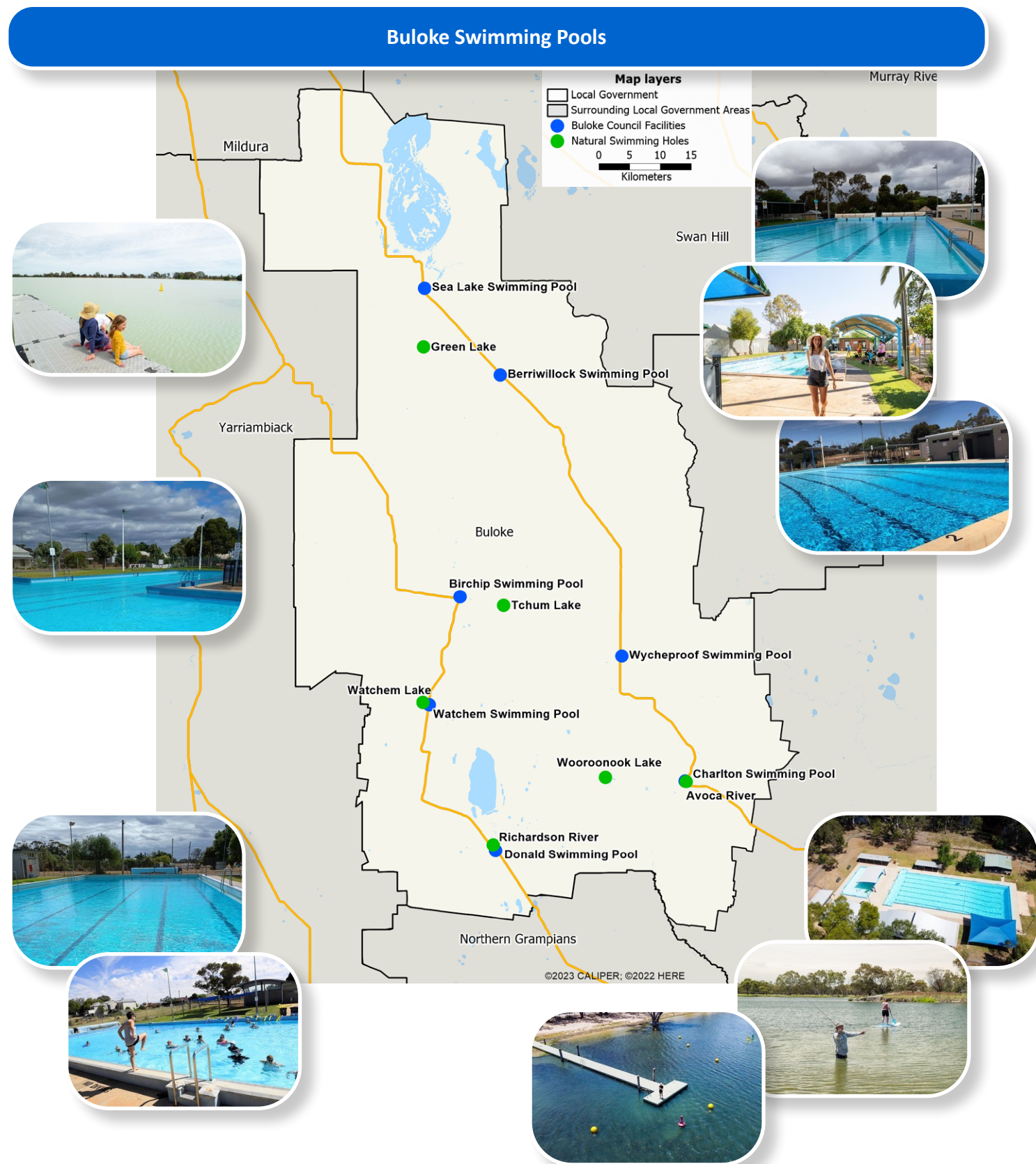
The following table outlines the hierarchy of the aquatic facilities.

Table 1: Facility Hierarchy

Service Hierarchy	Service Level Objective	Buloke and surrounding LGA Facilities
Local Local rural township catchment population (10 minutes)	« Provides a local aquatic experience i.e. pool or water play/leisure water. « Usually linked to other community facilities to share management and operation cost.	« Berriwillock Swimming Pool « Watchem Swimming Pool
District Major townships centre and district catchment population (20 minutes)	« Ability to provide program pool (generally one 25m pool) combined with water play/leisure water. « Consideration should be given to improving all abilities access to existing pools.	« Birchip Swimming Pool « Charlton Swimming Pool « Donald Swimming Pool « Sea Lake Swimming Pool « Wycheproof Swimming Pool
Sub Regional Major township centre with highest population area servicing a municipal catchment (30 minutes)	« Ability to separate program and leisure water. « Larger dry/gym facilities. « Additional limited facilities.	« Swan Hill Leisure Centre « Horsham Aquatic Centre
Regional Regional city catchment population servicing across municipal boundaries (30+ minutes)	« More extensive program and leisure water. « Consideration of indoor 50m pool and complementary warm water pool. « Increased gym and program space. « Additional complementary amenities, food and beverage.	« Gurri Wanyarra Wellbeing Centre

The following map shows the location of swimming pools and natural swimming holes in Buloke Shire.

Figure 2: Locations of Swimming Pools and Natural Swimming Holes in Buloke Shire



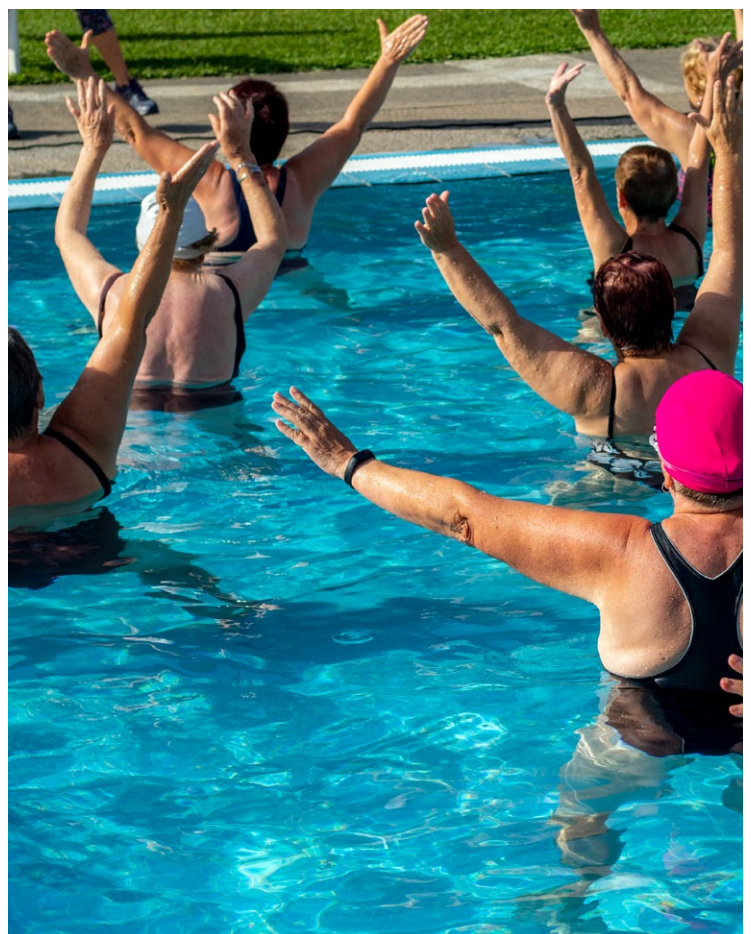
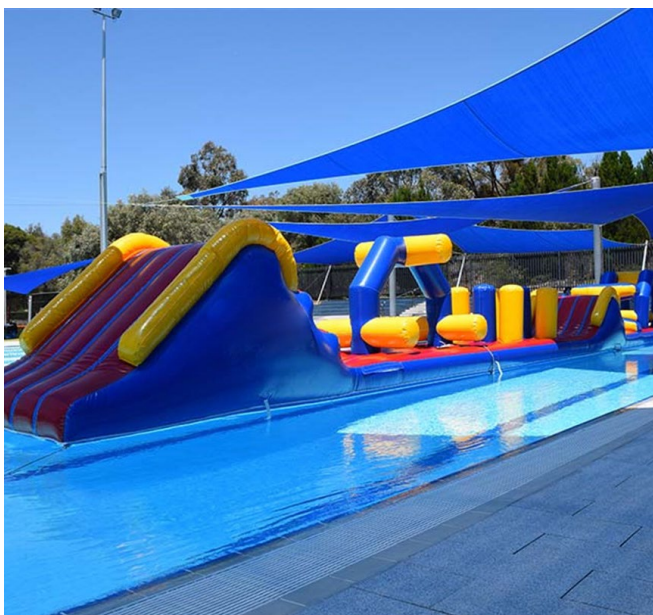
4.1. BULOKE SWIMMING POOLS

Buloke Shire Council manages seven seasonal (November to March) outdoor public swimming pools located in Birchip, Berriwillock, Charlton, Donald, Sea Lake, Watchem and Wycheproof.

The swimming pools support the following range of aquatic activities including school and private swim lessons, school carnivals and fun days, aqua aerobics, lap swimming including early morning swims, swim club squad, inflatable days and recreational use.

Shire pools are not the only pools servicing Buloke residents. If residents wish to participate in aquatic programs i.e. learn to swim lessons or swim year-round, they will drive to Bendigo, Swan Hill or Horsham indoor aquatic facilities.

There are also 153 private pools/spas registered with Buloke Shire Council.



4.2. NATURAL SWIMMING HOLES

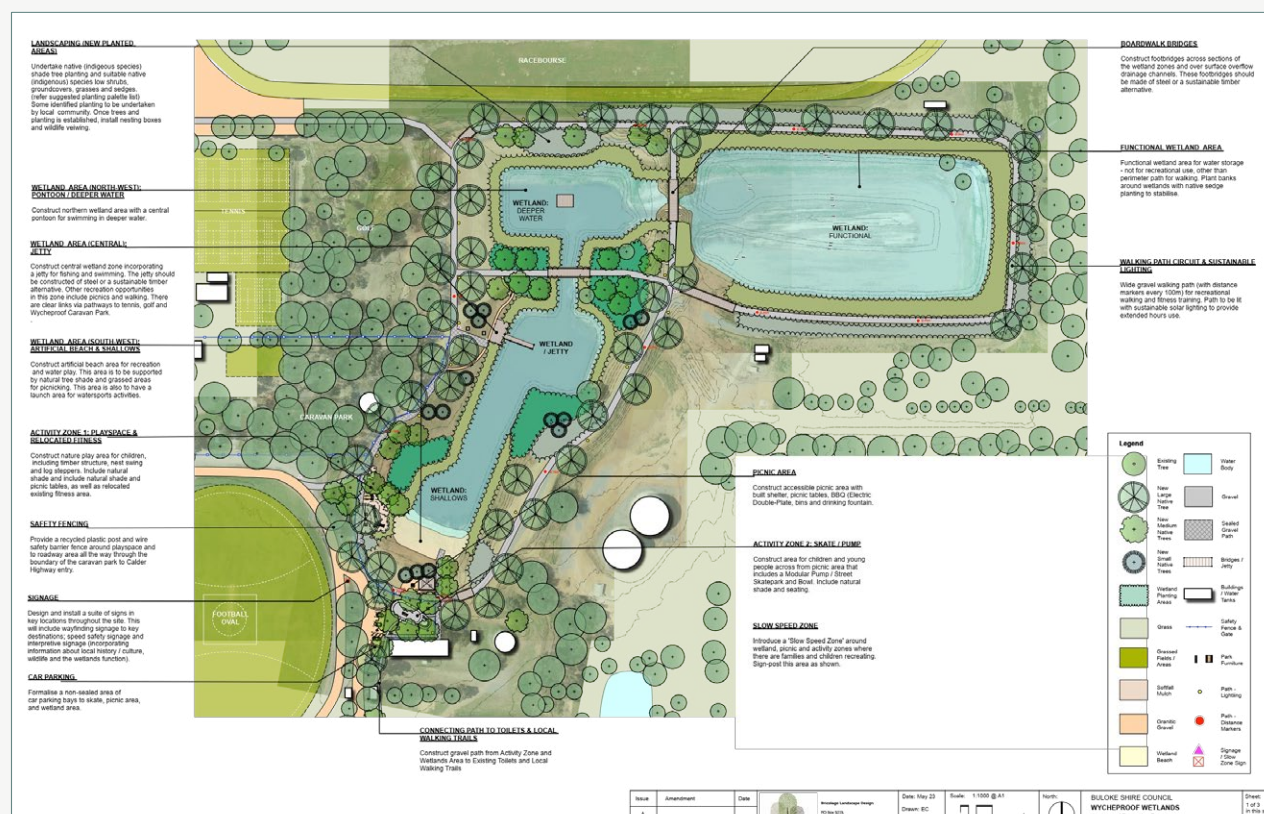
The swimming pools are complemented by natural swimming holes and water play experiences in Buloke including inland lakes and rivers like Wooroonook Lake, Watchem Lake, Tchum Lake and Green Lake and the Wycheproof Wetlands (under construction). These places provide unique place for people to swim, play in the water and other water activities that attract local communities and visitors to the region.

There is an opportunity to partner with Lakes Foreshore Committees and Traditional Owners in the development of diverse recreation activities and utilise cultural knowledge in sustainable water management.

Case Study: Wycheproof Wetlands

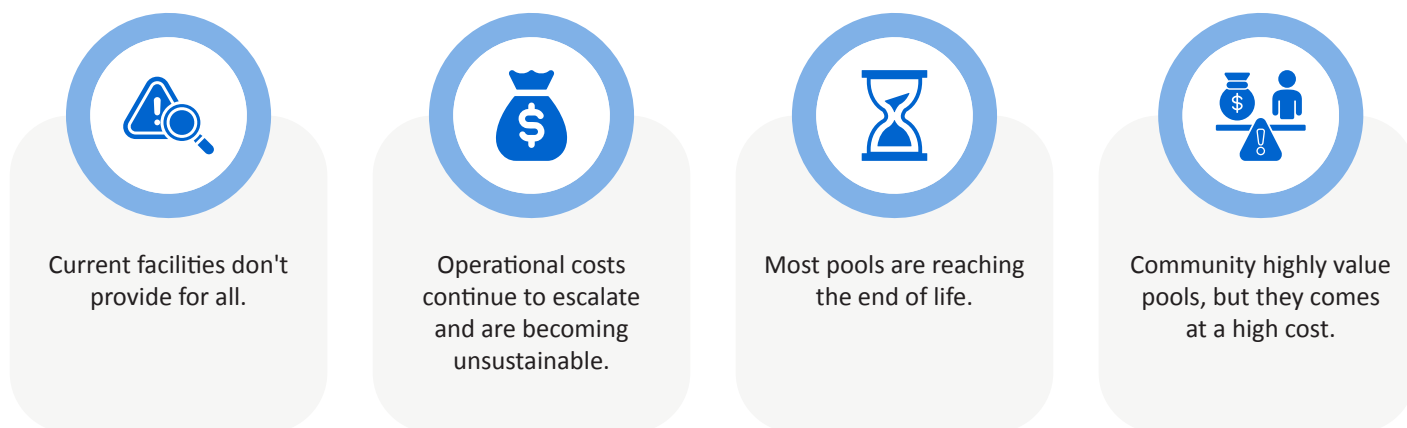
The wetlands are under construction and will provide a new swimming area with a pontoon.

Figure 3: Wycheproof Wetlands Concept



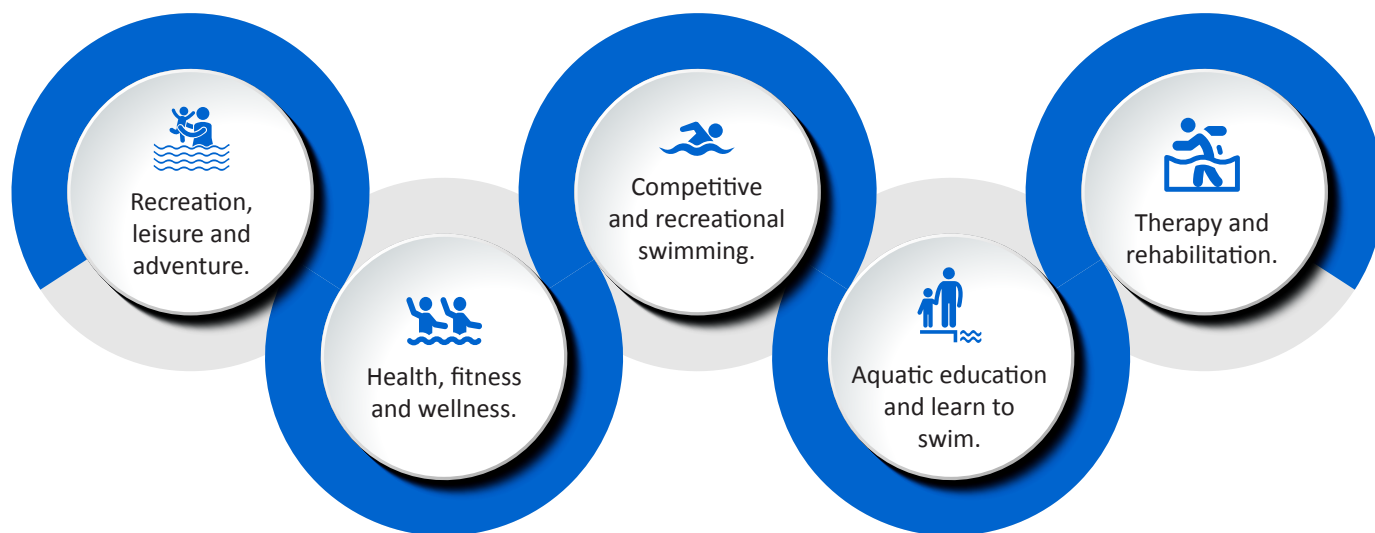
5. KEY CHALLENGES

The Council is facing key challenges in providing an aquatic service.



5.1. CURRENT FACILITIES DON'T PROVIDE FOR ALL

The key factors of successful swimming pools are providing diverse participation opportunities and programmable components. This Strategy has explored a range of contemporary 'wet' and 'dry' facilities in rural and regional areas that appeal to broader market segments:



The outdoor pools in Buloke Shire are missing key markets of leisure adventure facilities and therapy users, which impacts participation and financial position. They also do not meet industry standards for pool depths to support fitness and training and education users.

Providing equitable access to aquatic and leisure facilities (and other services like health, education, cultural, recreational and other community services) in rural and regional areas is a challenge, particularly in smaller townships. This is further impacted by the capital and operational costs of aquatic and leisure facilities having risen significantly over the last ten to 20 years, and even more so in recent times post the COVID-19 global pandemic.

5.2. OPERATIONAL COSTS CONTINUE TO ESCALATE AND ARE BECOMING UNSUSTAINABLE

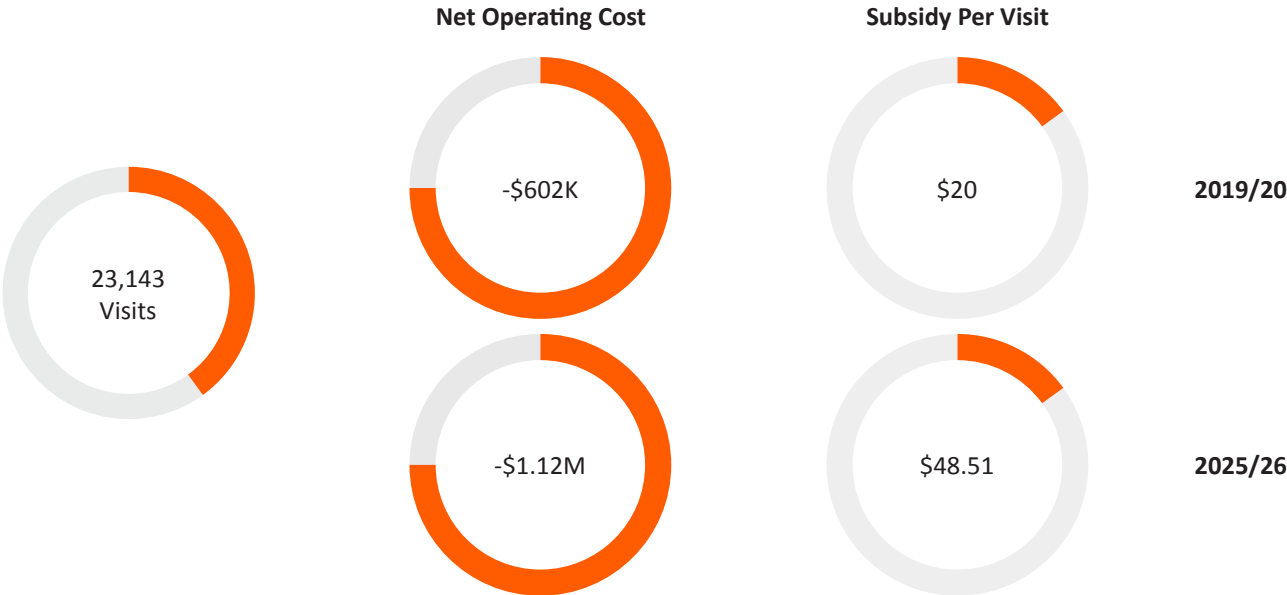
A key challenge facing the Council is that, despite the patronage over several years remaining stable, the maintenance and operational costs of the aquatic services are increasing, the facilities have accessibility issues, and there is a lack of a year-round facility.

The aquatic service review identifies that the seven outdoor swimming pools in Buloke Shire are attracting approximately 30,000 visits per annum. The Council is subsidising the use of the aquatic facilities by approximately \$36 per visit. This has increased by 76% over the last five years from \$20 per visit in 2019/20, mainly due to operating and maintenance costs almost doubling in five years.

Aquatic facility management and operations are subject to increasing costs across the industry. The higher cost of qualified staffing, chemical supply and utilities are major contributing factors for rural facilities. Staff (lifeguards) and chemicals (water treatment) are the major factors in managing operational risks and if underfunded, the risk to the Council and community increase.



Operational Performance



Subsidy includes net operational cost and asset maintenance costs

Visitation

23,143

A total of 23,143 visits were recorded in the 2025/26 season, compared to 22,637 visits in 2024/25 season.

2025/26 Season							
Swimming Pool	Berriwillock	Birchip	Charlton	Donald	Sea Lake	Watchem	Wycheproof
Casual Visits	749	2,484	3,538	4,567	1,015	514	1,851
Bookings	75	2,325	1,907	2,084	995	0	1,043
Total Visits	824	4,809	5,445	6,651	2,010	514	2,894

Monthly Totals				
November	December	January	February	March
1,886	5,818	7,793	6,153	1,497
Daily Averages				
95	178	233	259	128

The Council's objective is to maintain the current funding levels in the long-term financial plan.

To maintain the current aquatic service, which is a seven day per week operation from the start of November to end of March, the annual aquatic budget would need to increase by \$56,158 for the next 10-year period (total of \$565,178).

The Council supports maintaining access to all swimming pools; however, the Strategy recommends operational changes that, whilst delivering on the strategic objectives, reduce the current service level. This is required to maintain the current funding levels.



5.3. MOST POOLS ARE REACHING THE END OF LIFE

The funding of asset management works identified by the facility condition audit will only enable the status quo to be maintained and does not account for major failure or the ability to address identified community needs or new user markets. Due to the age of the outdoor pools and if asset renewal improvements are not undertaken, they will likely reach a catastrophic condition.

To help inform the Strategy, Structural Engineers undertook a detailed Technical Assessment of the swimming pools and has identified recommended asset renewal improvement and maintenance requirements of the facilities over the next five to 10 years. The total cost to maintain the current benefit, with no additional services, is about \$900,000 over this period.

That said, the Council investment in asset maintenance and improvements over the last decade has been worthwhile and extended the life of the pools. The pools can remain operational over the next 10 years if identified asset renewal improvement and maintenance costs are funded. Improvements include replacing plant and filtration and new amenities.

Case Study: Charlton Swimming Pool Improvements

New amenities, plant upgrade, lighting and shade structures at Charlton Swimming Pool.

Figure 4: Charlton Swimming Pool Amenities



5.4. COMMUNITY HIGHLY VALUE POOLS, BUT IT COMES AT A HIGH COST

The Council recognises that the Buloke Shire community highly values having access to swimming pool facilities and there is strong support for them. Pools are viewed as essential to supporting health and social connections in rural communities that don't have access to many free community services. It is especially important to the community during hot weather and school holidays.

A survey of the Buloke community generally rated the swimming pool facilities and programs as very good. The main activities during visits to the swimming pools were:

 **58.3%**
(144 responses) - Cool down from hot weather

 **55.5%**
(137 responses) - Recreation swimming/fun

 **47%**
(116 responses) - Take child to pool

 **27.1%**
(67 responses) - Lap swim/fitness

 **16.2%**
(40 responses) - Aqua aerobics

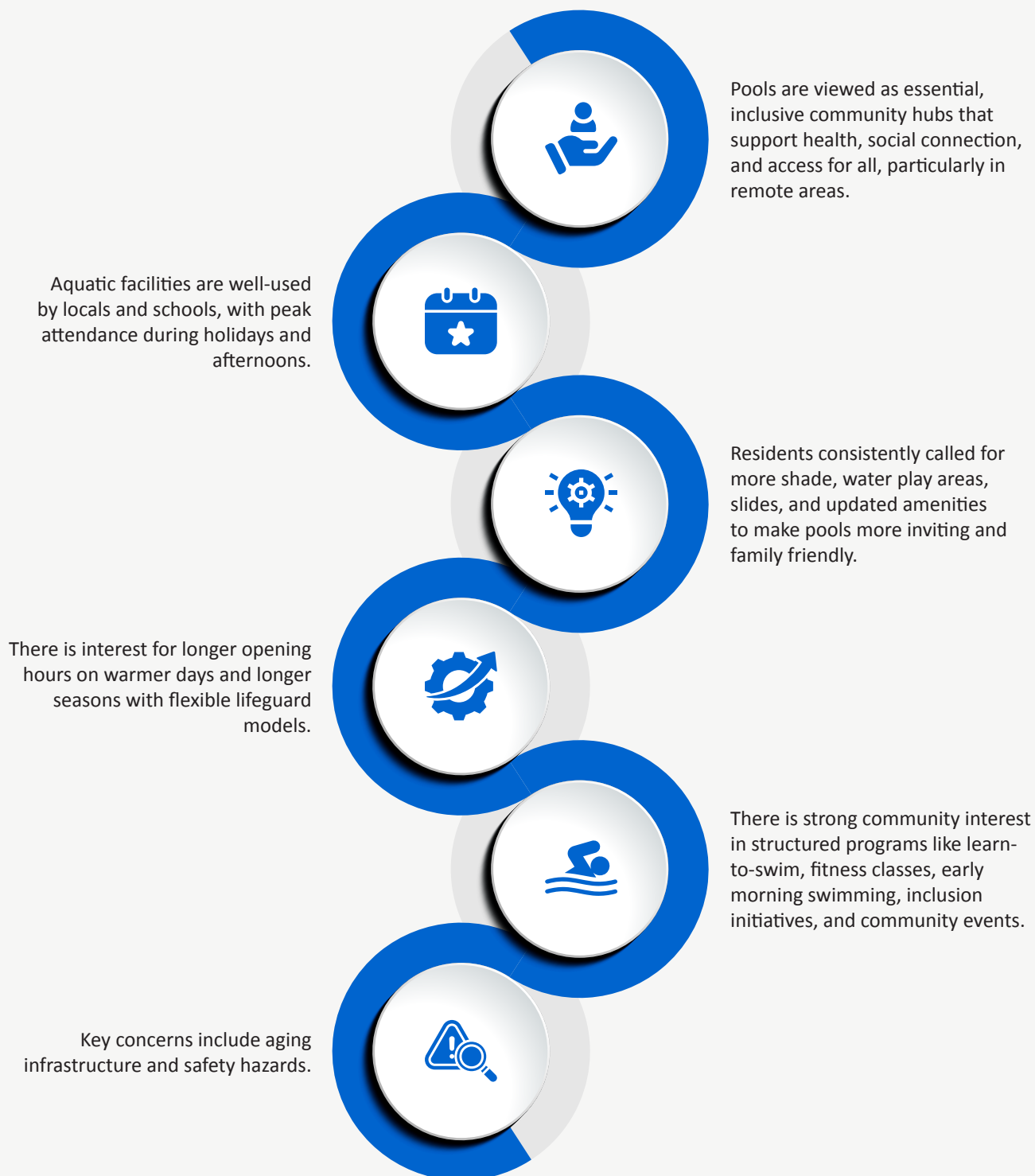


There is a strong interest in longer operating hours, improved adventure and water play, shade, social spaces and an increase in community programming.

Swimming lessons, water safety programs, and inclusive activities are seen as increasingly important due to declining swim competency across the diverse Buloke Shire communities and students with special needs. Schools are eager to expand their use of swimming pools for both education and events.

Unfortunately, the high cost of swimming pools is placing considerable pressure on Council's capacity to fund them amongst other competing community and infrastructure needs. A strategic approach to addressing this issue is critical.

Community Engagement Key Themes



6. STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

6.1. VISION

The Council aims to:



Provide sustainable, safe and accessible swimming pools that activate Buloke residents and connects communities.

The following strategic objectives and actions have been developed to achieve this vision. A road map of improvements (renewal and improvements) supports the objectives and actions.

6.2. OBJECTIVES

The Council aims to:

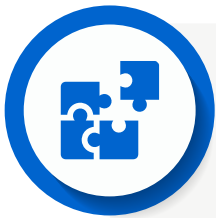




Activate aquatic facilities and communities

How?

- « Partner with Neighbourhood Houses and aquatic providers to facilitate programming of swimming pools for community activities i.e. aqua aerobics and early morning swimming.
- « Deliver innovative approaches and encourage a diversity of activities, programming and events at swimming pools to increase visitation, such as inflatable days and the Vicswim program.
- « Partner with health and fitness providers to provide fitness classes at aquatic facilities, such as Active Farmers boot camps, yoga, and Pilates classes.
- « Partner with the community in hosting community events at the aquatic facilities, such as dive-in movie nights and music concerts at the pools.



Provide a diversity of aquatic experiences to encourage greater participation and use

How?

- « Take a strategic and place-making approach to the improvement of district swimming pools.
- « When assets are due for renewal, identify opportunities to diversify aquatic facility opportunities at district swimming pools and undertake an initial design to enhance the ability to attract external funding.
- « Prioritise improvements at district swimming pools that improve access, safety and diversify experiences (dry and wet) for young people, families and older adults. Consider opportunities for leisure and water play, fitness areas, and social seating and shade. Seek external funding for these works.
- « Partner with Traditional Owners and Lake Foreshore Committees in the development of reserve management plans. The plans should explore how to provide diverse recreation activities and utilise cultural (Traditional Owners) knowledge in sustainable water management.



Well-managed and maintained quality aquatic facilities

How?

- « That Council undertake an annual review of the performance of all facilities in meeting key performance measures and progress made on the Strategy. The review should report on visitation and financial performance, including Council subsidy per visit, the condition of the assets and the level of risk to Council.
- « Apply a consistent standard to design and maintenance of swimming pools that responds to the planning framework (levels of service).
- « Develop an Asset Management Plan for aquatic facilities, informed by Structural Engineers Technical Condition Assessments and LSV Safety Audits, and regularly monitor and review the Asset Management Plan.
- « As part of Council's annual budget process provide funding for asset renewal of aquatic facilities as detailed in the Asset Management Plan.
- « Implement an off-season maintenance process for swimming pools.



Deliver a sustainable aquatic service

How?

- « Maintaining the existing pools is a priority in the short to medium term. However, if the cost of these works cannot be afforded over the long term, Council may be forced to close one or more of the existing pools. This will be considered if a pools asset renewal improvement and maintenance works exceed \$250,000 over five years.
- « Conducting close analysis and feasibility studies of individual pool locations. Upon catastrophic plant and/or pool failure, the Council will investigate alternative future aquatic experiences at these locations. This could include a water-play splash park or improvements at a local lake with a designated swimming area and would require external funding.
- « Delivering a flexible operating model that is supported by updated pool business rules and allows Council to operate within the current funding level. This approach will enable staff to adapt service delivery and consider:
 - Community demand and staffing capacity.
 - Reducing the season length from the start of November to the end of March to the start of December to mid-March (Labour Day weekend). This is in line with other rural Councils.
 - Increase the minimum weather temperature threshold for opening pools during normal public operating hours from 23°C to 25°C, in line with other rural councils. This threshold would not apply to pre-arranged bookings, school programs, learn-to-swim, or other scheduled activities.
 - Reduce operations at the local pools (Berriwillock and Watchem Swimming Pools) to a five-day-per-week operating model for the full swimming season to improve the long-term financial sustainability of Council's aquatic service delivery. These communities will continue to have access to a district swimming pool within 20 minutes operating seven days per week.
- « Monitor annual visitation trends across all Buloke Shire swimming pools, with a trigger point of a 20% or greater decline in participation over a rolling three-year period prompting a formal service viability review.
- « Apply a graduated response to declining participation and increased service delivery costs. Progressing through maintaining the current service levels, reducing service delivery (hours, season length or programs), temporary or permanent closure, or repurposing the facility for alternative community recreation or activation uses.
- « Integrate environmentally sustainable design and water-sensitive urban design features in aquatic facility renewal and improvement projects.
- « Introduce an equitable fee structure for private providers and school swimming and water safety programs that recognises Department of Education funding arrangements, including the different funding arrangements that apply to P–12 schools.
- « Investigate management models and partnering opportunities for aquatic facilities, e.g. Community partnership models, and regional management models with partnering councils. This includes what a possible transition of management models could look like.
- « Explore the introduction of voluntary place based aquatic membership options, including family memberships and flexible pricing arrangements, to support increased participation and encourage ongoing engagement with Council aquatic facilities.
- « Investigate opportunities to utilise trained volunteers, qualified teachers and community partners to support closed-group aquatic activities, subject to legislative, safety and policy requirements.

6.3. RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

The recommended strategy for Buloke aquatic facilities has taken into consideration the current condition of the assets, patronage, population catchment and cost of service. The recommended strategy aligns with the strategic directions and vision for the aquatic service in Buloke outlined above. This strategy supports a network approach that considers a fair and reasonable travel distance to access aquatic services. It is designed to provide a sustainable aquatic service for the next 10 years.

A road map has been prepared that applies the following strategic approach:

Short Term (0-3 years)

Immediate asset renewal improvements of pools in the first 5 years to ensure continued benefit beyond 10 years.

Medium Term (4-7 years)

Asset renewal improvements of pools in the first 5 years to ensure continued benefit beyond 10 years. Where there is an asset renewal project earmarked for toddler pools at district swimming pools, consider external funding advocacy to design and construct a new leisure / water play experience

Long Term (8-10 years)

Improvements projects that diversify aquatic and fitness facility and programming experiences across the network of district swimming pools, and dependant on site capacity to provide benefit.

Improvement projects will be subject to external funding, e.g., grants, while asset renewal projects will be referred to the Council's annual budget or 10-year financial plan. In addition, the annual maintenance allowance will cover painting and minor repairs i.e. expansion joints.





BULOKE
SHIRE COUNCIL

