Royal Life Saving
130 summers

Safer Places to SWIMPOSIUM

SUMMARY REPORT



27-28 AUGUST 2025

Hunter Valley



Document Management

Prepared By
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We acknowledge the Wonnarua People, Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways of the Hunter Valley, and pay our respects to Elders past and present and emerging. We honour their enduring connection to Country and water.

FOREWORD

The 2025 Safer Places to Swimposium marked a pivotal moment for the aquatic industry in New South Wales and beyond. Over two days in the Hunter Valley, we gathered as a sector to reflect, challenge, and envision the future of aquatic facilities and inland waterways. The Swimposium brought together voices from every corner of our industry—regional and metropolitan councils, state and federal government agencies, leisure operators, researchers, architects, suppliers, and community representatives.

Our discussions revealed a sector that is both resilient and resourceful, but also one facing significant pressures. Ageing facilities, workforce shortages, and financial constraints are testing the ability of councils to maintain safe, inclusive, and sustainable aquatic environments. At the same time, the opportunities before us are immense: reimagining inland waterways as community assets, embedding sustainability and adaptation into every project, and designing aquatic centres that meet real community needs while driving health, wellbeing, and social connection.

The Swimposium was not just a conversation—it was a workshop for solutions. From the powerful Slido sessions to the interactive design exercise, where delegates built their ideal aquatic facility with $10 million, $20 million, or $40 million, the creativity and commitment of our industry was on full display.

These activities highlighted the trade-offs councils face, the importance of designing for long-term value, and the critical role of collaboration in unlocking innovation.

This report captures the key themes, insights, and collective messages that emerged from the Swimposium. It is intended as both a record of our shared learning and a call to action. The future of aquatic facilities and waterways cannot rest on short-term fixes—it requires long-term strategy, sustained investment, and unified advocacy.

On behalf of Royal Life Saving, I thank all participants, speakers, and partners who made this event possible. Together, we have set the foundation for stronger advocacy with government, more resilient communities, and safer places to swim for all Australians.



Michael Ilinsky
Chief Executive Officer
Royal Life Saving NSW

OPENING AND KEYNOTE SESSIONS

The day began with a welcome address and acknowledgement of the sector's shared mission: ensuring safer places to swim for all Australians.

Dr William Koon (Royal Life Saving Australia) provided a midpoint update on the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030, reflecting on progress and priorities. His address underscored the importance of evidence-based interventions and cross-sector partnerships to achieve national drowning reduction targets.



July 2025 marks the halfway point of the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030. This provides an opportunity to critically assess progress to date, examine whether the Strategy continues to reflect the right priorities, and identify where greater focus and attention are needed.

Nick Ryan (Business Western Sydney) opened with a compelling vision of reconnecting communities with their rivers. He highlighted the potential of cleaner waterways, revitalised river beaches, and swimmable spaces to transform urban life. Achieving this, he argued, requires cultural, political, and physical change, positioning rivers as vital community assets rather than overlooked landscapes.



INLAND WATERWAYS AND RISK MANAGEMENT

The mid-morning sessions turned attention to the unique risks of inland waterways:

- **Jill Summers and Damien Kiley** (Liverpool Council / Maran Property) presented the Georges River Kayak Trail, a project built through community consultation and careful design. The trail demonstrates how inland waterways can be activated for recreation while managing safety and environmental risks.

- **Victoria Vanstone** (Keynote Speaker) shared her personal journey of sobriety, made famous through the Sober Awkward podcast. Her story resonated with delegates as a reminder of the link between alcohol and drowning risk, and the power of culture change in preventing harm.

- **Dr Amy Peden** (University of NSW) delivered an evidence-rich presentation on risk management in inland waterways, highlighting both gaps in current approaches and opportunities for stronger research, signage, and localised safety interventions.





COUNCIL PERSPECTIVES ON AGEING FACILITIES





The afternoon sessions provided raw insights from local councils, many of which are struggling with aging aquatic infrastructure, workforce shortages, and limited financial resources:

- **Belinda Mills** (Cabonne Council) shared how the council implemented a reduced lifeguard supervision model to manage risk in ageing centres while balancing financial constraints.
- **Gary Johnson** (Tamworth Regional Council) tackled the pressing question of how councils should prioritise any future funding for public swimming facilities, given the scale of renewal challenges.
- **Simon Duck** (Inner West Council) highlighted the unique challenges of operating six diverse facilities in a highly creative and multicultural community, underlining the need for adaptable operating models.
- **Brad Billet** (Otium Planning Group) presented the Inverell Aquatic Centre case study, a shining example of how small regional communities can deliver cost-effective, high-quality outcomes with the right design and funding approach.

INDUSTRY INSIGHTS AND SUSTAINABILITY

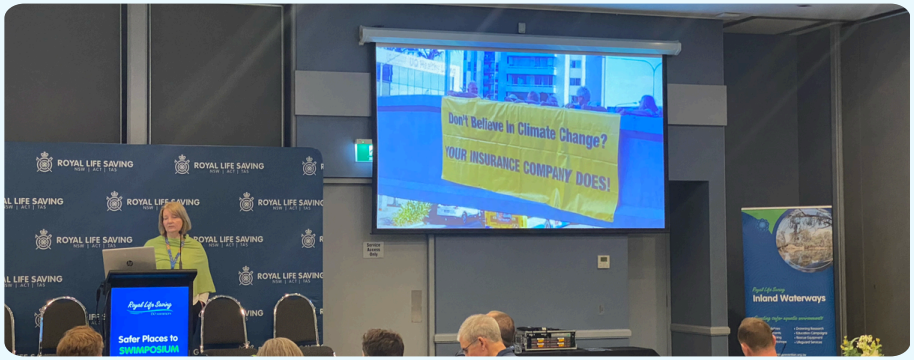
Day 1 also featured key perspectives from industry partners and operators on the intersection of safety, sustainability, and innovation:

- **Matt Gijselman** (Bentley Systems) drew on his experience in infrastructure reform, urging councils to adopt data-led decision-making to drive more sustainable and scalable outcomes.

- **Alexia Morgan** (Belgravia Leisure) framed aquatic centres as community hubs, advocating for strategies to make them safer, more inclusive, and more sustainable. She outlined how facilities can cut emissions, waste, and energy use while ensuring minimal disruption to community access.

- **David Stennent** (Maytronics) focused on future-proofing aquatic facilities, sharing industry innovations in maintenance, water management, and design that can extend facility life and reduce operational costs.







PANEL DISCUSSIONS

Industry Perspectives

The first panel brought together council and industry presenters to reflect on common challenges in aquatic facility management. Key points included:

- Communities want modern, inclusive facilities, but funding rarely matches expectations.
- Partnerships with leisure providers and suppliers are increasingly critical to stretch resources.
- Smaller communities, like Inverell, show that practical, cost-effective designs can outperform aspirational but unaffordable builds.
- Stronger use of data-led planning is needed to guide scarce capital investment.

The panel reinforced that councils need shared advocacy and realistic funding models to avoid facilities becoming unsafe or obsolete.



Hard Choices for Councils

The afternoon panel with Cessnock, Cabonne, and The Y focused on the pressures driving tough decisions. Key themes were:

- Financial strain is forcing councils to make difficult choices on safety and operations.
- Some are testing reduced supervision models, raising concerns about risk and community trust.
- Panellists stressed the need for government recognition and investment in aquatic facilities as essential public infrastructure.

Without support, many regional communities risk losing facilities altogether, with serious implications for equity, safety, and health outcomes.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM DAY 1

Day 1 set a sobering but constructive tone for the Swimposium. Across presentations and discussions, several themes emerged:

1. The urgent need for an Aquatic Infrastructure Renewal Strategy at both NSW and Federal Government levels.

2. The reality of regional councils, many of whom are making difficult decisions about supervision, safety, and operations under financial strain.

3. Recognition of the untapped potential of inland waterways, both as recreation spaces and as high-risk environments requiring targeted investment.

4. A strong call for innovation in design, builds, and adaptation strategies, to ensure facilities are sustainable, inclusive, and financially viable into the future.

As temperatures plummet in winter, heating Australia's public pools comes at an environmental cost

By Costa Haritos | Stateline | Environmental Impact

Mon 11 Aug



Jim Shen visits his local swimming pool every week. *(ABC News: Matthew Holmes)*





The State of Aquatic Facility Infrastructure in Australia report estimates that $8 billion needs to be spent on pools. *(ABC News: Bill Ormonde)*

"The pool is leaking, its tiles are cracked, the amenities need upgrading, and $1 million needs to be spent on the filtration system - Our budget is $250K".

Community will be consulted on MidCoast swimming pools review

Published on 27 October 2023



MidCoast Council owns nine swimming pools located at Forster, Gloucester, Taree, Wingham, Krambach, Tea Gardens, Nabiac, Bulahdelah and Stroud. Swimming pool operations are currently subsidised heavily by Council at $1.85 million each year (based on data from the 2021/2022 financial year). This cost increases around 5 per cent annually.

This does not include capital replacement and refurbishment costs for the existing pools which is estimated to cost in the order of $14 million over the next 10 years.

Pool usage figures, costs, and safety were examined during the review. The Royal Life Saving Society also conducted independent safety audits of each pool.

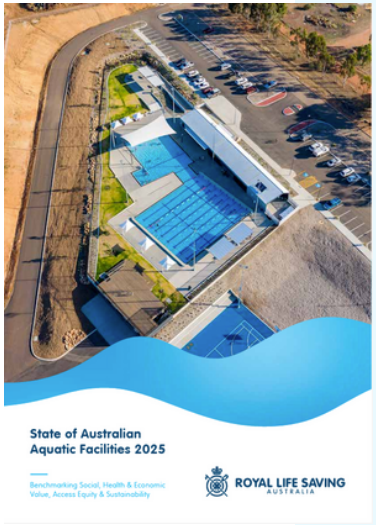
DAY 2 SUMMARY – SOLUTIONS

Thursday 28 August 2025

The second day of the 2025 Safer Places to Swimposium shifted the focus from challenges to solutions, exploring strategies to strengthen aquatic facility infrastructure, improve inland waterway safety, and build more sustainable and inclusive places to swim. Through data, innovation, and collaborative approaches, Day 2 showcased the sector's resilience and creativity in shaping a forward-looking agenda.

Opening Presentation

RJ Houston (Royal Life Saving Australia) presented on the extensive research that Royal Life Saving has done in recent years to help inform the industry. RJ focussed on in particular the State of Aquatic Facility Infrastructure Report, providing a national overview of aquatic centres and their condition. He highlighted the growing challenges posed by ageing infrastructure, rising maintenance costs, and the urgent need for long-term investment strategies to ensure facilities remain safe, accessible, and viable for communities.



KEY FINDINGS

Social & Economic Value

- 421 million visits to 2,103 aquatic facilities each year
- $12.84 billion annual social value inclusive of social, health and economic benefits
- $30.50 generated each visit to an aquatic facility in economic benefits

Infrastructure

- People living in many regional and outer metropolitan areas lack access to aquatic facilities for lessons, leisure and fitness. This gap in access contributes to social inequities
- New data shows a need for better planning frameworks that account for geographic distribution and population growth projections.
- 1 in 4 Australians have disadvantaged access to public pools
- The national average aquatic facility provisioning ratio is 1 aquatic facility per 12,826 population

Workforce & Safety Concerns

- 12.5% increase in major incidents responded to by pool lifeguards in 2024 (compared to 2023)
- Increasing trend of abuse and aggression towards staff at aquatic facilities by cohorts of the community

FACILITY INFRASTRUCTURE, DESIGN AND ACCESS

Michelle Nolland (Larcan) urged that facility design must reflect real community needs rather than costly aspirational features. She emphasised that effective consultation and practical functionality are key to avoiding ongoing costs and ensuring that facilities meet the expectations of those who use them most.

Matthew O'Connor (Blacktown City Council) outlined how Blacktown is planning to meet the demands of a rapidly growing population. His presentation focused on aligning infrastructure delivery with population forecasts, ensuring future facilities are scalable, inclusive, and adaptable to changing recreation needs.

Chiara Cenati (Myrtha Pools) showcased modular and innovative pool solutions designed to extend the life of ageing facilities. By reducing construction time and minimising community disruption, these approaches offer councils cost-effective options to revitalise facilities without the need for full rebuilds.

Tania Modde (ParaMobility) demonstrated how collaboration between councils, architects, and builders can deliver safe and dignified access for people with disability. Her presentation highlighted that accessibility should be embedded from the outset of design, ensuring facilities are welcoming and inclusive for all community members.





SAFETY, STRATEGY, AND LEADERSHIP





Alek Olszewski (Life Saving Victoria) provided a statewide overview of water safety in Victoria, outlining current trends, risks, and program outcomes across both aquatic facilities and inland waterways. He emphasised the importance of consistent, evidence-based strategies and the value of using data to guide investment and interventions.

Scott Vanderheyden (Belgravia Leisure) presented Belgravia's Triple A's for Aquatic Safety methodology, focusing on awareness, action, and accountability. He demonstrated how cultural change, strong leadership, and proactive supervision can improve lifeguard practice, strengthen safety culture, and increase community confidence in aquatic facilities.

BE ALERT BE AWARE BE ACTIVE
TRIPLE A'S FOR AQUATIC SAFETY

WORKSHOP – DESIGNING THE IDEAL PLACE TO SWIM

A highlight of Day 2 was the interactive workshop where delegates worked in groups to design their ideal aquatic facility. Using a community profile and different budget levels of **$10 million, $20 million, and $40 million**, participants were challenged to balance ambition with affordability. The exercise brought to light the real trade-offs councils face, particularly around operating costs, staffing, and sustainability features.

The workshop reinforced the value of embedding sustainability, inclusivity, and flexibility at all levels of investment. Even at the lowest budget, participants identified ways to deliver strong community outcomes by focusing on practical design choices and future-proofing facilities. At the higher funding levels, the emphasis shifted to building multi-purpose centres with enhanced health, wellbeing, and social outcomes.

The activity also showcased the creativity and problem-solving capacity of the sector when councils, operators, suppliers, and designers collaborate. It left a strong impression that the industry is ready with innovative ideas but needs the right investment frameworks to bring them to life.



WORKSHOP – DESIGNING THE IDEAL PLACE TO SWIM

COMMUNITY PROFILE
"SILVER SEACHANGE" COASTAL TOWN

Population & Growth:
18,000 permanent residents, with >50,000 in peak summer. Population ageing (>7 % over 65 in last 5 yrs). Sea-changers relocating from cities seeking active coastal lifestyle, plus seasonal hospitality workforce.
Demographic Mix:
- 28% aged 60+
- Seasonal migrant workforce (Pacific Islander farm/hotel staff) with low swim competency
- Dispersed settlement pattern along coastline – pockets of social isolation
- Tourism economy creates imbalance in off-peak vs peak infrastructure demand

Climate & Environment:
- Temperate, mild winters; outdoor activity highly viable
- Ocean conditions moderate but unpredictable; drownings occur despite patrolled beaches
- Natural estuary popular with families and older adults for calmer swimming

Existing Aquatic Services:
- Town pool closed (2015) due to high costs; now only ocean/estuary bathing for locals
- No warm-water exercise venue; large gap in rehab / aqua-fitness programming
- No formal seasonal open-water swim safety programs
- Growing number of seniors seek gentle aquatic exercise but traditional beach swimming is no longer safe

Community Needs (from consultation):
- Warm-water hydrotherapy pool, aqua classes for arthritis/joint health
- Safer and more accessible aquatic options than surf, interest in tidal-pool/lagoon
- Coffee/social hub integrated with aquatic facility to combat loneliness
- Scalable model that can cater to tourists and reduce strain on public beach systems

Ideal Solution Drivers:
Could lean into unique coastal identity via heated lagoon/tidal pool with connected indoor therapy space, or combined "aquatic wellness centre + open-water access node."

COMMUNITY PROFILE
"GROWING FAMILIES" INLAND TOWNSHIP

Population & Growth:
A fast-growing inland town currently at ~35,000 people, projected to exceed 50,000 by 2033. Growth driven by new housing developments, young families relocating from metro areas, and humanitarian-migrant settlement programs.

Demographic Mix:
- Child-heavy population (30% aged 0–14) with increasing demand for structured activities
- 20% overseas-born, notably South Asian, Middle Eastern and African communities
- Average household income below state average; affordability critical
- English-language barriers in some sub-groups, impacting access to recreation

Climate & Environment:
- Extremely hot summers (>36 °C days common) lead to strong seasonal demand; outdoor recreation otherwise limited
- Winters cold and dry (frosts common), discouraging outdoor water use
- No natural lakes; farm dams and irrigation channels represent high drowning risk

Existing Aquatic Services:
- One 25 m unheated outdoor pool (1974) – outdated amenities, no lift-accessibility, only open Nov–Mar
- Modest splash pad attracting heavy use by children under 10
- No indoor pool or gym; no meeting rooms, rehab space or community programming area
- Facility does not currently support learn-to-swim during winter or large community gatherings

Community Needs (from consultation):
- Year-round learn-to-swim access, especially for school groups and migrant communities
- Inclusive water safety education delivered in multiple languages
- Spaces for parents' groups, youth teams and community programs
- Better social connection opportunities for families moving into new suburbs

Ideal Solution Drivers:
Potential to deliver staged development – combining heated indoor pool / leisure pool for year-round use, or a modest hybrid model pairing outdoor upgrade with community centre and targeted mobile/outreach water-safety program.

COMMUNITY PROFILE
"SMALL REGIONAL SERVICE TOWN"

Population & Growth:
Township of ~12,000 residents servicing surrounding rural and mining communities (catchment ~25,000). Slight population decline overall but stable base due to agriculture, resources, and regional services (hospital, TAFE, aged care).

Demographic Mix:
- Balanced age spread (19% under 15, 22% over 60)
- Youth often leave after school (low retention of 18–30 yrs)
- Modest multicultural population (13% overseas born), but increasing Pacific, Filipino and African families arriving for agricultural/factory work
- Lower household incomes and transport access issues , particularly in outlying villages

Climate & Environment:
- Hot summers (35–40 °C); water-based recreation highly valued
- Very cold winter nights (<0 °C); outdoor pool use drops drastically
- Nearest natural waterways are dams/creeks with poor safety records and no supervision

Existing Aquatic Services:
- Basic 6-lane, 25 m outdoor town pool with toddler pool – unheated and ageing
- Open Nov–Mar only; limited to school carnival, lap swimming and summer recreation
- No indoor health/wellness or fitness centre in town
- Limited disability access and no structured programs (learn-to-swim outsourced to neighbouring town 45 mins away)

Community Needs (from consultation):
- Retain youth and families through better recreation and training opportunities
- Affordable learn-to-swim locally (transport to nearest pool is a known barrier)
- Warm-water access for seniors, rehab patients, and chronic condition management (heart/arthritis)
- Community pride and activation: strong desire for a contemporary space

Ideal Solution Drivers:
Potential for a modest, multi-use aquatic and lifestyle facility that supports town revitalisation, youth engagement, winter swim/rehab, and also acts as a community hub space — or a staged upgrade to outdoor pool with indoor hydro/recreation + strategic outreach to surrounding villages.

ROYAL LIFE SAVING NSW

PLANNING SHEET
"SILVER SEACHANGE" COASTAL TOWN

Budget Breakdown

Category	Description	Budget Allocation
Aquatic Infrastructure		$
Buildings & Amenities		$
Staffing & Safety		$
Technology & Innovation		$
Access & Inclusion		$
Programs		$
Sustainability Features		$
Other / Contingency		$
TOTAL CAPEX		$
TOTAL OPEX		$

What You Had to Leave Out
Every budget involves trade-offs. What did you decide not to include — and why?

ROYAL LIFE SAVING NSW







NATURAL WATERWAYS, HEALTH, AND RESILIENCE

The afternoon sessions broadened the focus to include natural aquatic environments and the role of resilience planning:

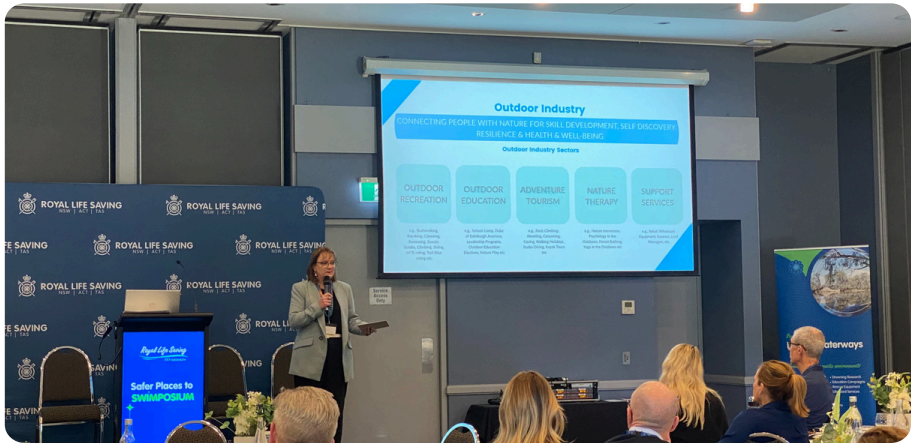
Hannah McKnight (Sydney Water) provided an update on efforts to make the Parramatta River swimmable, demonstrating how investment in water quality, monitoring, and infrastructure can transform urban waterways into safe, accessible recreation spaces.

Dr Susan Petterson (Water & Health) highlighted the microbial risks of natural swim sites, emphasising the importance of evidence-based monitoring to protect public health and build community trust in natural waterways.

Lori Modde (Outdoors NSW) connected aquatic environments to broader health and wellbeing outcomes, noting that rivers, lakes, and pools all play a role in building resilient, healthier communities.

Stephen Leahy (NSW SES) reflected on lessons from recent floods, reinforcing the need for aquatic facilities and waterways to be included in community emergency planning and resilience strategies.

Together, these presentations highlighted the potential of natural waterways as community assets while underscoring the need for robust safety, health, and resilience measures.





KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM DAY 2

Day 2 highlighted the solutions and strategies needed to ensure aquatic facilities and waterways remain safe, inclusive, and sustainable into the future.

1. The importance of evidence and data to guide investment decisions, ensuring renewal and safety strategies are targeted and effective.

2. Recognition that innovative design and access solutions can help councils deliver practical, affordable, and inclusive facilities within limited budgets.

3. The sector needs coordinated leadership from organisations such as Royal Life Saving to unify advocacy, align priorities, and strengthen the industry's voice to government.

4. Emphasis on leadership and culture as being just as critical as infrastructure for improving supervision, safety, and public confidence.

5. Agreement that the sector is ready with solutions but requires long-term policy certainty and consistent funding to turn plans into reality.



‘Not as dirty as I thought it would be’: Sydney opens a sandless new beach in the suburbs

It may have no sand, but Putney beach, which opens on Wednesday, gives residents far from the coast the chance to have a dip without the long commute

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‘It’s just so close to me’: Alhassan Dauda goes for a swim at the new Putney beach on the Parramatta River. Photograph: Bahram Mia/The Guardian

Western Sydney locals flock to newly opened Penrith beach dubbed 'Pondi'

By Declan Bowring | By Rosemary Bolger | ABC Radio Sydney | Urban Development and Planning

Tue 19 Dec 2023



It was a muggy, overcast opening day for Western Sydney's first beach. *(ABC Radio Sydney: Declan Bowring)*

“The Light Horse Park Redevelopment project is not just about upgrading a park; it's about enhancing our community's quality of life, promoting sustainability, and creating a space for shared memories and experiences,” the Mayor said.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 2025 Safer Places to Swimposium would not have been possible without the generous support of **Royal Life Saving Australia** and the **Australian Government's Water Safety and Snow Safe Funding Program**. Their commitment to strengthening water safety and aquatic facility sustainability provided the foundation for this event.

We extend our sincere thanks to the **speakers and panellists** who shared their expertise, case studies, and lived experiences across the two days. From **regional council representatives** and **leisure operators** to **researchers, designers, and community leaders**, their contributions shaped the discussions and gave voice to the challenges and solutions that matter most to communities across New South Wales.

Special recognition must also go to the event team at **Cypress Lakes Resort**, whose professionalism and attention to detail ensured the Swimposium was delivered smoothly. From technical support and room management to hospitality and logistics, their role was central in creating an environment that encouraged open dialogue, collaboration, and problem-solving.

Finally, we acknowledge the delegates—**representatives from councils, government agencies, industry partners, and community organisations**—whose active participation, insights, and contributions through Slido sessions, panels, and workshops helped build a shared vision for the future of aquatic facilities and waterways.

Together, this collective effort made the Swimposium a true reflection of the industry's resilience, creativity, and commitment to safer places to swim.

ROYAL LIFE SAVING
NEW SOUTH WALES

SAFER PLACES TO SWIMPOSIUM

SUMMARY REPORT

www.drowningprevention.org.au

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