

NSW AND ACT

Aquatic Industry Strategic Plan Scope

One industry.
One shared direction.

Built through evidence, industry consultation and a shared commitment to action.

Prepared by
ROYAL LIFE SAVING
NEW SOUTH WALES

Document Management

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Royal Life Saving NSW for and on behlaf of the Aquatic Industry of NSW and ACT

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Version 1 November 2026

Royal Life Saving acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters across Australia, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise that First Nations peoples have cared for rivers, lakes, creeks, and coastlines for tens of thousands of years, and that water holds deep cultural, spiritual, and practical significance.

As an organisation dedicated to water safety, we honour this enduring connection and commit to learning from and working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. By respecting traditional knowledge and strengthening partnerships, we aim to protect lives, celebrate culture, and ensure safer waterways for all.

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Introduction

Purpose of this document

The NSW and ACT aquatic industry supports community safety, health, recreation, education, sport and local employment. It connects public infrastructure with the organisations and people who own, operate, maintain and use aquatic facilities and services. The industry is substantial, but many of its most important challenges require shared leadership and coordinated action.

This Scoping Document provides the foundation for an industry-led Strategic Plan to 2032. It describes the industry, brings together the available NSW and ACT evidence, defines the proposed boundaries and themes of the Strategy, and explains how the industry will be engaged in setting the priorities, actions and measures of success.

What this document covers

The document is organised to move from the case for a shared Strategy to the evidence, scope and practical development process. It covers:

- The background and case for a NSW and ACT Aquatic Industry Strategic Plan.
- A consolidated profile of the industry's scale, value, infrastructure, access, workforce, safety and sustainability context.
- The proposed purpose, scope, strategic themes and alignment of the Strategy.
- The intended outcomes and tangible outputs of the project.
- A six-stage consultation and development pathway leading to an August 2027 launch.

One industry.
One shared direction.

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Industry context

Aquatic facilities and services are essential community infrastructure. They provide places where people learn to swim, build water-safety skills, participate in sport and recreation, improve their health, connect with others and develop lifelong confidence in and around water. The industry also supports public health, drowning prevention, emergency readiness, regional liveability and local employment.

The industry is broad and interdependent. Local government is a major owner and funder of public aquatic infrastructure; specialist operators and councils manage facilities and programs; workers provide supervision, teaching, coaching, customer service, technical operations and leadership; aquatic sports create participation and development pathways; and suppliers, designers, engineers, training organisations, health agencies and community partners support safe and sustainable delivery. Decisions made in one part of this system affect the capacity of others.

Despite this scale, the sector does not currently operate from a single NSW and ACT strategic framework. Investment decisions, workforce initiatives, standards, participation programs, research and advocacy are often developed separately. A shared Strategy provides the opportunity to establish common priorities, strengthen the evidence available to decision-makers and coordinate action where collaboration will produce greater impact than individual effort.

Why a Strategic Plan is needed

The need for a shared Strategy arises from pressures that are experienced across the industry and cannot be addressed effectively by individual organisations working alone. These include:

- Many public swimming pools are ageing and require significant renewal, replacement or adaptation, while fast-growing communities need additional water space.
- Regional, outer-metropolitan and vulnerable communities experience unequal access to facilities, affordable programs and swimming and water-safety education.
- The industry relies on a large, often casual and multi-skilled workforce that needs clearer career pathways, consistent capability development and safer working environments.
- Aquatic facilities manage complex public health, lifeguarding, water-quality, chemical, plant-room, child-safety and psychosocial risks.
- Energy, water and operating costs are increasing at the same time as facilities are expected to reduce emissions, improve resilience and demonstrate community value.
- Industry data are fragmented, limiting consistent planning, benchmarking, investment and advocacy across NSW and the ACT.

Aquatic Industry Profile

A connected industry

The NSW and ACT aquatic industry is a connected system of public infrastructure, services, programs, sport, safety and professional capability. It includes local government and other facility owners; operators and managers; swimming and water-safety teachers; lifeguards; technical operators; swim schools; aquatic sports and clubs; training and education providers; government agencies; researchers; designers and engineers; suppliers; and community partners.

Together, these organisations enable people to learn, work, participate and remain safe in aquatic environments. The strength of the industry depends on the quality and accessibility of its facilities, the capability of its workforce, the availability of programs and pathways, and the effectiveness of its partnerships.

Facilities, community value and visitation

NSW has 620 publicly accessible aquatic facilities and the ACT has 27, producing a combined network of 647 facilities. This includes 309 outdoor pools, 115 aquatic centres and 223 swim schools or other publicly accessible facilities.

The network receives approximately 129.6 million visits each year and generates an estimated $3.95 billion in annual social, health and economic value.

647

Publicly accessible aquatic facilities



309
Outdoor Pools



115
Indoor/outdoor pools



223
Swim Schools

129

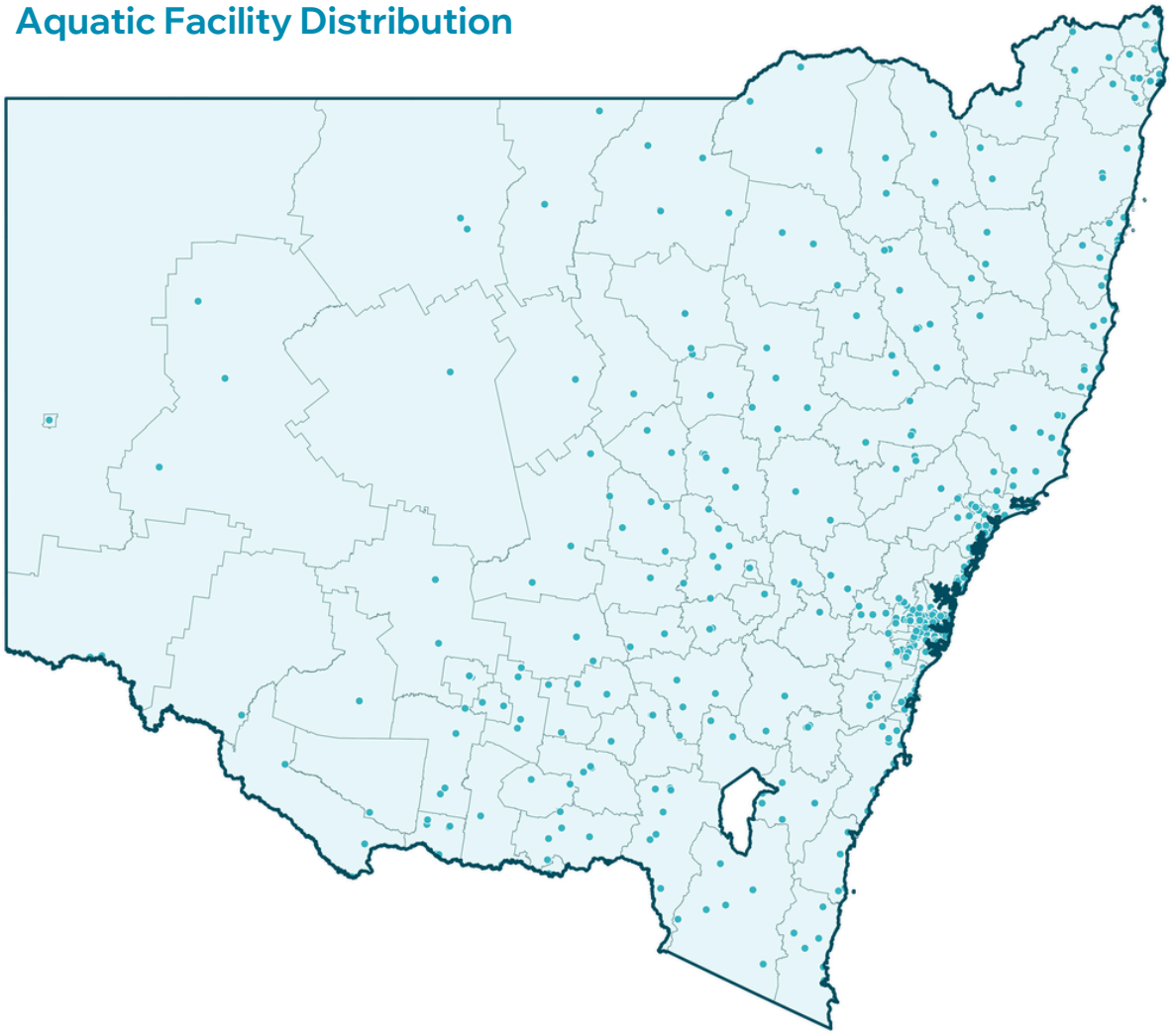
Million visits to facilities each year

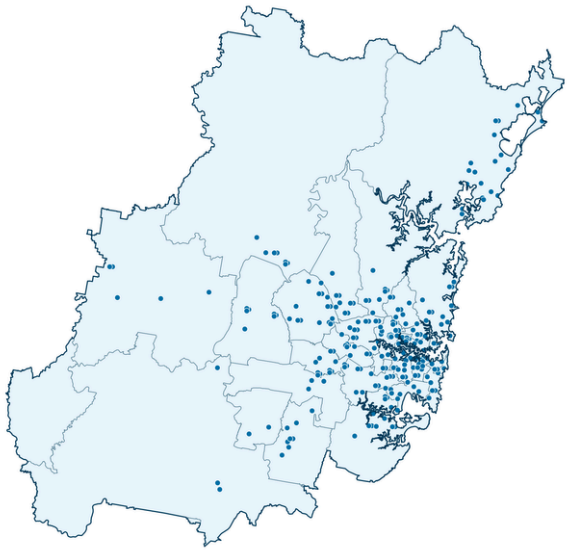
355,000
visits on an average day

$3.95b

In estimated annual social, health and economic value.

Aquatic Facility Distribution





Greater Sydney Region

Access to Pools

Information about the age, condition, remaining life, capacity, accessibility and renewal costs of publicly accessible aquatic facilities can support investment planning across NSW and the ACT. The Strategy can consider how this information can be used to assess future needs, compare priorities and plan for population growth.

Across NSW and the ACT, an estimated 1.63 million residents lived more than a 10-minute drive from a public pool in 2021. This number is projected to reach 1.91 million by 2032. The data also estimates that 447,697 residents lived more than a 20-minute drive from a public pool, increasing to 505,216 by 2032.

Access varies by location, including in regional communities, outer-metropolitan areas and growth corridors. The Strategy can address these differences through shared priorities tailored to local conditions.

1.63m

People living more than a 10-minute drive from a public pool, projected to reach 1.91 million by 2032.



Environmental sustainability

Aquatic facilities are energy- and water-intensive community assets. The combined NSW and ACT footprint is estimated at approximately 487.8 million kWh of electricity, 4.13 billion MJ of gas and 9.40 million kL of water each year. These figures indicate the scale of the opportunity for improved benchmarking, electrification, renewable energy, water efficiency, plant optimisation and climate resilience.

The main pressures include legacy gas heating, evaporation and leaks, inefficient filtration and backwashing, ageing heating and ventilation systems, and the capital cost of upgrading plant and building systems. Coordinated planning and procurement can help owners and operators develop stronger business cases and share effective practice.

An estimated annual footprint of:

487.8m
kWh of electricity

4.13b
MJ of gas

9.40m
kL of water

Aquatic Participation

Public swimming pools support a broad participation system across NSW and the ACT. This includes learn-to-swim and water safety education, lap and recreational swimming, fitness, school and community programmes, and organised pool sports. Alongside swimming, these sports include platform and springboard diving, artistic (synchronised) swimming, water polo, underwater sports and pool lifesaving. Participation involves people of all ages and abilities, as well as clubs, coaches, officials and volunteers. Pools provide the setting for regular training, competition and major events.

AusPlay estimates that in 2025–26, 1.14 million NSW adults (16.1 per cent of the adult population) and 72,400 ACT adults (18.0 per cent) participated in swimming at least once. It also estimates swimming participation by approximately 356,100 NSW children and 24,800 ACT children, using the child measure applied in the state data tables. These figures describe swimming participation; they do not represent the full range of pool-based sports or facility use.

Different disciplines place different demands on pool facilities. Diving requires suitable springboards or platforms; water polo and artistic swimming need pool space for training and competition; and underwater sports and pool lifesaving also depend on suitable water space, equipment and scheduled access. These activities share facilities with swimming lessons, school programmes, recreation and fitness.

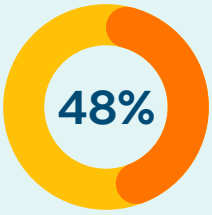
A useful industry profile should therefore consider participation across disciplines alongside club activity, facility availability and access to suitable pool space. This provides a stronger basis for understanding the capacity and role of swimming pool facilities across NSW and the ACT.

1.22m

adults participating in swimming

381,000

children participating in swimming





of Children leaving Primary School can meet the National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks for a 12 year old

Inclusion and access to participation

High facility visitation does not, on its own, show that participation is equitable. Cost, travel and transport, language, confidence, disability, limited program availability and culturally unsuitable delivery can affect whether people are able to begin or continue swimming, water-safety education and aquatic sport. NSW and ACT Government learn-to-swim programs have made a significant contribution to addressing these barriers by widening access to lessons and helping more people develop swimming and water-safety skills. Significant work has also been undertaken to improve accessibility and inclusion across aquatic programs and facilities.

The Strategy can build on this progress and consider barriers experienced by regional communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability, low-income households and people with limited previous exposure to aquatic environments. Access to suitable water space and access to effective education and programs are related but distinct issues, and both require attention.

100,000

Swimming Lessons to at risk communities in 2025

Workforce

The NSW and ACT aquatic industry has an estimated paid workforce of 25,530 people, comprising 24,326 in NSW and 1,204 in the ACT. The largest role groups are swimming and water-safety teachers (7,751), pool lifeguards (6,088), customer-service staff (4,088), fitness staff (2,625) and aquatic-program leaders and managers (1,669).

The industry depends on employees who are often seasonal, part-time, casual and multi-skilled. Its future capability will require stronger recruitment and retention, clearer career pathways, consistent qualifications and in-service development, improved technical capability, leadership development, workforce wellbeing and greater recognition of aquatic careers.

7751

Swim Teachers

6088

Pool Lifeguards

25,530

Paid aquatic-industry workforce

Health and safety

Aquatic workers manage public health, work health and safety, lifeguarding, supervision, first aid, emergency response, child safety, water quality, chemicals, plant rooms, patron behaviour and psychosocial hazards. Across NSW and the ACT, annual activity is estimated at 4,580 major incidents, 2,424 lifeguard rescues and 753 incidents of abuse directed at lifeguards or other staff. These are industry estimates rather than complete statutory counts.

The 2024 Safe Places to Swim report recorded 98 Aquatic Facility Safety Assessments across NSW and the ACT in 2023. The assessed facilities achieved a weighted average score of approximately 88 per cent and 69 were recognised or endorsed. The limited reach of independent assurance across the wider facility network remains an important strategic issue.

4580

Major Incidents

2424

Lifeguard Rescues

753

Psychosocial Incidents

98

Annual Safety Assessments







Percentage (%) of facilities assess





Average Safety score per facility

177

GSPO Subscribers (26%)

312

Mystery Guest Assessments

Project Plan

Purpose

The purpose of the project is to develop an industry-owned Strategic Plan that establishes a shared direction and practical priorities for the NSW and ACT aquatic industry. The Strategy will clarify where collective action is needed, support better investment and policy decisions, strengthen industry capability and provide a common basis for measuring progress.

Objective

To develop an industry-led Strategic Plan that sets a shared direction for the NSW and ACT aquatic industry to 2032.

Key Results

To develop an industry-led Strategic Plan that sets a shared direction for the NSW and ACT aquatic industry to 2032.

Scope

The Strategy will cover the publicly accessible aquatic industry across NSW and the ACT, including metropolitan, regional, rural and remote communities.

It will consider aquatic and leisure centres, outdoor pools, swim schools and other publicly accessible aquatic settings; facility planning, design and asset management; pool plant, water quality, technology and environmental sustainability; workforce, training and career pathways; inclusion and access; swimming, water safety, recreation and aquatic sport; health and safety; and sector leadership, data and growth.

It will engage owners, operators, workers, aquatic sports, education and water-safety providers, training organisations, suppliers, government and community partners.

Exclusions

The Strategy is intended to guide shared priorities and collective action. It will not replace existing organisational, regulatory or place-based responsibilities and will not:

- Include private residential pools within its operating scope.
- Replace individual facility master plans, asset plans or capital business cases.
- Replace the governance, industrial or operational responsibilities of individual organisations.
- Replace dedicated coastal or open-water strategies, although relevant intersections will be considered.
- Prescribe local actions that do not benefit from regional or whole-of-industry coordination.

Strategic Planing Principles

The development of the Strategy will be guided by the following principles:

Industry owned

The Strategy is shaped by the experience and priorities of the people and organisations that own, operate, work in and use aquatic services.

Evidence led

Decisions use the strongest available data and clearly identify where estimates, broader benchmarks or evidence gaps remain.

Inclusive and representative

Regional, metropolitan, workforce, cultural, disability and community perspectives are actively sought and reflected.

Focused on collective action

The Strategy concentrates on issues that require coordination, shared investment, consistent practice or whole-of-industry advocacy.

Practical and measurable

Every priority is supported by actions, accountable leaders, partners, timeframes and indicators that allow progress to be assessed.

Strategic Themes

The Strategy will be developed around six themes that reflect the shared issues identified through the industry profile and earlier engagement. Each theme will be tested through consultation and refined into a three-to-five-year outcome and a small number of priority actions.

01

Ageing Infrastructure

Future planning and design, ageing assets, renewal, accessibility, climate resilience, funding and procurement.

02

Workforce Development

Attraction and retention, qualifications, training quality, professional development, career pathways and worker wellbeing.

03

Aquatic Participation

Affordability, access, cultural inclusion, regional equity, growth and lifelong aquatic participation.

04

Aquatic Industry Cohesion

Leadership, governance, advocacy, investment, collaboration, data, research and demonstrating community value.

05

Health and Safety

Strengthening the systems and standards that protect participants, workers and communities.

06

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Affordable and equitable access; universal design; regional access; cultural safety; disability inclusion; representative participation and workforce diversity.

Strategic alignment

The Strategic Plan is intended to connect existing policy, standards and industry frameworks rather than duplicate them. Its role is to translate these directions into coordinated priorities for the NSW and ACT aquatic industry.

Development approach

The Strategy will be developed through a staged process that combines open participation with focused discussion and representative decision-making. Consultation will begin broadly, move into detailed thematic work, and then consolidate the strongest priorities and actions before the draft is tested with the wider industry.

01

Project announcement and mobilisation

Confirm the scope, governance, engagement approach and representation targets; explain why the Strategy is being developed and how people can contribute.

02

Have Your Say survey

Collect views from across the industry on strengths, pressures, future needs, priorities and actions; identify gaps in participation for targeted follow-up.

03

Thematic Workshops x 6

Explore each strategic theme in depth and produce one three-to-five-year outcome plus three to five proposed priorities for each theme.

04

Consolidated face-to-face forum

Bring representative regional, metropolitan and sector participants together to test evidence, resolve overlaps, prioritise directions and develop shared actions.

05

Draft Strategy consultation

Publish the proposed vision, outcomes, priorities, actions and measures and ask the industry whether the draft accurately reflects the consultation.

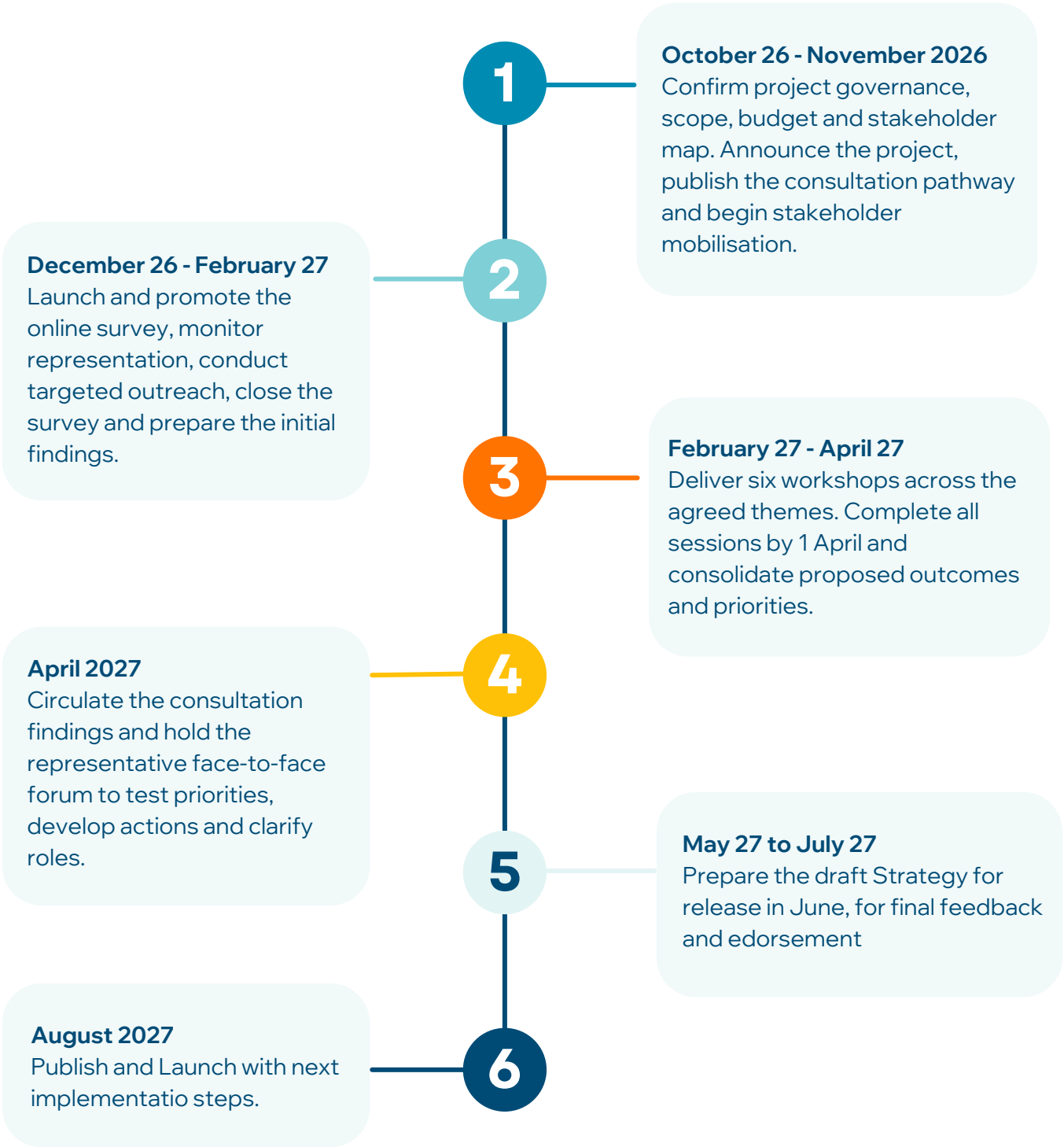
06

Finalisation and launch

Incorporate feedback, confirm ownership and implementation arrangements, secure endorsement and communicate the final Strategy across the sector.

Project Timeline

The timetable is designed to complete the thematic workshops before 1 April 2027, allow the consolidated forum to shape the draft in May, and preserve sufficient time for validation, endorsement, production and an August 2027 launch.



References

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- National Aquatic Industry Workforce Report (2025)
- Safe Places to Swim (2024)
- National Aquatic Workforce Framework (2024)
- The State of Aquatic Facility Infrastructure in Australia (2022)
- Children's Swimming and Water Safety Skills (2025)
- Annual Report 2024–25 (2025)
- National Aquatic Industry Committee Plan (2024)
- The Future of Public Swimming Pools (2026)
- Learn to Swim for At Risk Communities (2026) - NSW Government
- NSW Government Sport Plan
- ASC National Sport Strategy 2024 - 2034
- AusPlay NSW and ACT Data Tables, July 2025–June 2026 (2026)

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