



Research & Engagement Summary

Aquatic Facilities Strategy

March 2023



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Acknowledgement of Country

Delos Delta would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal, Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Peoples who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we work. We would like to express our respect for their Elders past and present.



Delos Delta

ABN

60 616 928 020

TELEPHONE

0432 034 967

EMAIL

hello@delosdelta.com

WEBSITE

delosdelta.com

ADDRESS

Level 2,
99 Northbourne Ave,
Turner, ACT 2612

delosdelta.com

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1. Introduction



Council is developing an *Aquatic Facilities Strategy* (the Strategy) to maximise the community benefit of aquatic facilities across the Western Downs.

This Summary provides a snapshot of important information related to the second and final stage of community engagement. It is intended to summarise progress to date and provide facts and findings to inform discussions in the community.

1.1 Why Do We Need A Strategy?

The *Aquatic Facilities Strategy* is an overarching document that will guide investment in developing, maintaining and managing Council's portfolio of aquatic facilities across the region to maximise community benefit and achieve desired outcomes.

The development of the Strategy marks the beginning of a multi-year method to identify, assess, and implement innovative opportunities for aquatic facilities in the Western Downs. This is necessary given the importance of these assets to the community and the costs they incur for Council. We therefore want to make sure that investment is directed to where its most needed.

The Strategy is being developed, in part, through a rigorous and multi-phased engagement process, which seeks the input and feedback of key stakeholders, the communities of the Western Downs, Councillors, and Council employees.

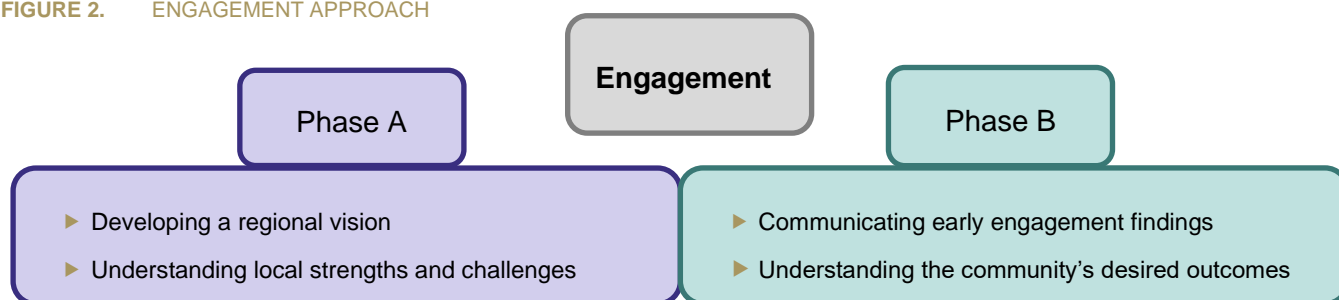
FIGURE 1. AQUATIC STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURE



1.2 Our Engagement Approach

Western Downs Regional Council is conducting extensive engagement with stakeholders and the community to ensure the Strategy is developed in line with the priorities of the region. Engagement consists of two phases. Early engagement (Phase A) sought to identify a vision for aquatic facilities across the Western Downs. It also examined how the strengths and challenges of each facility could be leveraged to address the needs of the region. The current phase of engagement (Phase B) presents the outcomes of Phase A to a wider cross-section of the community. Phase B provides a chance for each community to have their say on the outcomes and aspirations they want to see achieved over the next 10, 15, and 20 years.

FIGURE 2. ENGAGEMENT APPROACH



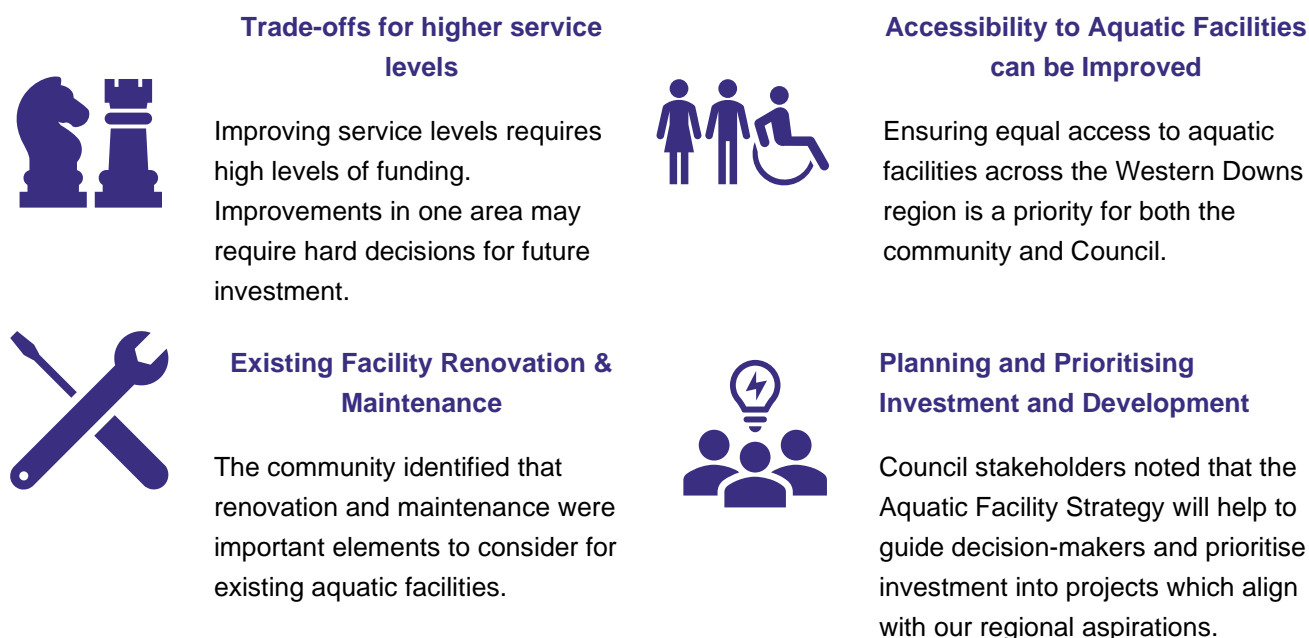
This engagement process provides the Western Downs community with the opportunity to voice their ideas and shape the *Aquatic Facilities Strategy* to their needs.

1.3 Early Key Findings

Clear themes have emerged from the existing engagement with the community as well as research undertaken to date. For instance:

- ▶ Stakeholders in the Western Downs have repeatedly highlighted the importance of community facilities. Aquatic facilities especially are considered important social and well hubs, with stakeholders keen to ensure these assets are well maintained and developed.
- ▶ When compared to similar neighbouring Local Government Areas, aquatic services in the Western Downs are broadly similar in terms of entry costs, and the total number of facilities relative to the size of the population.

Additional insights are summarised below:



2. Where Are We Now?



This section gives an overview of existing Council-owned aquatic facilities in Western Downs and their role in the community.

2.1 Aquatic Facilities in Our Community

Western Downs Regional Council has 7 aquatic facilities that lie within the scope of the *Aquatic Facilities Strategy*. They are:

- Chinchilla Aquatic Centre
- Chinchilla Botanic Parkland
- Dalby Aquatic Centre
- Jandowae Aquatic Centre
- Miles Aquatic Centre
- Tara Aquatic Centre
- Wandoan Aquatic Centre

The Strategy will not directly consider schools pools at Meandarra and Moonie, nor the natural watercourses such as rivers and lakes, but these will be acknowledged as valuable community assets within the Strategy.



As noted, early engagement focused on developing a common vision for aquatic facilities across the Western Downs. Engagement with key stakeholders allowed us to uncover how the respective strengths and challenges of each individual aquatic facility, and how we could make the most out of the opportunities these presented. As part of this approach, site visits were conducted and key stakeholders were engaged at every Council-owned aquatic facility illustrated above. Early engagement included:



378 Stakeholders Engaged



7 Site Visits



4 Workshops and Additional Follow-Up Interviews



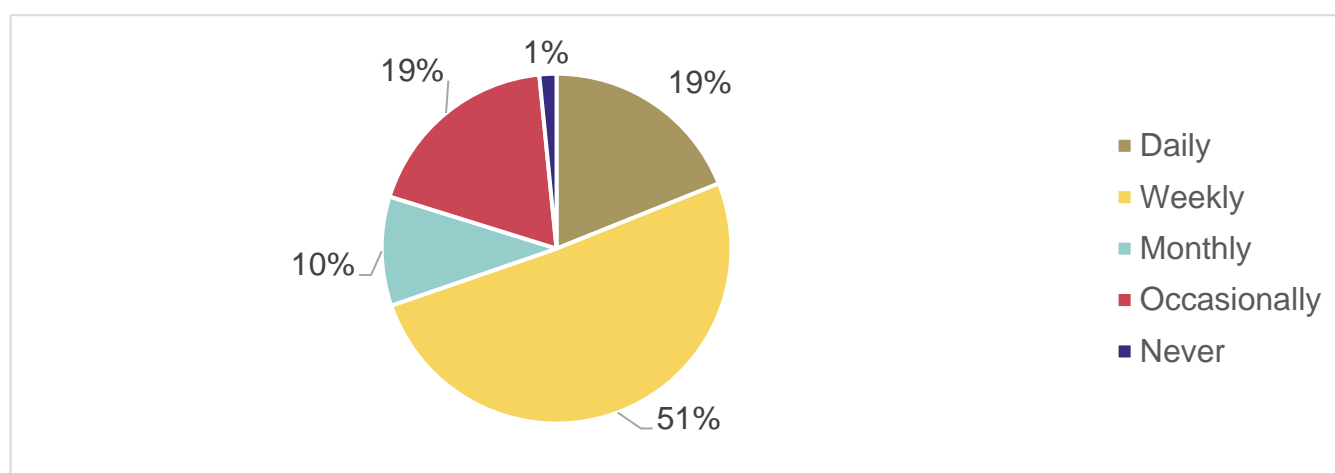
333 Survey Responses

2.2 High-level Engagement Insights

During early engagement, community members, Councillors, Council employees, and other key stakeholders identified common aspirations for aquatic facilities across the Western Downs. A common vision among those engaged was the need to **activate**, **maintain**, and **enhance** existing aquatic facilities.

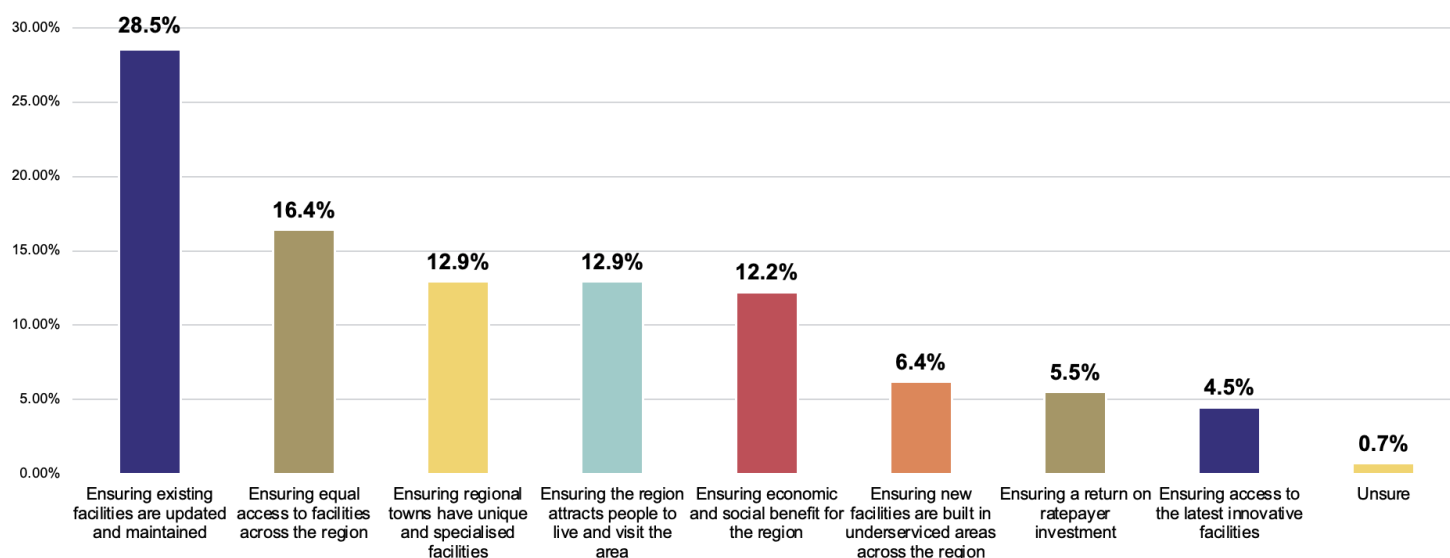
What was also evident was the value of aquatic facilities to the Western Downs community. Using data from the first community survey, the pie chart below shows how the majority of respondents (70%) use their local aquatic facility at least every week if not more. This high usage demonstrates the importance of aquatic facilities in the community.

GRAPH 1. HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE AQUATIC FACILITIES IN YOUR LOCAL AREA?




The maintenance and upgrade of existing aquatic facilities was also identified as a key priority in the first phase of engagement. The bar chart below from the community survey, shows a clear preference for the maintenance and upgrade of existing aquatic facilities.


GRAPH 2. WHAT SHOULD COUNCIL PRIORITISE WHEN MAKING INVESTMENT DECISIONS FOR AQUATIC FACILITIES?



2.3 Aquatic Facility Strengths and Challenges

This section summarises key strengths and challenges of aquatic facilities in the Western Downs identified through research and engagement.

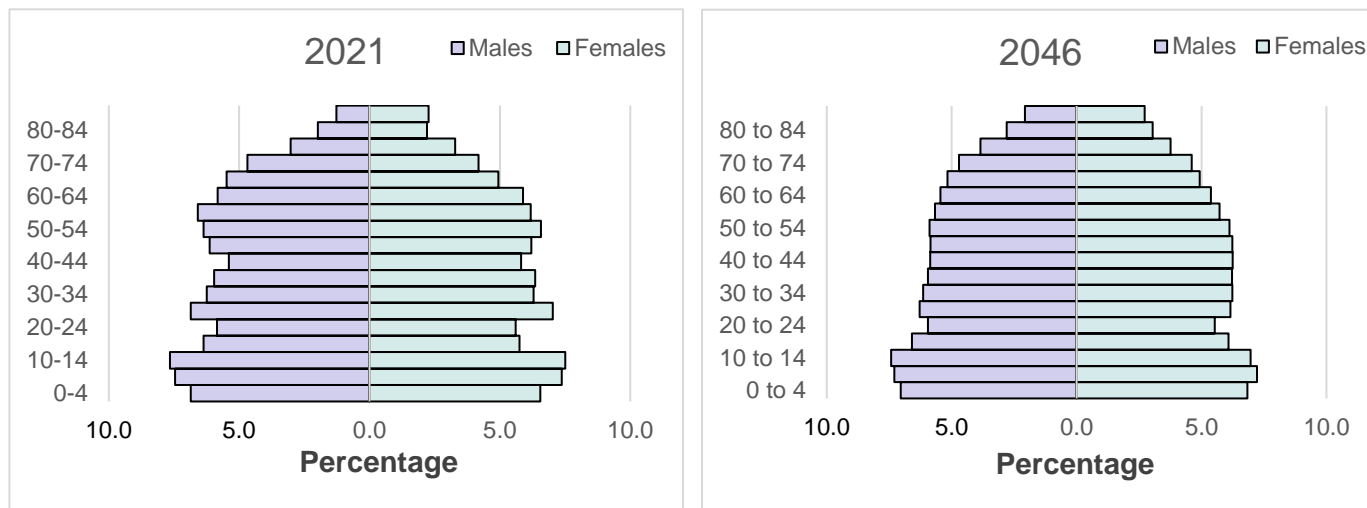
Themes	Strengths
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ The total number of aquatic facilities, and their wide dispersion around the region, is a relative strength of the Western Downs.▶ The blend of indoor and outdoor pools in the larger towns, and the existing availability of outdoor pools in the region's smaller towns, ensures that no area is currently missing out on the opportunity to make use of an aquatic facility regularly.▶ Stakeholders in early engagement indicated that all aquatic facilities are generally well used and loved by their local community.▶ Aquatic facilities play an important social and community role beyond being places to swim. Stakeholders in early engagement highlighted aquatic facilities as being important social outlets.▶ Aquatic facilities in the Western Downs are supported by a large membership base with a variety of different users.

Themes	Challenges
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Many aquatic facilities across the Western Downs are nearing the end of their serviceable life. This creates safety issues, and challenges for Council in maintaining, repairing, upgrading, or renewing these assets.▶ Research and engagement found several aquatic facilities in need of accessibility improvements, or maintenance and upgrade to key amenities.▶ Increased activation and utilisation of aquatic facilities will require further engagement with schools, swim clubs, and other users.

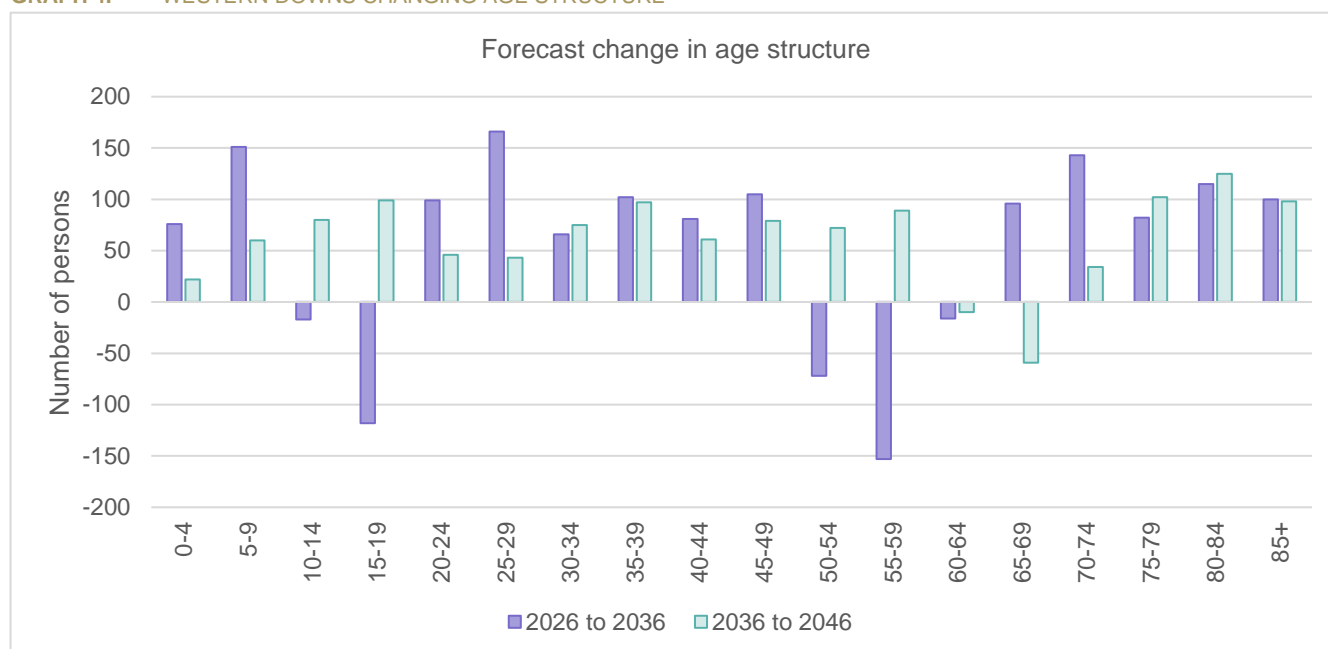
2.4 Population Trends

Population projections can provide valuable insight about the types of aquatic facilities and services required in the future. It is important for us understand how our community will change so that our decision-making now reflects and accommodates these moves.

GRAPH 3. WESTERN DOWNS POPULATION PYRAMID IN 2021, AND PROJECTED POPULATION IN 2046¹



GRAPH 4. WESTERN DOWNS CHANGING AGE STRUCTURE



Both the graph and population pyramids above predict changes to make-up of our community. Between 2026 and 2036, the largest growth in age groups will be within the 25 to 29 age group (growth of 166 persons) and the 5 to 9 age group (growth of 143 persons). Between 2036 and 2046, however, the largest growth will be in age cohorts of 75 to 79, and 80 to 84.

¹ <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA37310>, <https://forecast.id.com.au/western-downs>





Predicted growth of the infant and children population will require careful consideration in the *Aquatic Facilities Strategy*. This may include initiatives to provide more zero-depth or splash park facilities, either instead of or supplementary to traditional lap pools, or more amenities for families.

An ageing population brings with it another set of complexities that should be acknowledged and planned for in the *Aquatic Facilities Strategy*. These may include a need for new wellness and rehabilitation services, hydrotherapy and warm water pools, or earlier opening hours at our aquatic facilities.

2.5 National Trends – Aquatic Facilities

This section presents some of the key aquatic facility trends occurring throughout Australia that are most relevant to the Western Downs.

FIGURE 3. NATIONAL AQUATIC FACILITY TRENDS

Trends	Description
 Ageing Facilities	<p>The average public pool in Australia is over 50 years old. 40% of all public pools in the country will reach the end of their predicted lifespan in the next decade.² The Western Downs also possesses several pools at the end of their lifespan. The development of an <i>Aquatic Facilities Strategy</i> presents an opportunity to democratically prioritise future investment in aquatic facilities.</p>
 Rising Energy Costs and Labour Shortages	<p>Macroeconomic events have increased pressure on aquatic facility operating costs, including recent inflationary pressures on energy prices, employee wages³, and rising repayment rates on current borrowings⁴. Increased operating costs make service level improvements less affordable. A dedicated <i>Aquatic Facilities Strategy</i> will help us prioritise service level changes in the future.</p>
 Energy Efficiency and Technology	<p>Rising energy costs and international efforts to combat climate change have led to the development of more environmentally-friendly and energy-efficient buildings world-wide, including aquatic facilities⁵. These aquatic facilities often employ innovative solutions including energy storage systems, solar PVs, heat pumps, heat recovery systems, and smart control systems to reduce their carbon footprint⁶.</p>
 Wellness and Rehabilitation	<p>Australian pools have gone through several phases of design focus, from competitive sport to recreational and the emergence of 'wellness and rehabilitation.'⁷ The emergence of new user groups nationally aligns with engagement findings in the Western Downs which sees aquatic facilities enjoyed by a variety of competitive swimming teams, casual and rehabilitative users.</p>

² Royal Life Saving, *The state of Aquatic Facility Infrastructure in Australia*

³ ABS, *Wage Price Index*, 2022

⁴ RBA, *Financial Stability Review*, 2022

⁵ International Energy Agency, *'Building-Envelopes'*

⁶ The Mandarin, *'Federal funding flows to zero emissions aquatic centres'*

⁷ Royal Life Saving, *'The state of Aquatic Facility Infrastructure in Australia'*



As aquatic facilities have become larger and more complex, the expectations of communities across Australia have also shifted. A dedicated *Aquatic Facilities Strategy* ensures the Western Downs will continue to invest in innovative and multi-use facilities for the benefit of our changing community.

The trends outlined above are important to help us define what best practice looks like in the aquatic facility space. It is important for us to understand these the implications associated with changes in this space so that we can make investment decisions based on the future needs of the community.






2.6 How our Aquatic Facilities Compare

This section compares the provision of aquatic facilities across the Western Downs as well as with neighbouring local government areas.

2.6.1 Regional Comparison

The table below shows that the Western Downs provides a similar number of aquatic facilities relative to the size of the population. A future-focused *Aquatic Facilities Strategy* will ensure these existing facilities are enhanced, upgraded, and maintained now and in years to come.

TABLE 1. LOCAL AQUATIC FACILITIES COMPARISON

Council		Aquatic Facilities per 10k Population	Council Aquatic Facilities (not including community, private or school facilities)	Approximate Population
	Western Downs	2.1	7	34,000
	South Burnett	1.9	6	32,000
	Banana Shire	2.1	3	14,500
	Goondiwindi	3.0	3	10,000
	Southern Downs	1.1	4	36,000

2.6.2 Internal Comparison

The table below presents the total visits to the region's aquatic facilities in comparison to the population of the relevant local catchment.

TABLE 2. VISIT TO POPULATION STATISTICS

Aquatic Facility	Average Annual Visitors (2018-19 to 2020-21)	Population of Catchment (2023*) ⁸	Visit to Population Ratio
Chinchilla Aquatic Centre	48,500	7,213	6.7
Dalby Aquatic Centre	97,700	13,219	7.4
Jandowae Aquatic Centre	7,200	1,004 (2021) ⁹	7.2
Miles Aquatic Centre	12,700	1,841	6.9
Tara Aquatic Centre	14,600**	2,034	7.2
Wandoan Aquatic Centre	4,000	666 (2021) ¹⁰	6.0

*Population forecast for the year 2023. For the towns with insufficient information to create a forecast, the ABS census data from 2021 was used.

**For the purposes of calculation, 2020-21 visitor figures for the Tara Aquatic Centre are assumed to be equal to the 2019-20 season.

The statistics in the table above reconfirm the importance of every aquatic facility in the Western Downs. While the larger aquatic facilities in Dalby and Chinchilla enjoy high numbers of visitors, smaller facilities are also well used when compared to the size of the local population.

⁸ Forecast.id, "Population Forecast", 2023 - 2046

⁹ ABS 'Census All Persons QuickStats', 2021

¹⁰ ABS 'Census All Persons QuickStats', 2021

3. Next Steps



The development of a dedicated *Aquatic Facilities Strategy* will allow us to prioritise future investment in aquatic facilities, aligning decision-making with community aspirations while balancing these ambitions with what is financially viable.

The research and engagement undertaken to date provides the backdrop for deeper engagement with the community. This second stage of community consultation is happening now, and we want to hear from you.

We're interested in what the community sees as the key outcomes they'd like to see for their aquatic facilities, or the opportunities the new Aquatic Facilities Strategy can unlock. A selection of key opportunities that may be worth exploring include:

3.1.1 Existing Facility Renovation & Maintenance

Aquatic facility stakeholders identified the maintenance and renovation of existing aquatic facilities as a key priority for exploration in the *Aquatic Facilities Strategy*.

Key Opportunity: The necessary redevelopment of aquatic facilities across the Western Downs due to their age provides an opportunity to adapt the future direction of each facility. This includes investment and management arrangements, service levels, and the amenities provided at each site.

3.1.2 The Dalby Aquatic Centre

The age and condition of the Dalby Aquatic Centre resulted in it being quickly identified as a potential priority for future redevelopment in Council's recent condition assessment.¹¹ Since 2008, elements of the Dalby Aquatic Centre have been heritage listed, which will increase the time required to develop the site.

Key Opportunity: The redevelopment of the Dalby Aquatic Centre may become a strategic priority given the risks associated with the facility's deteriorating condition and the need for redevelopment to consider the site's heritage listing.

¹¹ GHD, Engineering review of Aquatic Facilities – Condition Assessment Report