New ACT Aquatic Strategy
Listening Report No. 1

The ACT Government is developing a new aquatic strategy to guide the planning, management, and future investment in territory-wide aquatic facilities over the next decade. The strategy will provide an evidence-based framework that reflects community needs, industry trends, and the long-term sustainability of the Territory's aquatic network.

Report on what we heard

The development of the new ACT Aquatic Strategy requires a strategic, future focused and transparent approach with meaningful engagement, that invests in modern, inclusive, competition-ready, and sustainable aquatic infrastructure. It will balance community needs, high-performance pathways, population growth and emerging trends such as urban and wild swimming.

Background

On 28 January 2026, the Minister for Sport and Recreation wrote to over 30 organisations with an interest in the development of the new aquatic strategy, to provide an update on the early planning for a new ACT Aquatic Strategy and noted Government's priorities within the process to be:

- Options to deliver a publicly-owned 50 metre outdoor pool in Woden
- Provision of competition and recreation dive facilities, that can also support other deep water aquatics sports such as water polo, underwater rugby, etc
- The need for new aquatic facilities in growth areas of Canberra, such as West Belconnen
- A high-level condition audit for each of the existing ACT Government aquatic facilities, which will provide guidance on operational and maintenance standards.

The correspondence invited feedback on any additional priorities that should be included in the terms of reference, with responses due by Friday, 13 February 2026.

Feedback from the 2025 Canberra Aquatic Centre consultation has been shared with relevant ACT Government agencies to assist in the development of the new aquatic strategy.

Submissions

In total, 10 responses were received, noting one response was co-signed by 30 stakeholder organisations. Key themes have emerged, with an interest from respondents to see:

- Co-design and early engagement
- Consideration of competition ready infrastructure: 50m pools, timing compatibility, seating, and deepwater facilities
- Inclusion of open/urban/wild swimming with support for water quality programs and shoreline amenities
- Commitment to equity and inclusion, with emphasis on universal access, affordability, and women-friendly features
- Focus on sustainability & lifecycle discipline, coupled with whole of life costing
- Protection of existing assets, including early audits

- Consideration of events and a regional hub to support hosting national or state events, contributing to economic uplift

Draft Terms of Reference

A draft Terms of Reference (ToR) has been developed to reflect the submissions and feedback received to date. The draft ToR are outlined below.

1. Background research and context

- Review relevant national and international literature on aquatic facility planning, design, and operation.
- Examine the previous ACT Aquatics Planning Framework and identify key learnings and areas requiring renewal.

2. Assessment of community needs

- Analyse current and future demand for aquatic facilities, including competition standard venues, informed by ACT population projections and input from the community, sporting groups, and stakeholders.
- Consider demographic changes, growth areas, and potential barriers to accessing aquatic facilities.

3. Mapping and inventory of facilities

- Develop a comprehensive register of ACT aquatic centres, including both government owned and private facilities, as well as facilities in nearby NSW.
- Develop a register of urban swimming locations, including any associated facilities, in the ACT.
- Produce catchment and access mapping to understand how Canberrans interact with the existing network of pools and urban swimming locations.

4. Benchmarking and industry trends

- Compare Canberra's level of aquatic facility provision to similar jurisdictions across Australia.
- Identify emerging trends in aquatic recreation, sports participation, facility design, sustainability, and operational models, particularly those relevant to Canberra's climate, including urban and wild swimming.

5. Analysis of facility use and organisational participation

- Review at least five years of visitation and usage data for ACT Government aquatic facilities and where available, other public aquatic facilities that are privately owned.
- Examine how sporting clubs and associations use facilities and assess membership trends across aquatic sports.

6. Assessment of operational performance

- Evaluate the performance of each ACT Government aquatic facility, including financial, operational, and service delivery metrics.

7. Identification of gaps and future provision options

- Determine whether gaps exist in facility provision, including for competition and recreation diving, and outline potential ways to address them.
- Recognise Government's existing commitments to deliver the new Canberra Aquatic Centre in Commonwealth Park and a new 50m outdoor pool in Woden (and identify a suitable site) and inform decisions on facility inclusions.
- Provide high level cost estimates (capital and operating) for any identified provision gaps.

8. Facility condition audits

- Undertake a review of existing condition assessments for all ACT Government aquatic centres.
- Identify asset lifecycle needs and develop a high level 10year program of maintenance and facility upgrades.
- Include analysis of electrification and gas replacement requirements in alignment with ACT Government policy.

9. Financial forecasting

- Prepare a 10-year forecast of expected maintenance, capital improvements, facility upgrades, and operating subsidy requirements for each ACT Government aquatic centre.
- Include financial assumptions for cost escalation, contingencies, and ACT Government oncosts.

10. Strategy development

- Ensure the final strategy presents clear, evidence-based recommendations.
- Align proposed directions with sustainable asset management practices, value for money principles, and broader ACT Government policies and planning frameworks.
- Inform the strategy development through meaningful engagement with stakeholders, aquatic sports groups, users, and the broader community.

Feedback

The ACT Government welcomes feedback on the draft Terms of Reference. Your input will help refine the document and shape the upcoming procurement documentation to be produced to engage a consultant who will lead the development of the new Aquatic Strategy.

A Statement of Requirements, that considers feedback provided on the draft Terms of Reference, will be available when the tender package is publicly released on Tenders ACT. For probity reasons, the final procurement documentation, including the Statement of Requirements, will not be made available or shared with community stakeholders prior to the commencement of the public tender process.

Feedback is invited until **Monday 20 April 2026**.

Please email submissions to sportandrecreation@act.gov.au

Future community engagement

The ACT Government is committed to genuine engagement with the community and stakeholders to help inform the development of the new Aquatic Strategy. In addition to this early engagement on the Terms of Reference, appropriate opportunities to use collaborative methods of engagement with stakeholders are also being considered as part of a broader approach to engaging with Canberrans.

Canberra Aquatic Centre

The ACT and Australian Governments have jointly committed $137.8 million to plan and deliver the new facility to meet the needs of our growing population. It will also strengthen the city's broader sport and recreation network and complement existing facilities.
The project is in the early stages of design and a final decision on the scope of the centre hasn't been made.

The Canberra Aquatic Centre is being progressed in parallel with the development of the new Aquatic Strategy, ensuring the new centre complements and strengthens the ACT's broader aquatic network. It is expected that the work undertaken through the development of Aquatic Strategy will inform the final design and scope decisions for the Canberra Aquatic Centre.

Planning for a new pool in Woden

The Government will also progress options to deliver a public 50 metre outdoor in Woden as part of the Aquatic Strategy, with work continuing on site options that meet the community's needs and technical requirements.