



Why do we build pools?

The value of public swimming facilities



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Introduction

Swimming pools are some of the most well-used and loved public facilities. They bring people together across age, background, and ability, offering shared spaces that promote health, fun, inclusion, and social connection. Pools foster resilient, equitable communities and support a wide range of benefits. Yet, despite their broad impact, public swimming pools are among the most expensive municipal assets to build and operate. Thus, when planning a swimming pool project to be economically sustainable, it becomes imperative to understand the desired intentions and benefits. This often begins by answering the simple question: Why do we build pools?

Too often, when a pool project begins – whether a new build or a renovation – the planning process is driven by immediate practical needs, such as learning to swim, school programs, or competition. These organised uses are important but represent only a fraction of a pool's overall potential. Many owners (typically municipalities) overlook the wider community benefits that well-planned aquatic facilities can deliver – from inclusive recreation and rehabilitation to mental wellness and cultural connection.

This discussion paper aims to expand the conversation. It explores a broader spectrum of what pools can offer and makes the case for approaching them not simply as recreational facilities, but as strategic investments in public health, community development, and social infrastructure.

Setting clear goals early in the planning process – and reviewing progress against these goals as the project moves forward – is crucial to realizing this potential. These goals help guide design decisions, ensuring the final facility reflects the community it serves.

In the past, most swimming pools were designed with a narrow understanding of community needs. As a result, many older facilities can be improved by having a broader, more inclusive vision during refurbishment.

This paper serves as a tool for municipal staff and decision-makers to develop strong rationales and clear expectations for pool projects in their communities, delivering aquatic spaces with lasting social value for generations to come.



Potential benefits

Public swimming pools offer benefits that extend well beyond recreation. We've grouped these into four key categories: health, wellbeing and safety benefits; social benefits; sport benefits; and economic benefits. They are discussed briefly below.

Health, wellbeing and safety benefits

- **Drowning prevention, water safety, learning to swim**

Swimming pools teach essential life skills, including how to feel comfortable in and around water. Learning to swim builds confidence; it prepares children and adults for safe aquatic experiences in all environments.

- **Rehabilitation**

Water-based activities are a powerful tool for physical rehabilitation. For some people – including those with joint problems, injuries, or excess weight – it can be one of the most effective and low-impact forms of physical activity.

- **Wellbeing, relaxation, and mental health**

The calming properties of water – particularly in thermal and spa environments – can help relax the body and mind, reduce stress, and support an individual's overall mental wellness.

- **Leisure and fun**

Pools are designed to support families with children and adolescents. They provide a healthy space to connect, play, and spend quality leisure time together.

- **Building a foundation for other water activities**

Swimming is a foundational skill to safely engage with most other water activities, including surfing, kayaking, and paddleboarding.

- **Respite from heat**

During times of extreme heat, as well as in hot regions of the world, it can be a matter of life or death to cool down. Water is incredibly efficient for lowering the body's core temperature; pools can therefore provide a valuable public safety service.

Social benefits

- **Youth development**

Swimming and other water activities are a positive and healthy way of spending leisure time and can help build social networks. Involvement in swim clubs or working as lifeguards can also foster leadership and provide employment opportunities for young people.

- **Community building and engagement**

Pools act as gathering spaces that strengthen community bonds. They offer a shared environment where people of all ages and backgrounds can connect.

- **Inclusion, universal design, and an equitable society**

Pools can be enjoyed across all stages of life and levels of ability; they are truly a place for all. With inclusive design and accessibility in mind, they become places where everyone feels welcome and supported.



Sport benefits

- **Fitness and sport for all**

From lane swimming to water aerobics, pools host a wide range of physical activities that promote health and fitness among diverse individuals and groups.

- **Competitive sport**

Swimming competitions and other water-based sports offer an opportunity for people to pursue their personal fitness goals, build discipline, and stay active.

- **Elite sport**

A strong network of local, regional, and national pools supports the development of high-performance athletes and a path to elite-level competition.

Economic benefits

- **Reduced healthcare system costs**

Participation at public pools helps lower healthcare system costs by promoting healthier, more active lifestyles. One clear example of this was during the COVID-19 lockdowns, when many elderly individuals were unable to attend their regular water gymnastics classes. As a result, their health significantly deteriorated, demonstrating the important role public aquatic programs play in preventative healthcare.

- **Reduced workplace absenteeism**

The health of the workforce was a key motivation when the pool sector was nationalised starting in England around 1850, with “public baths”. The recognition of this benefit remains to this day.

- **Neighbourhood development**

Leisure facilities, including pools and community centres, are catalysts for urban renewal. They can improve the desirability of a community and even increase local property values.

- **Attracting new businesses**

Companies increasingly consider the availability of community amenities when deciding where to locate or expand. Access to leisure facilities, such as pools, can be a key factor in their deliberations.

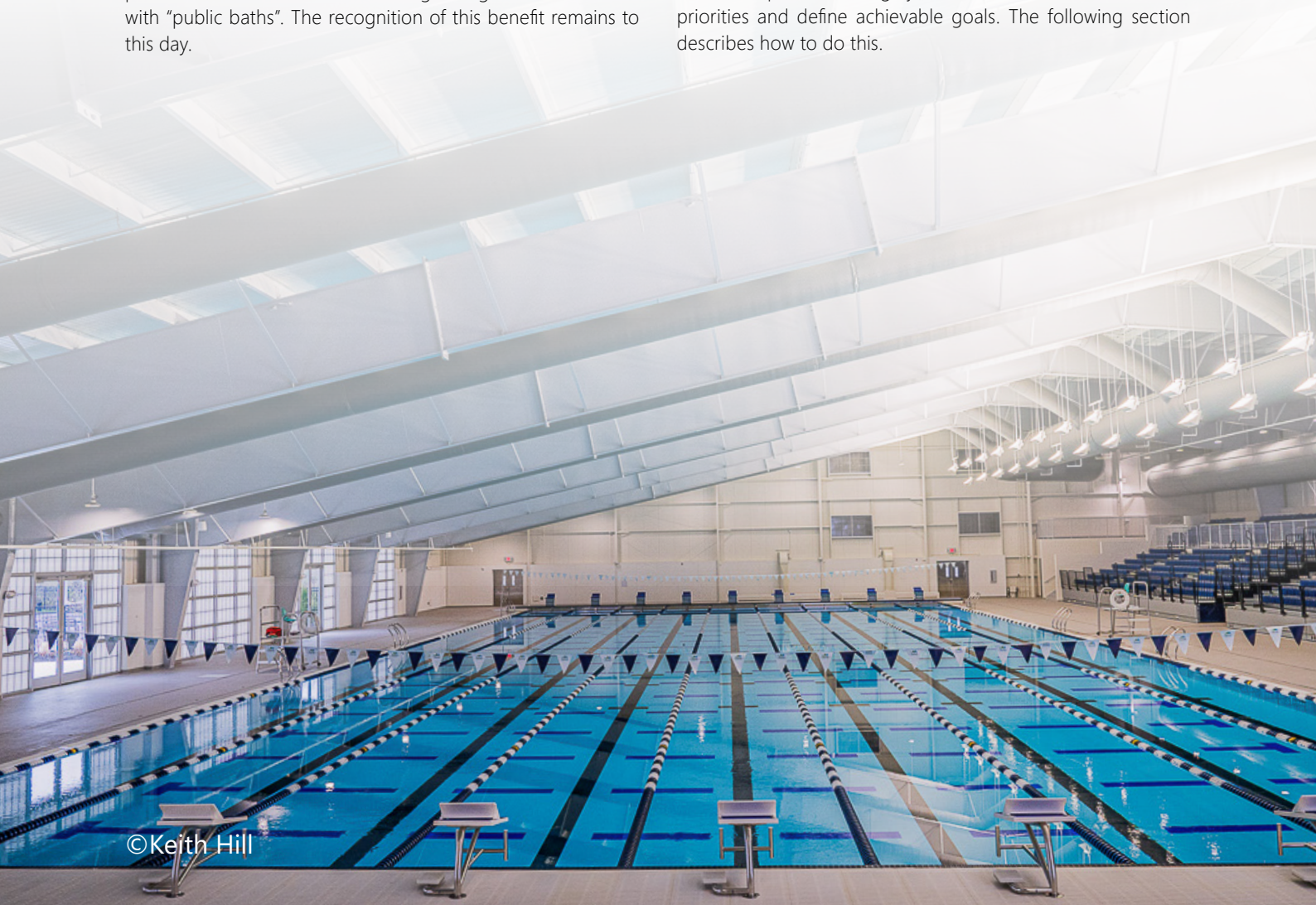
- **Tourism growth**

Pools are a natural complement to other tourism offerings – such as skiing – as they create all-weather recreation options. Indoor aquatic facilities, in particular, can help extend seasonal tourism and enhance a region’s overall appeal.

- **Job creation**

Building and operating a swimming pool requires a diverse team, creating meaningful job opportunities – including those for youth. They can also provide a vital link for those exploring new career directions.

In summary, the benefits of public swimming pools are diverse, impactful, and long-lasting. While communities may value different aspects more highly, in all cases it’s critical to set clear priorities and define achievable goals. The following section describes how to do this.



Setting goals: the starting point of a successful project

Public pools are unique community assets and can contribute to a wide range of goals: drowning prevention, population health, recreation, rehabilitation, inclusion, youth development, and local employment. To ensure these benefits, the starting point for all projects must be clear goal setting. Defining what success looks like from the outset will shape every key decision – from design and programming to measurement of long-term performance.

To guide this process, the following steps outline the most important considerations for launching a successful public pool project. For more technical guidance, see **'Getting Your Pool Facility Right'** by the IAKS Pool Expert Circle.

Why are we doing it? The strategic level

Before determining what to build or refurbish, it is essential to understand why you are doing it. Every facility should be anchored in a clearly defined purpose. This often begins with reviewing data from an existing pool. This helps at a strategic and political level, where decision-makers identify the core goals of the project or an identified need. This might be to replace an ageing and/or energy inefficient facility, to reduce overcrowding at other existing pools, to add missing programming, such as family-friendly spaces, or to introduce a new type of recreational or wellness offer in the region.

Regional and national planning

Swimming pools rarely serve only their immediate neighbourhood. Their impact – and their users – often span broader geographic areas. As such, it is essential to align any new facility with regional and national planning.

By analysing the current coverage of aquatic facilities in a given area, decision-makers can better identify gaps and avoid duplication. For instance, are there enough warm-water pools for therapeutic use? Is there a shortage of learn-to-swim facilities? Or perhaps there are already several 50-metre pools in the region? A national perspective becomes particularly important when there is demand for specialised functions, such as facilities for elite sports.

The users know best

Once the overall purpose of the project has been established, it's crucial to involve future users – and non-users – as they play a central role in the success of the project. Users can help clarify why certain features are important and what functions are necessary to meet those needs. This feedback becomes a valuable resource for architects and operators as they translate broad goals into practical, functional design.



Timing engagement for maximum impact

Engagement is most valuable in the early planning stages, when key decisions around programming and purpose are still being shaped. Later, once a preliminary concept has been developed, users should be brought back into the process to test, refine, and validate the proposed content and functionality.

To ensure this input is meaningful, it is important to set clear expectations about the purpose of their participation. The goal is not consensus, but insight. To inform decisions, not delay them. Be sure to involve a broad representation of future users – both organised and self-organised groups. Along with future local users, it is also advisable to involve operational experts and stakeholders who represent different aquatic activities, such as lifesaving organisations or aquatic federations.

Process design and curating user and expert input

Both the facility owner/operator and the architect play a crucial role in creating processes that integrate user input, while also ensuring their input is appropriately weighed according to how critical each group's needs are to the success of the facility.

For example, if the primary goal is drowning prevention, it is essential to create an environment that builds water confidence, including warm, shallow pools for beginner experiences. Therefore, if the consultation process focuses too heavily on competitive swimmers, their needs may dominate the design – and yield a facility that fails to meet its core mission.

Build knowledge to make better decisions

Ultimately, good decisions are grounded in good information: insights about users, awareness of the local, regional and national facility contexts, and a clear understanding of the project's strategic purpose.

Don't rush the process. Skipping early engagement – or failing to identify clear project goals – can lead to costly changes, when even the smallest revisions can require rework by architects, engineers, or contractors. Investing the time to build a strong foundation of knowledge early on is not only more effective but also more economical.

When setting goals, it is important to ensure they are measurable. We discuss this further in the next section.



Measuring outcomes and impact: Why it matters for public pool investment

Public swimming pools represent significant investments; it is essential to evaluate and measure if – and how – they are meeting the objectives set at the beginning of the project.

Clarifying purpose and demonstrating value

In an era of increased scrutiny over public spending, it is not enough for pool projects to deliver value – they must demonstrate it. For local governments and funding bodies, this means articulating clear goals and implementing robust frameworks to measure outcomes and impact. Demonstrating the benefits of public pools is essential – not only for accountability but also for securing sustained funding, policy support, and community trust.

From inputs to impact

Too often, measurement of community infrastructure focuses on inputs (e.g. money spent) or outputs (e.g. visitor numbers). While these metrics are useful, they don't answer the most important questions: What changed? For whom? And why?

Outcomes-based measurement digs deeper. It tracks the real-life changes that pools bring to individuals and communities, such as improved safety for children, increased physical activity levels among older adults, or stronger social cohesion in multicultural communities. Establishing a logic model or theory of change early in a project can help guide both planning and evaluation efforts by making these intended outcomes explicit.

Tools for measuring impact

Indicators and levels of measurement

Outcomes can be tracked at multiple levels:

- *Micro-level:* changes in individual behaviours or health (e.g. a child reaching swimming benchmarks)
- *Meso-level:* community-level change (e.g. increased community engagement or social connection)
- *Macro-level:* broader societal or economic impact (e.g. reduced healthcare costs or improved climate resilience)

Indicators should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely). They may be:

- *Qualitative*, such as interviews capturing personal experiences; or
- *Quantitative*, such as a reduction in non-swimmer rates

The choice of indicators must reflect stakeholder priorities and ethical considerations, especially when working with vulnerable populations.



Social return on investment (SROI)

SROI is one framework gaining traction around the world, as it helps quantify the social, health and economic benefits of various programmes and infrastructure, including pools. SROI estimates the social value created per Dollar/Euro invested, using financial proxies for non-market outcomes, such as improved wellbeing, increased social cohesion, fewer drownings, or reduced injury risk.

For example, a Royal Life Saving Australia study entitled 'Social Health and Economic Benefits of the National Aquatic Industry' found an SROI of \$4.87 (AUD) for every \$1 (AUD) invested in aquatic infrastructure and programs.

While powerful, SROI is data-intensive, and its effectiveness depends on the quality of proxies and stakeholder input. Its financial framing can also oversimplify complex outcomes, and comparisons between SROI analyses must be approached cautiously.

Cost-benefit analysis (CBA)

Cost-benefit analysis is a more traditional approach that monetises both direct and indirect costs and benefits to determine a project's overall net value.

Examples of direct costs and benefits might be the net value of employment to the local economy generated by the pool, while indirect costs and benefits might be less obvious, such as healthcare savings associated with the pool.

Although narrower in scope than SROI, CBA is often better understood by treasury and finance departments and can support more technical investment cases.

Ethics, materiality, and stakeholder relevance

High-quality measurement demands ethical integrity – respect for participants, honest reporting, and stewardship of resources. Outcomes should be material: metrics that are genuinely important to stakeholders and communities, not just what is easiest to measure.

Engaging stakeholders – from swim school participants to government officials – is essential in identifying what success looks like and how it should be captured. This not only improves evaluation quality but also builds legitimacy and shared ownership of the facility's goals.

Embedding measurement in pool planning

For planners and decision-makers, embedding impact thinking early in a pool project allows for smarter design, stronger business cases, and better long-term outcomes. Defining a clear, measurable set of social and economic objectives ensures the facility is not only fit for purpose – but also fit for the future.

Evaluation should not be an afterthought – it should guide investment decisions, policy alignment, and the public narrative around community wellbeing.



Conclusion

Public swimming pools create deep and lasting value in communities – but only if we intentionally define, pursue, and measure that value.

This discussion paper outlines the range of important community benefits public pools can create, offers guidance on how to establish a project's goals, and highlights various measurement methods to quantify impact. While every community and context is unique and requires a nuanced response, the overall benefits and our approach to achieving them remain the same.

We hope this discussion paper helps provide a foundation of knowledge as you embark on your new build or renewal pool project. For additional information, we suggest that you review an earlier IAKS document, 'Getting Your Public Pool Facility Right', which is available for download on the IAKS website **[iaks.sport](https://www.iaks.sport)**.

Through thoughtful goal-setting and strong project delivery, your pool project can become a cornerstone of community wellbeing – serving local needs and aspirations for many years to come.





International Association for Sports and Leisure Facilities

Who we are

IAKS is the leading global non-profit organisation for professionals from the sports, leisure and recreation facilities industry. Since 1965, IAKS has been enabling international networking for the exchange of expertise in the fields of architecture, construction and operations. IAKS is an IOC Recognized Organisation and cooperates with the IPC and many more international non-profit bodies.

Our network is the meeting place for architects, engineers, clients, designers, local authorities, technical and operative management, sports federations and clubs, suppliers and manufacturers.

IAKS has partners and members in 153 countries. National divisions serve local interests, organise regional events and provide services to the members of their countries.

Imprint

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