



2021-25

# Victorian Water Safety Strategy







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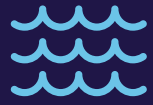
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## Our vision

Encourage more Victorians to safely participate and enjoy recreation in and around water, while reducing the number of drownings and water-related injuries to zero



## The challenge

Water safety risks are increasing

- More Victorians are spending leisure time in and around waterways
- More people are using recreational vessels, often with less experience
- Learn to swim and water safety education is under some pressure



## The way forward

Improved collaboration and coordination to drive drownings to zero

- Promote shared responsibility in communities
- Work with local partners to manage local risk
- Improve coordination and collaboration between agencies



## The actions

Set the foundation for more effective collaboration

- Establish better ways of working together through effective governance
- Expand research and data to underpin policy and decision-making
- Empower communities to better assess, and respond to, water safety risks

Coordinate agency effort to address key priorities in prevention and response

- Elevate safety in and around open waterways
- Reduce powered and non-powered recreational vessel related incidents
- Enhance learn to swim and water safety education
- Improve incident response





# About this strategy

Victoria should be proud of its mature water safety sector, and its achievements over many years in reducing water related fatalities. However, in 2018-19, Victoria reported the highest drowning toll in 20 years, with 56 reported fatal drowning incidents, an increase of 17 deaths compared to the 10-year average. Sadly, 2020-21 has again seen a significant drowning toll in Victoria with 61 reported fatal drowning incidents.

In response to the increase in drowning deaths and the expiry of the Victorian Water Safety Strategy 2016-2020 ("VWSS 2016-20"), the Minister for Police and Emergency Services convened a government-led Water Safety Taskforce (WST). The WST was tasked with addressing the increase in drowning by collaborating on a new water safety strategy for Victoria.

The development of this Victorian Water Safety Strategy 2021-2025 ("VWSS 2021-25") was commissioned by the WST, in partnership with Emergency Management Victoria. It is designed to be a whole-of-government strategy, coordinating effort across key agencies and stakeholders to achieve better water safety outcomes.

The VWSS 2021-25 sets a vision to:  
*Encourage more Victorians to safely participate and enjoy recreation in and around water, while reducing the number of drownings and water-related injuries to zero.* This vision continues the ambition of the previous strategy, the VWSS 2016-20. The Appendix of this report provides a summary of Victoria's progress against the aim and goals of this previous strategy.

In March 2020, the new Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 was also launched. This national strategy plays an essential role in national, state and territory, and community approaches to preventing drowning and promoting safe use of the nation's waterways and swimming pools. It outlines various key activities across five different components of water safety risk: people, places, activities, risk factors and populations.

The VWSS 2021-25 draws on the principles of the national strategy, however, takes a different approach to prioritising effort and resources. This strategy identifies priority areas and actions targeted at emerging water safety risks and opportunities rather than setting actions for each of the various components of risk. This approach provides Victoria with practical and targeted water safety priorities, tailored to the Victorian context.

The VWSS 2021-25 will be supported by the development of an action plan that provides a detailed set of initiatives aligned to each of the strategic priorities. The action plan will also describe the sequencing and timelines for initiatives, as well as the roles different parties will play in delivery.



# 1 The state of water safety in Victoria

A range of water safety initiatives have helped reduce the rate of fatal drowning, but slow progress in recent years, and an alarming spike in statistics in the last 12 months, demand a response.



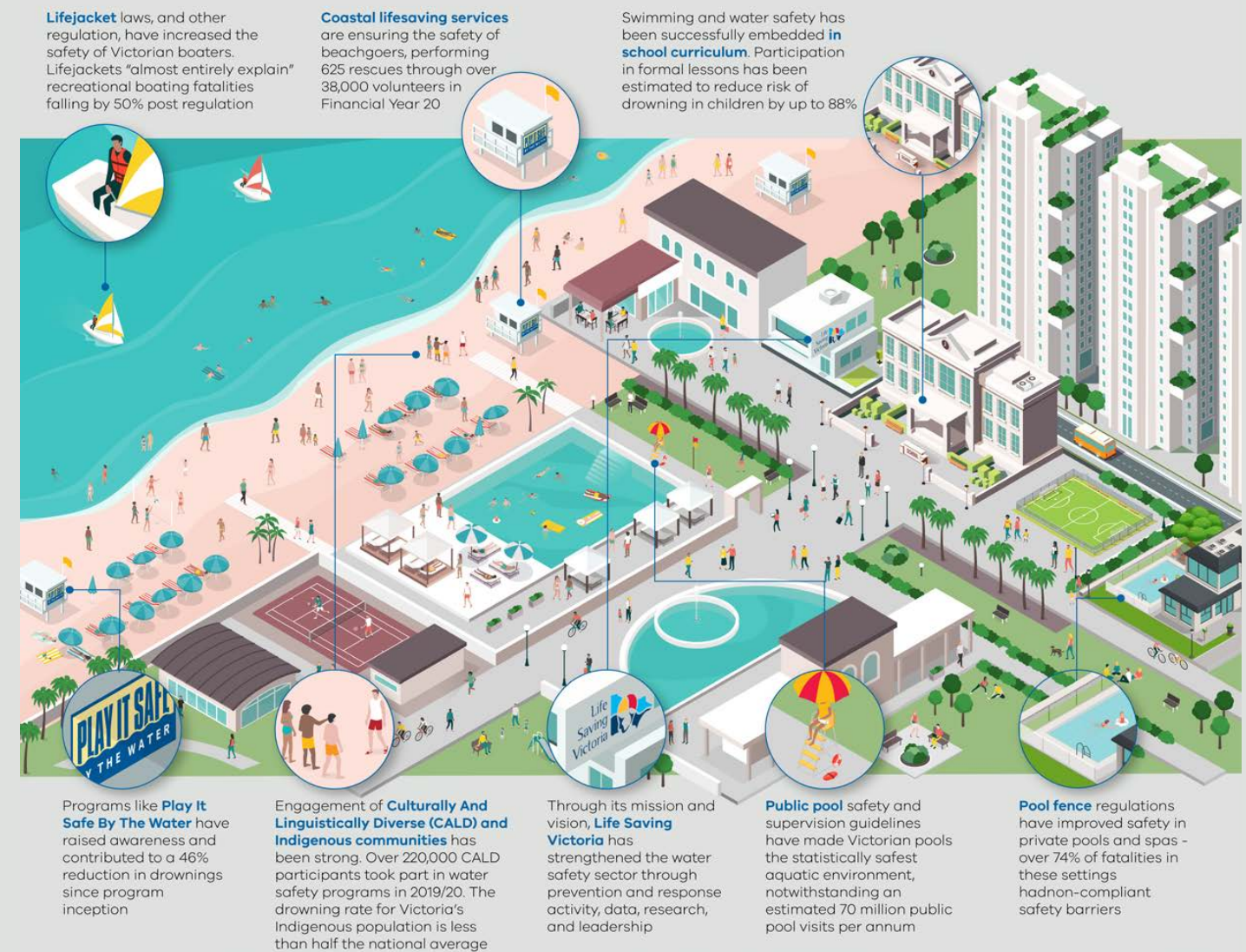




## 1.1 Victoria has successfully delivered a range of water safety initiatives

Victoria has long recognised both the benefits of water, and the risks water can pose to Victorians. Over many years Victoria has implemented a wide range of programs and initiatives which have successfully improved water safety (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 | A sample of programs and initiatives that have improved water safety in Victoria

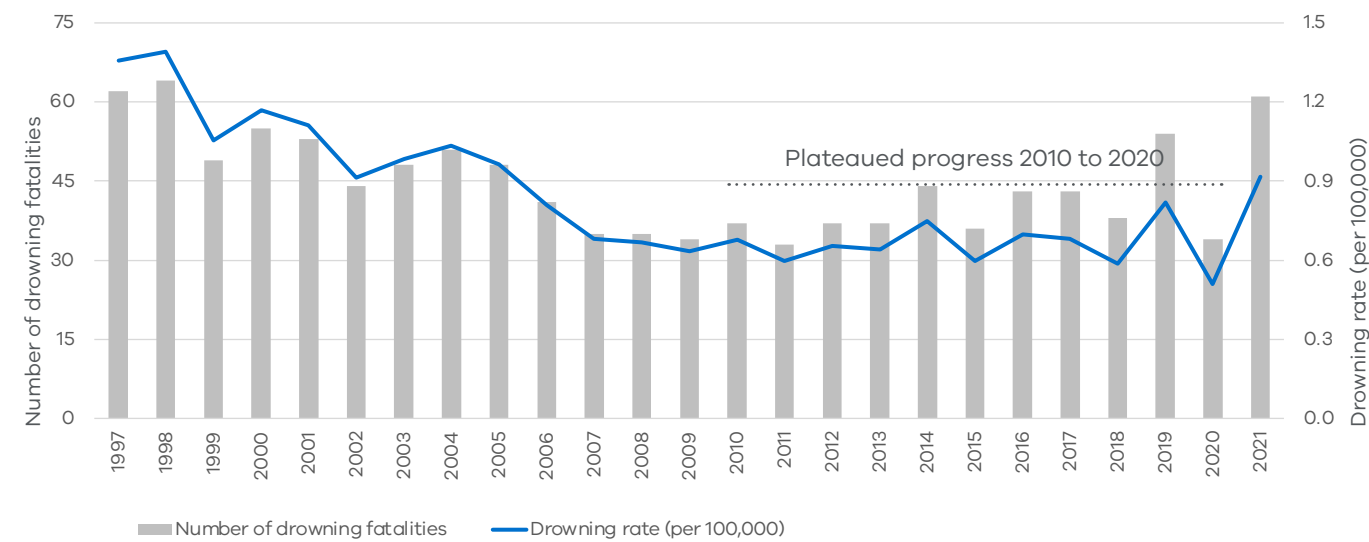




## 1.2 The rate of fatal drowning has plateaued over the past decade

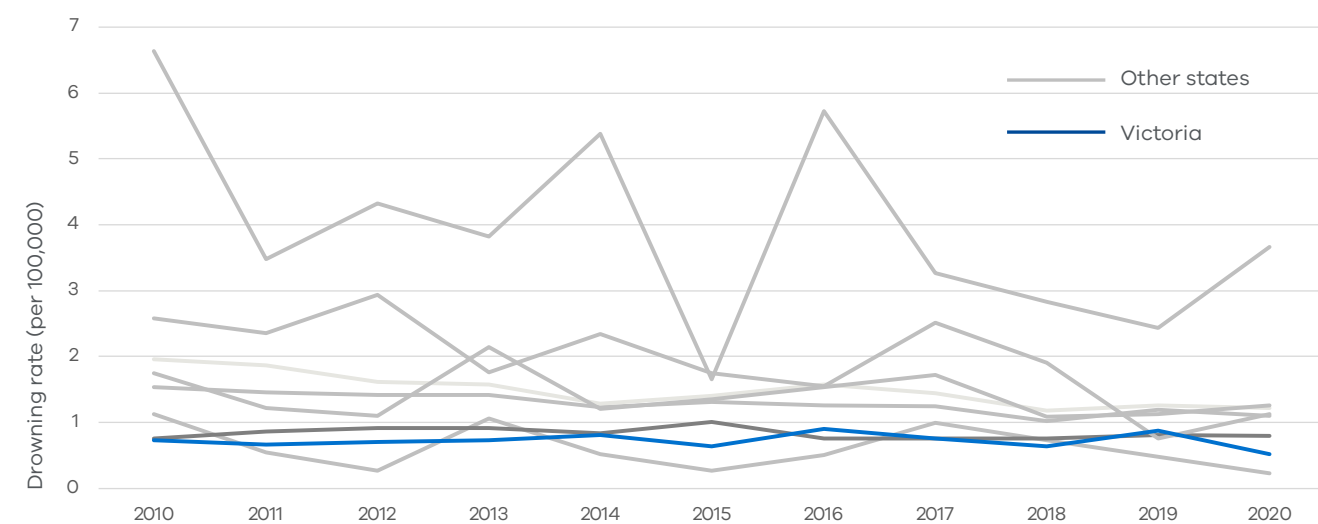
Victoria successfully halved the rate of drowning over the period 1997 to 2010. However, this success has not been sustained. Over the last ten years, the rate of drowning has remained relatively consistent at approximately 0.7 deaths per 100,000 population.

Figure 2 | Drowning deaths and drowning rate in Victoria



Note: Years presented are financial years (e.g. 2007 is FY2006/07)  
Source: Victorian drowning deaths data, provided by Life Saving Victoria

Figure 3 | Drowning rate across Australian states and territories, Victoria highlighted



Note: Years presented are financial years (e.g. 2007 is FY2006/07)  
Source: Royal Life Saving National Drowning Report 2020.

## 1.3 Recent and concerning drowning statistics require a response

Last year, the number of drowning fatalities grew to 53 per cent above the ten-year average (see Figure 4), representing a 40 per cent increase in the drowning rate (per 100,000 population). Other states and territories did not experience as severe spikes as Victoria in 2020/21. Additional Victorian fatalities comprised 60 per cent of additional fatalities in Australia in 2020/21, compared to the previous financial year.

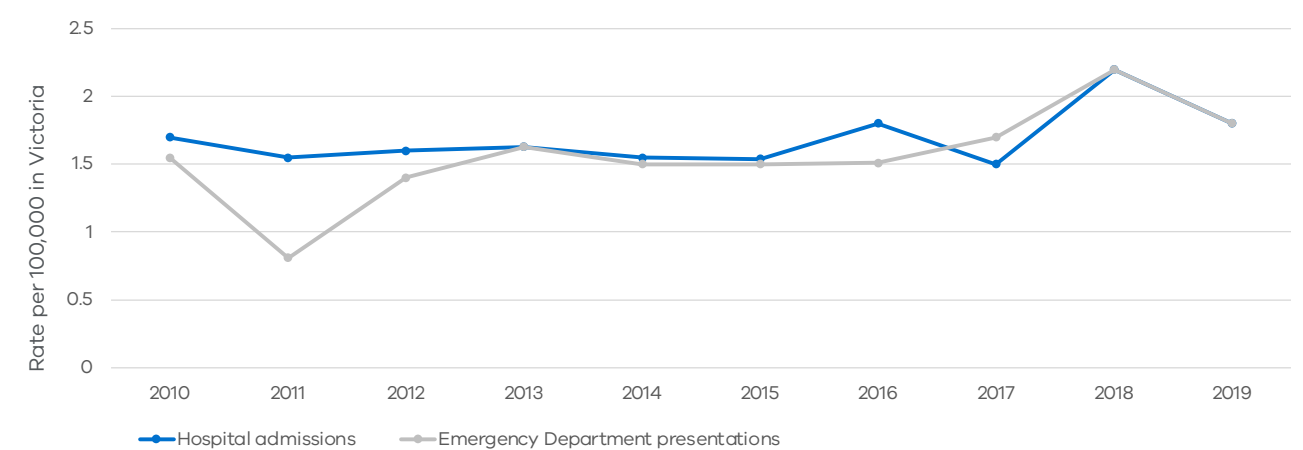
The Victorian spike was not the result of a significant increase in fatalities in a particular setting, or in those participating in a particular activity. Nevertheless, major contributors to the spike include more deaths in open waterways (both inland and coastal), as well as a greater number of children drowning in the home, in private pools and baths.

Meanwhile, the number of non-fatal drowning incidents has not fallen, and shows signs of trending upward.

Figure 4 | Key Victorian drowning fatality statistics



Figure 5 | Reported Victorian non-fatal drowning incidents



Note: Years presented are financial years (e.g. 2007 is FY2006/07)  
Source: Drowning Report 2019/20, Life Saving Victoria



## 2 The challenge – water safety risks are increasing

Key trends, amplified by COVID-19 impacts, are increasing Victorians' exposure to water safety risks.

Without intervention, these risks will increase the likelihood of drownings and water-related injuries in Victoria.





## 2.1 More Victorians are spending leisure time in and around waterways

Victorians love the outdoors and enjoying the benefits, both physical and emotional, that are gained by being in, on, or around water, as evidenced by steady growth in visitors over many years to parks, piers, and beaches<sup>1</sup>. However, tragically two-thirds of all Victorian drownings occur in open waters – rivers and creeks, beaches, lakes and dams, and the ocean<sup>2</sup>. As a growing number of Victorians recreate in the water (exacerbated by COVID-19 related patterns of visitation), and in waters unfamiliar to them, more Victorians are being exposed to water safety risks.

Visitation numbers have spiked and are set to spike further as COVID-19 lockdowns ease and interstate and international travel are constrained. Indeed, easing of COVID-19 restrictions and warmer weather have encouraged more Victorians to visit the beaches more than ever before. The estimated number of people visiting Victorian beaches in 2020/21 was 60 per cent higher than in 2019/20, and 51 per cent higher than the five-year average<sup>3</sup>, see Figure 6 below. Looking into the future, Victorians indicate that they intend to travel intrastate at a rate 17 per cent higher than pre-COVID-19 levels, and COVID-19 led growth in remote working is accelerating the existing trend of Victorians moving to the regions (including near the coast and other waterways).

Many are venturing to waterways for the first time with varying levels of water safety experience, including many from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Increasing numbers of people are poorly assessing risk and swimming in unsuitable environments (e.g. seeking out remote locations to social distance, travelling to un-patrolled beaches)<sup>4</sup>. This trend may be accelerated by new regulations<sup>5</sup> which are poised to grow the number of Victorians camping near water. In particular, CALD Victorians are at higher risk. This cohort is overrepresented in drowning statistics (36 per cent of drownings compared to 28 per cent representation in population<sup>6</sup>) and is at a higher risk of drowning when ‘day-tripping’ to waterways<sup>7</sup>.

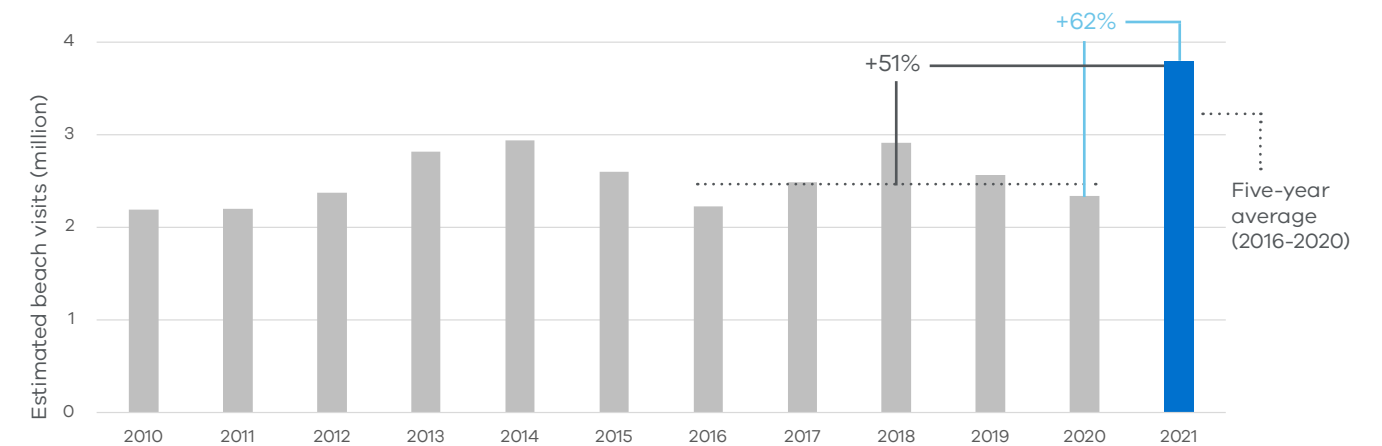
Growth in visitation and changing liabilities are putting land and water managers under pressure. Recent rulings regarding industrial manslaughter are increasingly liable for providing safe ‘workplaces’ which may include visitors on land and waters they manage<sup>8</sup>. As a result, managers are becoming more aware of their public safety responsibilities and are looking for better ways to manage growing risks. At the same time, managers have varied capacity to respond to water safety risks. There is a wide range of scope, scale, and capability across these organisations<sup>9</sup> which creates unique challenges, and opportunities.

<sup>1</sup>Public visitation of Victorian parks and piers has grown ~2 per cent p.a. faster than population growth over the past 20 years - 3.9 per cent compared to 1.9 per cent p.a (Analysis of Parks VIC data and ABS population data). Tree- and sea-changer communities can also explain some of the increase, as pre-COVID-19 these communities were growing 1.5 times faster than average population growth

<sup>2</sup>National Drowning Report 2021, Royal Life Saving (link)

<sup>3</sup>Estimated visitation at beaches in Victoria (patrolled by lifesavers and during patrol times), provided by Life Saving Victoria

Figure 6 | Estimated Victorian beach visitation



Note: Years presented are financial years (e.g. 2010 is FY2009/10)

Source: Estimated visitation at beaches in Victoria (patrolled by lifesavers and during patrol times), provided by Life Saving Victoria

<sup>4</sup> Consultations with Water Safety Taskforce members

<sup>5</sup> Delivering More Camping Opportunities For All Victorians, Media Release Victorian State Government (link)

<sup>6</sup> 36% of drownings over past ten years were people of a CALD background, Life Saving Victoria. 28% of people in Victoria in 2016 were born overseas, ABS population data

<sup>7</sup> Consultations with Water Safety Taskforce members and land and waterway managers

<sup>8</sup> Consultations with Water Safety Taskforce members and land and waterway managers

<sup>9</sup> Consultations with Water Safety Taskforce members



## 2.2 More people are using recreational vessels, often with less experience

Boating is one of Victoria’s most popular recreational pursuits, with 1-in-10 Victorians regularly participating in recreational boating<sup>10</sup>. However, the use of powered and non-powered vessels is a high-risk activity. In the financial year 2020/21, Maritime Safety Victoria logged 1,248 boating related incidents<sup>11</sup> and 11 per cent of fatalities in Victoria were boating when they drowned. As boating popularity grows, more Victorians will be exposed to these risks, there will be more inexperienced operators on the water, and Victoria’s capacity to respond will be stressed.

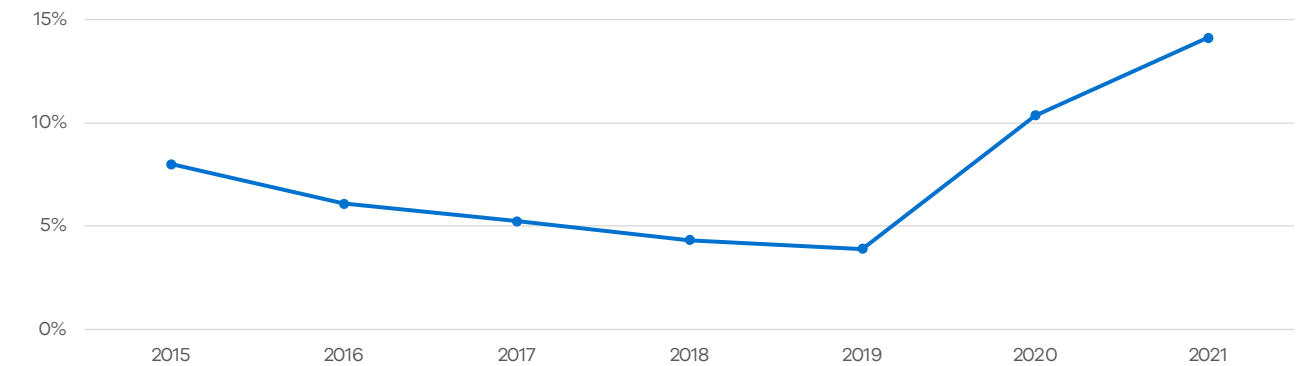
The popularity of powered and non-powered recreational vessels continues to grow, enabled by investment in new infrastructure. The number of recreational boating licences in Victorian grew by 12,700 in the Financial Year 2020/21; a 3 per cent increase which is 1.2 per cent higher than recent population growth<sup>12</sup>. Greater government investment has enabled this growth in popularity. Better Boating Victoria is investing \$47 million in boating reforms including boat ramp upgrades across the state and removing fees to 35 boat ramps<sup>13</sup>.

Some COVID-19 trends are driving up the number of inexperienced operators – often in poorly maintained craft. For example, Australians have more disposable income as COVID-19 restrictions have led them to the highest household saving ratio on record – 22 per cent in March 2020. Some of this additional disposable income is being used to buy watercraft, particularly second-hand watercraft. The overall number of registered vessels in Victoria continues to grow at 1.1 per cent per annum, while vessel registration transfers in 2020/21 were 28 per cent higher than in FY20 and 21 per cent higher than the five-year average<sup>14</sup>.

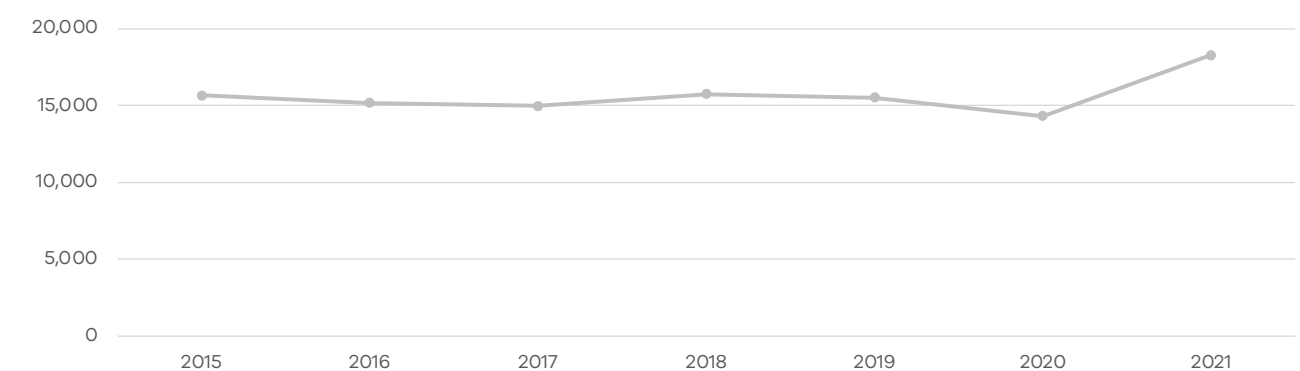
The capacity to respond to marine accidents is under pressure with an ageing and declining volunteer base. Volunteers are the primary providers of marine response – they attend up to 900 (of 1,500) incidents per year<sup>15</sup>. The average age of Marine Search and Research volunteers is over 55 years old, which presents a considerable issue in the near term as sign-up rates are not in line with expected attrition<sup>16</sup>.

Figure 7 | Victorian household savings ratio and vessel registration transfers

Household savings grew to twice the average in FY2020. Victorian household saving ratio, seasonally adjusted



A record number of vessels changed hands in FY2021. Number of Victorian vessel registration transfers



Note: Years presented are financial years (e.g. 2015 is FY14/15). \*Q4FY21 data was not available. Source: LEFT: Household income experience, ABS

<sup>10</sup> Victorian recreational boating strategy 2021 – 2030, Better Boating Victoria (link)

<sup>11</sup> Boating incidents include: disablement of vessel (69%), Non marine incidents (9%), Person in trouble (6%), Grounding (6%), capsizing (3%), person overboard (1.5%), others (~5%)

<sup>12</sup> Analysis of: ‘On Deck’ MSV data (link) and ABS population data

<sup>13</sup> Better Boating Victoria (link)

<sup>14</sup> Analysis of vessel registration data provided by Maritime Safety Victoria

<sup>15</sup> Consultations with Water Safety Taskforce members

<sup>16</sup> Analysis of MSAR volunteers age demographics, provided by Emergency Management Victoria



## 2.3 Learn to swim and water safety education is under some pressure

Swim lessons and education have been a critical pillar of Victorian water safety over the last fifty years. However, COVID-19 has exacerbated trends in lesson availability, workforce capacity, and swimming infrastructure.

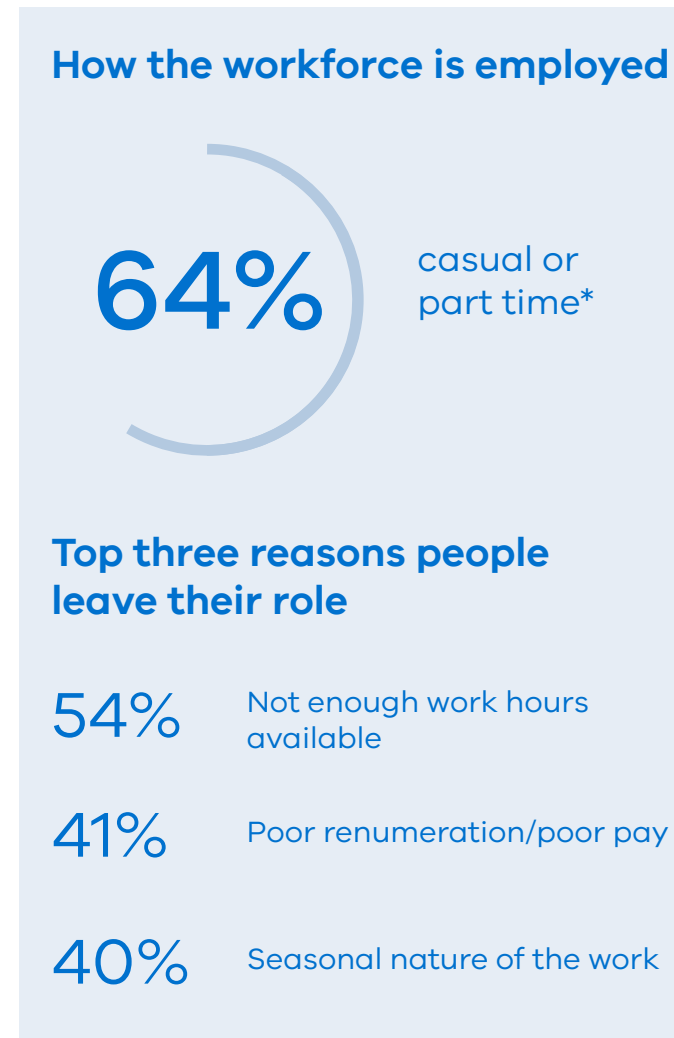
COVID-19 restrictions have had a dramatic impact on the availability of swimming lessons. COVID-19 lockdowns created a 6-to-12-month period where swimming lessons were not taught as pools were closed, causing 5 million lessons to be missed<sup>17</sup>. However, there were signs of demand ‘bouncing-back’ when restrictions were briefly eased. During temporarily eased lockdown conditions in May/June 2021, multiple councils recorded a significant uplift in lesson demand, exceeding previous highs by as much as 24 per cent<sup>18</sup>.

This has exacerbated an already chronic shortage of swimming teachers, as a largely casual workforce has sought employment elsewhere. The Victorian aquatic industry employs 20,000 workers, including swim teachers, lifeguards, and administrative staff<sup>19</sup>. The majority (62 per cent) of the aquatic industry workforce works casual or part-time. A pre-COVID-19 national survey<sup>20</sup> found

that those exiting the workforce left for reasons relating to consistent and reliable work and remuneration see Figure 8. Life Saving Victoria estimates that the COVID-19-induced 24 per cent fall in this workforce has translated to a shortfall of up to 1,800 swimming teachers<sup>21</sup>. This concern is shared by swim schools – 82 per cent of swim schools claimed they were worried about staff retention in a recent survey<sup>22</sup>.

Potential permanent pool closures will hinder access to lessons, particularly in regional Victoria where closures are more likely. Volatile demand, combined with growing operational and maintenance costs for local pools, is stressing the financial viability for keeping facilities open, particularly in rural and regional municipalities<sup>23</sup>. Potential pool closures<sup>24</sup> may reduce the availability of necessary swim lesson infrastructure, stifling supply. For regional and rural communities, and for some segments of communities at risk (e.g. CALD and people with disability), this can significantly increase the travel time to the nearest pool, making it less likely these communities will participate in crucial learn to swim lessons.

Figure 8 | Australian aquatic industry workforce employment statistics



Note: This survey was conducted prior to COVID-19  
Source: National aquatic industry workforce reports 2019 and 2020, Royal Life Savings Australia.

\*Refers to 2019 RLSA report, 2020 report didn't report employment status

<sup>17</sup> Swim school survey conducted by Life Saving Victoria

<sup>18</sup> Consultations with representatives of Victorian Councils

<sup>19</sup> Victorian lockdown being felt hard by aquatic industry, Royal Life Savings Australia (link)

<sup>20</sup> National aquatic industry workforce report, Royal Life Savings Australia (link)

<sup>21</sup> Swim school survey conducted by Life Saving Victoria

<sup>22</sup> Victorian Public Pools State of the Sector Report 2019/20, Life Saving Victoria and Aquatics & Recreation Victoria (link)

<sup>23</sup> Consultations with representatives of Victorian Councils

<sup>24</sup> Consultations with representatives of Victorian Councils



### **3 The way forward – working together will be key**

Leveraging recent water safety successes, the focus is now on improved sector coordination and collaboration to overcome key challenges and reduce drownings to zero.



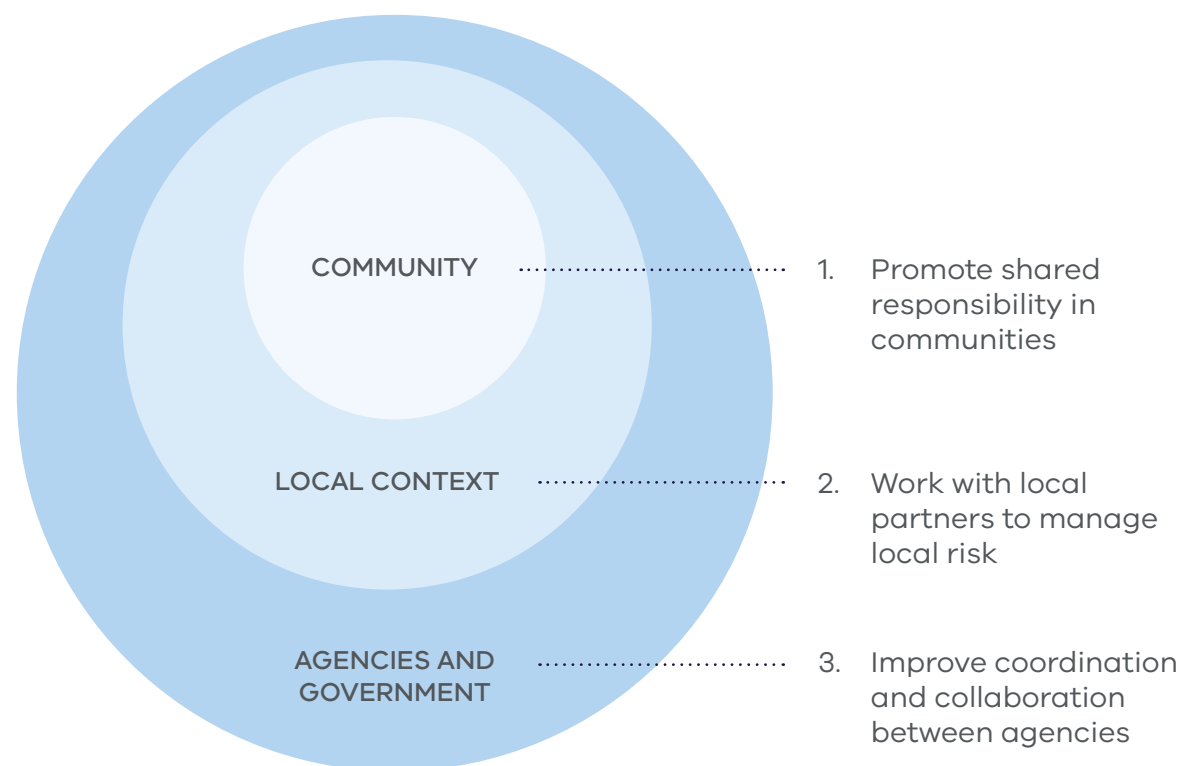


Reducing water related fatalities and serious injuries is challenging, as evidenced by the plateau, and more recent spike, in drowning statistics. This is because we are dealing with inherently risky behaviours of a broad range of cohorts across various settings. Getting traction here requires important contributions from a number of players.

With a number of recent trends increasing exposure to water safety risks (as outlined above), it is critical that we work more effectively together to reduce harm. This is the focus of this strategy – a strong focus on coordination and collaboration from water safety agencies, communities, local government, government departments and agencies, and other parties to reduce drownings and water-related injuries to zero.

The three levels of collaboration and coordination required are outlined in Figure 9 below and in the following subsections.

Figure 9 | Collaboration and coordination opportunities are at three levels







### 3.1 Promote shared responsibility in communities

Water safety is a shared responsibility for all Victorians, and services and support provided by the sector aim to be inclusive of all Victorian communities.

All communities are different. The nature and scale of risk exposure and depth of experience around water are unique to each, and as a result, support requirements vary. For example, CALD communities are statistically more susceptible to water risks.

Where possible, initiatives to improve water safety are most effectively led at a community level. Through better collaboration and coordination, the sector can better tailor services and empower communities (and individuals) to play a larger role in water safety.

### 3.2 Work with local partners to manage local risk

Local governments, local land and waterway managers, and other local partners have unique insight into water safety risks at the community level, founded in the local context. Statewide agencies currently do not have access to the data required to provide this level of insight.

There is an opportunity to support local partners to conduct strategic local risk assessments and develop water safety plans tailored to their local area. Support should be tailored to cater for the diversity in capacity and capability across the many different local bodies across Victoria. This work can build on foundations established through the recently reformed Region and Municipal Emergency Management Planning processes, to improve how agencies partner with government and other partners to deliver water safety initiatives within the local context.





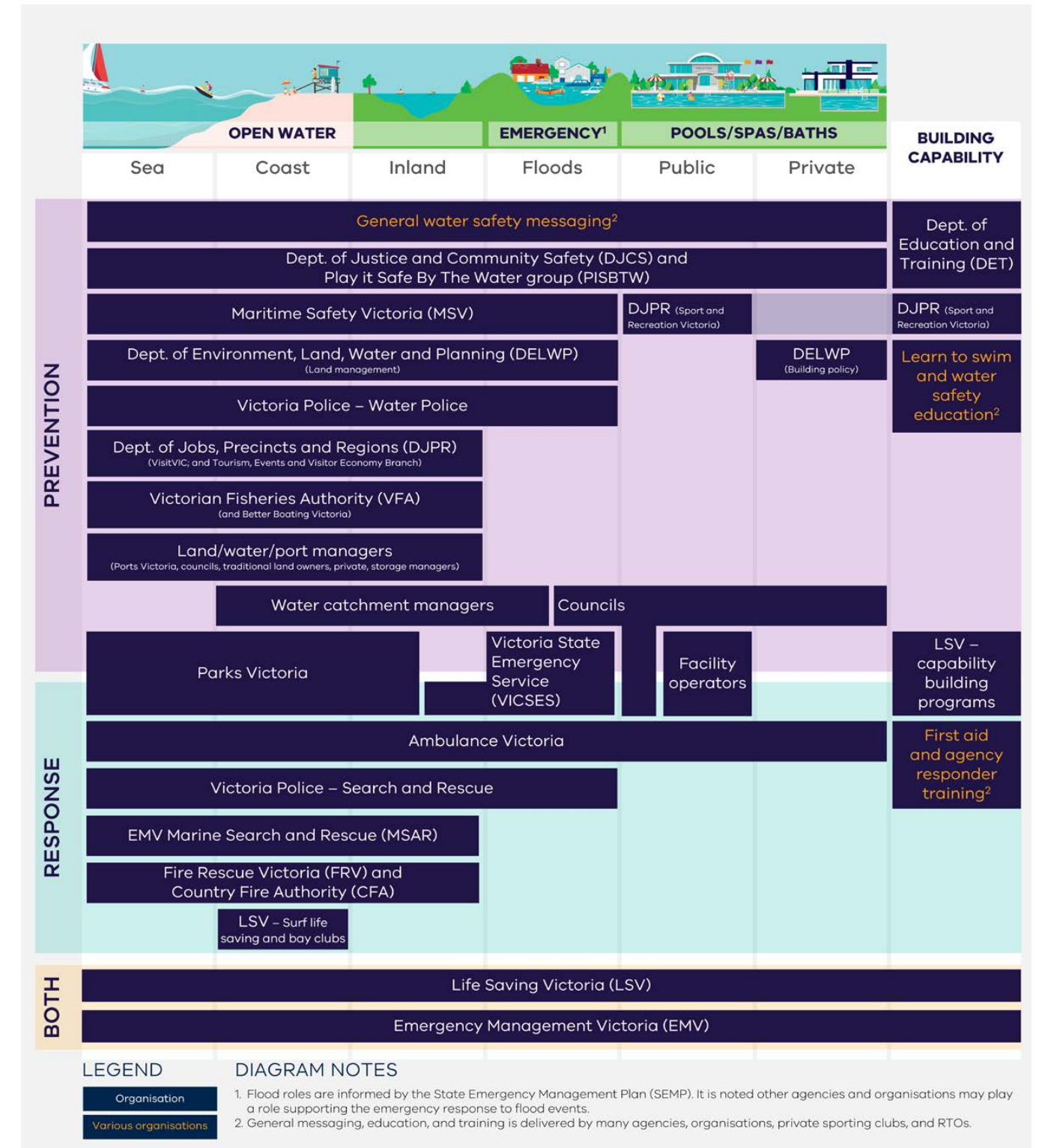
### 3.3 Improve coordination and collaboration between agencies

The water safety landscape is complex – many agencies operate in this space, with insufficient clarity about roles and responsibilities. Figure 10 provides an overview of the roles agencies and other stakeholders play in the landscape, across various water safety settings.

This complexity has led to inefficient, siloed approaches with suboptimal sharing of resources and intelligence across the sector (e.g. limited data and insight sharing, duplicative and unaligned messaging), as well as limited strategic oversight and prioritisation of water safety initiatives.

The sector has taken steps to collaborate and coordinate better. The establishment of the Water Safety Taskforce has provided early benefits to the sector, which can be extended through concerted collaboration and coordination efforts.

Figure 10 | Victorian water safety stakeholder ecosystem

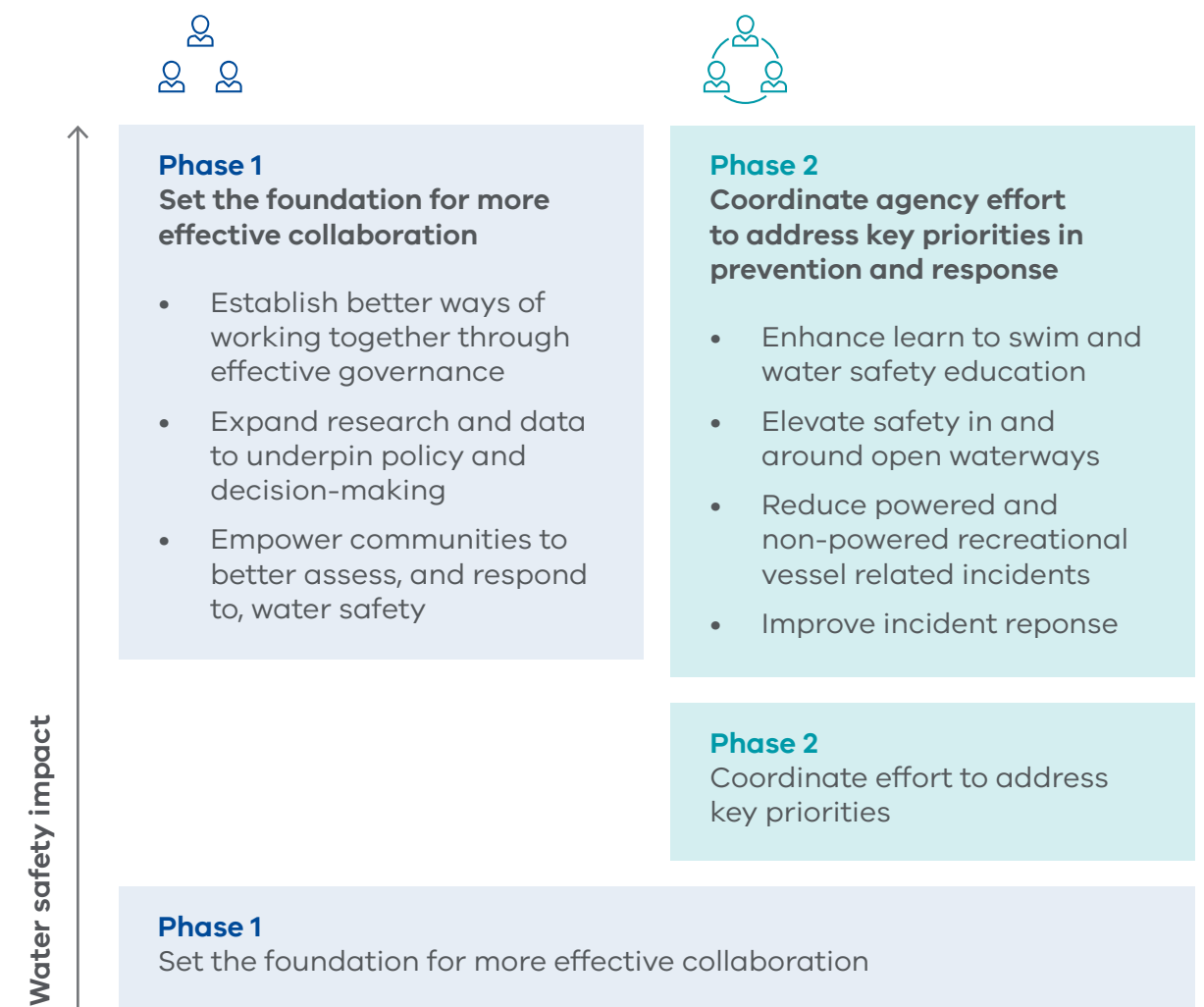




# 4 The actions – how, together, Victoria will improve water safety

Victorian water safety priority areas have been identified across two phases, setting foundations for collaboration then addressing key priorities in prevention and response, as shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11 | Overview of the Victorian Water Safety Strategy 2021-2025 priority areas





## 4.1 Set the foundation for more effective collaboration

There are a range of sector foundational initiatives and projects which will enable us to work better together, align our priorities, and more effectively deliver our priorities.

### 4.1.1 Establish better ways of working together through effective governance

Many organisations have a role to play in improving water safety – this sometimes makes it difficult to identify who is ultimately responsible for some key water safety issues, and for effectively coordinating the effort and resources of multiple agencies. A number of committees have been established to improve coordination, including most recently the Water Safety Taskforce, but something more enduring is required.

There is an opportunity to introduce more effective governance arrangements to unlock better ways of collaborating, overcome the limitations of fragmented funding, and improve prevention and response initiatives. This would include the responsibility for implementing this strategy and reporting on progress, supporting the coordinated effort by other agencies to deliver on key priorities. Ideally, these reforms to governance would build on existing arrangements as much as possible.

#### Targeted actions

- **Establish a governance model** and supporting arrangements for coordinating the sector-wide response to water safety issues
- **Clarify the roles and responsibilities** of key stakeholders that contribute to water safety outcomes
- **Implement sector-wide priority setting** to help coordinate the effort and direct funding to priority risk, and highest impact, areas.

### 4.1.2 Expand research and data to underpin policy and decision-making

A robust evidence base and data-driven decision making must underpin a contemporary public safety strategy. In water safety, we have some of the key pieces in place. For example, we have world-leading water safety research capabilities, concentrated in Life Saving Victoria, which help us to better understand and mitigate water safety risks. However, much of the data and information required to support good policy-making remains fragmented across key sector agencies and is hard to access, particularly at the local level.

There is an opportunity to build a much more effective evidence base to improve the efficacy of our programs and ultimately get better water safety outcomes. The consolidation and better connection of datasets will help, particularly if we broaden our focus to include 'near misses' and 'prevention' activities (i.e. not just fatalities). More effective evaluations of programs that track changes in attitudes and behaviours that impact water safety – not just fatalities – will give us greater insight into what works. A broader-based whole-of-sector research strategy that identifies, and wins funding support for, the key water safety research priorities will help focus research efforts on what matters most.

#### Targeted actions

- **Expand and refine connections between data sources** for aquatic-related injuries and fatalities, to better share key statistics across the sector (e.g. fatal, non-fatal, near misses)
- **Build monitoring and evaluation frameworks** to understand how interventions change behaviour and ultimately influence outcomes
- **Develop a sector research strategy** that helps clarify research priorities as well as partnership and funding opportunities.



### 4.1.3 Empower communities to better assess, and respond to, water safety risks

Across the sector, agencies and stakeholders recognise and promote the importance of water safety. Many organisations deliver messaging to their users, members, and the public to raise awareness and understanding of water safety risks. This messaging is well intentioned. However, the variety in content, channels and branding across stakeholders dilutes the 'cut-through' of these messages. This can lead to Victorians being unaware of, or underprepared for, life-threatening water safety risks.

There is an opportunity for the sector to better coordinate and streamline messages, education, and communications. Coordinating simple, repeated messages through consistent channels will more effectively grow awareness in the community. Greater awareness of general risks will promote increased engagement in community-based water safety education, which will also develop skills and know-how to better assess, mitigate and respond to local risks (for both people at risk, and those that come to their aid). Lastly, improved local risk communications will provide people with the information they need to make informed decisions around and in water (e.g. Bureau of Meteorology weather warnings, Vic Emergency app notifications, flood warnings etc.)

#### Targeted actions

- **Develop a simple, coherent set of key messages** for target cohorts that increases awareness and understanding of water safety risks (i.e. prevention)
- **Promote the design and delivery of community education** programs to drive shared responsibility and water safety behaviour change
- **Deliver timely and localised risk communications** to empower communities to make informed water safety decisions.





## 4.2 Coordinate agency effort to address key priorities in prevention and response

Water safety risk is complex and wide-ranging. There is a lot the sector could do, should do, and should continue to do. In this strategy, four priority areas were identified where sector-wide coordination of effort will have the most significant impact on reducing water-related injuries and fatalities. Strategic priorities and associated actions are described below.

### 4.2.1 Elevate safety in and around open waterways

More and more Victorians continue to participate in water-related activities at our beaches, regional parks and other areas. While participation has many benefits, it also means more people in the water, and in unfamiliar environments, which increases our collective risk exposure. National and state-level approaches to mitigate these risks are in place, but incidents ultimately occur at the local level. At the same time, the accountabilities of different local stakeholders (e.g. public land/water managers, infrastructure owners and industries such as tourism) for water safety in their area are unclear.

There is an opportunity to ensure that all Victorians can safely enjoy open water environments by targeting efforts to local areas or 'hotspots' where the risk is greatest. This requires tailored local risk assessments, better engagement with communities most at risk (e.g. CALD and people with disabilities) and greater sharing of effective solutions across the sector, facilitated by a clear understanding of who is accountable for safety in different locations and environments. Sustainable resourcing arrangements for responsible local bodies may also need to be considered to support any increased activity.

#### Targeted actions

- **Clarify water safety liabilities and responsibilities** for public land/water managers, and others
- **Establish more coordinated risk assessment** by public land and waterway managers (supported by state-wide agencies) and controls for both common and target risks (e.g. floods)
- **Better engage visitors most at risk**, particularly CALD communities, people with disabilities and the often difficult to engage day-trippers.

### 4.2.2 Reduce powered and non-powered recreational vessel related incidents

The popularity of boating and other non-powered vessels is growing across Victoria, and recent conditions have attracted many new, inexperienced operators. The most common (and most at-risk) cohort is older men, often more complacent about safety, sometimes with underlying health issues. Current safety messaging, licensing requirements (which are focused on regulations rather than competencies), and other initiatives are not sufficient to address this growing risk.

There is an opportunity to ensure that Victorians going out on the water are better prepared, make risk-informed decisions and can respond effectively if something does go wrong. This includes ensuring a greater focus on safe trip planning, tailored education for at-risk cohorts, and the promotion of low-cost safety technologies that can significantly improve outcomes in an emergency. The sector will leverage existing partnerships to collaborate with boating associations and private sporting clubs, who have direct channels and connections with target cohorts.

#### Targeted actions

- **Improve trip planning and review national boating competencies** to better prepare operators for the inherent risks involved in recreational boating
- **Increase promotion of new safety technologies** that help 'raise the alarm' e.g. Personal Locator Beacons
- **Tailor education and risk awareness initiatives to target cohorts** most susceptible to water safety risks.

*This strategy notes that the Victorian Government is developing a Recreational Boating Strategy (2021-30) in parallel with the development of this strategy. The boating strategy is poised to cover powered vessels and similar challenges and actions to the VWSS; however, safety is just one of the strategy's many objectives. A key role for the VWSS is to ensure that safety is a strong consideration during the implementation of the boating strategy, working in collaboration with Better Boating Victoria, Victorian Fisheries Authority and Maritime Safety Victoria.*



### 4.2.3 Enhance learn to swim and water safety education

Victorian 'Learn to swim' programs have a proven track record for teaching kids how to be safe in a pool-based environment and are a critical part of water safety skills development. However, the sector faces several emerging challenges to maintain and build on this success. Limited capacity to deliver lessons (including a declining workforce) is impeding the recovery from COVID-19 impacts, other at-risk population cohorts do not have access to programs, and most drownings happen outside in open water environments (e.g. rivers, lakes and beaches) – where pool-based skills are not always transferrable or sufficient to be safe.

There is an opportunity to expand successful programs to improve the physical literacy of more Victorians. This includes contextualising teaching to different local environments where the risk is greatest, leveraging existing touchpoints to extend education and skills development to at-risk parents, families and communities<sup>25</sup> (including safe supervision practices), and alleviating constraints on workforce capacity. Innovative solutions should be explored to encourage and enable greater participation, such as integration or co-location of health services with swimming facilities.

<sup>25</sup> For example, people with, and families of people with, disabilities. Children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are three times more likely to drown than children without ASD (Peden AE, Willcox-Pidgeon S. Autism spectrum disorder and unintentional fatal drowning of children and adolescents in Australia: an epidemiological analysis (2020))

#### Targeted actions

- **Expand existing programs and extend programs to target parents and families**, to improve water safety skills, supervision practices, and awareness of limitations
- **Enhance opportunities for children to transfer skills and knowledge** from pool to open water environments
- **Improve recruitment and retention** of the learn to swim and water safety education workforce.

### 4.2.4 Improve incident response

Responding to water-related incidents can be a complex process, with many organisations fulfilling critical roles across the state. Incidents can involve up to 150 emergency responders across multiple agencies and require the coordination of operations in real-time, often in extreme conditions. At times, response efforts can become fragmented, with many agencies playing different roles, without coordinated strategic oversight or awareness of each other's capabilities and limitations.

There is an opportunity for greater cross-sector collaboration to improve the timeliness and quality of responses to water incidents. Optimal distribution of sector-wide resources and capabilities (particularly leading up to high-risk periods), with clear responsibilities, is key to enabling a timely response. This should be supported by drills to prepare for high-risk scenarios (as per other emergencies such as bushfires) and training to ensure all agency responders have the relevant capability to enact a successful rescue. Continued integration and trialling of new location technologies will also improve response outcomes, particularly for drownings as timing is of the essence.

#### Targeted actions

- **Improve response coordination and management** through improved role clarity for different scenarios, coordinated risk-based resource allocation and more sector exercises
- **Enhance local identification** for emergencies to reduce response times through new innovations and technologies – such as Advanced Mobile Location (AML), emergency markers, use of cell towers
- **Grow the capacity of agency responders** to better manage water safety incidents through targeted training and increasing workforce sustainability.



## 5 What's next

A clear 'action plan' which brings the strategy to life will be developed and overseen by the Water Safety Taskforce.





The WST commits to bringing the strategy to life with the development and oversight of a clear action plan. This action plan will draw on the range of potential initiatives identified throughout consultation with agencies, other water safety organisations and public stakeholders during the development of the strategy. The WST will continue to coordinate and monitor progress against the strategy until a sector governance model is developed, with a clear owner for strategy implementation.

## 5.1 Develop a detailed action plan

Develop a detailed action plan, which:

1. Identifies specific initiatives that support the delivery of the strategy, with explicit alignment to each of the strategic priorities
2. Describes which agencies will contribute to the delivery of each initiative, and the respective roles they will play
3. Determines the priority and sequence of initiatives to ensure that effort resources are targeted to achieve optimal benefit
4. Provides sufficient detail on the nature and scope of initiatives to support corresponding funding bids
5. Includes clear delivery timelines and measures of success (both 'implementation' and 'impact' measures).



## 5.2 Collaborate, monitor, and review progress

Regularly review progress towards the implementation of the action plan strategic goals, through:

- Operational/tactical collaboration between WST agencies as required to effectively and efficiently deliver initiatives (both 'offline, and in monthly WST sessions)
- Periodic (e.g. quarterly) reflection on progress against implementation measures and timelines for each initiative, to collectively identify and address challenges/opportunities impacting delivery
- Formal reviews at set intervals (e.g. annually) across the life of the strategy to review progress against impact measures, and revise/update the action plan with new initiatives under each focus area.



## Progress against the previous water safety strategy

The following table outlines Victoria's progress against the Victorian Water Safety Strategy 2016-2020 (Victorian Water Safety Assembly, 2016) and Australian Water Safety Strategy 2016-2020 (Australian Water Safety Council, 2016) concerning fatal drowning incidents. Whilst the overall drowning rate has decreased by 8% from baseline, this is well short of the Strategy's goal of a 50% reduction in drowning by the end of 2020.

Of the 11 priority areas, only two are on track. Urgent work is required across nine areas, especially in priority areas 6. Reduce drowning in coastal waters, and 5. Reduce drowning in inland waterways, which have increased by 34%, and 21% respectively, since baseline. The progress towards each area is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1 | Progress toward the Australian Water Safety Council 2008 goal to reduce fatal drowning by 50% by 2020.

Priority areas and goals		Progress (target of 50%)	Progress rating
<b>Priority Area One: Taking a Life Stages Approach</b>			
1. Reduce drowning in children aged 0-14 years	0-4 years	-14%	Urgent work needed
	5-14 years	-40%	Work needed
2. Reduce drowning in young people aged 15-24 years		+4%	Urgent work needed
3. Reduce drowning in males aged 25-64 years	25-44 years	-34%	Work needed
	45-64 years	-5%	Urgent work needed
4. Reduce drowning in people aged 65+		+10%	Urgent work needed
<b>Priority Area Two: Targeting High-Risk Locations</b>			
5. Reduce drowning in inland waterways		+21%	Urgent work needed
6. Reduce drowning in coastal waters		+34%	Urgent work needed
7. Reduce drowning by strengthening the aquatic industry*		0%	On track
<b>Priority Area Three: Focusing on Key Drowning Challenges</b>			
8. Reduce alcohol and drug related drowning†		-7%	Urgent work needed
9. Reduce boating, watercraft and recreational activity related drowning**		+12%	Urgent work needed
10. Reduce drowning in high-risk populations***		+15%	Urgent work needed
11. Reduce the impact of disaster and extreme weather on drowning		0%	On track

\* Figures include drowning deaths at public swimming pools;

\*\*Includes boats and watercraft, rock fishing, fishing and diving;

\*\*\* Includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, international tourists and international students. Statistics are primarily determined from Country of Birth data. Due to a high number of open cases in recent years with unknown toxicology results the follow-up 3-year average from 2015/16 to 2017/18 has been used.

† Toxicology reports to confirm alcohol and/or drug involvement are available only once a case is closed therefore numbers may change once cases are closed. Due to a high number of open cases in recent years with unknown toxicology results the follow-up 3-year average from 2015/16 to 2017/18 has been used.



