



The Riverland Water Safety Strategy

Finalised
August 2024

Acknowledgment

The River Murray Safety Working Group and Royal Life Saving acknowledge the First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee Region, the traditional owners of the lands and waters on which we live, work and play. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in and visit our beautiful district.

About this document

This local water safety strategy is the result of a collaborative drafting process led by Royal Life Saving Society – Australia and involved input from 33 people representing a variety of organisations with an interest in drowning prevention and water safety in The Riverland.

About Royal Life Saving

Royal Life Saving is a public benevolent institution (PBI) dedicated to reducing drowning and turning everyday people into everyday community lifesavers. This is achieved through: advocacy, education, training, health promotion, aquatic risk management, community development, research, sport, leadership and participation in international networks.

The drowning prevention research of the Royal Life Saving Society – Australia is proudly supported by the Australian Government.



Australian Government

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Recommended citation

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia & River Murray Safety Working group (2024). Riverland Water Safety Strategy. Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, Sydney.

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WHY A WATER SAFETY STRATEGY FOR THE RIVERLAND?

Water safety strategy and planning efforts help establish and guide collective action towards the common goal of preventing drowning and ensuring that everyone can enjoy the water safely. Australia has long been a global leader in drowning prevention, with the first Australian Water Safety Strategy (AWSS) published in 1998, and several subsequent editions released since. While drowning prevention strategies and plans continue to be promoted at the global level with recent United Nations and World Health Assembly Resolutions, which reinforce the importance of such efforts, drowning occurs locally and requires local solutions.

The River Murray was identified in a [2023 Royal Life Saving Report](#) as the top inland waterway blackspot for drowning in the nation, with a significant proportion of drowning fatalities occurring in the Riverland in South Australia. Sadly, between July 2002 and June 2023, 17 people died from drowning in the Riverland, resulting in a fatal drowning rate 50% higher than the nation and more than twice as high as the rest of South Australia. Further details on these cases are available in Appendix 1.

These events represent the loss of a father, brother, child or grandparent and has a detrimental impact on families, friends, community groups, health and emergency services workers, the economy, and overall social fabric of a community. While every drowning is a tragedy, nearly all are preventable.

In the Riverland, the River Murray, Lake Bonney, other open water locations, and the region's aquatic facilities are key contributors to the economic, social, and health outcomes of the community. While the risk of drowning is ever present, and the region's drowning prevention community is dedicated to preventing tragedy, it is crucial to note that these are also places of wellbeing. The water is where we recreate and relax; ensuring both residents and visitors to the Riverland continue to have opportunities to access and enjoy the water safely is a priority.

In this context, a multisectoral group of stakeholders convened in Renmark in May of 2024 to workshop and co-design a local water safety strategy, building collaborative momentum towards the common goal of preventing drowning in the region.



CO-DESIGNING A LOCAL WATER SAFETY STRATEGY

Royal Life Saving Society – Australia brings over 25 years of drowning prevention planning experience, including core roles in global drowning prevention strategy efforts, supporting specific processes in multiple other countries, longstanding national leadership in the Australian Water Safety Strategy, and guidance of multiple local water safety strategy initiatives around the country.

More information about the RLSSA water safety planning process, including the Australian Water Safety Strategy Framework and approach to local initiatives is available in Appendix 2. Briefly, this Riverland Water Safety Strategy involved an

2024 Water Safety Roundtable – Renmark, SA

Building on previous collaboration in The Riverland coordinated by South Australia Police, Royal Life Saving Society – South Australia, with the support of Royal Life Saving Society – Australia, facilitated a Water Safety Roundtable in Renmark, as an in-person opportunity to discuss, debate, and explore the local context for drowning and its prevention in the region; strengthen collaborative partnerships; and co-design this water safety strategy which endeavours to inspire action.

The two-day event included representatives from local and state government, emergency response agencies, local businesses, aquatic facility managers, and other civil society organisations. Participants had the opportunity to engage with and hear from multiple elected representatives, who reinforced the importance of drowning

analysis of drowning data and high-visitation recreational areas on the River Murray and Lake Bonney, an in-person Water Safety Roundtable (described below) that provided an opportunity to discuss, debate, and draft core sections of a strategy, and a review process where community members verified and provide additional feedback to the strategy.

This strategy is designed to be flexible and of use to anyone who wants to prevent drowning in The Riverland. It identifies and calls attention to key priorities and focus areas for the region, and outlines goals and activates that will improve safety and prevent drowning.

prevention efforts in the Riverland and provided guidance to the group on how to successfully move the needle. They included the Hon. Emily Bourke MLC, Assistant Minister to the Premier and Assistant Minister for Autism; Hon. Russel Wortley MLC; Mr. Tim Whetstone MP, member for Chaffey; and Ms. Margaret Howie, Acting Mayor for Renmark.

At the Roundtable, participants identified and prioritised key issues to address in the region, shown on the following page in the Strategy Framework, and refined four consensus-based goals. This strategy reflects the collective work of those individuals and organisations and carefully balances a focus on the prevention of drowning with reinforcing the benefits of recreating in and around the water.



Riverland drowning prevention priorities & focus areas



Riverland drowning prevention goals

1. Ongoing collaboration

Strengthen and expand the River Murray Safety Working Group, dedicating a consistent backbone support for cooperation.

2. State policy engagement

Advocate for increased marine compliance resources for the Riverland and support for aquatic facility infrastructure in the region.

3. Joint campaigns and messaging

Partner to design and distribute educational material and safety messages, speaking with one voice to maximise impact.

4. Swimming & water safety skills

Strengthen and support programs that teach skills and knowledge, prioritising equity to ensure no one misses out.

1. Ongoing collaboration

A pillar of any strategic planning initiative, collaboration and the ability to work together for collective impact is essential. In the Riverland, the SAPOL initiated River Murray Safety Working Group serves as a vehicle for the region's drowning prevention community to network, identify emerging trends and challenges, plan cooperatively, and advance action in the goals and focus areas of this strategy.

Ongoing collaboration is explicitly cited as a goal in this local water safety strategy to ensure that cooperation remains a priority for all. Rooted in the belief that actions are better together, success in this area includes:

- An annual in-person convening to exchange ideas, provide updates, build partnerships, and assess progress
- Additional online meetings scheduled as required to achieve specific objectives
- A commitment to ongoing logistical support for the group, providing administrative assistance with scheduling meetings, maintaining contact lists, drafting and distributing agendas and meeting notes, growing the network to include new participants, and other backbone organisational duties to ensure a healthy and collaborative environment.

2. State policy engagement

At the May 2024 Riverland Water Safety Roundtable, participants identified the need for increased state government attention on the issue of drowning prevention in the Riverland. In this sense, a whole of government response was advised to ensure that people continue to have the opportunity to enjoy the region's waterways, safely. Two primary state policy needs were identified:

1. Increased marine compliance resources for the Riverland

The need for increased compliance with existing regulations on the River Murray was a common theme throughout the drafting of this strategy as speed, alcohol, and other risky boating activities often contribute to incidents on the river. Increased resourcing for marine compliance, including patrol vessels and personal, are a critical step for improving safety. Other ideas to improve compliance include the potential for a speed camera placed at strategic locations, and review and update of state boat license requirements.

2. Increased support for aquatic facility infrastructure in the Riverland

Much like the rest of Australia, aquatic facilities in the Riverland are under threat with significant maintenance and infrastructure projects due in the next 10 years. Moreover, the seasonal nature of the region's community pools means that swimming lessons and other programming are limited to only a few months per year. Ensuring that the next generation of Riverland residents have swimming skills to safely enjoy the River Murray and other waterways depends on children having a safe place to learn to swim. Strategic funding to support the Riverland's public pool infrastructure is urgently needed.

3. Joint campaigns and messaging

The power of speaking with one voice was identified as a potential game changer for water safety in the Riverland. The current state of multiple groups providing multiple messages on multiple topics is confusing for residents and visitors alike. A coordinated effort to streamline messaging from different channels is a major priority for the Riverland drowning prevention community.

Key messages for consideration relate to the changing conditions on the river, dangerous speed, the use of alcohol while swimming or boating, complacency towards water safety, and decreasing personal abilities and fitness. Valuing a set of key messages that are simple, local, and unified, success in this area could include:

- Establishing a subcommittee of the River Murray Working Group to progress a regional campaign to raise awareness
- Securing resources and endorsement from local or state government and/or key water safety organisations to support the campaign
- Launch of a coordinated media and social media campaign from several different stakeholders in the region
- Evaluation and review of efforts

4. Swimming and water safety skills

Swimming and water safety education has an inverse relationship with drowning incidents and other types of water injuries. The Riverland Water Safety Roundtable participants identified an alarming lack of swim ability, water safety, survival and boat skills across all age groups and demographics.

Success in this area includes:

- Improved collaboration between local governments in the Riverland for increased availability and low-cost access to safe swimmable locations
- Increased number of qualified swimming and water safety instructors in the region
- Increased opportunity for all ages to participate in swimming & water safety lessons
- Implementation of the existing school-based learn to swim program across the region to include both classroom and practical components
- Increased availability of low-cost transport to and from safe swimmable locations
- Efforts to establish a creative and sustainable model for delivering lessons locally
- Achievement of minimum National Benchmarks for swimming and water safety

The Australian Water Safety Council has endorsed three National Benchmarks which are the minimum standards that every Australian should have the opportunity to achieve and maintain. For detail surrounding these benchmarks, refer to [The National Swimming and Water Safety Framework](#) which provides a core structure to enable people to develop the skills, knowledge, understanding, attitudes and behaviours they need to enjoy a range of aquatic environments safely.

STRATEGY PRIORITIES AND FOCUS AREAS

POPULATIONS

Key groups that are considered vulnerable to drowning

Tailored strategies can effectively meet the needs of each population/subpopulation by addressing risk factors specific to the group

Focus Areas	Frequent river-using locals	Visitors	Low socioeconomic groups	Multicultural communities
<p>Why?</p>	<p>Specific focus on over-represented populations in the drowning statistics is one strategy to reduce drowning in the Riverland. Specifically, workshop participants identified the above focus areas as requiring additional/specific focus. Justifying these selections were a tapestry of stories and experiences in the Riverland, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most drowning fatalities were Riverland residents. • People visit the Riverland seeking fun, new, unique experiences but are often unfamiliar and unexperienced. • Financial pressures and cost of living contribute to the complexity and underpin the stories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Families are seeking out free places to recreate and cool off such as the river or lake ○ Families are prioritising core needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare over swimming and water safety lessons or purchase of safety equipment such as lifejackets • Some parents who have never taken swimming and water safety education, do not know how to help their children be safe in, on or around the water. • Peer groups recreate around waterways, while individuals within the peer groups have differing levels of swimming and water safety awareness, skills and experience. • Weekends and holidays are predictable high-visitation periods that overwhelms local services including police and ambulance. 			



STRATEGY PRIORITIES AND FOCUS AREAS

People

Life stages / age demographics that are over-represented in drowning statistics

Drowning prevention strategies need to be tailored to specific life stages

Focus Areas	Young males (16-24 years)	Adult males (25-45 years)	Older males (55+ years)
Why?	<p>Specific focus on people who are over-represented in the drowning statistics is one strategy to reduce drowning in the Riverland. Specifically, workshop participants identified the above focus areas as requiring additional/specific focus. Justifying these selections were a tapestry of stories and experiences in the Riverland, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun and leisure leads to trouble when egos, peer pressure and alcohol are involved • Decades of no/minimal visible consequences for risky behaviour on the water perpetuates these activities with all generations. • Complacency around the following contributes to unsafe behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Overconfidence in health, personal fitness and swimming ability ○ Changing conditions of the waterway ○ Speed ○ Alcohol ○ Waterway regulations • The local waterways are frequently used as an escape from family and social pressures/hardship. 		



STRATEGY PRIORITIES AND FOCUS AREAS

Places

Aquatic Environments

Targeted drowning prevention strategies enable environment-specific hazards to be addressed

Focus Areas	The River Murray & Lake Bonney	High-use entry & exit points	Holiday parks	Pubs and licensed venues near the River	Aquatic facilities
<p>Why?</p>	<p>Specific focus on high-risk locations is one strategy to reduce drowning in the Riverland. Specifically, workshop participants identified the above focus areas as requiring additional/specific focus. Justifying these selections were a tapestry of stories and experiences in the Riverland, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A jet ski comes around a blind corner in the river and collides with a school canoe group. • High speed along the river and in Lake Bonney contributes to significant incidents. • On warm sunny days and holidays, the green grassy area around boat ramps are packed full of families enjoying the outdoors and the water creating an environment where incompatible waterway activities exist. • Boat launches are busy and chaotic places on summer days. • Visitors to the area stay at holiday parks and children run around unsupervised with the lake adjacent to the park and accessible. Many of the risks associated with water are not understood and literacy limitations prevent some visitors from accessing this information because of the complex signage. • Excitement and energy around the River Murray increase as users prepare to play and enjoy the day. However, this produces an increase in the impatience of frequent river-using locals who are making space for the visitors. • Pubs and licensed venues near the river are frequented by locals and visitors who arrive and depart by boat, namely because there is no police presence and thus alcohol level checks on the river, compared to the road. • There currently exist only one supervised places to swim during the winter months for Riverland residence. 				



STRATEGY PRIORITIES AND FOCUS AREAS

ACTIVITIES

Things people do in, on, around the water

Different aquatic activities carry different risks that can often be minimised with appropriate safety equipment, education, and experience

Focus Areas	Boating	Swimming	Fishing
<p>Why?</p>	<p>Specific focus on high-risk activities is one strategy to reduce drowning in the Riverland. Specifically, workshop participants identified the above focus areas as requiring additional/specific focus. Justifying these selections were a tapestry of stories and experiences in the Riverland, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities such a boating, fishing are often done alone in remote areas of the river with inconsistent mobile reception. • Frequent river-using locals seek out remote swimming locations to avoid the crowds. These locations are usually only accessible by boat, and often have no mobile reception • Racing and officially sanctioned speed events on the water are endorsed and encouraged parts of Riverland culture, which lends itself to high-speed activities during in non-sanctioned spaces and times. • People are overconfident and complacent regarding their own swimming and survival skills, and those of there loved ones. • Some areas of the river allow for both boating and swimming activities simultaneously in the same location. • Yabbing and fishing are frequent activities conducted in the dark or in unsafe locations. • There is an intergenerational stigma and complacence towards wearing lifejackets on the river. • The lifejacket loaner shop closes at 5pm even though people continue to use the water for several hours after. • Alcohol is a cultural part of nearly every water activity including boating, fishing, swimming, picnics by the river, etc. • While schools are open to more swimming and water safety education, the transportation to available safe swimming locations is a challenge for many schools in the Riverland. 		



STRATEGY PRIORITIES AND FOCUS AREAS

RISK FACTORS

Cross-cutting risk factors that can address common themes across multiple priority areas

Significant barriers to lowering risk factors hamper progress in all Priority Areas

Focus Areas	Speed	Lack of knowledge	Alcohol
<p>Why?</p>	<p>Specific focus on risk factors is one strategy to reduce drowning in the Riverland. Specifically, workshop participants identified the above focus areas as requiring additional/specific focus. Justifying these selections were a tapestry of stories and experiences in the Riverland, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The river is a gathering place. Pack an Esky and meet up for a BBQ, night swim, fish, float, tinny trip, etc. • There is often competitive jostling and peer dares to engage in activities such as jumping off the houseboat roof or rocks/cliffs, water sports at high speeds, swimming across the river, etc. • Local beliefs and cultural practices include statements like the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ‘Once you learn to swim, you can always swim.’ ○ ‘My child gets swimming lessons in school (1 week lesson sets), this is enough water safety for them.’ ○ ‘We already know the river.’ ○ ‘Lifejackets are not cool. I have never worn one and I have been okay.’ ○ ‘If my parents and grand parents don’t have to wear a lifejacket, I don’t either.’ ○ ‘It won’t happen to me.’ ○ ‘No one checks [alcohol, speed, lifejackets], she’ll be right’ • Any adult can rent a houseboat. It does not require a boat license or for them to be aware of the risks and dangers of the river. • Some have taken their boat license many years ago and are out of touch with the new regulations. 		



NEXT STEPS

Implementation of the Riverland Water Safety Strategy relies on the resources and support of many. Monitoring, evaluation and review are essential components and must be resourced appropriately. This resourcing will come from a combination of coordinated activities, evaluation activities of members and other stakeholders, and commissioned evaluations where resources have been secured.

The River Murray Safety Working Group should meet at least annually to review progress. The group should encourage diversity and adapt the strategy to meet emerging challenges and opportunities.

ADOPTION

Whether local, state and federal governments and their agencies, industry, volunteer movements and community groups and individuals endorse, adopt and align activities to the strategy.

What commitments have been made and by who?
Has the strategy been formally adopted / endorsed and are the actions reflected in workplans, key performance indicators and position descriptions?
What funding has been allocated to ensure delivery of the action statements?

COLLABORATION

Whether stakeholder support and actions, as well as the formation of partnerships address the issues, implement the actions and strive to achieve the strategy targets.

What are partners doing to support the strategy?
How committed are stakeholders to collaborative approaches to solving the issues?
Does the River Murray Safety Working Group continue to meet, expand representation, work through key issues, advocate, communicate and coordinate?

SOCIAL LICENSE

Do community members, groups, and media organisations encourage policy makers, water safety organisations, governments and industry to carry through the strategy?

How committed are media organisations to promoting water safety messages and campaigns, reporting on drowning incidents and encouraging policy makers to resource the strategy?
Will community groups support the changes needed to reduce the burden of drowning?
Do community sentiments and individual behaviours align with increased water safety?

EVALUATION

What is the evidence that the strategy is having an impact?

Has there been progress toward the four main goals?
Are data sources and reporting systems available to record progress against the strategy?
Which stakeholders are invested in outcomes measured against the strategy?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following organisations chose to contribute to the creation of this document:

Organisation Name

ALERT First Aid & Training
Belgravia Leisure
Berri Barmera Council
Canoe the Riverland
Department for Education
Discovery Holiday Parks - Lake Bonney
District Council of Loxton Waikerie
Life Saving Victoria
MCCSA
Renmark Paringa council
Royal Life Saving Society - Australia
Royal Life Saving South Australia
SA Ambulance Service
SA State Emergency Service
SAPOL
South Australian Water Corporation
Surf Life Saving South Australia

Thank you to the government representatives who attended the Riverland Water Safety Roundtable and provided insight and strategic direction:

Hon Emily Bourke MLC
Member of the Legislative Council of South Australia
Assistant Minister to the Premier
Assistant Minister for Autism

Hon Russel Wortley MLC
Member of the Legislative Council for South Australia

Tim Whetstone MP
Shadow Minister for Trade and Investment
Member for Chaffey

Dana Wortley MP
Member for Torrens

Sue Lyons on behalf of Hon Anne Ruston
Senator for South Australia
Manager of Opposition Business in the Senate

Margaret Howie
Acting Mayor – Renmark Paringa Council



Appendix 1: Drowning in The Riverland

Prepared by:



ROYAL LIFE SAVING
AUSTRALIA

> 20 year analysis 2002/03 to 2022/23

AGE BREAKDOWN



17 people have **fatally drowned** in the Riverland region, South Australia



51 estimated **non-fatal drowning** incidents in the Riverland region

100% OF DROWNING DEATHS WERE MALES



In comparison, males account for approximately 80% of drowning deaths nationally

LOCATION OF DROWNING



94% IN A RIVER/CREEK

All except one occurred in the River Murray

ACTIVITY PRIOR TO DROWNING



41%
BOATING & WATERCRAFT



29%
SWIMMING & RECREATING

30%
OTHER

52%

of drowning deaths **occurred within 10km** of where the person lived.

16 of the 17 occurred in the river (not home) and the other occurred in a public pool (not home).

29%

of drowning incidents were people who **lived 100km or further away** (both intra- and inter-state visitors).

24%

of those who fatally drowned were known to be **born overseas**.

None were known to be international visitors or international students.

WHEN DOES DROWNING OCCUR?



41% IN THE SUMMER
41% IN THE SPRING



24% OCCURRED
ON A TUESDAY



53% IN THE
AFTERNOON
(12:01PM TO 6PM)

LEADING RISK FACTORS



36%
RECORDED PRESENCE
OF ALCOHOL



29%
RECORDED A
PRE-EXISTING
MEDICAL CONDITION



18%
OCCURRED AT NIGHT
(EVENING OR
EARLY MORNING)



SWIMMING ABILITY WAS
UNKNOWN IN ALL CASES,
EXCEPT 1, THOUGHT TO
BE A STRONG SWIMMER



BOATING AND WATERCRAFT DROWNING DEATHS:
100% WERE NOT WEARING A LIFEJACKET
29% OCCURRED WHEN ON A HOUSEBOAT

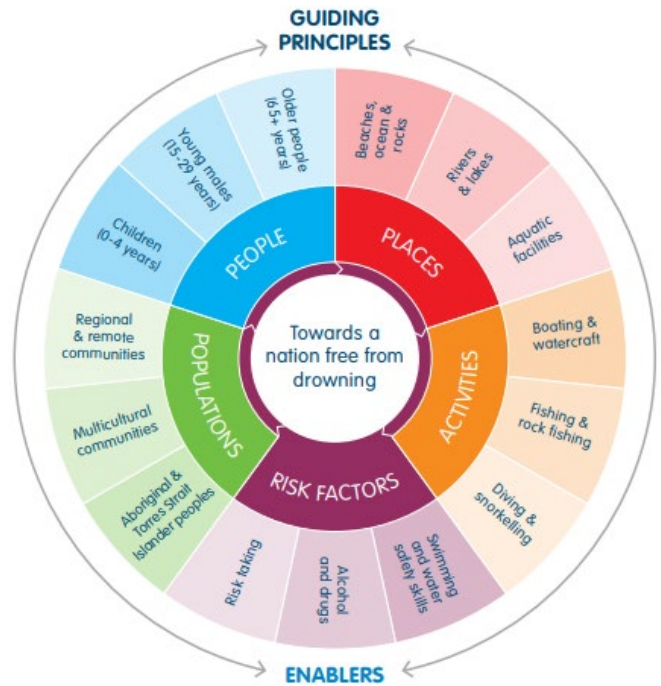
Drowning in the Riverland (20-year analysis) is available [here](#)

APPENDIX 2: AUSTRALIAN WATER SAFETY STRATEGY FRAMEWORK & LOCAL WATER SAFETY STRATEGY PLANNING

The Australian Water Safety Strategy model is a model developed and used by the Australian Water Safety Council and advocated highlighted by the World Health Organisation. It seeks to understand and prioritise actions based on:

- Where the burden of drowning is proportionally highest
- Where there are issues emerging and/or drowning is most preventable
- Where issues are sufficiently defined and understood so that actions can be targeted
- Prioritises achievable, measurable focus areas and associated actions

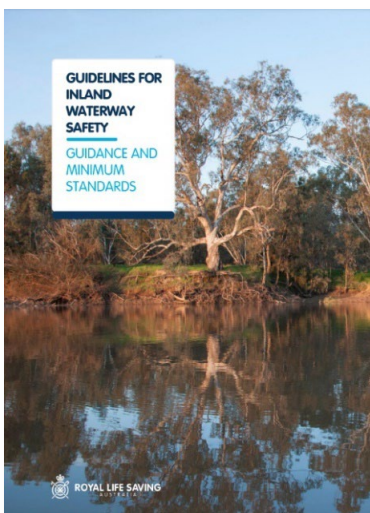
The chosen Local Water Safety Planning Process is closely aligned to the Australian Water Safety Strategy Framework and the methodologies and practices used by the Australian Water Safety Council for the development of the Australian Water Safety Strategic Framework.



Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 and its relationship with this plan

The Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030 (AWSS 2030) is an inter-sector strategy released in 2021 which provides a framework to reduce drowning deaths in Australia by 50% by 2030. In it, inland waterways are identified as one of the three primary places requiring attention to meet this target. Key themes occurring from the AWSS 2030 encourage community-based action in the form of Local Water Safety Plans. Whether these inland waterways safety plans are part of a land and water management plan, Local Government plan, or a standalone regional waterways safety plan, the outcome remains the same – reduced fatal and non-fatal drowning by creating safer aquatic locations for all to enjoy.

In addition, the framework of the AWSS 2030 provides a valuable tool in prioritising and categorising key issues, priorities and focuses towards reducing drowning by recognising that drowning prevention occurs at both a systems' and individuals' levels.



Guidelines for Inland Waterway Safety and their relationship with the development of this plan

The Guidelines for Inland Waterway Safety (GIWS) provide practical guidance for owners and operators of inland waterways in planning for water safety. Every attempt has been made to align the structure and content of this document with the recommendations of the GIWS. Where inconsistencies between other standards and the GIWS exist, a decision has been made to align with the GIWS, considering a range of water safety knowledge, research and expertise has been incorporated into the development of the GIWS.

Local water safety strategy planning process

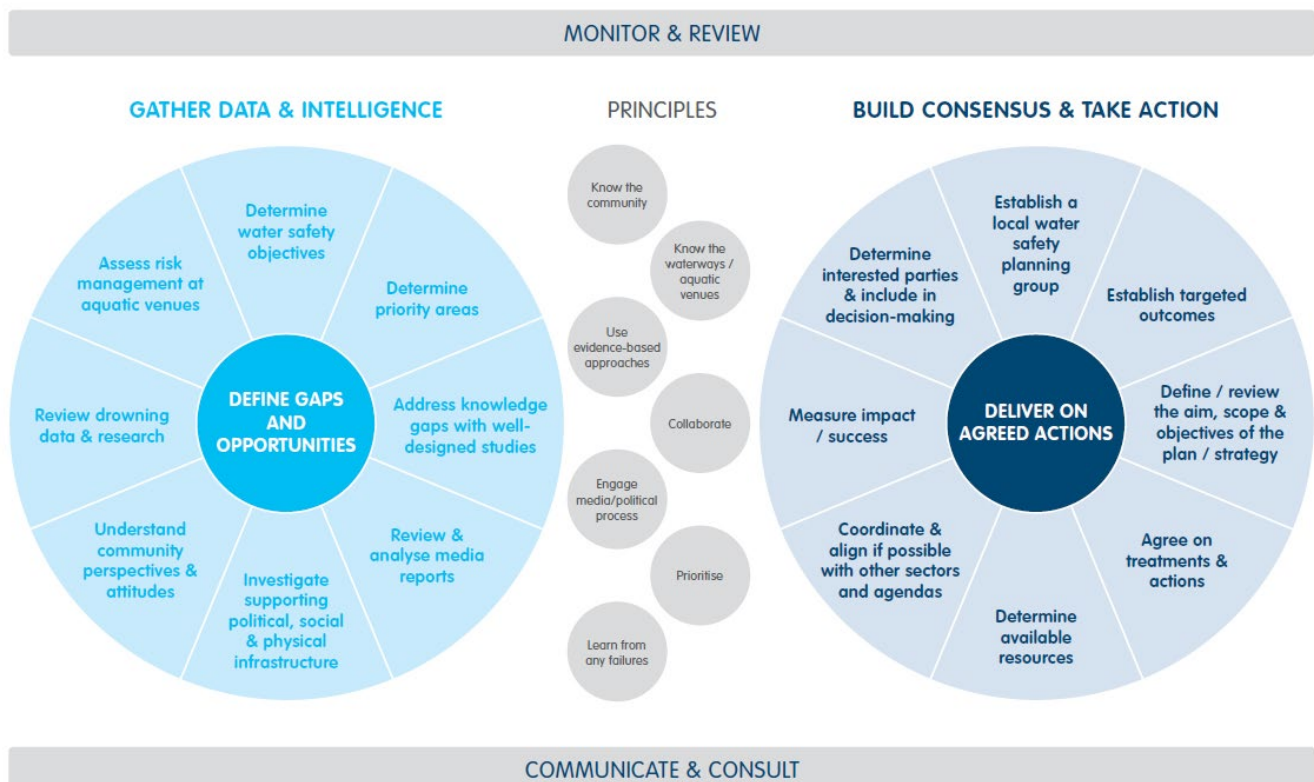
This Local Water Safety Strategy incorporates a holistic approach to community water safety, following a review of several existing methodologies from both within Australia and around the world. The structure and methodology incorporated into the development of this review has been closely aligned to the Australian Water Safety Strategy (AWSS) 2030, the Guidelines for Inland Waterway Safety (GIWS), Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience resources, International Life Saving Federation resources and the World Health Organisation’s drowning prevention action plan. In addition to the framework approach brought by the alignment to the AWSS, the development of this strategy has been informed by the following monitoring activities:

- Royal Life Saving drowning data and research
- Fatal drowning data sourced from the National Coronial Information System
- The perspectives of local stakeholders, agencies, and stakeholders through the Local Water Safety Planning Committee workshop
- Exposure analysis of high-use locations based on Roy Morgan people Movement Dashboards
- A desk top review of key policies, programs, campaigns, and locations that contribute to or deter from improved water safety and drowning prevention outcomes within the community (Royal Life Saving Community Water Safety Assessment).

Incorporating a holistic approach to planning, review, monitoring activities, local intelligence, stakeholder communication and consultation, and ongoing monitoring and review, the model emphasises a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach and is intended to follow a cyclical process.

The process is intended to reflect that there are many ways to arrive at a Local Water Safety Plan and should be approached as a ‘menu’ rather than a linear process of distinct steps.

LOCAL WATER SAFETY PLAN DEVELOPMENT PROCESS



Riverland Water Safety Strategy

