

SWIMMING POOL CHANGE OF OPERATIONS CONSULTATION PLAN

NOVEMBER 2023 – JANUARY 2024



Introduction

This consultation strategy outlines how we will work with communities across the MidCoast on the implementation of key changes to swimming pool operation for the 2024-25 swimming season.

Background

A resolution of the elected Councillors to review the management and operation of all public and community swimming pools in the MidCoast has resulted in several findings that will impact the way pools are operated into the future.

MidCoast Council owns nine swimming pools across the region. These are located at:

- Taree
- Forster
- Tea Gardens
- Wingham
- Krambach
- Gloucester
- Nabiac
- Bulahdelah
- Stroud

Currently there are a range of management models, from contract arrangements to unsupervised facilities.

The report has outlined the following key issues:

- The provision of pools is a large investment by the community with maintenance and operations of pools being subsidised in the order of \$1.85 million per year, with capital renewal not fully funded across all sites. This cost is expected to grow approximately 5% a year.
- Small user numbers mean that ratepayers are subsidising swimmers up to \$45 per swim in some locations.
- We have a number of unstaffed pools which present a safety risk.

To address these and other issues, the report has identified several key recommendations including:

- The need to reduce the opening hours of pools to provide services when the community is using the facilities and not when they are not
- The need to have supervision at the smaller currently unsupervised pools
- Introducing a cost for visiting smaller pools
- Implementation of models of community management in smaller pools and changes to contract arrangements in larger pools.

Key considerations/level of engagement

There are several changes that will impact on pool users for the 2024-25 swimming season. Some pools are more impacted by the recommendations than others and some of the recommendations do not form part of the consultation proposed with the community.

The non-negotiable changes are:

- Outdoor pools will open and close from the start and end of Eastern Daylight Saving Time, rather than being aligned with school holidays subject to agreement between pool operators and Council
- Fees and charges will be introduced across all pools
- Management of pools at Tea Gardens, Bulahdelah, Nambucca and Stroud will be by community group or small operator
- Management of the Wingham pool will move to a small operator or community group, however there will be an option for it to be included in the specialist management contract
- The Manning Aquatic and Leisure Centre outdoor pool will close during the middle of the day – we will not be consulting the community on this as we have attendance data to inform the decision of operational hours
- It should be noted there are no changes to the operation of the Great Lakes Aquatic Centre

We will be consulting with the communities of Tea Gardens, Wingham, Stroud, Bulahdelah, Gloucester and Nambucca on their preferred opening hours.

We will be working with the community of Kambach to inform the development of

- A feasibility assessment for the continuing operation of the pool
- A feasibility assessment for the upgrade of the pool to meet current standards
- Options for the use of the pool site if the feasibility assessments are unfavourable

Purpose

The purpose of this consultation is to:

- understand the community's preferred opening times at Gloucester, Stroud, Bulahdelah, Nambucca, Tea Gardens and Wingham
- gather information from the Kambach community to inform the development of feasibility assessments and options as outlined above
- inform operational decisions on pool opening hours for the 2024-25 season

Approach

The broad approach for this consultation will be to:

- gather information from the communities and key stakeholders on their preferred hours of use for their community pools by providing opportunities for community input through face-to-face consultation and online engagement opportunities. We will specifically seek feedback from users and user groups of the pools, schools, local residents and community groups.
- inform the community of the proposed changes via a range of communication tools and methods, including direct email to the community database, Council social media channels, local Facebook group administrators, flyer distribution, Council's weekly e-newsletter, media release and information on Council's web page.

General key messages

The key messages will include the following.

- The provision of pools is a large investment by the community with maintenance and service costs in the order of \$1.85 million per year, with capital renewal not fully funded across all sites. This cost is expected to grow to approximately 5% a year.
- Small user numbers mean that ratepayers are subsidising swimmers up to \$45 per swim in some locations.
- We have several unstaffed pools which present a safety risk.
- Changes will provide opportunities for community and small operators to provide flexible services to their communities. They may choose to operate more hours than the minimum established.
- The two larger centres, Taree and Forster, will continue to be managed under contract by a specialist operator. This will go out to a new contract in 2024.
- Changes will come into place for the 2024-25 swim season.
- We will continue to seek funding for improvements to energy efficiency to reduce the costs of running pools to the community.
- We will work with State and Federal MPs to seek grant funding for concept plans, a feasibility study and the construction of a new pool for the Wingham community.

Location specific key messages

Key location specific messages include the following.

Krambach

- The Krambach pool is not of a commercial standard and doesn't meet Royal Life Saving Society guidelines for water turnover.
- We want to understand how the Krambach community uses its pool
- We are undertaking an assessment on the feasibility of continuing to operate the pool
- We are also undertaking an assessment on the feasibility of upgrading the pool to meet current standards
- If the pool can't be operated or upgraded, we want to understand what the community would see as a future use for the pool site

Wingham

- The pool will be contracted to a smaller operator or interested community group however there will be an option for it to be included in the specialist management contract.
- We want to know from the community the hours users would most like the pool to be open.
- The Wingham Pool is in poor condition.
- The pool leaks at the expansion joint where the pool was extended and through the gutters that are experiencing concrete cancer resulting in the pool nearing the end of its life.

- We will work with State and Federal MPs to seek grant funding for concept plans, a feasibility study and the construction of a new pool for the Wingham community.

Nabiac, Stroud, Bulahdelah

- We want to know from the community the hours of the day that users would most like the pools to be open.
- Council can no longer carry the risk of unstaffed community pools.
- We are looking to work with interested community groups to manage the pools.
- The new model will mean users have to pay. This will start with the 2024-25 swim season.
- Charges will be standard across all pools.

Gloucester

- The pool will continue to be managed by Council staff.
- We want to know from the community the hours of the day that users would most like the pools to be open-

Tea Gardens

- We want to know from the community the hours of the day that users would most like the pools to be open.
- We are looking to work with interested community groups to manage the pool.

Taree

- The Manning Aquatic and Leisure Centre will continue to be managed under contract by a specialist operator. This will go out to a new contract in 2024.
- The Manning Aquatic and Leisure Centre outdoor pool will close during the middle of the day from the 2024-25 swimming season.

Forster

- The Great Lakes Aquatic Centre will continue to be managed under contract by a specialist operator. This will go out to a new contract in 2024.
- There are no changes to the operation of the Great Lakes Aquatic Centre

Stakeholders

The following table outlines who we will consult with, their interest in the project, and how we may consult with them.

Stakeholder	Interest in the project	Consultation method
General pool users	Users of the pools	Face-to-face, digital and email
Schools	Potential users of the pools	Face-to-face or digital
Specific user groups	Higher users of the pools	Digital and EDM
Community groups	Potential users of the pools and potential operators	Face-to-face or digital
Older people	Users	Face-to-face or digital
People living with disability	Potential users of the pools	Face-to-Face, digital or EDM
Tourists/visitors	Potential users of the pools	Face-to-face or digital
Sports groups	Potential users of the pools	Face-to-face or digital

Timeframe and activities

The following activities, communications tools and channels will be used to support the face-to-face and digital consultation that will take place:

Method	Timing	Details
Face-to-face discussions	Throughout the consultation	Popups at the various pools and communities to discuss the changes and elicit feedback on most preferred times
Online tools	Throughout the consultation	Appropriate online feedback tools will be selected to engage with communities
Website	Throughout the consultation	Raise awareness of engagement and provide information on the project including how to participate and provide feedback.
Media releases	At various points throughout the consultation	Issued to print, radio, and television contacts in a timely manner to help inform the community of the consultation.
News articles	At various points throughout the consultation	Targeting community newsletters and other local avenues of communication to connect with impacted communities.
e-newsletter	At various points throughout the consultation	Inclusion in weekly MidCoast News Wrap
Flyer or poster	Initial stages	This will support and complement face-to-face engagement, provide information on popups and link to online feedback opportunities
Social media	As appropriate	Use social media channels to inform members of the community how they can participate. Monitor responses and use them to inform engagement.
Intranet (internal)	Prior to consultation starting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Customer Service briefings• News and updates to all staff
Email to community database	Throughout consultation	Use our community databases to raise awareness and encourage feedback.

Flexibility

This plan outlines how Council intends to listen to our community. As new information is gained, or concerns are raised by the community, the plan can be revised as required. We will remain agile enough to take advantage of the opportunities and changing circumstances that may arise.

Reporting

We will report back to our community on the outcomes of this consultation. Information collected during the process will be used to inform the opening hours of pools to be included in contracts and will be reported back to the elected Council as part of the broader discussion on pool operations.