



**Legislative Assembly** for the  
**Australian Capital Territory**

Standing Committee on Environment,  
and Planning

# Submission Cover Sheet

## **Inquiry into the Role and Future of the Woden Town Centre in the context of a compact city**

Submission number: 022

Submitter: Save Phillip Pool

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# Submission by Save Phillip Pool

Inquiry into the Role and Future of the Woden Town Centre in the context of a compact city

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry on Woden's future. Save Phillip Pool is a community group that formed in 2023 with the following aims:

- Safeguarding the continuation of the 50-metre outdoor Phillip Pool and its surroundings for the community and for future generations.
- Engaging the community in the preservation and management of Phillip Pool and its environs.
- Supporting sustainable planning and management for the benefit of the community and continued access to and enjoyment of Phillip Pool
- Advocating for thoughtful planning of the areas surrounding Phillip Pool to ensure recreation and green space is preserved for the health and benefit of the wider community.

Our submission focuses on the elements in the Terms of Reference most relevant to the question of Phillip Pool's future: social connectivity; health, education and community services; public spaces that encourage activity and make people feel safe; community facilities and services; and sustainability and resilience to climate change.

## History

The Phillip Pool was planned and constructed in 1971 by the then National Capital Development Commission (NCDC), as part of a new sporting and leisure precinct for the Woden Town Centre. It was common to privately lease public pools on short term rental leases at the time, as the Commonwealth still held control over ACT pool sites by approving major works.

Phillip Pool was leased to a Sydney based company who built an ice rink on the site which not only provided extra sporting facilities but was a way to sustainably provide a heating source to the outdoor pools by using the waste heat from condensing unit used to freeze the ice rink surface. This was a first for the ACT at that time, and is similar to cogeneration systems from around the world. This is part of Canberra's engineering history and should be recognised as such.

The Phillip Pool site was granted a 99 year lease in 2008 without community consultation and the site was sold to a local apartment and hotel construction company Geocon in December 2022. This was shortly after the release of the draft new territory plan, which recommended changing the 50m pool requirement for the site, to a reduced 25m pool and associated smaller pools. The community, having provided feedback on the site and aquatic facilities in general for the Woden area, was blindsided by this recommendation. At no stage prior to the release of the draft territory plan documents was there any consideration about removing the Olympic size

pool for a smaller pool. It was suggested that a 'sports and recreation needs analysis' recommended the change. To date no analysis has been provided by the ACT Government.

### **Social Connectivity**

The Woden Town centre is the key shopping and services area for South Canberra, playing an important role for residents of the Inner South, Woden, Weston Creek and Molonglo. It is the hub for Canberra's public transport system and therefore plays an important role in the social and economic fabric of Canberra's south.

In 2013, the population of Woden was 34,657, but this is expected to increase to 49,200 by 2041 (ACT Government). This is part of an overall ACT Government strategy of increasing Canberra's population. The increase in density is a big change to Woden - and it is our observation that the density increase has not been thoughtfully done, indicating a lack of care and planning. Many cities around the world pursue densification as a strategy for increasing environmental sustainability, using strategies that increase social cohesion, reduce resource use and support sustainable behaviours such as walking, cycling and use of public transport. Woden's densification has not achieved this. New housing has been provided but the supporting infrastructure needed for successful densification has not.

Social connectivity depends on places to play, socialise and spend time with friends and family. Unfortunately Woden's increased population has come at the cost of these spaces. Take for example Phillip Pool, a 50m outdoor pool in an accessible location in the heart of Woden, which is subject to a current development application. The pool is a green space in an increasingly built-up area of town and is one of the only options for kids and adults to spend time outdoors in hot summers. It's cheap and accessible to public transport, and supports an active community of local swimmers. The proposed replacement, an indoor 25m pool inside a private development, could very well be expensive, with limited opening hours, and hostile to non-residents. There are a range of unanswered questions about its operating model which make it more akin to small private facilities such as Stellar or Club Lime at ANU (\$20 per visit for non-members). It is clear that it will not be the kind of place where you can meet friends or take your family to hang out for hours on a hot afternoon, for \$20 and the price of hot chips. It does not meet the requirements of lap swimmers who need access to 50m.

Social cohesion is at risk in Woden, with residents of older areas increasingly angry about traffic and the perceived sale of public assets to developers for housing which is not uniformly well-designed. Apartment owner members of Save Phillip Pool are distressed at decreasing amenity, poor and unsustainable construction standards and heat islanding as we lose green space. There is a feeling that nobody is benefiting but the developers.

Another way is open, to pursue best-practice densification, and use the once-in-a-generation change underway to reorient Woden and invest in the public facilities we need into the future. Save Phillip Pool believes there is a strong case for retaining a 50m outdoor pool in Woden and using it as the centrepiece for a new vision of Woden as a socially, environmentally and economically prosperous centre for the South.

**A range of community facilities/services, including cultural and recreational facilities (with a focus on an aquatic centre)**

According to Royal Lifesaving Society of Australia benchmarks, Woden with a population approaching 50,000 people warrants 'district' level facilities including a 50m pool, a 25m pool, various warm water and program pools, as well as a splash park and play area, sauna and spa. This analysis is backed by Save Phillip Pool's deep knowledge of community expectations and needs following extensive public engagement around the current Development Application. Woden is also the service centre for the Inner South, Weston Creek and Molonglo - while Stromlo Aquatic Centre services the latter, there is a much broader population base served by Woden which needs access to adequate aquatic facilities.

Further analysis of typical aquatic facility shows typical aquatic facility components by population.

Development Level			Typical Components																				
Population Catchment (within 20 minutes drive)	Level	Description	50m Lap Pool	25m Lap Pool	Leisure/Prog Pool	Splashpark/Slides	Warm Water Pool	Spa/Sauna/Steam	Dive Pool & Platforms	Marshalling Room	Grandstands	Broadcasting facilities	Plant Room(s)	Fitness Centre	Change Facilities	Reception/Café/Kiosk	Admin Office	Treatment Rooms	Program Room(s)	First Aid Room	Meeting Room	Creche	
Over 1,000,000	9	International	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Over 500,000	8	National	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Over 100,000	7	State	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
70,000-100,000	6	Major	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y					Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
40,000-70,000	5	District	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y					Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
10,000-40,000	4	Local		Y	Y								Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
5,000-10,000	3	Rural		Y	Y								Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			
2,500-5000	2	Remote		Y									Y		Y	Y	Y				Y		
800-2,500	1	Very remote		Y									Y		Y	Y	Y				Y		

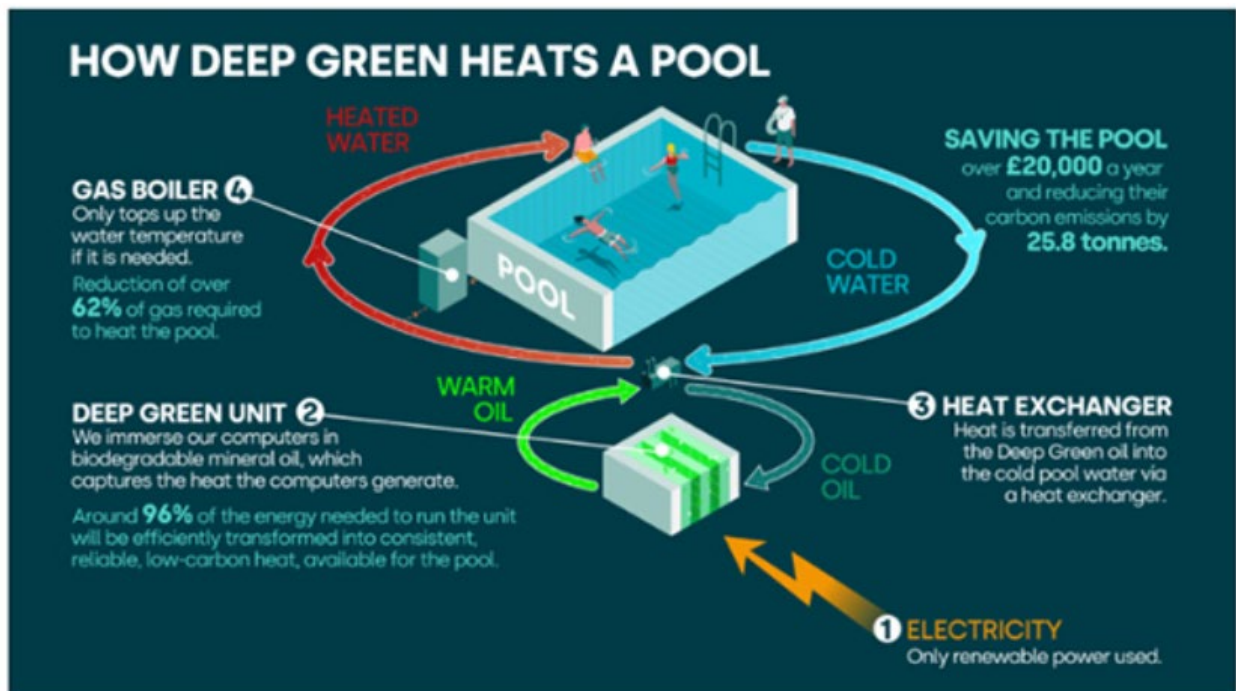
Fig 1: Royal Life Saving Society, 2025 State of Aquatic Facilities report

The Stromlo Aquatic centre was never planned to be the aquatics centre for the Woden and Inner South area. Originally, it was meant to be a new pool for Weston Creek and the new Molonglo district, and was announced at the 2012 ACT Election. It is arguably the worst located aquatic facility in Australia let alone the ACT. The ACT Government Aquatic Facilities Planning

Framework 2013-2033 recommends trends are well established for integrating and co-locating facilities as part of a “village”, or town centres, consisting of community and education facilities with aquatic facility hubs. The Stromlo facility, while located in Molonglo on the western edge, will be located outside of the proposed new Molonglo town centre. Public transport can take up to an hour by bus from the Woden town centre.

### Viability of existing facilities and future provision

Comments have been made that Canberra’s climate makes outdoor pools unviable. This assertion has been made in the media and seems to have informed the Woden District Strategy. Evidence actually suggests the contrary, as outdoor swimming has increased in popularity in Australia and globally since the pandemic. Melbourne has at least three public 50m outdoor pools that are open year-round. Historic outdoor pools or “Lidos” are reopening across the United Kingdom, and outdoor pools are being opened in other European capitals such as Copenhagen and Dublin. Outdoor pools operate year-round in London, and Canberrans swim year-round in Lake Burley Griffin. **A well-designed, year-round indoor/outdoor facility in Woden would be a drawcard and offer something unique to Canberra and indeed the broader region.** Heating water uses power but Phillip Pool has already solved this issue through what must be one of the first local examples of circular engineering. Currently waste heat from the ice rink is used to heat the pool, a model that should be replicated to enable year-round outdoor swimming. Integrating a pool with new ice skating facilities or even emerging industries such as data centres which create significant heat waste would make economic and environmental sense and potentially diversify the local economy.



Deep Green says it can heat the pool to 30C for 60% of the time. Credit: Deep Green.

Fig 2: Deep Green pilot circular heating model for data centre/pool in Devon, UK. Source: [ausleisure.com.au](http://ausleisure.com.au)

A lap lane availability analysis undertaken by Save Phillip Pool shows that in winter there are about 200 hours of 50m lane availability weekly on Canberra's Southside. This can be compared to 3000 hours on the Northside. The local Islamic community has also noted there is no availability at all for gender segregated swimming, due to a lack of facilities. There is a clear case for a year round 50m facility in Woden to redress this imbalance. The ACT Government should seize the opportunity for innovation through retaining and upgrading Phillip Pool until another suitable facility is open in the Woden Valley. In the context of a compact city, these facilities need to be in walking or cycling distance to encourage sustainable modes of transport - currently for most Woden residents, when Phillip Pool is closed, getting to a 50m pool is either a 20 minute drive (to Stromlo, Tuggeranong or Civic) or over an hour by bus.

While Save Phillip Pool wishes to retain and upgrade the current facility, we are also realistic. Phillip Pool has been in limbo for decades, not a public facility but also not quite private due to lease conditions on the land. Basic upgrades have been neglected for years, and it is in poor condition. Now in a developer's hands, and the unwelcome and unviable proposed replacement more or less locked in, we know there are very few options for the community to be heard. However the ACT government can still act. A land swap might be possible - the developer appears to be struggling to meet all the requirements for the site and might welcome an unencumbered parcel. The government could then take over management of Phillip Pool and upgrade it to meet contemporary expectations. This is a low-cost option and would give the community a much better outcome. The ACT government could alternatively commit to an appropriate replacement facility and renegotiate the development requirements for the current pool site, removing the pool requirement for the Irving St site.

### **Health, education and community services**

Community is an important outcome of public swimming facilities. The RLSS has found that "Increased social cohesion and improved health and wellbeing are two of the main social benefits of the Australian aquatic industry." According to Future Lidos, a UK-based outdoor swimming organisation, outdoor pools (known as Lidos in the UK) are "uniquely able to generate value through their powerful sense of community, openness and generosity, and a deep sense of place." More evidence is accruing that outdoor pools are a critical node for community, because they provide a safe, accessible and welcoming "third space" to foster community and social interaction. Outdoor pools are more social than indoor facilities which can be loud, crowded and noisy on hot days and discourage the kind of longer periods of unstructured social interaction that can be seen at Phillip Pool and other outdoor swimming spots. Young people in particular need places to go and Woden does not have any other locations like it, particularly on very hot days, where the only other option is Westfield.

The health benefits of swimming are clear; a 2021 report by PWC and the RLSS estimated annual health benefits of the aquatic industry are \$2.5 billion through reduced burden of disease. Providing facilities that encourage people from a range of backgrounds, ages, abilities and demographics with the opportunity to swim locally would have many preventative health

benefits. If the RLSS benchmark is taken seriously, Woden should have 50m, 25m and warm and program pools provided which can support the range of needs across the spectrum from aquarobics and hydrotherapy to swimming lessons, school carnivals, squad training and casual lap swimming. There are opportunities, if the pool is relocated elsewhere in Woden, to choose a site near the hospital and plan for an integrated health and wellness precinct.

Education has a strong link to public pools, particularly 50m pools which can host swimming carnivals and Physical Education lessons. Phillip Pool is used by students of Canberra College and Marist College already; there is much more scope to offer facilities for the scores of other schools in South Canberra to integrate swimming into their curriculum.

More critically, a new facility would offer opportunities to encourage more children into swimming and water safety. This is a real concern in Australia which has been recently noted by the RLSS, who note that 40% of 12 year olds do not meet swimming baselines. Drowning rates are increasing as well. Local, accessible aquatic facilities are critical to build water confidence and swimming skills to address these issues.

### **Public spaces that encourage activity and in which people feel safe**

As noted above, aquatic facilities have important impacts on increasing low-impact, gentle exercise that is accessible and suitable for all, especially in increasing swimming and water safety skills for children. Canberrans love to swim and residents of the South are missing out, with more people spending time at less-safe unsupervised locations such as the Murrumbidgee River - where there was a tragic drowning in 2024.

A well-designed 50m indoor/outdoor facility in Woden could provide further social activation in a part of town where a lot of mixed-use development is not currently thriving. On summer evenings people move from the pool to nearby restaurants to pick up takeaway or stay for dinner. An investment in keeping Phillip Pool open and available to the community, with upgrades such as those done to Dickson Pool over the years, could generate more evening activity amongst local businesses. Further activation could be provided by including a multi-purpose community space in an upgraded Phillip Pool, creating an accessible hub well-connected to public transport and cycle paths, helping Canberra to achieve sustainability goals by providing excellent local facilities - and reversing the trend of privatising community assets that has been sadly observed in Woden over recent years.

### **Sustainability and resilience to climate change, including by protecting and expanding living infrastructure and managing Yarralumla Creek**

A final note to suggest that if a new pool site is being considered, there are opportunities to integrate a new aquatic centre with renaturalisation of Yarralumla Creek, using water sensitive urban design principles. A well-designed indoor/outdoor 50m facility like Gunyama Park, located in the urban renewal precinct of Green Square in the Sydney city (see image below). The new aquatic facility could integrate wetlands and ponds within a broader landscape design,

offering opportunities to bring the creek back to life, fostering biodiversity and locking in green space forever at the heart of a rapidly-developing Woden.

