

Written Response by the Welsh Government to the recommendations within; Mark Allen's Law Water Safety and Drowning Prevention report.

There are still too many water-related incidents occurring in Wales and sadly water-related deaths. The recommendations brought forward in this report will enhance Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy which was published in December 2020 by Water Safety Wales.

Wales has many iconic inland water features and Blue Flag beaches which attract a plethora of visitors every year. We fully support water activities and encourage everyone to enjoy the water in a safe way.

Wales has seen a substantial growth in outdoor activity over recent years, and our appreciation for our outdoor space has been solidified by the COVID pandemic. Outdoor spaces are important for our physical and mental health and wellbeing.

By increasing awareness of water safety throughout Wales, the hope is more people will be better informed and able judge the dangers of their surroundings. Places in Wales can be very remote which provides its own difficulties including the impact on our rescue services and our Health Service.

I would like to thank all members of the Petitions Committee for Mark Allen's Law Water Safety and Drowning Prevention report. In particular, I want to thank the campaigners who have lost loved ones and have inputted their valuable comments to the report and for their continued awareness raising. I am pleased to see the Committee's recommendations as sensible to improve water safety and increase awareness of the dangers. I have set out my response to the Report's individual recommendations below.

Detailed Responses to the report's recommendations are set out below:

Recommendation 1

The Welsh Government should consider providing clear leadership and co-ordination for water safety and drowning prevention by allocating a specific Minister to lead on this. At present this straddles various portfolios including community safety, education and mental health which hinders a concerted effort to progress this agenda.

Response: Accept.

The Minister for Climate Change will lead this work. Water safety and drowning prevention will be included within the Minister for Climate Change's portfolio to provide focus and coordination within Welsh Government and across relevant partner agencies.

Financial Implications: None.

Recommendation 2

The Welsh Government should formalise the relationship with Water Safety Wales and provide sufficient funding to ensure the effective delivery of the Drowning Prevention Strategy.

Response: Accept.

The work to date by Water Safety Wales, a third-party group consisting of more than 30 member organisations, has taken the water safety agenda forward since 2017. To ensure the effective delivery and maximise their work, my officials met with Water Safety Wales to discuss how funding can be made available to support the work of Water Safety Wales. My officials are exploring the appropriate mechanism to fund Water Safety Wales for the 2023-24 financial year.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 3

The Welsh Government should ensure that there is a coherent education and water safety programme in schools, delivered from a young age. Increasing awareness of the risks presented by water and an understanding of how to stay safe or respond in an accident can save lives.

Response: Accept.

A number of our delivery partners and wider organisations deliver Water Safety messaging as part of education campaigns. For example, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, Keep Wales Tidy (Blue Flag), Natural Resources Wales (the wild swimming code), and National Parks.

My officials are considering how to bring all partners together in a targeted approach. There could, for example, be opportunities to increase awareness in schools in Wales by including an ask of Water Safety Wales to co-ordinate and facilitate, linking close ties with already established education communicators who have Wales-wide reach.

My officials are liaising with their colleagues across Welsh Government with a view to using all of the available levers presented from the new school curriculum. With an increased role for outdoor learning and natural environment we will look for opportunities to increase young people's understanding of water safety. It is important we look further than formal education by consulting key external organisations to consider how to get the most impact in the most effective way.

The Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water Education Team proactively engage with schools in areas near reservoirs each spring and summer when the risk of unauthorised swimming is at its' highest. As well as raising awareness of the dangers, the provision also highlights the effect of cold water immersion on the human body, and uses video footage from the One Last Breath campaign to encourage behaviour change. 2,500 pupils across the Secondary School sector received a dedicated assembly on this topic by Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water's Education Team in the last academic year and following these visits, feedback from Cyfarthfa High in Merthyr Tydfil confirmed it was considered "*one of the most important assemblies of the year by far*". An email circular was also sent to further schools in some key areas, inviting staff to raise the crucial safety message with pupils through internal school communication channels and directing them to online video content to support in the process. The dangers of unauthorised swimming is also referenced, alongside other topics, in Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water curriculum-led Primary School water cycle outreach provision which is typically delivered to tens-of thousands of pupils each year.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 4

The Welsh Government should take steps to ensure that there is clarity about the minimum safety information and signage required around water bodies to increase awareness of the risks present to those who enter the water. Good quality and visible information has been cited as essential, whilst there was concern about the lack of such information at key locations. This is one of a range of control measures identified as part of thorough risk assessments of water bodies.

Response: Accept in principle.

The landscape of Wales and location of waters where dangers can arise is complex and different organisations have varying roles and responsibilities. Welsh Government officials will bring relevant parties together to understand the issues including the information currently provided at key sites by the end of 2022/23 financial year with a view to developing guidance.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 5

The Welsh Government should co-ordinate formalised links between the National Access Forum Wales Access to water sub-group with Water Safety Wales.

Response: Accept.

It has come to our attention that National Access Forum Wales (NAFW) Access to Water Sub-Group has completed its work. However, discussion between National Access Forum Wales will continue to see if there is scope to formalise links with Water Safety Wales. The primary purpose of NAFW is as follows.

- improve the quality and extent of access to the countryside and coasts of Wales.
- extend the opportunities for enjoyment and responsible outdoor recreation to all.

By formalising links between NAFW and Water Safety Wales we will enable better knowledge from their previous experiences where there are overlapping themes and interests. Welsh Government have arranged NAFW to invite Water Safety Wales to a future forum meeting, to introduce their work to date including their strategy as there is overlap in terms of “responsible outdoor recreation”.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 6

The Welsh Government should develop a public awareness campaign, involving all the relevant organisations, to deliver a powerful and consistent message about water safety. At present water companies, various charities and organisations and families are working hard to raise awareness, educate and reach all members of the public. A co-ordinated campaign could be more effective and ensure a consistency of message.

Response: Accept.

My officials are working with their communications team to ensure full and effective messaging ahead of the 2023 Spring/Summer season. This will draw on the successful messaging from summer 2022 led by NRW, water companies and Public Health Wales for example on cold water shocks during heatwaves.

A targeted campaign by Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water on Reservoir safety in 2022 took place across radio, digital audio, social media, including Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, as well as YouTube and digital display. Coupled with ongoing organic social media, PR and influencer content. There was also a mock incident at Llandegfedd which included support from Fire and Rescue, Water Safety Wales Forum, and the RNLI. The rescue was filmed, and interviews took place with ITV and BBC Wales around World drowning Prevention Day. They also invited influencers who shared their content widely resulting in 53,000 views across TikTok and Instagram and almost 14,000 likes.

Coordinating a public awareness campaign will be a key brief of Water Safety Wales to bring stakeholders together to discuss and agree how a powerful and consistent message about water safety can be delivered with awareness of each other's communication strategies and timings.

Financial Implications: None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.