

Mid-Strategy Review

**Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy
(2020–2026)**



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Forewords

Huw Irranca-Davies, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs

As we reflect on the progress made since the launch of the Wales Drowning Prevention Strategy (2020–2026), we must also confront the challenges that lie ahead.

Sadly, there are still too many water-related incidents and fatalities occurring in Wales. This is why the work being undertaken by Water Safety Wales and their mission to reduce drowning incidents is so vital.

Since the introduction of the Wales Drowning Prevention Strategy, there has been incredible collaboration from key stakeholders and a new partnership between Water Safety Wales and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, heightening awareness, enhancing water safety education, and cultivating a strong culture of prevention.

Looking ahead, we must all stay flexible and responsive to the changing conditions that affect water safety. This means adapting to new challenges, shifting public habits, and embracing innovative approaches to keep communities safe around water. This is a shared responsibility, and it is vital that members continue working together to prevent future tragedies.

I'm grateful to everyone involved in this collaborative effort to promote water safety in Wales. By raising awareness and educating the public on water safety, we can empower individuals to safely enjoy our beautiful water environment.

Water Safety Wales Families Group

The Water Safety Wales Families Group is a group of people who have lost a loved one to drowning in Wales. We are dedicated to preventing drownings and ensuring no other family experiences our loss. This strategy review identifies that whilst progress has been made, there is still much more to be done. We thank all of those involved in drowning prevention for their efforts and remain committed to creating a safer Wales.

Together, we can honour our loved ones by making our waters safer for everyone.

Sadly, too many people are drowning in Wales. The Water Incident Database (WAID) shows that there was a total of 55 water-related fatalities in Wales for 2023, an increase of seven from the previous year and the first overall increase in Wales in five years.

The figure of 55 is higher than the baseline figure of 45 in Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy 2020–2026 (WDPS), so despite our efforts, drownings in Wales are now more prevalent than in 2020 when the WDPS was published.

Drowning continues to be an under-appreciated issue in Wales and the UK as a whole. The number of drowning deaths each year far exceeds the number of deaths in fires or in cycling incidents, for example, but this isn't always reflected in the public consciousness or in the amount of resource afforded to drowning prevention activity.

As Chair of Water Safety Wales, I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to our efforts to reduce drowning since the WDPS was published in December 2020. As this document details, there has been tremendous collaboration and innovation, and so much has been achieved. But we have further to go, and we have to redouble our efforts and be flexible enough to adapt to an ever-changing societal, behavioural and environmental landscape.

Chris Cousens, Chair, Water Safety Wales



Credit Wales Online

Background

Water Safety Wales (WSW) is a partnership of organisations and individuals that believe every water-related fatality, regardless of its cause or circumstance, is preventable. WSW's aspiration is a Wales with zero drowning-related deaths.

Wales' seas and inland open waters – enjoyed by millions each year – are some of the best in the world, and WSW wants to help people enjoy them safely and make sure they get back home to their loved ones after a day out, whether on, in or near the water.

Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy (WDPS) has seven key aims:

- Improve water incident data and intelligence in Wales
- Promote and develop learning to swim and water safety education
- Promote and support the development of water safety plans
- Promote public awareness of water-related risks and ensure consistent messages reach the right people at the right time
- Promote the safe participation in water activities across Wales
- Contribute to the reduction of water-related suicide
- Work with families affected by water-related incidents.

This Mid-Strategy Review provides an up-to-date analysis of the seven key aims set out in WDPS since its launch.

Context

Growing support

Internationally, there has been strong support for water safety and drowning prevention, following the United Nations General Assembly affirmation that drowning is a preventable public health issue. The General Assembly asks Member States to “*Appoint a national focal point for drowning prevention*” and “*Develop a national drowning prevention plan*”.ⁱ Respectively, WSW and the WDPS meet these requests.

In Wales, political support for water safety and drowning prevention has developed significantly, largely in response to the tragic death of Mark Allen. The Senedd Petitions Committee made six recommendations as part of Mark Allen’s Law, published in 2022.ⁱⁱ This included appointing a Minister (now Cabinet Secretary) to lead Welsh Government drowning prevention work. Additionally, the Welsh Government is providing financial support in 2024/25 for WSW, enhancing our ability to achieve the seven key aims of the WDPS.

Changing context

From 2020 to 2022, the unexpected priority of combating Covid-19 significantly affected local and national governments, as well as members of WSW. Changes brought about by the pandemic threw up new and unexpected challenges and necessitated a change in direction and focus on some of the key aims of the WDPS.

Water safety education faced considerable challenges due to schools operating remotely, and the closure of swimming pools led to a sharp reduction in the number of young people accessing swimming lessons and reaching expected standards. The development of water safety plans, which requires the collaboration of local authorities and emergency services, was also hindered, as these entities were heavily engaged in addressing the pandemic and mitigating its impacts.

The repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic on water safety extend beyond the initial effects of the virus and lockdowns. With air travel suspended for significant periods, there was an increase in the number of people staying in the UK for their holidays. Anecdotal evidence suggests this led to a rise in the number of individuals visiting open water locations in Wales and trying different water-related activities for the first time.

Progress

Overall water-related fatality figures

According to WAID, the total number of water-related fatalities has increased in comparison to the WDPS initial average baseline of 45 (2016–2018). The most recent three-year data (2021–2023) shows an average of 51 water-related fatalities.

The number of accidental drowning fatalities¹ has increased in comparison to the initial baseline, whilst suspected suicide has remained the same.

Using an updated three-year average (2021–2023), overall water-related fatalities have increased by 13 per cent whilst accidental drowning fatalities have increased by 4 per cent.

The number of water-related fatalities not recorded as either ‘accidental suspected’, ‘suicide suspected’ or ‘crime suspected’ has also increased in comparison to the initial baseline (see Figure 1).

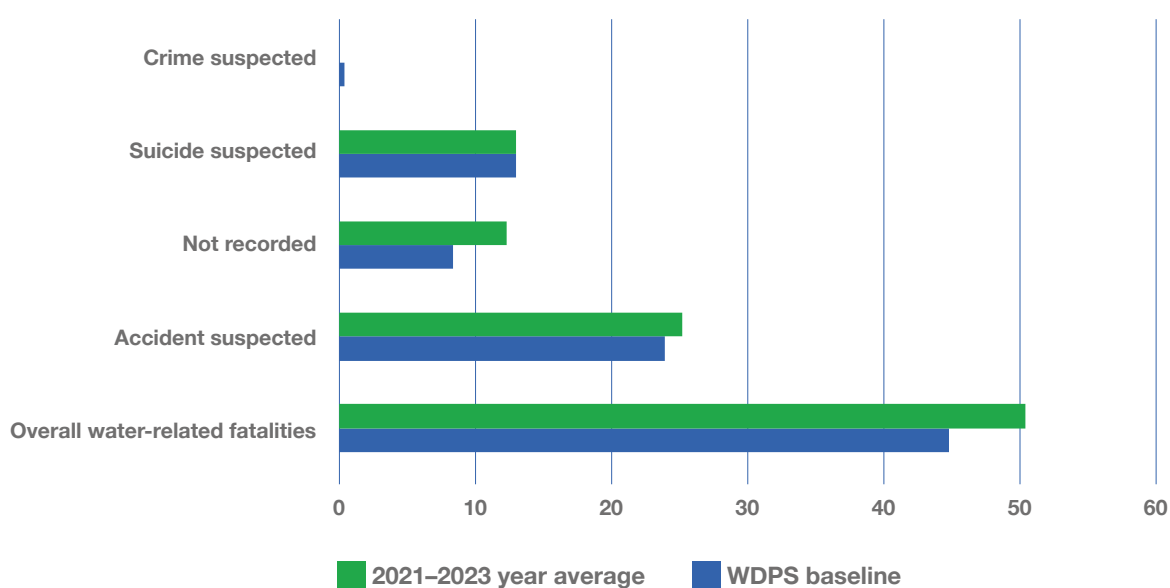


Figure 1: WDPS baseline (2013–2015) vs Mid-Strategy Review average (2021–2023)

¹ In this document, ‘accidental’ refers to both accidental and natural causes.

Figure 2 provides a longer-term year-by-year trend of overall water-related fatalities by outcome.

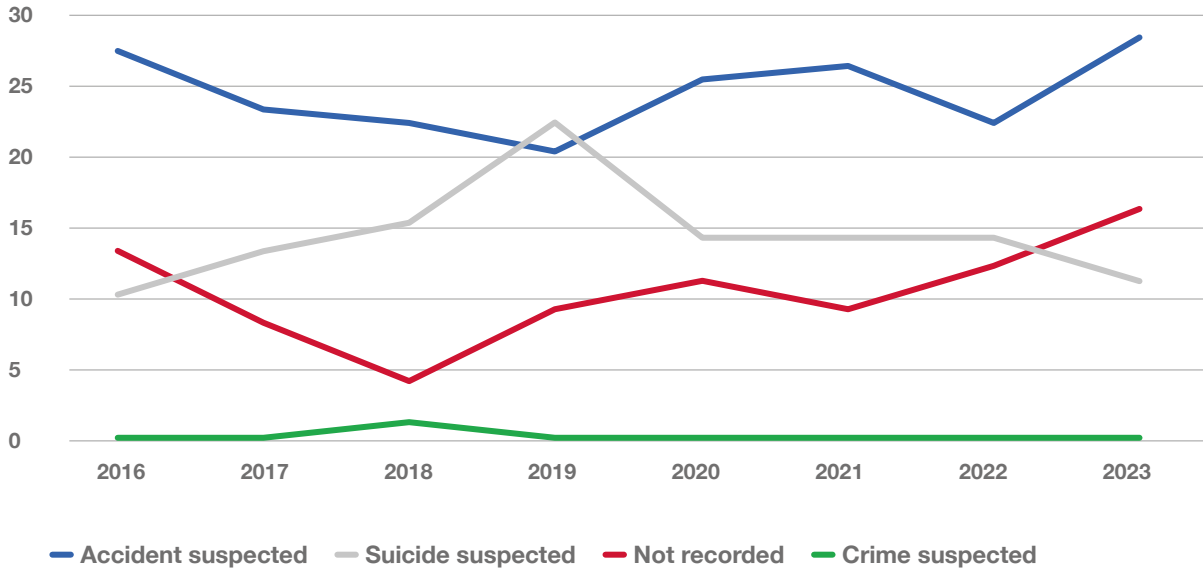


Figure 2: Water-related fatalities by outcome and year, 2016–2023

As shown in Figure 3, the accidental fatality rate per 100,000 population has increased since the original WDPS baseline and is still higher than the rate for the UK as a whole. Critically, the UK rate has decreased over the period, whilst Wales has seen an increase.

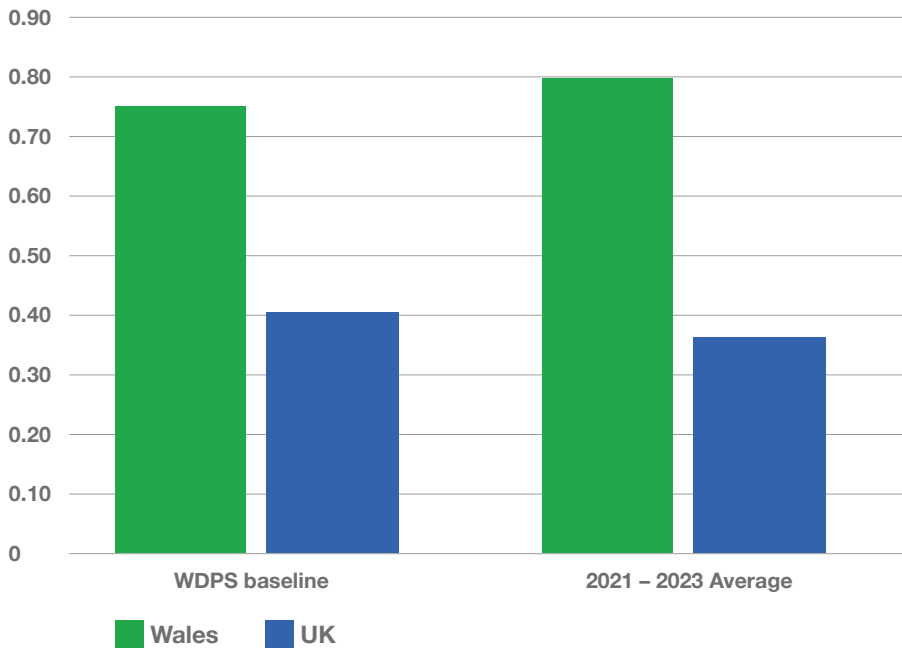


Figure 3: Rates of accidental water-related fatalities in UK and Wales, WDPS baseline vs Mid-Strategy Review average (2021–2023)²

² The accidental fatality rate for Wales is based on the population of Wales and the WAID figures which may include those visiting Wales from other countries. See appendix 2 for further notes.

Changing demographics

There have been some subtle changes to some of the demographics of accidental water-related fatalities in Wales over the past three years.

Consistent with the Strategy baseline, men still account for the majority of accidental fatalities – although this has decreased slightly from 89 per cent to 76 per cent.

The Mid-Strategy Review data shows that accidental fatalities are now at their highest in the male 20–29 age group; for women, there is no specific age group more represented than others.

The data also shows that accidental fatalities occur at both coastal and inland locations in almost the same proportion (49 per cent inland vs 51 per cent coastal). This is a change from the baseline, with 43 per cent occurring inland against 57 per cent coastal.

Recreational activities on or near the water account for half of all accidental water-related fatalities (50 per cent). However, 43 per cent of accidental fatalities are a result of everyday activities where the person had no intention of entering the water e.g. walking, cycling or running near water.

This information is summarised in Table 1, compared to the original baseline found in WDPS. Accidental water-related fatalities are mapped by location in Figure 4.

	WDPS baseline (2016–2018)	Three-year data (2021 -2023)
Sex distribution of fatalities	89 per cent male; 11 per cent female	76 per cent male; 24 per cent female
Age group with highest fatality rate	Males aged 40–49; Females across the range	Males aged 20–29; Females across the range
Location of fatalities	43 per cent inland; 57 per cent coastal	51 per cent coastal; 49 per cent inland
Activity³	32 per cent recreational; 58 per cent did not intend to be in the water ⁴ ; 8 per cent commercial; 2 per cent domestic	50 per cent recreational; 43 per cent did not intend to be in the water ⁴ ; 4 per cent commercial; 3 per cent exceptional ⁴

Table 1: WDPS baseline (2016–2018) demographics vs Mid-Strategy Review average (2021–2023) demographics

³ Please see Appendix 2 for further information on classifications.

⁴ 'Did not intend to be in the water' refers to 'everyday' activities, e.g. running, walking or cycling by the water.

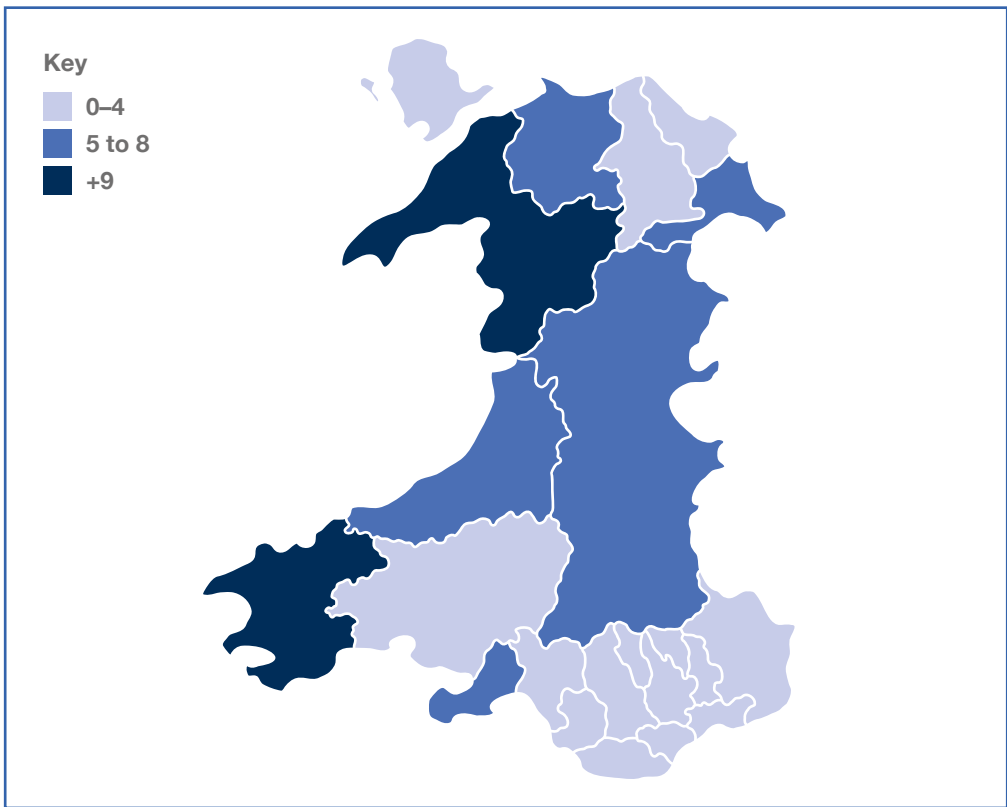
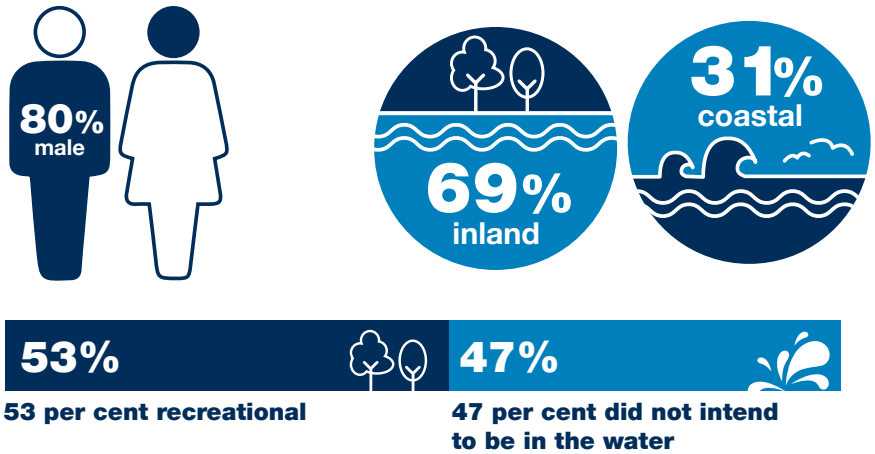


Figure 4: Map of accidental fatalities over the three years (2021–2023)

Young People






Over the three years (2021–2023), there were 20 accidental water-related fatalities of people under the age of 25. This is an increase from the baseline data period (2016–2018), when there were 17 accidental water-related fatalities of people under the age of 25.

The breakdown of fatalities for under-25s is as follows:






Progress of target aims

Key

-  Activity complete
-  Significant progress made
-  Some progress made
-  Intended action to be completed before the end of the strategy
-  Change in direction/no longer an intended action

Improve water incident data and intelligence in Wales

Understanding the circumstances which led to a drowning helps prevent others. WSW has sought to improve water incident data and intelligence in Wales by promoting both the UK and Welsh versions of WAID, which brings together data on fatalities from different organisations.

Promote UK and Welsh WAID data reports with partner organisations and local authorities.		Annual WAID reports for the UK and Wales have been released. Additionally, bespoke reports such as the Public Health Wales report was published in 2023. ⁱⁱⁱ
Support the sharing of Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) inland water rescue data with WAID.		WSW and FRS have enabled this process; progress and next steps are dependent upon the National Water Safety Forum (NWSF).
Explore opportunities to identify areas of high risk and share local knowledge of incidents to ensure lessons are learned.		Areas of high risk and lessons learned have been shared in relation to specific activities, such as stand up paddleboarding (SUP).

Promote and develop learning to swim and water safety education

Not everybody in Wales knows how to swim or how to keep themselves safe in and around water. WSW promotes the importance of acquiring these key life skills through early years, primary and secondary school programmes and across our diverse communities.

In addition to learning to swim, classroom-based water safety lessons provide learners with lifesaving knowledge. WSW would like to see a Wales where everybody has the opportunity to learn to swim and attend classroom-based water safety lessons. WSW, supported by the Welsh Government, is therefore creating age-and stage-appropriate classroom-based resources for schools to use.

Establish an education subgroup.	✓	An education subgroup was established and is led by Swim Wales.
All children to participate in water safety education activities.	↑	The importance and promotion of school swimming is well established but requires ongoing funding and resources to address the decline in access and attainment levels. A further action has been established in this area – the need to ensure consistent classroom education in schools.
Collaboratively co-ordinate the promotion of the opportunity for diverse communities in Wales to learn to swim and receive water safety education.	↑	The Black Swimming Association (BSA), a WSW member, has been supporting the distribution of water safety information for diverse communities in Wales. The BSA also actively supports ethnically diverse communities to access water familiarisation and water safety programmes which support the transition to ‘learn to swim’ programmes, as well as other aquatic activity. Swim Wales launched the Cynnwys framework, which aims to eliminate barriers and promote diversity in aquatic sports. ^{iv}

Swim Safe in Wales

The Swim Safe initiative provides children aged 7 to 14 with free practical swimming lessons at open water locations. Using land-based and in-water tuition, participants are taught how to keep safe in the water.

Since 2019, thousands of children across Wales have benefited from this program. Sessions have been held in:

- Denbighshire
- Conwy
- Gwynedd
- Pembrokeshire
- Bridgend
- Anglesey
- Cardiff

Promote and support the development of water safety plans

WSW works to support the development of water safety forums and partnerships across Wales to better understand water risks within local communities and develop plans to mitigate.

Supporting unitary authorities (UAs) in Wales to develop water safety plans.



Research is being undertaken to build baseline insights into policy provision. Areas of high risk have also been identified through the use of a risk matrix.

Support the development of local water safety forums and community groups.



Some groups are already well established within Wales. A formal structure for water safety forums/ groups is currently being investigated by the WSW Steering Group. It is anticipated that areas of highest risk will be prioritised for development.

The management of water safety in Wales

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accident (RoSPA) is currently examining the issue of responsibility for the management of water safety. Understanding who is responsible, and their approaches to water safety, enables effective targeting of drowning prevention measures. In 2023, RoSPA published its 10-year study for Scotland, *Local authority approaches to managing water safety: A 10-year comparative analysis*.^v Unfortunately, an attempt in 2021 to engage Wales, England and Northern Ireland in a similar study resulted in an incomplete data set, which limited the findings of the report.^{vi}

RoSPA is now conducting research on how the 22 local authorities in Wales approach water safety. Each local authority has been asked to complete a survey outlining their approach to water safety and whether they have a water safety plan in place. The finding of this survey will help to inform the next iteration of this Strategy and identify where support can be provided to develop and implement water safety plans.



Pembrokeshire Water Safety Partnership

In 2019, the Pembrokeshire Water Safety Forum was established to coordinate the efforts of those involved in drowning prevention within the county. The forum meets quarterly and shares data and local knowledge to identify trends and prioritise at-risk groups.

Specific activities include subgroups running events and promoting safety for open water, jet ski and SUP activities, improving signage and education at the Blue Lagoon, and organising multi-agency education events on cliff jumping for local students. An annual event led by Pembrokeshire Water Safety Partnership members trains outdoor activity instructors on their role in emergencies and having water safety conversations with the public. Since its inception, the Pembrokeshire Water Safety Partnership had made drowning prevention efforts more coordinated, visible and effective, sharing resources and best practices.

Promote public awareness of water-related risks and ensure consistent messages reach the right people at the right time

WSW recognises the valuable work undertaken to raise awareness about water-related risks and drowning prevention. WSW will continue to support these efforts and look to increase collaboration and consistency.

<p>Establish a media and communications subgroup.</p>		<p>A media and communications group has been established. Progress has also been made with annual press releases. A full WSW comms plan and toolkit is in progress for future use.</p>
<p>Raise awareness of water safety campaigns across Wales.</p>		<p>WSW has effectively promoted the Respect The Water: Call, Tell, Throw campaign.^{vii} A full WSW communications plan and toolkit are in development for WSW members.</p>

CASE STUDY

Respect The Water

Respect The Water (RTW) is a partnership approach to public-facing water safety campaigns in the UK. Historically owned by the RNLI, the RTW brand has been gifted to the NWSF and is supported by a network of over 50 organisations (including WSW). The campaign focuses on resisting your instincts to try to save someone in trouble and instead call 999. The key messaging includes raising awareness of the ‘Call – Tell – Throw Method’. If someone witnesses a water emergency, they should call 999, tell the person in the water to float on their back, and then throw them something that floats. The RTW campaign assets have been produced in both Welsh and English, enabling the messaging to be shared across the whole of Wales by both public and private organisations.

		
<p>FFONIWCH 999 a gofynnwch am y gwasanaeth cywir</p>	<p>DYWEDWCH wrthynt i arnofio ar eu cefn</p>	<p>TAFLWCH rywbeth sy'n arnofion iddynt</p>

Promote the safe participation in water activities across Wales

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 has a goal of a healthier Wales. Undertaking water activities is a great way to maintain a healthy balanced lifestyle. Wales is a popular visitor destination with a global reputation for outdoor activity and adventure, with our coastal and inland waters a key attraction.

Encourage safe water activities in Wales as a way of maintaining a healthy lifestyle and enjoying our environment.



WSW has supported the work of members in encouraging safe water activities that promote a healthy lifestyle. This has included supporting Swim Wales in accrediting 15 sites with the Safe Aquatic Facility Endorsement (S.A.F.E) Cymru accreditation for outdoor facility partners.

Other support has included promotion of Dŵr Cymru's supervised reservoir swimming sessions and supporting improvements to SUP safety recommended by the Marine Accident Investigation Branch report into the Haverfordwest SUP tragedy in 2021.

Contribute to the reduction of water-related suicide

Water-related suicide is increasing in Wales. WSW acknowledges the need to better understand influencing factors and will work on prevention, in line with the Welsh Government's suicide and self-harm prevention strategy.

Establish a suicide prevention subgroup.



A link has been established with the Public Health Wales National Advisory Group for suicide and self-harm prevention. A specific WSW subgroup is therefore not required.

Support the understanding that suicide is preventable.



Dependent on completion of the above.

Work with families affected by water-related incidents

The impact of losing a family member can only truly be understood by those who have gone through that experience. Many bereaved families are at the forefront of drowning prevention.

Recognise the human impact of drowning.



Five meetings of the Families Group have been held. Several petitions, parliamentary debates and projects have been undertaken by families affected in Wales.

Forever 11

The Charity Forever 11 was established in memory of Zac Thompson, who tragically lost his life in July 2022. ‘Forever 11’ began as a saying used by Zac’s school friends, rugby team mates and community residents to express their love for him and heartache at his death.

Following a successful memorial fundraising event, which raised £10,000 for emergency services, Forever 11 has grown into a charity which continues to raise funds and campaign for water safety.

The charity raises funds to ensure young children can access water safety training in case of emergencies. Forever 11 organises free water safety sessions for children aged 8 and above, including for students at Zac’s former school. The charity also raises funds to replace and repair water safety equipment and defibrillators for locations near bodies of water.

Call to action and next steps

WSW acknowledges that whilst progress has been made in drowning prevention since the launch of the WDPS, there is still significant progress to be made.

Target aims which have been identified as either ‘intended actions’ or ‘some progress made’ will be prioritised over the next two years to ensure the successful implementation of the Strategy by 2026.

WSW continues to assert that every water-related fatality, regardless of its cause or circumstance, is preventable. We will continue to work towards a Wales with zero drowning-related deaths.

Appendices

Appendix 1. List of WSW member organisations

AdventureSmart UK	Natural Resources Wales
All Wales Beach Managers' Group	North Wales Fire and Rescue Service
Atlantic Crest	North Wales Local Resilience Forum
Black Swimming Association	North West Police Underwater Search & Marine Unit
Canoe Wales	Outreach Rescue
Canal & River Trust (Glandŵr Cymru)	Royal Lifesaving Society
Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water	Royal National Lifeboat Institution
Dyfed Powys Police	Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents
Gwent Police	Samaritans Cymru
Keep Wales Tidy	Severn Trent (Hafren Dyfrdwy)
Maritime and Coastguard Agency	South Wales Police
Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue	South Wales Fire and Rescue Service
Mineral and Products Association	Surf Lifesaving Association of Wales
National Advisory Group to Welsh Government on Suicide and Self-Harm Prevention	Swansea Council
National Coastwatch Institute	Swim Wales
National Independent Lifeboat Association	The Bluetits Chill Swimmers
National Water Safety Forum	Water Safety Scotland

Appendix 2. Notes on WAID data

- Data used is from the R1 version of WAID. Please note that core data providers continue to collate updated information from various sources, which can be used to improve the data set, and which may result in future changes to the WAID data.
- The 2021–2023 data totals 76, with the following exceptions: age/sex excludes 9 records, location data excludes 6 records, and activity data excludes 4 records.
- 2021–2023 data on the under 25s totals 20, with the following exceptions: location data excludes 4 records and activity data excludes 3 records.
- WAID taxonomies for activity include recreational (sports and water-based activity); everyday (which is classified as those who did not intend to be in the water, e.g. people who were walking, running and cycling next to water); commercial; and exceptional (e.g. person/animal rescue).
- It is recognised that the drowning rate does not necessarily reflect the true drowning rate in Wales or of its population as whole. WAID data in its current state does not take into consideration home country of the deceased.
- Outcomes of fatal incidents are based both on suspected and confirmed (e.g. accident suspected or confirmed).

References

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- ii Welsh Parliament Petitions Committee (2022) Mark Allen's Law, Water safety and drowning prevention. Available online: senedd.wales/media/cn4fcehy/cr-ld15291-e.pdf
- iii Public Health Wales (2023) Water-related fatalities in children and young people under 25 years of age, Wales, 2013–2022. Available online: phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/child-death-review/publications/water-related-fatalities-in-children-and-young-people-under-25-years-of-age-wales-2013-2022
- iv Swim Wales (2024) Cynnwys. Available online: www.swimwales.org/cynnwys
- v RoSPA (2023) Local authority approaches to managing water safety: A 10-year comparative analysis. Available online: watersafetyscotland.org.uk/media/frmfv3wm/rospa-local-authority-approaches-to-managing-water-safety-2.pdf
- vi RoSPA (2021) Local authority approaches to managing water safety: England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Available online: www.rospa.com/media/documents/water-leisure/Local-Authority-Approaches-to-Managing-Water-Safety.pdf
- vii Respect the Water (2024) Campaigns and resources. Available online: respectthewater.com/campaigns-resources



diogelwch dŵr
Cymru
water safety
Wales