

Towards zero drownings: a future where everyone in Wales can be safe in, on and around the water.

**Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy
2026**



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Foreword

To be added

Introduction

We can build a future with zero-drownings where everyone in Wales can be safe in, on and around the water.

Water Safety Wales (WSW) brings together organisations and individuals who share this vision, providing the necessary structure and governance to ensure that drowning prevention is managed and coordinated efficiently across the country.

Wales is a nation shaped by its natural environment and close relationship with water. With a population of around 3.2 million, it features over 1,680 miles of coastline and a network of rivers, reservoirs, lakes, canals and other inland waters. Open water is central to Welsh life, offering opportunities for recreation and tourism, and forming the heart of many communities. However, these waters also present risks.

Wales has a higher drowning rate than the UK as a whole, with recent analysis from the NWSF showing a drowning rate of 0.91 per 100,00 people (2019 – 2023) in comparison to the UK average of 0.42 per 100,000ⁱ. Most recent analysis also shows that sadly, water-related fatalities are increasing in Wales, with slightly higher rates than in 2020 when the first Wales Drowning Prevention Strategy was publishedⁱⁱ. Changing patterns in water usage, climate change, economic and social factors and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have all contributed.

Each year in Wales, 1071.5 years of life are lost to drowning¹. Each of these deaths is a tragedy for friends, families and communities. They underscore the urgent need for this strategy and the importance of renewing our efforts to prevent drowning.

Over the last decade, WSW and its partners have been working tirelessly to develop important initiatives to prevent drownings including the release of the first ever Wales Drowning Prevention Strategyⁱⁱⁱ. A recent reviewⁱⁱ provided insights into many of the successful initiatives undertaken in the past five years, many of which have been funded or supported by Welsh Government, including immersive free education resources for schools, guidance for consistent water safety signage and guidance for water safety partnerships. Despite these progressive initiatives, more must be done to ensure a reduction in water-related deaths.

Globally, the United Nations General Assembly recommends that every nation develop a national drowning prevention strategy or plan^{iv} to reduce and prevent drowning deaths. In 2025, the Global Alliance for Drowning Prevention, which was established in response to the resolution in 2023, created the first ever Global strategy^v which Wales has tailored to its specific needs. The National Water Safety Forum (NWSF) has also provided guiding principles for the four UK nations to adopt and regionalise to ensure consistency across the UK and this strategy adheres to these important principles.

This strategy aligns with key Welsh Government frameworks. It supports the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (as amended), promoting prevention, education and long-term thinking to build a healthier, more resilient Wales^{vi}. It complements the Climate Adaptation Strategy

¹ Based on 2023 v2 (enhanced) WAID data.

for Wales (2024) by addressing climate-related risks such as flooding and extreme weather^{vii}. It also supports Investing in a Healthier Wales, prioritising public health and safety for vulnerable groups^{viii}. Together, these alignments embed drowning prevention within broader national efforts to improve well-being and resilience. This strategy will provide direction and practical guidance to anyone and everyone with the desire or means to help reduce drowning. We will be most successful if everyone plays their part.

CASE STUDY: National Leadership in Drowning Prevention – A Welsh Milestone

Since the publication of the last Wales Drowning Prevention Strategyⁱⁱⁱ, Welsh Government has taken a significant step forward by providing clear leadership and co-ordination for water safety and drowning prevention by allocating The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change to lead on this.

This move aligns with the World Health Organization's (WHO) call for strong national leadership and coordination in drowning prevention.^{ix} By designating ministerial responsibility, Welsh Government ensures that water safety is recognised as a public health priority, enabling better coordination, funding, and accountability across agencies.

Understanding the issue (data and context)

Data plays a critical role in understanding the issue by providing insights into patterns, risks and behaviours which can help to inform targeted interventions to save lives. Data collection systems are the first essential step to preventing drowning because they establish the scale of the problem and allow for prioritisation and optimisation of targeted interventions to those most at risk. To be of use, such data must be complete, valid and quickly available.

Key data insights

In a five-year period (2019-2023):

- 260 people lost their life due to a water-related fatality. Annually, this equates to an average of one death every week²
- Accidental water-related outcomes³ accounted for 55 per cent (143 people) of the fatalities, whilst 32 per cent (83 people) were suspected suicide, 13 per cent (33 people) were inconclusive and less than 1 per cent were crimes
- On average, each year, there are 29 accidental water-related fatalities in Wales
- Eight in 10 accidental water-related fatalities are male with accidental drownings most frequent in males aged 20 to 29
- Around half of accidental water-related fatalities happened at inland locations (49 per cent)
- 36 per cent of accidental water-related fatalities happened in the summer season
- The majority of accidental fatalities (43 per cent) occurred during a recreational activity⁴
- Alcohol/drugs were reported as being present in 31 per cent of fatalities.

² The figure of one per week represents an average, calculated from a total of 260 fatalities over a five-year period. It is intended to illustrate the overall occurrence and does not suggest that one fatality occurred in every individual week.

³ Accidental refers to accidental and natural cause outcomes.

⁴ Recreational activity refers to adventure sports, angling, boating (other), motorboating, sailing, waterside activities.

Emergency Response and Rescue

To be confirmed

Vision and mission

Vision: Towards zero drownings: Building a future where everyone in Wales can be safe in, on and around the water.

Mission: Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy sets out Water Safety Wales' principles and priorities to inform a consistent and effective approach to preventing drowning in Wales.

Core Values

The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy has provided four core values and supporting actions that this strategy adheres to.

Collaboration: Drowning is complex, and its prevention involves multiple individuals and organisations locally and nationally. Multi-sectoral collaboration across sectors is fundamental to ensure consistency and alignment.

Equity: Drowning prevention should be equitable, ensuring that all communities have fair/appropriate access to life-saving resources and safe environments.

Informed action: Actions to prevent drowning should be evidence-based, informed by research, and regularly evaluated to measure effectiveness and guide policy decisions.

Compassion. Drowning affects many people and communities, and prevention efforts should be empathetic and guided by the experiences of those who have been directly affected.

Supporting actions

There are four key supporting functions for achieving our vision (table 1):

Data and Evidence	Accurate, complete data with relevant knowledge and experience are fundamental to informing effective and optimised preventative practice that helps to keep people safe around UK waterways.
Education	Equipping people with knowledge, skills and experience in water safety, swimming, water competency and related technical aspects will contribute to their safety in, on and around the water.
Communication	The promotion of water safety awareness campaigns and advocacy will help drive forward and disseminate critical drowning prevention advice and behaviours.
Policy	Facilitating collaboration between government, landowners, and other responsible parties to ensure proactive management of risks in and around water.

Table 1: Key supporting functions for achieving the WSW vision

Aims

To achieve our vision, WSW has developed the following aims:

- Keep families affected by drowning at the heart of drowning prevention
- Improve data on water incidents
- Ensure every child and young person has a water safety education and can swim
- Lead the creation of a network of local drowning prevention groups
- Adapt drowning prevention efforts to respond to climate change
- Champion safe and responsible enjoyment of open water in Wales
- Contribute to the reduction of water-related suicide

These aims are not listed in priority order.

AIM

Keep families affected by drowning at the heart of drowning prevention

In Wales, families who have tragically lost loved ones to drowning play a vital role in shaping drowning prevention efforts. Their contributions, through the WSW Families Group and individual advocacy, have driven meaningful change. A powerful example of this is provided in the case study on Mark Allen's Law which transformed the national approach to water safety.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Provide a space for family members to connect and coordinate drowning prevention efforts

- Work with families who want to be involved in drowning prevention
- Provide signposting for bereaved families to connect with WSW
- Empower families, gather insights, co-create campaigns, and influence drowning prevention efforts.

CASE STUDY: Mark Allen's Law — Transforming Water Safety in Wales

In 2018, 18-year-old Mark Allen tragically drowned after entering cold water on a warm day. Mark's passing sparked a powerful campaign led by his mother, Leeanne Bartley, who advocated for improved water safety measures to prevent similar tragedies. The campaign gained widespread public support, culminating in a petition that received over 11,000 signatures.

The campaign led to a transformational shift in Wales' approach to drowning prevention. The Welsh Government passed Mark Allen's Law^x, which led to the appointment of a dedicated minister for drowning prevention and a commitment for funding to support WSW.

AIM

Improve data on water incidents

Good data and insight help us understand where, when, and why drowning incidents happen. Without it, we can't see patterns, spot risks, or know which safety measures work best. Data on fatalities, rescues and near misses makes a vital contribution to reducing drowning deaths, however it is not always collected or available. Data for coastal incidents is more available compared to inland incidents, but improvements are needed in both areas. By improving how we collect and share data and insight about water-related incidents, we can make smarter decisions, focus efforts and help keep people safe across Wales.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Improve data available in Wales for drowning prevention purposes

- Gather and analyse data on water-related fatalities to inform and target drowning prevention initiatives at both national and local levels
- Explore options for improving data on water incidents including a process similar to Scotland's Drowning Incident Review (DIR)
- Improve quality and accessibility of data for inland water related fatalities and rescues
- Promote the collection and sharing of data on non-fatal water incidents.

Promote drowning and water safety data with partner organisations and public

- Share headline data and insights with WSW membership, partner organisations and public to help better understand risk.

CASE STUDY: Data in Action: the Drowning and Incident Review process

To be added

AIM

Ensure every child and young person has a water safety education and can swim

Swimming and water safety education are vital life skills for all children and young people. Our goal is to make them available and accessible to all.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Every child can swim

- Support school swimming to help every child successfully complete the Nofio Ysgol Self-Rescue Award
- Work with Welsh Government and Local Authorities to ensure that every child is given 20 hours of water-based school swimming lessons
- Create more opportunities for immersive open water education through programmes like Swim Safe Cymru
- Support partner organisation calls to reduce pool closures and cost barriers for swimming lessons.

Every child to have a classroom-based water safety education in Wales

- Work with Welsh Government on how water safety education can be delivered through the Curriculum for Wales
- Support water safety organisations in delivering consistent and standardised water safety education lessons ensuring alignment to WSW resources
- Develop tailored educational resources that engage teenagers and young adults with relevant, age-appropriate water safety content.

What is Nofio Ysgol?

Swim Wales' YMLAEN strategy sets out a vision of "aquatics for everyone, for life."^{xi} Central to this vision is Nofio Ysgol, a flagship initiative within the Education & Health pillar of YMLAEN. Nofio Ysgol is Wales's national school swimming programme for children aged 7–11, designed to provide every child with essential swimming skills and vital water safety knowledge such as safe entry and exit, floating, treading water, and survival techniques. Fully aligned with the Curriculum for Wales, the programme aims to ensure that every child leaves primary school as a confident, competent swimmer who understands how to stay safe in and around water.

CASE STUDY: Swim Safe Cymru: Empowering Children with Lifesaving Skills

Swim Safe Cymru is a water safety education intervention that delivers a practical experience of open water in a safe, fun way for children aged 7–14. The free, community-focused water safety programme is delivered through a partnership of Swim Wales, the RNLI and Swim England with support from local authorities, schools and Dŵr Cymru.

In 2025, **X** children took part in Swim Safe Cymru sessions, gaining essential water safety knowledge and practical experience in self-rescue techniques in open water environments. Sessions were successfully delivered across Anglesey, Cardiff, Conwy, Denbighshire, Gwynedd, Pembrokeshire, and Torfaen, helping to build confidence and lifesaving skills among young participants.

AIM

Lead the creation of a network of local drowning prevention groups

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Local organisations are well placed to lead drowning prevention efforts, as they understand the specific risks in their communities. These organisations are most effective when they work together as a Water Safety Partnership, nationally coordinated and supported by WSW.

Water Safety Policies are a key driver of resource and commitment to drowning prevention. They outline how landowners manage risks at open water sites and assign clear responsibilities to help prevent drowning.

Support the creation and sustainability of water safety partnerships across Wales

- Establish Water Safety Partnerships across Wales to lead and coordinate drowning prevention efforts at a local level
- Ensure WSW is consistently represented to promote alignment, strengthen collaboration, and support both national and local decision-making.

Support all 22 local authorities to adopt and implement a water safety policy

- Analyse and report on the adoption of water safety policies across Wales at consistent time intervals
- Provide guidance, support and advice for local authorities on creating and implementing Water Safety Policies.

CASE STUDY: WSP guidance

To be added

AIM

Adapt drowning prevention efforts to respond to climate change

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

More frequent and severe weather events, like flooding, heatwaves, and storms, are changing how and where people are exposed to risk. The Welsh Government's *Climate Adaptation Strategy*^{xii} highlights the need for strong emergency preparedness in response to these changes.

As open-water risks evolve, it's vital that WSW adapts its drowning prevention efforts to match. This means staying ahead of emerging threats and ensuring communities are protected in a changing environment.

Prepare the Welsh public for increased water related risk is arising from climate change

- Improve resilience and respond to the changing climate by adapting water safety messaging
- Inform people of new and developing water related risks, arising from climate change such as increased flooding, heatwaves and coastal erosion
- Monitor and report on climate-related drowning incidents to inform future drowning prevention efforts.

CASE STUDY: Understanding the Impact of Climate Change on Drowning Risk: Insights from RLSS UK and Bournemouth University

Separate research studies by Bournemouth University and the Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK) have confirmed a relationship between rising air temperatures and increased drowning risk.

The RLSS UK study showed that:

- Five times more accidental drowning fatalities occur when air temperatures reach 25°C or higher, compared to when UK average maximum air temperatures are below 17°C
- More teenagers and adolescents drown when temperatures reach 25°C or higher
- 57% of those who drowned on hot days were swimming, nearly three times higher than on cooler days^{xiii}

The Bournemouth University study showed that:

- The risk of drowning increases by over 7% for every 1°C rise in temperature
- The greatest increase was observed in males and on days when air temperatures reach 25°C or higher
- Increases in risk appeared to be greater when intoxication was suspected^{xiv}

These findings have significant implications for Wales, where climate change is expected to bring more frequent and intense heatwaves.

AIM

Champion safe and responsible enjoyment of open water in Wales

Taking part in water activities is a great way to stay active and enjoy nature. Wales is well known for its beautiful coastlines, rivers, and lakes, which attract people from all over the world. Everyone in Wales should be aware of water-related risks, including those at a significant risk of drowning and groups and communities who are currently underserved by water safety messaging. In line with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and its goal of a healthier Wales,^{xv} WSW will:

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Ensure water safety messages are accessible and reach underrepresented⁵ groups and those facing barriers to engagement

- Work with partners to identify and overcome barriers to engagement
- Co-design and deliver drowning prevention programmes to ensure they are inclusive, accessible and impactful for all.

Raise public awareness of water-related risks

- Use press, online media and social media and new technology to distribute key WSW messages to the public
- Track public understanding of water-related risk to inform future approach
- Create tailored campaigns based upon evidence, data and insights.

Provide expert, data-led advice on recreational activities around open water

- Develop consistent messages for water related activities, agreed by WSW members and relevant sport/activity governing bodies
- Raise public awareness of water safety initiatives and accredited schemes
- Support retailers and manufacturers to provide water safety messaging at point-of-sale.

CASE STUDY:

To be added

⁵ In this context, “underrepresented” refers to groups or people who may face barriers to accessing water safety information or participating in water-based activities.

AIM

Contribute to the reduction of water-related suicide

Suicide around waterways is a serious and complex issue. The tragic and preventable loss of life has far-reaching consequences for families and communities. Responding to incidents also has a significant impact on the mental health of responders and the capacity of their organisations, often accounting for a significant proportion of emergency callouts. WSW acknowledges that addressing water-related suicide is fundamental to reducing drowning deaths.

Many people who experience a crisis at a water location are successfully rescued and go on to live fulfilling lives. These rescues highlight the importance of timely intervention, compassionate response and effective prevention measures in saving lives.

Nationally, there are resources dedicated to suicide prevention and self-harm funded by Welsh Government and delivered through the Wales Suicide Prevention and Self-Harm Strategy (2025–2035).^{xvi} WSW supports this strategy and its accompanying delivery plans.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Support public and health professionals in suicide prevention and the prevention of self-harm

- Collaborate with mental health professionals to improve safety at water-related locations of concern
- Share data and insight on water incidents to enhance suicide and self-harm prevention
- Inform WSW members of best practice and relevant guidelines relating to suicide prevention and self-harm, including support for responders who regularly work with people in crisis or are exposed to traumatic incidents.

Monitoring, evaluation and review

Regularly monitoring, evaluating and reviewing this strategy, its framework and function are essential to ensure its continued relevance and usefulness with changing demands, trends and technologies.

WSW will review this strategy annually through its Steering Group and will work with the NWSF annually for a full UK review of the strategic framework.

Acknowledgements

This document was developed and written by members of the Water Safety Wales Strategy Subgroup:

- Chris Cousens (RNLI)
- Carlene McAvoy (RoSPA)
- Peter Gallagher (RoSPA)
- Richard Wasson (HM Coastguard)
- Paul Kay (North Wales Fire Rescue Service)
- Fergus Feeney (Swim Wales)

We like to thank WSW members and those who inputted into the strategy and its development.

We would also like to thank all organisations and individuals who responded to the consultation.

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