

PRESS RELEASE

Wales releases a new review, as water-fatalities increase

- 55 people lost their lives to water-related fatalities in Wales in 2023.
- 43 per cent of accidental drownings involve everyday activity like walking or running near water.
- Water Safety Wales to attend Senedd's Y Farchnad (marketplace) event at Cardiff Bay

Water Safety Wales (WSW) has released the Mid-Strategy Review of the Wales Drowning Prevention Strategy (2020–2026), revealing an increase in water-related fatalities. According to the document, which uses data from the WAter Incident Database (WAID), the most recent three-year data average shows 51 water-related fatalities in Wales per year – an increase from the strategy baseline of 45.

Despite significant efforts, drowning remains a growing public health issue in Wales, with fatalities exceeding those from fires or cycling incidents. The strategy, launched in 2020, aspires for a Wales with zero water-related deaths and promotes enhanced water safety education, better data collection, public awareness, and suicide prevention. However, progress has been hampered by challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely disrupted swimming lessons and water safety education.

Chris Cousens, Chair of Water Safety Wales, said: “We need to redouble our efforts to tackle the growing number of drowning incidents in Wales. This review highlights the importance of our ongoing work and the critical need for enhanced public awareness and education around water safety.”

Huw Irranca-Davies, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, said: “This is an important moment to reflect on what more can be done to halt the trend in water related fatalities and incidents. Water Safety Wales and its partners are building the foundations to achieve the aims of the Wales Drowning Prevention Strategy. To create a safer water environment we must heighten awareness and cultivate a culture of prevention. We can only do this by working together.”

Changing Trends and Risks

The report highlights significant demographic shifts in accidental drownings:

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- **Gender and Age:** Men still account for most accidental fatalities, though their proportion has decreased from 89 per cent to 76 per cent. The highest fatality rate is now among men aged 20-29.
- **Location:** Incidents are almost evenly split between coastal (51 per cent) and inland (49 per cent) waters, reflecting a shift from previous years when coastal drownings were more common.
- **Activities:** Half of all accidental drownings occur during recreational activities, while 43 per cent involve everyday actions where people did not expect to enter the water, like walking or running near water.

Increased Support and Community Efforts

Drowning Prevention has gained political backing, with funding from Welsh Government to The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) to support WSW's efforts to tackle this growing public health issue. The strategy review highlights the important work carried out by Local safety forums, such as the Pembrokeshire Water Safety Forum, who are actively working to coordinate drowning prevention activities at the local level. Public awareness campaigns, like Respect the Water, focus on educating the public on safe actions during water emergencies, emphasising calling 999 rather than attempting rescues.

About Water Safety Wales

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

Original Strategy - Wales' first ever drowning prevention strategy was launched by First Minister Mark Drakeford in December 2020 It 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

<https://www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/wales/drowning-prevention-strategy>

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WAID –The WAter Incident Database (WAID) is a service developed by the National Water Safety Forum to bring together water-related incident data from a wide range of sources within the UK search and rescue region.

<https://www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/waid/>