

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

Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy 2026-2030





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Foreword

Water is at the heart of life in Wales. It shapes our nation, sustains our communities and provides important opportunities for recreation, wellbeing and prosperity. Sadly, every year lives are lost in preventable water-related incidents, leaving families and communities to carry the consequences of tragedy that too often could have been avoided.

I am pleased to support this strategy, that sets a shared ambition towards zero drownings in Wales. It means bringing together public services, schools, colleges, communities, charities and partners across Wales behind a shared mission to prevent avoidable deaths in, on and around water.

This strategy sets out a national framework to drive that work forward - Prevention must come first. Water safety is not an optional extra; it is a life skill. Alongside learning to swim, every child and every community should have the knowledge and confidence to understand risk and stay safe. This strategy provides a clear national framework to drive that work forward, strengthening education, improving prevention activity, improving awareness and targeting action where it is needed most, making sure we focus on those groups we know are at risk.

This is about the Wales we want to build: a country that values every life, acts early to prevent harm, and works together for the common good. By backing communities, supporting collaboration and taking a joined-up national approach, we can make our rivers, coasts, lakes and reservoirs safer for everyone.

Together, we can and will save lives.

Llŷr Gruffydd MS, Cabinet Minister for Rural Resilience and Sustainability



Credit: Crown Copyright
Welsh Government

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 about 3.2 million, it features more than 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 National Water Safety Forum (NWSF) showing Wales has a drowning rate of 0.91 per 100,000 people (2019 to 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 the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have all contributed.

Each year in Wales, 1,071.5 years of life are lost to drowningⁱⁱⁱ. 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 Strategy^{iv}. A recent review^v 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 (WSPs). 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^v 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^{vi}. The NWSF has also provided guiding principles for the four UK nations to adopt and regionalise to ensure consistency across the UK^{vii}. Informed by this global guidance and the NWSF's UK Drowning Prevention Strategy, this strategy provides a clear framework to guide coordinated action for Wales.



Figure 1: Relationship between global, UK and Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy

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^{viii}. It complements the Climate Adaptation Strategy for Wales (2024) by addressing climate-related risks such as flooding and extreme weather^{ix}. It also supports Investing in a Healthier Wales, prioritising public health and safety for vulnerable groups^x. Together, these alignments embed drowning prevention within broader national efforts to improve wellbeing 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 Strategy^{iv}, the Welsh Government has taken a significant step forward by providing clear leadership and coordination for water safety and drowning prevention by allocating a government minister to lead on this.

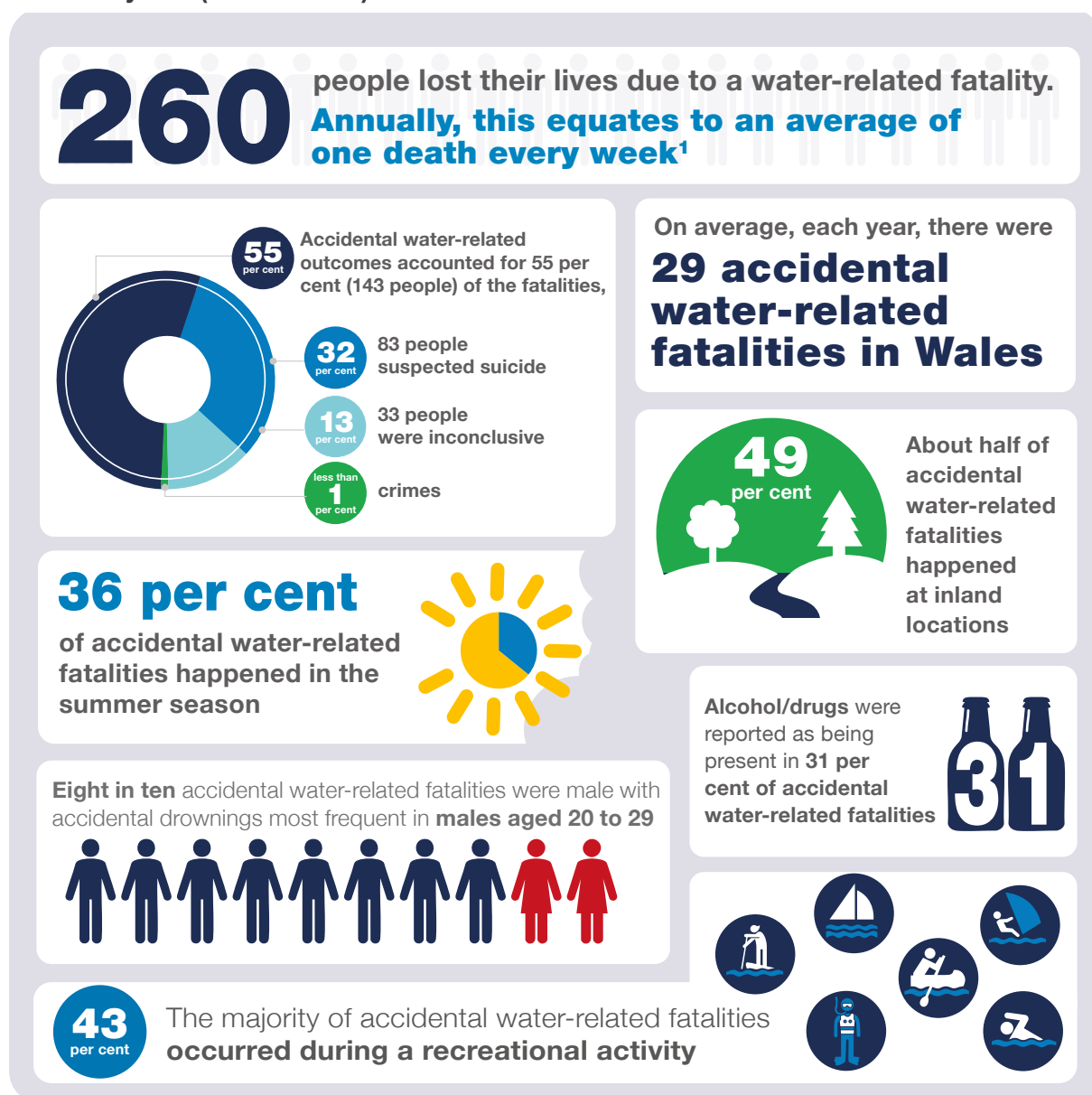
This move aligns with the World Health Organization's call for strong national leadership and coordination in drowning prevention. By designating ministerial responsibility, the Welsh Government ensures that water safety is recognised as a public health priority, enabling better coordination, funding,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

Understanding the issue (data and context)

Data play 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

Over five years (2019 to 2023):



A full data analysis is available for Wales in [Wales Drowning Prevention Strategy 2026 Annex 1: Wales Data Tables](#)

¹ 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.

² Accidental refers to accidental and natural cause outcomes.

³ Recreational activity refers to adventure sports, angling, boating (other), motorboating, sailing, waterside activities.



Emergency Response and Rescue

On average, there are 2,049 water-related incidents each year that require an emergency response, which equates to approximately 6 incidents every day.

While not every incident results in a fatality, each emergency response is a reminder that harm can escalate quickly in, on or around water. By improving public awareness, strengthening local partnerships, supporting safer environments and encouraging timely action, WSW and its members can help reduce avoidable emergencies, protecting both the public and those who respond.

Total number of emergency responses to water-related incidents in Wales for 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23:



These figures include water-related incidents coordinated by both Fire and Rescue Services and HM Coastguard (see Appendix One for further notes).

Vision

Our vision is:

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

Outlined below is a summary of the key values and functions defined in the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy^{vii}. These form the foundation of this strategy, guiding its direction and ensuring consistency with national priorities.



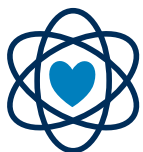
VISION

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



MISSION

The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy sets out the NWSF's key principles for preventing drowning by informing consistent and complementary strategies across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.



VALUES

- Collaboration • Equity
- Informed action • Compassion



SUPPORTING FUNCTIONS

- Data and evidence • Communication
- Education • Policy

Figure 2: The concepts underpinning the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy

Informed by this vision and these core values, WSW has established clear priorities and targeted interventions to help reduce drowning. This work is delivered through WSW's functional groups, partnership arrangements, and the wider contribution of WSW members, who play a vital role in delivering practical drowning prevention activity across Wales (full list of WSW members supporting the strategy is included in Appendix Two).



Aims

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

- Keep those 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
- Strengthen local drowning prevention partnerships across Wales
- Ensure drowning prevention efforts remain responsive to changing weather patterns and emerging water-related risks
- 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 those affected by drowning at the heart of drowning prevention

In Wales, families, friends and those who have tragically lost loved ones to drowning play a vital role in shaping drowning prevention efforts. Their contributions, through the WSW Lived Experience 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 those who have lost a loved one to connect and coordinate drowning prevention efforts

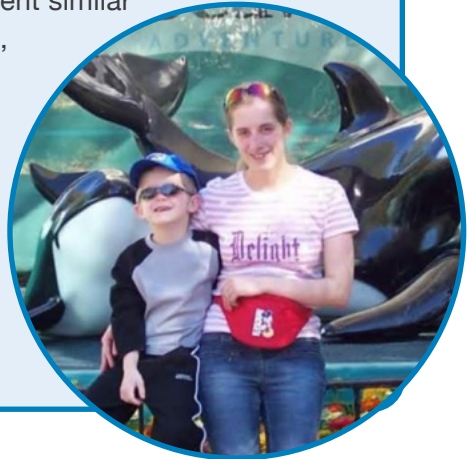
- Work with those who have lost a loved one and want to be involved in drowning prevention
- Provide signposting for those bereaved by drowning to connect with WSW
- Empower those who have lost a loved one, gather insights, co-create campaigns and influence drowning prevention efforts.

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 more than 11,000 signatures.

The campaign led to a transformational shift in Wales' approach to drowning prevention. The Welsh Government passed Mark Allen's Law^{xi}, which led to a number of recommendations being accepted, including the appointment of a dedicated minister for drowning prevention and a commitment for funding to support WSW.



Credit: Picture provided by LEEANNE BARTLEY

AIM

Improve data on water incidents

Good data and insight help us understand where, when, and why drowning incidents happen. Without them, we can't see patterns, spot risks, or know which safety measures work best. Data on fatalities, rescues and near misses make a vital contribution to reducing drowning deaths, however data are not always collected or available. Data for coastal incidents are 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

The feasibility of a Drowning Incident Review process in Wales

WSW is undertaking a feasibility study to explore the potential for a DIR-type process in Wales. Informed by the model developed by Water Safety Scotland, the study is considering whether a structured, multi-agency approach to reviewing accidental water-related fatalities could be applied in the Welsh context.

The work involves engagement with partners across relevant sectors and will examine the possible benefits alongside practical, legal and resource considerations. This exploratory study does not commit to implementation but will provide valuable insights into the feasibility of such a system which is working towards improved data collection to better inform interventions aimed at reducing drownings in Wales.



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 organisations' 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"^{xii}. Central to this vision is Nofio Ysgol, a flagship initiative within the Education & Health pillar of YMLAEN. Nofio Ysgol is Wales' 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 Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) and Swim England with support from local authorities, schools, Dŵr Cymru and other delivery partners.

In 2025, 3,117 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

Strengthen local drowning prevention partnerships across Wales

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 Water Safety Partnerships (WSPs), 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.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Support the development, strengthening and sustainability of WSPs across Wales

- Support existing WSPs to continue to coordinate drowning prevention efforts at a local level.
- Establish WSPs in areas where they are needed but are not yet in place.
- 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

Pembrokeshire Water Safety Forum

Pembrokeshire has a long and varied coastline, with busy beaches, harbours, inland waters and well-known activity locations attracting residents, visitors and organised groups throughout the year. These settings bring significant benefits for health, wellbeing and local tourism, but they also create a range of water safety risks which require coordinated local action.

In 2019, the Pembrokeshire Water Safety Forum was established to bring together organisations involved in drowning prevention across the county. The forum provides a structure for partners to share data, local knowledge and operational experience, helping to identify trends, understand local risks and prioritise activity where it is most needed.

The partnership has supported targeted work on open water swimming, personal watercraft, paddleboarding, coastal activity and cliff jumping. This includes work to improve signage and education at higher-risk locations such as the Blue Lagoon at Abereddy, and multi-agency education for local students on the dangers of jumping from height into water.

Since its establishment, Pembrokeshire Water Safety Forum has helped make local drowning prevention activity more coordinated, visible and evidence informed. It provides a practical example of how local partners can work together to understand risk, share resources and deliver action that reflects the needs of their communities.



AIM

Ensure drowning prevention efforts remain responsive to changing weather patterns and emerging water-related risks

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^{ix} 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.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Prepare the Welsh public for increased water-related risk 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 the Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK)^{xiii} and Bournemouth University^{xiv}

Separate research studies by Bournemouth University and the RLSS UK have confirmed a relationship between rising air temperatures and increased drowning risk.

The RLSS UK study showed that:

- When UK air temperatures reach 25°C or higher, accidental drowning risk is five times greater than on 10°C days, and drowning fatalities are three times higher than the seasonal average
- More teenagers and adolescents drown when temperatures reach 25°C or higher
- 57 per cent of those who drowned on hot days were swimming, nearly three times higher than on cooler days.

The Bournemouth University study showed that:

- The risk of drowning increases by more than 7 per cent 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

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 champion safe and responsible enjoyment of open water.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Ensure water safety messages are accessible and reach underrepresented⁴ 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, 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.

⁴ 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 the 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 prevention of suicide and self-harm
- 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 ensuring 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

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- Peter Gallagher (RoSPA)
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- Fergus Feeney (Swim Wales).

We would 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.

Appendices

Appendix One - Notes on the data

WAID data

All data used are from WAID 2019 to 2023 (v2) unless otherwise noted.

Population rate figures use ONS mid-year data from the Mid-2024 edition of the data.

Overall water-related fatalities include: accidental, suicide, crime and inconclusive. Accidental fatalities refers to suspected/confirmed accidental causes and natural water-related causes. Suicide fatalities refers to suspected/confirmed suicide causes.

Inconclusive refers to incidents where intent has not been able to be categorised.

Where figures have been excluded due to limited information, this has been clearly indicated by category (e.g. n=394; 13 excluded).

WAID taxonomies for activity:

- Commercial activities where the activity of the deceased was recorded as commercial
- Domestic activities where the activity of the deceased was recorded in a domestic/residential setting
- Everyday activities where the deceased did not intend to be in the water (e.g. people who were walking, running and cycling next to water)
- Exceptional activities where the activity of the deceased was recorded as exceptional e.g. person/animal rescue
- Recreational activities where the activity was recorded as sports or a water-based activity.

Emergency response data

The data captured for the Welsh Emergency response section are from Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) and HM Coastguard sources. The Welsh Fire and Rescue data cover Special Service Incidents attended by crews which were recorded as flooding, rescue or evacuation from water.

The HM Coastguard data have been supplied by HM Coastguard Milford Haven and takes into account the following incident types: person appears in difficulty, person in water, person cut off or stranded, person on personal watercraft – e.g. inflatable, flare, person stuck in mud, civil contingencies flooding, divers, vessel – personal watercraft, man overboard and other incidents starting with “vessel” which involve an emergency response and risk to life.

Agency	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Welsh FRS	1,207	1,023	610	785
HM Coastguard	1,096	1,068	1,223	1,184
Totals	2,303	2,091	1,833	1,969



Appendix Two - WSW member organisations supporting the Strategy



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