

# **Mark Allen's Law**

## Water safety and drowning prevention

August 2022



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# About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:  
[www.senedd.wales/SeneddPetitions](http://www.senedd.wales/SeneddPetitions)

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Current Committee membership:



**Committee Chair:  
Jack Sargeant MS**  
Welsh Labour



**Luke Fletcher MS**  
Plaid Cymru



**Joel James MS**  
Welsh Conservatives



**Buffy Williams MS**  
Welsh Labour

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This report sets out the recommendations and conclusions of the Petitions Committee, and provides links to the evidence considered by the Committee in relation to the following petition:

**Mark Allen's Law: we want throw-line stations around all open water sites in Wales**

Mark Allen, aged 18, drowned after jumping into a freezing reservoir on a hot day in June 2018. In May 2019 we watched whilst 3 throw-lines were installed where he died. Mark could have possibly been saved if they were in place beforehand.

We, Mark's family and friends, feel that it should be law that throw-lines like those placed where Mark died should be placed in designated places around every reservoir, lake, canal etc. Speaking to people who work in water safety, e.g. fire services etc., such throw-lines have saved many lives. We want to save lives and save people from going through the heartbreak and tragedy of losing someone they love to drowning.

Plz help us make a positive difference in Marks memory.

Thank you, Mark's family and friends

## Chair's foreword

During the relatively short period that we have been considering this petition at least three more young people have lost their lives to drowning in Wales. We must do better as a country, and I hope this report will give a boost to all those working hard to do so.

Leeanne Bartley's son Mark lost his life in a freezing cold reservoir on a warm summer's day.

In his memory, she has campaigned tirelessly to raise awareness and increase understanding about water safety by creating petitions, speaking to politicians, visiting schools, working with the water company on a project to install throw-lines and most recently written a book for younger children on water safety.

During our inquiry looking in-depth at the issues arising from this petition, we have heard evidence from Water Safety Wales, water utilities companies, The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), and Natural Resources Wales to gain a fuller picture of the context, challenges and action needed to increase water safety and prevent drowning. We have visited Pontsticill Reservoir, in order to see for ourselves the difficulties involved in making vast sites safe.

And most importantly we heard from the petitioner and other families who have lost loved ones to drowning. We've heard about the devastating impact such a tragedy has had on their lives, but also of their steely determination to raise awareness and prevent future loss of life through drowning. We are grateful for their time, their honesty, and their willingness to share their trauma so that others might benefit.

This report, and the recommendations we make, are our attempt to support their campaign, and ensure that other families do not have to go through that terrible journey.

*JACK SARCENT.*

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# 1. Background

1. Around **400 people drown** in the UK every year. For people between the ages of 5 and 24, drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death.
2. Consideration of how best to **ensure water safety and prevent drowning** has been ongoing since the 1960's and work is underway to educate, raise awareness and increase safety to prevent further loss of life.
3. **Water Safety Wales** was established in 2017. It is a group of more than 30 member organisations working on water safety and drowning prevention in Wales. It launched Wales' **Drowning Prevention Strategy** in December 2020, and highlights that "*on average 45 people lose their lives to drowning every year*" in Wales. The then Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths MS **stated that the strategy will:**

*"...give a clear outline on how [the Welsh Government] will work in collaboration with partnership organisations to engage, educate and raise awareness on the dangers of water to the communities which we serve."*

4. However, many campaigners are calling for more proactive action to prevent future deaths by drowning. A number of campaigners have lost loved ones and are determined to ensure others do not lose family or friends in a similar way.
  5. Leeanne Bartley created this petition following the tragic death of her son. Mark was only 18 years old when he died in June 2018 after jumping into a freezing reservoir on a hot day. The family believe that he could have been saved if a throw-line was available near the water.
  6. Throw-lines, typically a length of rope stuffed loosely into a bag which will let out when open, have since been installed at Gorton Reservoir, Manchester, where Mark lost his life. The **RNLI says that** for someone who has fallen in the water they are a lifeline.
  7. The petition has already raised awareness among the public, having collected a total of 11,027 signatures. It forms part of a wider campaign undertaken by Mark's mother to raise awareness of the risks, educate the public and campaign for action to promote water safety and prevent drowning.
  8. As part of this campaign a **similar petition** was submitted to the UK Government calling for legislation to require throw-lines to be installed around open bodies of water which was supported by 103,531. This was debated in the UK parliament on 24 January 2022. In her response Kemi Badenoch MP, Minister for Levelling up Communities, said the Government will
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consider options to protect the public using open bodies of water, including introducing legislation requiring the installation of throw-line stations.

## 2. The petition and the work of the committee

This chapter details the journey of the petition, and the work of the Committee to explore how to take the petition forward.

### About the petition

**9.** The petition was opened in March 2021, and collected 11,027 signatures. It closed on 29 October 2021. In its first consideration of this petition on 29 November 2011 the Committee considered the response from Julie James MS, Minister for Climate Change who welcomed the,

*"... work being done by our delivery partners to educate and address safety concerns such as the reservoir safety campaign by the water companies. In particular, the publication of the Drowning Prevention Strategy by Water Safety Wales commits to reducing drowning deaths and keeping our communities safe around water. Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy 2020-2026 has been drawn up by the Water Safety Wales group, a collaboration of individuals, communities, charities and public and private sector organisations with an interest in water safety and drowning prevention. It aims to reduce water related deaths and incidents in Wales by promoting the importance of a consistent and effective approach to water safety."*

**10.** The petitioner expressed her disappointment with the response and noted the importance of hearing from the emergency services and water safety experts. The Committee decided to take evidence and explore the call for increased water safety throughout Wales.

**11.** Whilst the petition calls for throw-lines to be installed around all open water sites, the Committee agreed to focus its work on how to improve water safety in publicly funded or owned water sites and identify proactive solutions. This was agreed following a meeting between the petitioner, Leeanne Bartley, and the Chair of the Committee, acknowledging the significant challenge of considering all open water sites.

**12.** Evidence sessions took place on 10 January 2022 with water companies and water safety professionals. Written evidence has also been received from Natural Resources Wales, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and the petitioner. On 16 May 2022 Members visited Pontsticill Reservoir to see first-hand the challenges of making open water sites safe.

**13.** On 25 May 2022 members of the Committee met online with families who have lost loved ones by drowning. We listened to their devastating experiences and inspiring commitment to make positive changes for the future. The Committee is grateful to all those who gave evidence, which helped shape our discussion and conclusions.

## **Water safety in Wales**

**14.** Chris Cousens, Chair of Water Safety Wales, provided the context, stating that:

*"... around 50 people a year lose their lives to water-related fatalities in Wales every year. The rate of accidental drowning per head of population here in Wales is around double that of the UK as a whole. The number of accidental drowning deaths, sadly, is also higher than the number of deaths in fires, for example, motorcycle accidents and cycling—three other very high-profile causes of accidental deaths."*

**15.** According to Water Safety Wales there are more than 1,750 water-related incidents that require an emergency response each year. This includes blue light and search and rescue services, but doesn't include incidents requiring support from the lifeguard on Welsh beaches.

**16.** As Wales has seen a substantial growth in outdoor activity over recent years, including stand-up paddleboarding and open-water swimming, it is likely that more people will find themselves getting into difficulties and needing rescuing. This will further increase demands on relevant services.

**17.** Bleddyn Jones, South Wales Fire and Rescue Service, stated that the fire and rescue service has a statutory duty to respond to inland water incidents. He described how a rescue incident would usually involve around 20 firefighters which would include specialists to undertake swimming rescues or boat rescues for example.

**18.** Water Safety Wales is a collaboration of individuals, communities, charities and public and private sector organisations with an interest in water safety and drowning prevention, aiming to reduce water-related deaths and incidents in Wales. The group works to promote a consistent and common approach to water safety, promote drowning prevention and water safety education and awareness. It works in a collaborative multi-agency approach to identify and target areas of risk and then develop and implement a drowning prevention strategy. In December 2020 Water Safety Wales published Wales' first **drowning prevention strategy**.

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<sup>1</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 12

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**19.** The strategy has an aspiration of no water-related deaths and is an acknowledgement that *"every water-related fatality is preventable."*<sup>2</sup> Chris Cousens hopes that the strategy is *"a call to action for everybody to play their part. And if everybody plays their part in Wales, we feel we can make a difference to those drowning numbers, which are too high."*<sup>3</sup>

**20.** Water Safety Wales collaborated with the Welsh Government on the development of the strategy. However, it was noted that that this partnership with the Welsh Government needs to be formalised and funding arrangements secured to enable Water Safety Wales to progress this important work. There are calls for the responsibility for drowning prevention and water safety to be allocated to a specific Minister. Whilst the remit of the Wales Drowning Prevention Strategy 2020-2026 is broad and cross-departmental, Chris Cousens highlighted that *"no-one has overall responsibility for the issue at present, and that can cause issues for policy formation and also funding solutions."*<sup>4</sup> He cited the funding request that Water Safety Wales made to aid the delivery of the Drowning Prevention Strategy to enable them to be on par with Scotland and UK water safety groups.

**21.** Last year, the UK Government held a round-table discussion on drowning prevention, bringing various government departments together in order to move things forward. Water Safety Wales have suggested this may be a constructive approach in Wales.

**22.** Education is crucial in ensuring awareness and understanding in terms of water safety. It is one of the priority targets of the drowning prevention strategy to ensure that every child should have the opportunity to learn to swim and receive water safety education at primary school and where required at Key Stage 3. Chris Cousens highlighted that *"more children die, sadly, in the water than on bikes and in fires, yet there are really established cycling proficiency and fire prevention campaigns in schools, and education has also halved the number of road fatalities."*<sup>5</sup> He emphasises the value of having a *"coherent education and water safety programme in schools"*<sup>6</sup> and Water Safety Wales would be pleased to help to take such an approach forward.

**23.** In principle Water Safety Wales support the Welsh Government's proposals to widening access to inland waterways for recreational purposes. The Welsh Government is **considering introducing legislation** to provide for wider access to the countryside for the purposes of recreation. It **states that:**

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<sup>2</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 12

<sup>3</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 13

<sup>4</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 42

<sup>5</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 44

<sup>6</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 44

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*"There are currently no general statutory public rights of recreational access in or on inland waters in Wales and very little common law."<sup>7</sup>*

**24.** However, it's important to encourage people to use the water safely and it's crucial that any additional access is granted in a controlled way that does not put people at any unnecessary risk. Bleddyn Jones noted the need to *"really understand how we teach people the dangers of cold water shock, the danger of going in after your dog, for example, and, if you are a recreational user in the water, what are the safety measures required and how you save yourself if need be."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is essential that these sites will be properly risk assessed on a regular basis.*

**25.** Whilst there hasn't been any direct communication between the **National Access Forum Wales Access to Water Sub-Group**, set up to give priority to inland water issues, and Water Safety Wales, there are many overlaps in terms of membership. Water Safety Wales would welcome formal links being established to progress the work.

**26.** Information and data about fatalities and rescues form an important part of risk assessments and the water incident database, WAID, is the most reliable source and provides fatalities data with enough locality to be taken into account. Water Safety Wales recognise the need to improve the quality of data available around non-fatal water-based incidents and are working on this as part of their strategy.

**27.** Bleddyn Jones referred to recent research by RoSPA which evidenced the various approaches used by local authorities across the UK to managing and assessing water sites. Eighty-nine per cent of the local authorities said that water safety was an important issue for them, but only 50 per cent had a person or persons responsible for water safety. Only 22 per cent had a specific water safety policy or plan in that local authority area, with others being in development. It was also notable that only four Welsh councils participated. Water Safety Wales believe that more work needs to be done to support local authorities and other landowners in prioritising water safety, including further clarity and guidance from the Welsh Local Government Association.

**28.** The utilities companies, responsible for reservoirs, regularly risk-assess their locations. Whilst their approach has traditionally been prohibitive, which is understandable due to the risks, Water Safety Wales commended Dŵr Cymru's change of approach in 2021. This acknowledges that despite warning people not to enter the water, many people continued to

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<sup>7</sup> Access to Inland Waterways Welsh Government Outline Policy Intent National Access Forum 05/11/19 Welsh Government

<sup>8</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 26

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do so, placing themselves at risk. In partnership with Swim Wales under the Safe Aquatic Facility Endorsement Cymru scheme, they have designated a small number of their reservoirs to be managed 'safe' open water swimming sites. It provides people with an option of a place that has been risk-assessed and is managed.

**29.** Throw-lines or throw bags are one of a range of rescue equipment placed at the edge of the water and the petitioner believes that if a throw-line had been available at the reservoir where her son Mark died he may have been saved. Bleddyn Jones supports the use of throw-lines and confirms that the fire and rescue service use them effectively. However, he emphasises the need for recreational users to be educated about *"what it is, what it looks like, how you'd use it, and how you'd use it effectively"*<sup>9</sup>. The challenge is to educate people to maintain them, keep them in operational use, when they are often vandalised or stolen, but also how to use them effectively. Bleddyn cited a positive example of partnership working with the RNLI to develop a waterside responder scheme, where publicans in Cardiff Bay are taught how to use throw-lines.

**30.** Chris Cousens referred to a literature review undertaken by Water Safety Scotland of global publications about public use of rescue equipment, like throw-lines, citing that there is a lack of robust evidence about the frequency of use or how effective they are when used. There are however, case studies where lives have been saved. *"I think it's important that throw-lines aren't seen as the answer to keeping people safe in open water, and that organisations responsible for managing open water sites look at all the options, including throw-lines"*.<sup>10</sup>

## Safety around reservoirs

**31.** The evidence from United Utilities, Dŵr Cymru and Hafren Dyfrdwy, who own and manage reservoirs, clearly emphasised that their first and foremost priority is prevention. Preventing people from entering the water at a reservoir is important, given the significant risk of someone experiencing cold water shock with such deep-water bodies. It was also highlighted that reservoirs are not natural bodies of water and should be considered as 'factories for water' where there is unseen equipment and machinery and deep embankments.

**32.** Each of the water companies placed safety as their priority, for the public and their staff who work around reservoirs. However, it was acknowledged that this is a challenge when there are many large water bodies with miles of shoreline to manage.

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<sup>9</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 35

<sup>10</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 38

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**33.** In addition to signage, there are rangers at some sites, and additional security during summer months at busy reservoirs.

## Education

**34.** Signage plays a crucial role in prevention and Paula Steer, Director of Health, Safety and Well-being and Estate Services at United Utilities, stated that there are a lot of signage and information boards around their reservoirs sites about the dangers of deep waters, as well as 'keep out' signs.

**35.** Raising awareness and educating the public about the dangers of cold and deep waters in reservoirs is a key element of each organisation's prevention work. Dominic Robinson, Head of Visitor Experience for Hafren Dyfrdwy, stated that they raise awareness through press releases, social media platforms and the radio and United Utilities have developed their *"communication approach particularly using social media and reaching that right target group—so, young teenagers, often, and often, very sadly, it's boys as well—but targeting specific audiences around the dangers."*<sup>11</sup>

**36.** There was a clear consensus that education is paramount and considerable work is being done to educate children and young people in particular. During the two years prior to the pandemic Dŵr Cymru had provided lessons on water safety and water education to around 18,500 pupils. United Utilities joined forces with some of the families that had lost loved ones and the North West Theatre Arts Company, to create a production that replayed the sad death of a young boy. This was taken to secondary schools and was very impactful.

**37.** Dominic Robinson summarised the issues and the message for the future:

*"I think what's really important is finding the ways of engaging as well. Paula touched on the powerful testimony that some of the families have brought to some of that engagement, and from our perspective, being able to innovate in that I think is really key; finding ways of getting to younger people some of the hard-hitting messages is going to be important. I think that education piece—as others have highlighted—is about collaboration, because it's across sectors. We are equally engaging with schools as a water company as well, regularly within our region, but there are others who also do that, and I think doing that in a co-ordinated fashion across sectors, and as an industry as well, I think, is really important for the future."*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 35

<sup>12</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 118

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## Throw-lines

**38.** United Utilities developed a pilot scheme with Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service and some of the families that had lost loved ones in drowning. This involved creating an information board with throw-lines, and of them were installed 20 across eight sites.

**39.** Paula Steer described the

*"board itself is quite big and very visual, so it's red in colour, so it's making people aware of the dangers. They have a locked box that contains a throw-line and a whistle, and it has a keypad to enter to open it. We also have unique identifiers, so working with the fire and rescue service, one of the things we identified was actually that these sites are very vast and often can be in rural locations, and it's quite difficult for the emergency services to pinpoint the exact location when that 999 call is made, so they have a unique identifier on them as well. So, the intention is that a member of the public would dial the emergency services, they would give the code on the board, and that they would give them a code to release the box, so basically to take the throw-line out."<sup>13</sup>*

**40.** However, since the throw-lines were installed none have been used but their maintenance has proved to be a 'massive challenge' with all of them vandalised including damage to the boards, the boxes broken and throw-lines stolen. Regrettably this has happened regularly.

**41.** Dominic Robinson explained that their rangers have throw-lines on their vehicles, which they have been trained to use. The rangers regularly patrol reservoirs where there is public access and *"need to know how to use them to use them effectively."*<sup>14</sup> From their own experiences and others' Hafren Dyfrdwy believe that installing throw-lines sends a confusing message, giving the public reassurance that it's safe to enter the water.

**42.** Nikki Kemmery stated that Dŵr Cymru have *"not generally relied on installing throw-lines but more training our rangers so that they can effect rescue, and also monitoring those sites."*<sup>15</sup> Similar to the other water companies Dwr Cymru actively monitor reservoirs during warmer weather, ensuring more rangers visibility who can educate and advise the public.

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<sup>13</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 69

<sup>14</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 78

<sup>15</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 81

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## Swimming at reservoirs

**43.** Neither United Utilities nor Hafren Dyfrdwy allow swimming at their reservoirs due to the risks involved. Dŵr Cymru have reviewed their position on this, recognising the demand by the public to access water for recreational activities including swimming. They started with a pilot at Llandegfedd reservoir, which has proved to be very popular with around 3,500 swimming there during the year. As part of the process the site was accredited to SAFE Cymru accreditation and lifeguards were trained. Dŵr Cymru are exploring opening up four or five similar sites as visitor centres with safety measures in place. However, Nikki Kemmery was clear that they wouldn't want to encourage it anywhere else and would direct people to go to the designated reservoirs where it's safe and managed.

## Risk assessments

**44.** Risk assessments are an integral part of the work around reservoirs and the Committee heard evidence that these are undertaken regularly and with rigour, both in terms of their operational function and public safety. They include consideration of the location, access to the public, how many people visit the reservoir and previous incidents to identify the risk and challenges and respond accordingly.

**45.** Dŵr Cymru have 91 reservoirs and Hafren Dyfrdwy have 19 across a range of rural and urban locations. Dŵr Cymru undertake an annual review, considering what happened the previous year, discuss any challenges or incidents and check all the sites. They also prepare additional 'hot weather measures' which will be implemented as appropriate.

**46.** Hafren Dyfrdwy's strategy to manage the risk is to prevent access in the first place with their no-swimming policy. The only access to water is *"through organised activities through insured providers who have safety boats, lifejackets, et cetera. We encourage that and we support that..."*<sup>16</sup>. They undertake a seasonal review at the end of the summer period to consider *"what's taken place and ensure we have the right resources and the right focus for the coming year"*<sup>17</sup>.

**47.** It was evident that despite working with and having conversation with others in the industry regarding drowning prevention, such as within the reservoir safety group, there has been limited engagement with the Welsh Government. Both water companies in Wales would welcome an opportunity to develop joined up thinking and collaboration with school, charities, communities and the Welsh Government.

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<sup>16</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 88

<sup>17</sup> Petitions Committee, Record of Proceedings, 10 January 2022, paragraph 96

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- 48.** RoSPA advised the Committee that they host the UK's database (WAID) and the National Water Safety Forum (NWSF) which aims to halve the number of accidental drownings within 10 years. They were delighted to share that the UK safety sector has come together with a single campaign and message **Respect the Water**. They believe that drownings and rescue data should be used to inform risk assessments and decide where rescue equipment such as throw-lines should be located. Whilst they believe that it would be impractical to try to provide throw-lines at "every open water site in Wales" they note that these should be available at locations where there is a history of drownings and rescues. In addition, they state that there should be public awareness campaigns through broadcast and social media at key times of year (before, for example, Spring heatwaves and Summer Bank Holidays).
- 49.** In their evidence Natural Resources Wales (NRW) outline how seriously they take water safety and how they assess the risks associated with water bodies on the land they manage, on their structures on rivers and the 42 reservoirs they own and operate.
- 50.** NRW manages 144,087 hectares of woodland and nature reserves, which contains over 120 open water bodies. Most of NRW managed land is designated or dedicated as Open Access under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW), where the Code specifically excludes swimming without the landowner's permission and NRW's liability is reduced.
- 51.** NRW advised the Welsh Government regarding their proposal to widen access to inland waterways for recreation, following their work leading the Access Reform Advisory Group. The NRW Chair of the former Access to Water Sub-Group, confirmed the focus had been on improving shared use of inland waters between Angling and Paddle-sport, seeking to develop a sustainable solution to the historic challenges, with a report submitted for Ministerial consideration. Public safety considerations were not a part of the sub-group's remit.
- 52.** At NRW-managed reservoirs there is a programme of risk assessment, inspection and maintenance to ensure safety. They manage recreational safety on the land in their care via application of the Visitor Safety Group (VSG) principles and practice. The VSG is a UK and Ireland body with membership from most large landowning and visited historic property organisations. The VSG publication "Managing Visitor Safety in the Countryside" (as supported by the Health and Safety Executive), sets out principles for balancing the benefits and risks for visitors to the countryside.
- 53.** NRW conducts Public Safety Risk Assessments on its reservoirs and flood assets and applies control measures, such as signage, fencing and barriers to exclude members of the public. However they caution that whilst the provision of throw-lines might seem attractive and can at times be a sensible step there are very real difficulties that need to be considered. Their
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provision might be seen to condone entry to the water and encourage unauthorised access. Perceptions of personal risk might be lowered if public rescue equipment is provided. NRW experience vandalism and theft where they do provide public rescue equipment of this nature at visitor sites. It is expensive to adequately inspect and maintain to ensure it will always be available and in serviceable condition.

**54.** For use in a workplace scenario, NRW staff who may be involved in water rescue scenarios receive training and regularly practice the use of throw-lines. It is not easy and failure to get it right first time leads to diminishing success on subsequent attempts. Members of the public are unlikely to have had training, practice, or experience, and therefore their effectiveness in general use will likely be reduced.

**55.** Local conditions have a big impact on throw-line deployment success, surrounding vegetation, distance to victim (e.g. It is hard to deploy a throw-line successfully beyond 15m) and the consciousness and coherence of the victim are critical, especially in cold water shock situations.

**56.** NRW acknowledge there is a known risk of drowning in all water and have issued general guidance on their website as part of their wider Countryside Code messaging The Wild Swimmers Code. They have worked in partnership with Water Safety Group Wales to promote shared messaging around the risks.<sup>18</sup> They are also working with Royal National Lifeboats Institute at some coastal sites to develop beach safety risk assessments, and sit on the Wales Beach Managers' Forum, alongside officers from County Borough Councils, to share safety information and best practice.

**57.** Committee members visited Dŵr Cymru reservoir Pontsticill near Merthyr Tydfil and met with Gwyn Thomas, Head of Stakeholder and Public Relations, Dean Baker, Health and Safety Manager and Edward Pritchard, Dam Safety Assistant Engineer. Standing beside the large reservoir brought to life some of the challenges and opportunities raised during the course of this inquiry. We are grateful to Dŵr Cymru for sharing their views and answering our questions.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://nrw-newsroom.prgloo.com/news/be-adventure-smart-and-stay-safe-around-water-this-summer-mentron-gall-ac-aros-yn-ddiogel-o-gwmpas-dwr-yr-haf-hwn>

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### 3. Families' testimony

**58.** Members of the Committee met families who have experienced the devastating impact of losing a loved one by drowning and we thank them for their openness and commitment to improve water safety and avoid further tragic deaths. Consistent themes emerged from the discussions around key concerns and improvements that needed to be made.

#### Signage

**59.** Concerns regarding the lack of information and visible (or any) signage were shared, including reluctance or refusal by land owners to erect safety signage on their land or damaged signage which needs to be replaced.

*"Where Mark jumped in there was nothing clear at all. There was no throw-line. There was no safety ring and it's just kids being kids isn't it. They never think that anything is going to happen to them. They think at that age, they think they're invincible."*

*Response from the discussion group with families*

*"You know, we tried all sorts of things and I got permission to put signs there and I was told it wasn't good for business locally. Local tourist business."*

*Response from the discussion group with families*

#### Education and raising awareness

**60.** All advocated for education on water safety to be delivered in all schools and within the wider community. It was clear that education should be tailored to the needs of young people, not only informing them how to be safe in and around water, how to respect and know how to use safety equipment but also exploring areas such as peer pressure, being aware of hidden equipment or discarded shopping trolleys and similar in the water.

*"But I think also we need to educate people about the safety equipment. How to use them and respect them. There is a lot of work that needs to be done on the education side, and it needs to be done sooner rather than later."*

*Response from the discussion group with families*

**61.** Many of the families campaign and provide raising awareness to schools, communities and organisations including the police. They feel that their personal experience has a profound impact on young people.

*"That is exactly what I speak about when I go into schools and I actually do quite a long exercise when I work with younger children as well. I ask them to imagine that they're under the water and what things would be under the water that might be dangerous and we get all sorts of comments."*

*Response from the discussion group with families*

**62.** Learning how to swim is a key life-saving skill which is currently set as part of the curriculum in Wales. Children should be taught to swim 25 meters unaided by the time they leave primary school, although only around 70% of children could in fact swim that distance in the latest study undertaken, which is not a particularly good level of attainment. And worryingly children from ethnic minority backgrounds or socio-economically deprived backgrounds have lower scores. Questions were raised about whether this would be a requirement in the new curriculum and whether there is equity of provision across Wales.

### **Ethnic minorities and socio-economic status**

**63.** There are concerns regarding that the data from the main database around water-related fatalities doesn't currently include information about ethnicity. Given concerns that fewer children from ethnic minority backgrounds are learning to swim and worries about a number of fatalities involving people from ethnic minorities, this is also an area to explore.

### **Safety Equipment**

**64.** The families raised a number of issues relating to the provision of safety equipment.

*"My brother drowned a long time ago, and it was said that there wasn't enough safety equipment around that harbour around that time. I'm horrified that even 50 years later, this is still a problem."*

*Response from the discussion group with families*

**65.** Whilst there is a clear call for more safety equipment to be installed at water sites, the group recognised the challenges of vandalism and maintenance. There was a sense that

education is also key to influencing attitudes and behaviour regarding respecting and valuing life saving equipment.

*"I think personally it would reduce tampering with such equipment because more people are aware and then if you've got a situation where someone is drowning and someone knows how to use the equipment, potentially a lot more lives are going to be saved."*

*Response from the discussion group with families*

**66.** Poor funding and the lack of resources limit the work that can be done to improve water safety. In comparison road safety has had a huge amount of government funding through police services, which have proved very successful. The prevention work undertaken by the Fire and Rescue services funded by the government has also been extremely effective in reducing fires and increasing safety. During the discussion with families Chris Cousens, Water Safety Wales said that:

*"46 people in Wales drowned last year, which is too many and the reason that that number isn't higher is because of the goodwill of organizations like the RNLI and others and the individuals like Leeanne and Debbie and David and Doug who are doing all this work. Not because we spend an awful lot of money on the issue."*

**67.** There was recognition of the challenge as there are many aspects involved including education, community safety, public health and suicide prevention. However, following the Scottish example where Water Safety Scotland has had the designated support of the Community Safety Minister for the last two years and the funding that goes with it would be a positive step forward. With such support they have been able to achieve a lot more.

**68.** Water Safety Wales and the families reinforce the need for resources and clout to deliver the Drowning Prevention Strategy in Wales, which at present is limited and done in a piecemeal way.

*"It's been very humbling and I am quite upset, but it's just been something I've had to do tonight. It's so important. The work that we do at water safety is incredibly important for all."*

*Response from the discussion group with families*

## Recommendations

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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

**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.



## Annex A: Evidence received during the course of inquiry

### List of oral evidence sessions

The following witnesses provided oral evidence to the Committee on the dates noted below. Transcripts of all oral evidence sessions can be viewed on the Committee's website.

Date	Name and Organisation
10 January 2022	<p><b>Bleddyn Jones,</b> South Wales Fire and Rescue Service</p> <p><b>Chris Cousens,</b> Water Safety Wales (Chair)</p> <p><b>Paula Steer,</b> United Utilities</p> <p><b>Nikki Kemmery</b> Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water</p> <p><b>Dominic Robinson,</b> Hafren Dyfrdwy and Severn Trent</p>

Online discussion group with families involved with Water Safety Wales on 25 May 2022

Members visited Dŵr Cymru Pontsticill reservoir on 16 May 2022

### List of written evidence

The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee. All written information can be viewed on the Committee's website.

Title	Date
Letter to the Chair from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA)	7 January 2022
Letter to the Chair from Natural Resources Wales	7 February 2022