

# MEETING WITH STAKEHOLDERS WATER SAFETY

11 AUGUST 2021, 15:30-17:00

## NOTE OF MEETING

### Attendees

- Chair: Ash Denham MSP - Minister for Community Safety
- Kenny Auld - Head of Visitor Services, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park
- Michael Avril - Chair, Water Safety Scotland (and RNLI)
- Paul Bassett - Director of Operations, Scottish Ambulance Service
- Martin Blunden - Chief Officer, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
- Albert Bruce - Sub-Group Chair, Water Safety Scotland (and SFRS)
- Forbes Dunlop - Chief Operating Officer, SportScotland
- Ross Greenhill - Area Commander, HM Coastguard
- Linda Jones - Chief Superintendent, Police Scotland
- Euan Lowe - Chief Executive, Scottish Swimming
- Carlene McAvoy - Secretariat, Water Safety Scotland (and RoSPA)
- Richard Millar - Chief Operating Officer, Scottish Canals
- Douglas Millican - Chief Executive, Scottish Water
- Matthew Mulligan - Regional Support Lead, RNLI
- Jeanette Roberts - Head of Health and Safety, Scottish Canals
- David Shea - Senior National Development Officer, Scottish Community Safety Network
- Errol Taylor - Chief Executive, RoSPA
- Ollie Gray - Strategic Director, Curriculum Innovation, Design and Pedagogy, Education Scotland

### **Welcome and Introductions**

1. The Minister welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for making time to attend. She was particularly grateful for the briefing notes which organisations had prepared for circulation ahead of the meeting.

2. The Minister invited attendees to observe a moment of silence to reflect on lives lost through drowning. The Minister then recorded her thanks to all those involved in responding to these incidents, before commenting on:

- the ongoing loss of life, with SFRS 2019-20 incident statistics confirming '*a significant uptick in incidents involving rescue or evacuation from water, at 218, a 26.7% increase on the previous year and the highest value on record*';
- the briefing papers confirm that a lot of good work is already taking place, but it is clear that further progress is needed and the meeting's purpose is to facilitate that;
- one issue to explore, taking account of what is outlined in the briefing papers, may be around ensuring alignment and clarity in relation to inland water rescue;

- another issue, caveated with recognition that competent swimmers feature amongst drowning fatalities, is around the provision of swimming lessons. The context is that while there is not generally a statutory curriculum in Scotland, the Health and Wellbeing element of the Curriculum for Excellence does enable the provision of swimming as part of physical activity and sport;
- prevention is crucial, so there must be a strong focus on education and awareness – particularly around the risks of cold water shock – as well as the provision of safety signage and rescue equipment;
- the framework in Water Safety Scotland’s ‘Drowning Prevention Strategy’ provides a basis from which stakeholders can work and develop their approach;
- against that background, this meeting gives an opportunity to identify definite, practical steps that can be taken to strengthen efforts to work individually and collaboratively to help to improve water safety;
- it is important to hear perspectives, ideas and discussion from the wide range of stakeholders in attendance, but initially invite Water Safety Scotland to provide an assessment of what the data and evidence says about the nature of the challenge.

### **Water Safety Scotland (WSS) overview**

3. Michael Avril and Carlene McAvoy provided an overview of WSS’s role and its assessment of evidence:

- WSS’s strategy aims to reduce accidental drownings by 50% by 2026, and also to promote safe leisure use and reduce suicides;
- the strategy, which was reviewed in 2020 and is to be reviewed again in 2022, has to be deliverable in practice, working across all 32 local authorities;
- WAID data and its communication to key organisations is important, with e.g. an annual press release and an annual summary / trend report being produced by RoSPA;
- most recently there has been a small increase in overall fatalities, to 97 per year. This includes suicide and crime; there is a general decrease in accidental drowning from around 50 to 40 per year;
- Scotland has a disproportionate rate compared to the UK and some of the EU;
- despite the recent cluster of fatalities, the fatality rate for 2021 so far is consistent with previous years;
- the typical victim is mainly male, middle-aged and linked to recreation, sometimes with alcohol as factor. Water temperature is also a factor. There appears recently to have been a shift from coastal to inland fatalities.
- WSS feel that progress has been made and that in some respects Scotland is seen (e.g. by Wales) as an example to emulate:
  - many objectives have already been achieved, so the intention now is to adjust objectives, raise sights and improve effectiveness;
  - partnership relationships are strengthening (notably with SFRS and HMCG), though there is room for further improvement;

- it remains critical that the right people are round the table;
- WSS is dependent on the commitment of volunteers (related to, but on top of, their day job) and this is one aspect that would benefit attention.

4. The Minister thanked Michael and Carlene for setting the scene and suggested that discussions should centre around key themes.

### **Intelligence Gathering and Sharing**

5. The Minister invited participants to address the importance of mutual appreciation of intelligence, including around identifying what the key challenges are; where any hotspots might be and why they exist; whether resources are in the right places; what works and what doesn't work; and where the knowledge gaps are. In discussion it was observed:

- resources are important, and those committed to water safety are limited / scattered when compared to what Transport Scotland focuses on in relation to road safety. Additional resource in intelligence gathering and sharing could help to address knowledge gaps and join up the expertise that exists in pockets e.g. around hot spots;
- it was highlighted that data shows a stark difference between the fatality pattern here compared with England, but more analytical work is needed to understand the underpinning reasons for that;
- the importance of WAID was noted, and that there is considerable scope to develop this further with buy-in from other additional organisations and especially as regards data from the Emergency Services, most notably Police Scotland as they hold key data. WSS added that they also look at drowning fatality incident reviews to identify contributory factors. There is a need for top level buy-in from all stakeholders;
- Police Scotland acknowledged that their approach to data-sharing can present barriers, but added that progress is being made in some areas (e.g. suicide data) and undertook to explore urgently what more can be done around water safety;
- HMCG advised that they are now issuing monthly reports to local authorities, which creates an open door to start communicating and spotting trends. A key aspect is that the reports cover all incidents rather than being limited to those with fatalities, which expands the scope for learning. Initial feedback has been good; and the intention is to develop the reports further so they move from a coastal focus to also take on inland waters.
- Intelligence now is identifying new trends and associated challenges, likely related to Covid and staycationing, around greater adoption of water activities, wild swimming, paddleboarding etc with new users and children featuring prominently. This intelligence suggests a need for work to highlight water risks e.g. when people are considering and actually buying equipment.
- Decluttering the landscape was noted by Albert Bruce (SFRS/WSS) as a necessary practical step, and he cited recent examples of collaborative groups being mobilised in W Dunbartonshire and in Argyll and Bute.

6. The Minister concluded that participants seem to agree on the importance of having as much accurate and up-to-date intelligence, shared timeously with as many key partners, as possible and noted **actions**:

- for Police Scotland to explore urgently and update the group on what steps will be taken to improve data-sharing;
- for all attendees to review and update the group on their approach to information gathering and sharing (including around actual incidents, both fatal and non-fatal), with a view to sharing data more collegiately and putting an agreed process in place for this data to be pulled together and shared in a real time and regular basis to facilitate mutual understanding of issues and improvements in practice, and also to review their resourcing of this work.

### **Awareness Raising**

7. The Minister noted that the previous discussion had illustrated how good intelligence can help identify particular targets for awareness-raising interventions (whether that be geographic locations, or demographic groups, or seasonal factors), as well as communicating messages more generally, and sought views on how to better raise awareness of the dangers presented by water. In discussion it emerged:

- SFRS have their own annual summer thematic plan and the Community Action Team go out each summer to talk to groups of children, but there could be merit in reviewing this and similar activities to check whether they need to change demographics;
- agreeing a fully co-ordinated approach across organisations could make the best of the available resource, but SFRS feel there is also a need (e.g. in WSS) for more resource and more support from key partners;
- an agreed, long-term communication strategy and consistent messaging is seen as important, as the impact on awareness could be heightened if the various organisations in diverse situations were giving the same consistent message. WSS are currently trying to develop proposals for partners for the 2022 season;
- the challenge of finding consistent messages to cover appropriately the diversity of reality was flagged, given they work closely with Scottish Swimming and are happy to collaborate with other potential partners – Scottish Water actively seek messaging and action to discourage all swimming and water activities in their own reservoirs. There is also a debate about what messaging is most effective e.g. whether shock tactics (as adopted in Wales) are helpful;
- it was noted that the implications of the Access Code need to be addressed, as this contributes to a situation in Scotland that differs markedly from England;
- the importance of the medium as well as the message was mentioned, understanding target groups and taking account of how they now access information, in order to ensure that the message is actually received (perhaps working with Young Scot, or social media influencers);

- there's a need raise awareness of the framework for consistent messaging that's been in place since 2019, and Carlene McAvoy commented that it now needs effort in delivery and targeting, taking on board too the opportunity presented by the UK-wide 'respect the water' campaign;
- SFRS endorsed a collaborative approach, stressing the need to engage with and support WSS with strategic sign-up for consistency and impact. In terms of message content, it was commented that fundamentally people need to be taught how to stay safe / float even if they can't swim, but there could also be value in working with retailers (e.g. Amazon) on messaging at the point of sale for water sport equipment;
- the Learn to Swim programme promotes swimming, but also includes more general coverage around water safety as a key element. The programme can be seen as part of the jigsaw to address the fact that 40% of young people are leaving school unable to swim;
- attention also needs to be paid to adults and to temporary visitors and those new to Scotland. It may be helpful to target the Further/Higher Education populations (as students from abroad won't necessarily know about Scottish waters conditions and e.g. the dangers of cold water shock);
- evidence was cited (e.g. from Scottish Water and from the Cramond initiative) that good, well-placed signage can have an effective deterrent impact and is perhaps something that could be extended quite swiftly. It was also observed that while it has an important role, signage is not always effective (as some fatalities occurred at sites where signs are already in place) and the volume of water in/around Scotland means that signs can't be at every potential danger point. It was also noted that signage should be appropriately targeted, given the impact of Access Code (i.e. people want to be in the water, so signs need to explain where and why swimming is discouraged);
- Michael Avril (WSS) added there is a concern that signage isn't right in certain areas. WSS are trying to work to ensure signage is appropriate and effective, based on audits and meets British standards.

8. The Minister concluded that there seemed to be agreement that awareness-raising must take place in diverse ways and places, but with a focus on impact through appropriate consistency and targeting, and with proper resourcing and cooperation. The Minister noted that this suggested an **action**:

- for WSS to update the group on progress with the signage audit, share any emerging lessons, and outline any assistance required;
- for all attendees to reflect on their existing activity around raising awareness of the dangers of water and all aspects of water safety, to identify options for improvement;
- for all attendees to reflect on how they might enhance the impact of awareness-raising activity, by engaging more closely with other organisations in general and by supporting WSS in particular.

## Skills Training

9. The Minister noted that the provision of swimming lessons had been a focus of some attention recently, but that drowning victims can be basic or even competent swimmers. So while she was interested to hear views on how to promote the learning of that particular life-skill, she would also be interested in views on the promotion of broader skills such as knowing when/how to float and life-saving techniques. It discussion it was noted that:

- changing circumstances (e.g. the growth of open water and wild swimming) can bring new concerns, and while Scottish Swimming is trying to address this through its membership the messages need to get to a wider population. It was noted that the demands of the pool are very different to the demands of open water, and swimmers need to be aware of that and of their own limitations;
- Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park (LLTTNP) has done some work with West Dunbartonshire Council on transitioning from safe pool environment to an outdoor environment, but such activity needs to be expanded bearing in mind that swimming skills are low in Scotland and that is especially true in areas of urban deprivation. With regard to dealing with some of the impact of the recent boom in paddle-boarding, LLTTNP is in a position to use byelaws and can also talk to different authorities to foster mutual learning, including the new National Visitor Management Group, which is looking at water safety;
- the feasibility and merits of having designated outdoor swimming locations with lessons was discussed. It was noted that this happens in England, while Welsh Water are rolling out accredited locations and venues. However, it was noted that while accredited sites are useful for the minority with clear plans and a safety ethos, many deaths are amongst runners and others who never intend to go in the water and didn't plan on that basis.
- only 8 beaches on the east coast have RNLI life guards in the summer, which is very small given the coastline of Scotland and population;

10. The Minister summarised that it appeared that the requisite skills would evolve as people's use of water evolved, but that core skills seemed to remain as being around floating and dealing with cold water shock, learning to swim and to do so within one's limitations and in accordance with circumstances. The Minister noted a range of views about the potential and limitations of designated sites for certain activities, and that discussion suggested a need for further reflection. She concluded that it would be useful as an **action**:

- for all attendees to review what core skills it would be useful for the population, and specific groups (e.g. new paddleboarders), to acquire, how those needs might best be identified and what role attendees can play in meeting them.

## Response

11. The Minister asked for views on what more can be done to ensure that the right resources are in the right place for responding to incidents and emergencies, including emergency service resources but also the provision of waterside lifebelts etc. In discussion the following points were made:

- SFRS try to ensure as far as possible that resources are appropriately located, but that predicting where they will be needed at any time is extremely challenging; resources are finite and cannot be everywhere. A starting point is that people need to understand how to alert any available resource as quickly as possible i.e. who to contact when someone falls into the water such as park ranger, lifeboat etc. Sadly, it is often the case that when people dial 999 it is too late due to the cold water or currents. Given the speed with which things can escalate and the time taken to mobilise resources, there is a duty to put prevention first and a responsibility to influence children and educate. People need to be influenced to get beyond “I thought the water looked safe” and consider what may be unseen;
- WSS noted a need to tackle confusion about who to call in an inland water crisis; Martin Blunden (SFRS) advised that he is already talking to Police and Ambulance counterparts on this topic.
- HMCG expressed concern that calls are generally put through to Police and SFRS first, whereas coastguard may be better placed (especially for coastal incident) – a case in point at Tentsmuir today, when a 12-yo child was in trouble but the coastguard weren’t alerted until after the ambulance was actually on the scene. Such delays can cost lives. 999 operators may not necessarily know the full picture, but it could help if location details were available automatically to operators. The coastguard adopted a system which removes the need for a panicking caller to provide location details and has been of great assistance – it may be difficult for larger organisations to adopt, but the payback in terms of rapid location identification should be considered. (While “what3words” app is favoured by some, it has limitations at the moment, especially for islands where it can be inaccurate.)
- HMCG also observed that Search and Rescue (SAR) liaison groups around the country are learning lessons on how to respond and acting on appropriate resource allocation locally, but national discussions are required across organisations to spread resources to best effect. However, it is not a static picture, as hotspots are not static.
- Albert Bruce (SFRS/WSS) commented that there is a fantastic opportunity to be proactive and to be in a better place next year than we are now on resource deployment and mobilisation, but it will take co-ordination.

12. The Minister welcomed the enthusiasm for collaboration and suggested that **actions:**

- for emergency responders, including coastguard, to progress discussions about the most effective collaborative approach to resource distribution, alert notification, rapid mobilisation and location identification, including automatic caller location technology;
- for all attendees to consider the effectiveness of their proactive and reactive preparations for responding to incidents.

## **Summary**

13. The Minister thanked everyone for their contributions and obvious concern. She added that this meeting cannot be a one-off and suggested that a follow-up take place in 4-6 weeks' time, to pick up on actions, to get to know what is changing, and further consider what things individually or with partners have been identified as weaknesses or opportunities and how they can be addressed. The Minister commented that this is not an exhaustive "to do" list and she is keen to seize the initiative together, and build momentum for sustained improvement.

14. The Minister concluded by advising that in light of public interest in this matter, she intended to issue a short, factual statement about the meeting in the morning and that an advance copy would be sent to all attendees.

## **Building Safer Communities August 2021**

