

Water Safety

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

Water safety is a significant issue for councils, and attracted media coverage over the summer due to a number of different incidents. The LGA is not currently a member of the National Water Safety Forum and has not worked with it in the past. The paper sets out the extent of drowning as an issue, the work of the Forum, recent LGA activity and proposes that the LGA work more closely with the Forum in future, detailing proposed activities. Chris Margetts from Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service, will attend the Board to talk about the work the Chief Fire Officers Association has been involved in so far around water safety and the work of the Forum.

Recommendation

That members endorse the actions proposed

Action

Officers to work with National Water Safety Forum to raise awareness of water safety issues, support its existing campaign, encourage councils to adopt best practice and include water safety on the agenda of the LGA's annual conference.

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Water Safety

Background

1. More people drown in the UK than die in fires at home - on average around 400 a year (excluding suicides).
2. LGA officers have undertaken preliminary work on how we might support improved water safety as a number of councils, such as Durham, have been running local water safety campaigns (in Durham's case 'Dying to be Cool') to reduce the number of deaths by drowning, and to help support Rother District Council following the drowning of five friends at Camber Sands on 25 August, after an earlier drowning at the same beach in July and drownings on the same beach in previous years.
3. While there is an ongoing debate around specific measures that can be used to reduce risks to the public at beaches, rivers, lakes, reservoirs and quarries, work to reduce water safety incidents will need to involve:
 - 3.1. a campaign to raise public awareness; and
 - 3.2. sharing best practice.
4. The National Water Safety Forum which brings together a range of organisations with an interest in and responsibilities for water safety has considerable expertise in various aspects of water safety, and the LGA will need to engage with the Forum on this agenda going forward.

Issues

Water Safety

5. One of the striking characteristics of data on accidental drownings in the UK is that the majority of victims in 2015 did not leave home on the day they died intending to go into water of significant depth. More people drown while out walking or running than while swimming.
6. Although most of those who drown can swim, over half the fatalities recorded for 2015 involved victims who either entered the water on the spur of the moment to assist an animal or person or to retrieve an object (35), entered accidentally while running, walking or cycling (70), or were playing beside water or paddling in shallows (26). Seven others died while angling. Other causes included recreational flying (1) and eight occupants of motor vehicles.
7. In contrast, relatively few fatalities involved activities traditionally regarded as high risk: jumping into water (7), swimming (24), and cliff climbing (1). Twelve people died working on water and 31 whilst engaging in water sports or on pleasure craft. Nine people drowned accidentally whilst having a bath.
8. 83 per cent of drownings involve men; a third involve alcohol. The 19-29 age group is most at risk.

9. Water safety is an issue which affects all areas. Only eight English counties had fewer than three drownings in 2015.
10. In considering a response from councils and the LGA to issues around water safety there are a range of factors to be taken into account including:
 - 10.1. Where does the balance of responsibility lie between central government, local partners, and voluntary sector groups when there is no body with statutory responsibility for water safety?
 - 10.2. Should the emphasis in improving water safety be on preventing people putting themselves at risk or investing in safety features at specific sites? For instance how effective can lifeguards be on long beaches with large numbers of visitors and a significant distance between high and low water marks or at inland locations which become unofficial pools on hot days?
 - 10.3. How much emphasis should there be on personal responsibility for water safety?
 - 10.4. How can we best educate the public about water safety? Are there specific groups within the community at whom educational messages need to be aimed?
 - 10.5. How should water safety measures be funded?
 - 10.6. What can the LGA do to support councils on this agenda? For example should it be looking to ensure best practice is effectively shared among councils?
 - 10.7. Should our work cover all water safety issues or just beach issues, and should it include cliff safety?

The National Water Safety Forum

11. The National Water Safety Forum (NWSF) is a UK-wide association of organisations that have interests in and responsibilities for water safety including sports governing bodies, rescue services, regulators, navigation and harbour authorities, local government, utilities, and other representative groups. The Forum works in partnership with Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents who provide technical and administrative support. The Chief Fire Officers' Association is a member of the NWSF, as are some 80 local authorities.
12. The Forum was established in 2005 to provide a single point of contact for water safety advice, expertise and information, which could act as a single point of contact for Government departments through a Government Interdepartmental Group on water safety.
13. The Forum's work is divided between six specialist advisory groups covering: beaches; inland water; the sea; swimming; water sports and information/research, all report to a coordinating committee.
14. The Forum has produced the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy 2016-26, which aims to reduce drownings by 50 per cent by 2026. Launched in February 2016, the strategy was endorsed by the then Transport Minister Robert Goodwill MP.

15. The Strategy's initial three-year phase will address the following targets:

- 15.1. 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.
- 15.2. Every community with water risks should have a community-level risk assessment and water safety plan.
- 15.3. To better understand water-related self-harm.
- 15.4. Increase awareness of everyday risks in, on and around the water.
- 15.5. All recreational activity organisations should have a clear strategic risk assessment and plans that address key risks.

16. The NWSF also provides the Water Incident Database (WAID) - a web-based database designed to provide comprehensive information on risks from water based activities, from which the figures in paragraphs 5-7 above are taken. More work is required to improve its data sources and the NWSF would like the LGA to encourage councils to share data.

17. Chris Margetts from the Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service will be attending the Board to talk about the issue of water safety and the work of the NWSF.

LGA Activity

18. The LGA has offered Rother District Council support in its response to the drownings in August and an LGA representative attended a working group set up by the council to look at beach safety issues. Rother District Council have asked the LGA for support in helping to secure a higher profile national campaign on water safety.

19. In light of the work by the NWSF and its strategy the LGA would be best placed to support our wider membership through sharing of existing good practice. Officers have asked members of the Coastal Special Interest Group for examples of best practice to populate a page on the LGA website, while campaigns officers are seeking potential partners with a view to lobbying the government to run a water safety awareness campaign next year.

20. A number of Coastal SIG members have responded to the LGA's request. There is general agreement that education – both in terms of improving swimming rates and ability and raising awareness of the risks – is a priority.

21. While these responses support the idea of campaigning to raise awareness around water safety, some make the point that there are existing campaigns, such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's (RNLI) Respect the Water and that it would be better to lend our support to these rather than start a fresh campaign.

22. Respondents report difficulties arising from ignorance of basic water safety for example one council officer was approached by a member of the public asking 'where's the water gone?' when the tide went out. Given that being cut off by the tide is a common cause of beach safety incidents, this is worrying.

23. Councils also report difficulties arising from visitors who are unaware of the specific risks of a location.
24. Anecdotally, some suggest that certain ethnic and cultural groups may be at particular risk, in part because they may enter the sea fully-clothed. However, there is a lack of hard evidence to establish whether this is the case.
25. It is therefore proposed that rather than launch its own campaign, the LGA:
- 25.1. Work with the NWSF and its members, including RNLI, to support existing campaigns and educational work and to support the objectives set out in paragraph 15 above, possibly including a series of workshops for councils;
 - 25.2. Continue to seek examples of water safety best practice and to publicise these on the LGA website;
 - 25.3. Work to encourage councils to share data for inclusion on WAID and to consider joining the National Water Safety Forum;
 - 25.4. Encourage councils to have a community-level risk assessment and water safety plan and to in turn encourage local recreational activity organisations to have a clear strategic risk assessment and plans that address key risks; and
 - 25.5. Make the case for a session on water safety at the LGA's 2017 annual conference.
 - 25.6. Work with NWSF and other partners to encourage central government to do more to raise awareness of water safety issues

Next steps

26. Members are asked to endorse the proposals in paragraph 25.
27. Members may also wish to remind officers in their authorities to send any relevant examples of best practice to Charles Loft..

Financial Implications

28. None.