

Improving the swimming and life-saving skills of children provided through schools

House of Lords

6 March 2019



KEY MESSAGES

- Water safety is a significant concern for councils and the LGA has called on government to do more to raise awareness of water safety issues.
- In addition to improving swimming rates, there needs to be a greater emphasis in the school curriculum on water safety and drowning prevention (for both sea and in-land water).
- We have called for swimming and classroom lessons to include messages around cold water shock as well as highlighting the dangers of tombstoning (this is where people jump or dive from height into water). Swimming and classroom lessons should be part of a wider campaign to raise public awareness about water safety.
- The Government should take advantage of councils' position in the community in order to give them a clear and strategic role in school improvement and holding schools to account for education standards. Councils know their local schools best and are uniquely placed to offer up to date local knowledge. Local government must be empowered to help all schools improve where necessary, including academies and free schools.
- However, even with changes to the curriculum, the pressure on local swimming pools poses a risk to improving water safety. Data from Sport England's 'Swim Group' shows that 72 per cent of primary schools use publicly owned swimming facilities for their swimming activity,ⁱ but access can be compromised as a result of issues regarding cost, availability and transport.
- It is very expensive for councils to provide and maintain swimming pools, due to the need to heat them, and many old swimming pools were not designed effectively. New and improved designs are available and more cost effective, but many councils lack access to the finance to replace existing facilities with provision that meets the needs of their communities.
- Councils are just about managing to keep leisure facilities running but in many cases, these facilities are coming to the end of their lifespan. In 2017, we highlighted figures that showed that 60 per cent of swimming pools are now more than 20 years old.ⁱⁱ
- Our new analysis shows that 838 local authority pools and 591 swimming pools situated on education sites have had no refurbishment since the year 2000.
- We are calling for Sport England's facilities fund to be increased tenfold to ensure that councils can provide the right offer for their communities.

Briefing

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Water safety is a significant concern for councils with more people drowning in the UK than dying in fires at home. In 2017, 255ⁱⁱⁱ people lost their lives in accidental drownings. One of the striking characteristics of data on accidental drownings in the UK is that the majority of victims 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.

Although most of those who drown can swim, over half of the fatalities (excluding suicide) recorded for 2017^{iv} involved victims who either entered the water on the spur of the moment to assist an animal or person or to retrieve an object, entered accidentally while running, walking or cycling, or were playing beside water or paddling in shallows. These statistics also show that 86 per cent of drownings involve men; and a third involve alcohol. The 19-29 age group is most at risk. Water safety is an issue which affects most areas.

Councils' role in water safety

Specific concerns about water safety, and the risk of drowning will vary from authority to authority given the differing geographical, social and cultural differences across the country.

We are committed to raising awareness of the issues surrounding water safety and its potential impact on all areas and we encourage councils to have a community-level risk assessment and water safety plan as well as encouraging local recreational activity organisations to have a clear strategic risk assessment and plans that address key risks.

We have created a [water safety toolkit](#) to support councils who are at the start of their journey to create a water safety partnership.

Importance of education

The LGA works alongside the National Water Safety Forum (NWSF), which brings together a range of organisations with an interest in, and responsibilities for, water safety. 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, one of the Strategy's targets is 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.

We called for swimming and classroom lessons to include messages around cold water shock as well as highlighting the dangers of tombstoning (where people jump or dive from height into water). We have also argued that government should do more to raise awareness of water safety issues more generally so that the public are aware of the risks.

ⁱ <https://www.swimming.org/swimengland/swim-group/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/leisure-centres-could-be-forced-close-without-government-investment>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://nationalwatersafety.org.uk/waid/reports-and-data/> WAID fatality information for 2017

^{iv} <https://nationalwatersafety.org.uk/waid/reports-and-data/> WAID fatality information for 2017