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1 in 3: a stark warning for school swimming

The ASA published its manifesto for school swimming, winning the support of politicians and securing plenty of press attention. *The Leisure Review* takes a look behind the headline figures to see what it might mean for the sport, leisure and culture sector.

After a dark and torrential spring, the first spell of hot weather of the summer brought relief and danger. Among the stories of a UK sweltering in seasonal temperatures, the press and news bulletins also reported several drownings. One Saturday in mid May brought two separate cases, one involving a boy drowned in the Thames after jumping from a bridge and another in which a young man drowned in the sea attempting to rescue two children on an inflatable a few metres from the shore. Both incidents served to throw the message of the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) manifesto for school swimming into sharp relief.

Launched only a couple of weeks earlier at the start of May with a full parliamentary reception, the ASA document highlighted the failings of primary school learn-to-swim programmes and the risks that such failings represent. The headline statistics from the research that underpinned the 2012 School Swimming Census and Manifesto revealed that “an astonishing one in three children are leaving primary school unable to swim”. This, the document reasons, means that some 200,000 pupils leave primary school each year as non-swimmers, which in turn would suggest that “without action, this could amount to two million non-swimmers over the next ten years”. The research also showed that 40% of non-swimmers had never been offered swimming lessons and highlighted the role of parents in the learn-to-swim process, noting that one in six parents never take their children swimming. The six-point plan for school swimming at the heart of the manifesto document called for: every child learning to swim in primary school; improved training for teachers; better monitoring by Ofsted; swimming as a school budget priority; support at secondary school; and additional support to help schools keep pools open.

From a public relations perspective the manifesto hit the mark, capturing plenty of column inches and broadcast minutes, but, as John Glenn, the ASA’s head of youth and community, explained to *The Leisure Review*, there are numerous issues for school swimming beyond the stark headline and the neat statistic. The first point was that the ASA is confident that the figures within the research are robust. Although the raw data has not been published, the statistics are based on a freedom of information request to local authorities that resulted in some 35 responses. According to Glenn, these responses equate to details of some 2,500 primary schools, which in turn represent some 14% of the national total.

The definition of a non-swimmer is, of course, central to any discussion of learn-to-swim programmes and water safety, and in this case the indicator of competence was attainment of key stage 2, which requires pupils to be able to swim 25m using a recognised stroke. Glenn confirmed that this ruled out those able to swim less than 25m but he stressed that this was a standard understanding of what constitutes a swimmer. It seems that no specific research has been done on how many pupils leave secondary school as non-swimmers by this definition but among adults the proportion of non-swimmers is generally understood to be 20%.

“We’re confident that if you don’t learn at primary school then as a teenager it becomes more and more difficult to step across that threshold into swimming lessons,” Glenn said. He conceded that the figure of 2 million non-swimmers over ten years depends upon an assumption that primary-school leavers will not learn to swim but countered with the 200,000 non-swimmers per annum quoted in the document being a conservative estimate. “Every child should be learning at primary school,” he said. “To some extent that’s our one bite at the cherry. In Manchester 54% of children that come to swimming lessons have never been to

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One of the manifesto's figures is notable for what it implies rather than what it states. If 40% of non-swimmers have never been offered swimming lessons one is invited to infer that 60% of non-swimmers have been offered lessons but remain non-swimmers. Glenn's response to the question of why this might be the case was pointed: "Do you want a list?"

The starting point is frequency. Some schools are able to offer six 30-minute lessons but the key stage 2 recommendation is 24 hours of study. Some of that might be classroom-based activity but one might equally say that it represents 48 30-minute lessons. "Getting someone from beginner to swimmer in 48 lessons," Glenn laughed. "I'd put my house on that." Time within the curriculum is also high on the list. A half-hour lesson can take two and a half hours out of the school day but the ASA encourages schools to be a bit smarter with their use of time, including taking two classes at a time, using the journey time or using the pool as a wet classroom for other subjects. Prioritisation within the curriculum is another issue, particularly when there is pressure on academic subjects, and some teachers are simply not comfortable with the task of leading swimming lessons, not a complete surprise when their training includes just six hours of physical education in total; the ASA are calling for an additional six hours within teacher training dedicated to swimming. Also on the list are parents – those who cannot swim tend to have children who do not swim – and issues relating to socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

The context of the ASA manifesto for school swimming is provided not by occasional headlines that highlight specific incidents but by the Water Incident Database (known colloquially as WAID) published by the National Water Safety Forum. The most recent document was published in February 2012 and uses the 2010 data set, recording all water-related fatalities. In 2010 a total of 420 people died in water-related incidents, comprising 385 accidental deaths and 35 deaths by natural causes. Of these accidental deaths 31 occurred while engaged in activities under the heading of "swimming" and 57 involved the 0 to 19 age group.

In its own reports on drowning RoSPA, which provides administrative and technical support for the National Water Safety Forum, draws stark conclusions from its caseload: "Young people who drown are often victims of their own misjudgement of their swimming ability... Figures show that more than half of those who drowned could in fact swim."

The Swimming Teachers' Association (STA) welcomed the manifesto, commenting: "The findings of the research are not surprising. We've all known for a long, long while that there are problems with school swimming with a number of contributing reasons, mainly cost, which are mainly transport costs, education and curriculum priorities, teacher training, pool access, etc. This is why the government introduced year six top-up swimming some five years ago, which was unfortunately stopped last year. Anything that can be done now to pro-actively support school swimming is welcomed. However, it's difficult to respond fully on the report as it does not give detailed information about the research; the results will depend on which area of the country you live."

The STA was also clear that in the interests of water safety the definition of a non-swimmer should be robust: "The government's minimum requirement is 25m but STA work to international standards – the IFSTA – where the minimum criterion is actually higher than 25m. STA believe that struggling to swim 25m in a warm pool in a swimming costume does not make a child safe." Recent incidents and the WAID publication would seem to support this conclusion.

On the message boards leisure professionals have offered their own views and suggestions. Some note the cancellation of the top-up swimming initiative when funding for school sports partnerships was cut. Others point to the example of New York City, which constructs temporary pools in the summer to provide intensive learn-to-swim and water safety programmes, and some suggest that swimming should be moved from primary schools to nursery and reception classes on the basis that it is never too early to learn. As one leisure professional noted, "Everyone seems to have forgotten the basics and why we have invested money in swimming pools for the last 150 years."

Politicians from both houses and all parties were on hand at the launch of the ASA manifesto to lend their support to the overall aims of promoting swimming in schools but the extent to which this translates into positive action and financial support will remain to be seen. It is an unfortunate truth that the

judgement of political success will be found in the pages of the WAID.

Download the ASA-Kellogg's 2012 School Swimming Census and Manifesto [pdf]

The National Water Safety Forum can be found online at www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk The Water Incident Database can be accessed from this site by following the links for 'professionals'.

RoSPA drowning statistics can be found on the RoSPA website at www.rospa.com

A number of discussions of the issues raised by the ASA manifesto can be found on LinkedIn, with perhaps the most interesting found via the Sport, Leisure and Culture Consultancy discussion group.

The Leisure Review, June 2012

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