

Water Safety in Grim Focus

While the strides made to successfully reduce deaths on Irish roads have been justly lauded and reported upon, the level of fatalities on our waterways, lakes and other water sources remains far too high. And this issue was tragically highlighted on Thursday last following the deaths of Jack Kenneally and Shay Moloney at a quarry lake at Knockanean near Ennis in County Clare.

Commenting in the wake of the tragedy, Rural and Community Development Minister Michael Ring stated: "It is heart breaking that the tragic drownings in County Clare once again highlight the need for us to foster a culture that encourages safer attitudes and behaviours in all those who live, work and play on or near water in Ireland."

The innocence, indeed fearlessness of youth, doesn't lend itself to the forbearance that comes with the benefit of middle and older age, and such avoidable loss of life cannot pass without considered and sensitive comment.



To be blunt: quarry water should never be swum in. This region has seen some experience of fatalities in quarry water, and, it should be stressed, such deaths have not been exclusively adolescent, which raises the issue Minister Ring referenced in his statement: the need to increase public awareness of water safety.

On far too regular a basis, we see youngsters in Tramore diving and jumping from high rocks, sometimes into shallow water, taking unnecessary risks. This is despite the preponderance of safe and supervised swimming areas along the Waterford coast. Such guidance and sound advice should of course start at home with parents and guardians, but the world being what it is, such advice sometimes falls on deaf, adolescent ears. And that's why Minister Ring is correct in his call for a change in our water safety culture, given that in 2016, 123 people in Ireland lost their lives through drowning.

Minister Ring, in conjunction with Irish Water Safety (IWS) recently launched the National Drowning Prevention Strategy which aims to halve the number of drownings by 2027.

"The focus needs to be on raising awareness of the dangers of our waters, through education, training, intervention and action," he stated,

"With effort and commitment from everyone, this 10-year strategy can help us to halve the amount of drownings in our waters. This goal is achievable and implementation of the actions will go some way to preventing such tragedies as the one in Clare (on Thursday last)."

Perhaps the time has come for a tightening of the laws on swimming in dangerous and typically unsupervised areas?

Where signed warnings are in place, it would of course make things easier for all if such notices were adhered to, but where such warnings are not working, heavier sanctions must be applied. Should parents suffer a legal penalty in such instances?

Said Michael Ring: "We have a wonderful natural environment here in Ireland and we must know how to enjoy it safely and sensibly. I would also urge anyone to report damaged or missing safety equipment such as ringbuoys."

Needless tragedy can be avoided with greater individual responsibility. But the time may have come to flex greater statutory muscle if we're to reduce fatalities on all our waterways.