THE BIG BLUE

Joanne Milne-Rowe *explains why water safety starts with perimeter access control and why coded locks provide convenience and control*

No summer goes by in the UK without the inevitable heatwave headlines and favourable comparisons between our own cities and those better known for scorching temperatures. But behind the excitement are some altogether darker stories. Recent figures from the National Water Safety Forum reveal that in 2024, 193 people died in the UK through accidental drowning. In fact, the UK typically sees around 400 fatalities each year from accidental drowning. Many people also suffer the negative consequences of near-drowning, a major cause of hypoxic brain injury, which can be severe and permanent.

While each case is a personal tragedy, such incidents can result in major repercussions for the businesses and organisations responsible for pools and other water hazards. Many of the UK's water-related incidents are sustained in leisure facilities including pools and in public spaces such as parks, lakes or canals that are meant to be off-limits. This might be because swimming is known to be unsafe, there are no lifesavers available or simply because the site is closed overnight or during the off-season.

The Health and Safety at Work Act (HaSaWA) makes the organisations that own and operate pools, lakes or other bodies of water responsible for taking appropriate action to ensure their safety. That means that councils, businesses and charities must take steps to mitigate reasonably foreseeable risks such as drowning, through site-specific risk-assessments and measures such as signage, supervision, life-guarding and effective access control.

The penalties for failing to do so are severe, with the Health and Safety Executive able to prosecute a breach of these duties even when they don't result in an accident. When they do, the reputational and financial damage can be significant.

Perhaps the single most effective measure duty holders can take to prevent accidents in bodies of water is to prevent people having access. Research shows that well over a third of people who drown never intended to enter the water; effective fencing and signage can provide the necessary warning and protection. Even when it doesn't prevent access, it can help protect the landowner from prosecution and reputational damage.

It's crucial that solutions to prevent access to dangerous bodies of water are fit for purpose. Not only to prevent accidents, but to protect organisations and duty holders from the legal and reputational risks. This consideration also extends to the locks controlling access.

No matter how effective the fencing around water, authorised employees and visitors still need access. Gates and doors need to be robust yet accessible to the right people. Achieving this means having a suitable locking solution in place. At the most simple level, latching gates offer some control over entry. Because they are affordable and straightforward, they're a simple replacement when an existing access control solution breaks. But while they might discourage young children from accessing, say, a pool, they're not a suitable means to prevent adults accessing potentially dangerous water – or other off-limits areas. They can fit badly, wear out quickly and won't stop determined adults, who can simply reach over and unlatch them.

In some instances, organisations might be equally focused on preventing access to a facility *from* a body of water. For example, treatment works, manufacturing plants or other sensitive sites may all be situated next to rivers, lakes or the sea and they may require barriers and gates to prevent unauthorised access by boat. In these cases, latches and other casual solutions are simply not fit for purpose.

It's essential to prevent unauthorised access to pools and other dangerous water with locked gates, appropriately designed for the level of risk. Most obviously, locks prevent members of the public from opening gates and other access doors. Just as importantly for organisations with duties under the HaSaWA, coded locks can prevent access by staff members without the appropriate skills or training – for example helping ensure statutory requirements for lifeguarding are met.

Not all locks are created equal, however, and it's important to choose those appropriately designed for the job. While gates can be locked with padlocks or chains, these must be manually refitted and locked after someone has passed through to maintain the perimeter. Yet workers can be distracted or may choose not to lock up if they're not expecting to be on-site for long. For this reason, purpose-designed coded door and gate locks that engage and re-lock automatically as the entrance is closed provide better, more reliable access control.

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CODED LOCKS GRANT EMERGENCY ACCESS TO A FACILITY WITHOUT NEEDING TO BE ONSITE

Where a lock is installed outside, it should be weatherproofed to avoid either seizing or failing when exposed to the elements. And where locks are used in high-traffic areas such as the entrance to water sports facilities, harbours or shared pools, they must be engineered and built to withstand frequent use without failing. All locks need periodic inspection and maintenance to ensure they continue working as designed – something that must be factored into security or health and safety policies.

When it comes to access control, organisations can choose from two main types of perimeter lock: a standard lock with a key or a keyless coded lock. Either is better than a latch, but coded locks have several practical and safety advantages across a number of settings.

Standard locks carry the risk that their keys are prone to being lost, which is an inconvenience and a risk – especially if the key is subsequently copied. In public areas, lost keys mean anyone who finds them now has access to the water hazard. And if it's a generic or universal key, several locks within a facility would need to be replaced to maintain the integrity of the access control. That's time-consuming and can be very expensive.

Coded locks eliminate the risk of left or lost keys. They ensure that only those people with the relevant code have access to a controlled area, helping organisations extend access only to appropriate staff or users. Coded locks save time and money that would otherwise be wasted on copying or replacing keys. Codes are easily changed when needed and if they're forgotten, managers or facilities managers can use override keys to get access and reset the code.

Locks operated by a code can also improve the lives of facilities, pool and grounds managers beyond the perimeter of any water hazard. Wherever a key lock would be appropriate, a coded lock can be used instead, meaning even more savings in time, money and effort. Main entrances can be more easily managed with a coded lock, and so too can facilities such as boat houses, storage areas or even changing room lockers. In fact all other parts of the facility, like playgrounds, offices or plant access doors, can benefit from the use of coded locks over traditional key locks. And if they can be centrally managed, using an access control management system that allocates specific codes to specific individuals, then the overall access control profile of the facility can

be greatly improved by switching to this more convenient locking method.

A further advantage of coded locks is that they provide scope for organisations to grant emergency access to a facility without needing to be onsite. Take the example of a local authority, responsible for several deepwater sites spread across a large and remote area. Should emergency services need urgent access in the event of an accident, they can be given access via the coded lock, instead of having to either wait for the keyholder or gain entry by force.

GATES AND DOORS NEED TO BE ROBUST YET ACCESSIBLE TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE

The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy rightly places the focus on education as a central tool for increasing awareness of water dangers and helping children in particular learn what to do in and around water. Additionally, campaigns such as Respect the Water and Float to Live convey vital advice on what to do if you find yourself in trouble in the water or you see somebody else who is.

It's not possible to fence off all the UK's open water, with the sea, rivers and canals in particular all requiring care from visitors and the supervision of those less able to protect themselves from danger. However, facilities and pool managers can all help prevent accidents and incidents by being aware of their duties under the Health and Safety at Work Act. In particular, organisations must conduct appropriate risk assessments and ensure they have taken appropriate measures to warn users of dangers, provide protection through lifesaving or lifeguarding measures and prevent access to water when necessary. Here, locks can play a crucial role in controlling access to all hazardous areas and reducing unauthorised access and the risk of accidents throughout the organisation's estate.

By choosing coded locks, businesses, local authorities and other duty holders can help prevent tragedy, while protecting themselves from litigation and reputational damage. At the same time, they can reduce the costs and hassle of managing multiple keyed locks and gain the control and flexibility that only coded locks can offer ●

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Picture credit: Codelocks