

**Cllr Jim Millard:** Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond with me, your host, Jim Millard. As we approach the summer holidays, it's important to raise awareness, particularly amongst younger residents, of the dangers of the River Thames. It's a beautiful part of the borough, of course, but it's important to treat it with respect and I'm very pleased to be joined today by the Borough Commander of London Fire Brigade, Robert Davis, to discuss water safety in Richmond upon Thames. London Fire Brigade is working with Richmond Council to familiarise residents with water safety guidance, with the aim of reducing the numbers of young people engaging in dangerous behaviours, so to tell us more about this and without further ado, I'm very pleased to say a very warm welcome, Robert to Talk Richmond. Hello.

**Robert Davies, Borough Commander, London Fire Brigade:** Good morning, Councillor Millard, how are you today?

**Cllr Millard:** I'm very well. How are you?

**Robert Davies:** Yes, good. Thank you very much.

**Cllr Millard:** You're joining me, I can hear from Twickenham Fire station, is that right?

**Robert Davies:** I am, yes. That's where my office is based, actually within the station. So I've got firefighters all around me, not actually in the office, but I can see them now, outside in the Bay, working away.

**Cllr Millard:** Excellent. Well, thanks for taking the time to join us. This is obviously a very important piece of work and I understand you've created with Richmond Council a water safety video, is that right?

**Robert Davies:** We have, yes. So an essential part of my job really is looking at the risks within the borough and to work to mitigate that risk. We've done some real good partnership working not only with the leaders of the Council, but also our partners in the RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) and Met Police. Part of that proactive piece of work that we've done in the run up to the summer was to make a safety video that's had some really great traction across social media.

**Cllr Millard:** Excellent, excellent. And is that available, can listeners view that video?

**Robert Davies:** We can, yes. So it's on my Twitter (X) feed. It's also on Richmond

Council's website. So periodically, especially in the run up to the good weather – and it's a little bit hit and miss as you know at the moment, one minute we're sunny and next minute it's raining – but we try to up that exposure. So I always put the link on to Richmond's X feed.

**Cllr Millard:** Well, fantastic. And we'll make sure the show notes include a link as well. This is an audio format of course, we're in a podcast so can you summarise what the advice is in that video for those listening?

**Robert Davies:** It was based around the reaction to a fatal incident in 2022. Richmond Council, along with myself, used some data and local knowledge to install some safety equipment in and around the rivers. So just to give you a little bit of a taste of our risk, we own the longest stretch of the River Thames in any borough in London, so just over 22 1/2 miles and we cover both sides of the River Thames. Also, tidal and non-tidal, so it's a real risk for us and in response to this, we've put up 17 throw line boards. Again, we're leading the way of any borough of London. No other borough has that amount. Essentially it's an emergency piece of equipment that tells the caller what to do in an emergency. It also holds a vital lifesaving equipment in the way of a throw line. So it's a board on the riverbank that has a safe on it, you call 999 and that releases the code. It also tells the emergency services exactly where you are, so we mobilise all blue light partners: RNLI, Met Police, LAS (London Ambulance Service), London Fire Brigade and also the control operator will stay on the line with the person making the call and talk them through how to affect the rescue.

**Cllr Millard:** Well, that's obviously brilliant. And Robert, I wonder if I could ask more, you've set out a bit about what we're doing in partnership to respond to this risk, but can I ask more about what the risk is? Obviously some young people are tempted at this time of year to jump into the river. What is the difference, to put it in simple terms, between swimming in a swimming pool versus jumping into open water like that?

**Robert Davies:** OK, so there's many risks that the Thames offers and some of them are not starkly apparent. So I think the biggest difference for me is that pools have trained lifeguards. Pools don't have tides. They don't have differences in temperature. So what probably most of our listeners wouldn't be aware of is - because the Thames is a moving body of water and also carries a bit of debris in it and a bit of algae - what will happen is the top around 60 centimetres of water will be hugely different in temperature to the bottom to underneath the 60 centimetres. It can be a difference of 10 degrees.

**Cllr Millard:** Right.

**Robert Davies:** So if you enter the water safely, although it's still cold and you won't be feeling the effects of what we call 'cold water shock'. If you penetrate water further than that 60 degrees, that's when the shock really gets hold of you. You could have a gasp effect and you take in water, but essentially what will be happening slowly – and some people don't feel it immediately – is that the warm, oxygenated blood will retract from your muscles, from your leg muscles and from your arm muscles, into the essential core to try and keep you warm. It's a survival technique that the body has. What we generally see then is people thrashing on the water and unfortunately, most people can't stay on the surface, so go down again and the shock gets you again and can have obviously fatal subsequent effects.

**Cllr Millard:** We've seen that in this past and it is absolutely heartbreaking and it's so tragic and I think that's important what you're pointing out. I think we're doing quite well at getting the message out about 'cold water shock' and it's interesting. I think what you highlight in there that we can almost get our heads around is that if you jump off a bridge, you don't know what you're jumping into and you could very likely not have judged the temperature and you will get 'cold water shock'. But you're also saying if you enter from the bank and start swimming across the river, you might think you're doing all right but halfway through 'cold water shock' can take hold as you get into deeper water and we've also seen that have tragic consequences. It's not just jumping in.

**Robert Davies:** Only last year we had that exact thing happen. Part of our educational piece and part of our engagement with the communities that we reach out to is exactly that: do not attempt to swim across the River Thames because if you do get in trouble halfway across you're in no man's land, so we would always advise people to use the Thames respectfully. It's a lovely stretch of the river that we have. But use it safely and try and swim within your depth and along length ways of the river in an area that is known. We do not only have 'cold water shock' and the underwater tidal system, you've got floating debris that can move around unseen. There's lots of lots of dangers associated with the River Thames.

**Cllr Millard:** Yes, indeed. In fact, that was my next question: how can people stay safe and safely enjoy the river?

**Robert Davies:** There are groups that do open water swimming, so they're available on social media. Treat the water respectfully, don't swim around weirs, bridges,

anything like that. So anything that we introduce to the water will have an effect on the water and on the tide itself. So just by introducing a current, we're massively changing the aspects and the dynamics of open water swimming. So choose your area of swimming safely. Always do it within your own depth and make sure that you're with competent swimmers.

**Cllr Millard:** That makes a lot of sense, and I suppose you can enjoy the river in other ways.

**Robert Davies:** Absolutely yes. So we have paddle boarders, canoeists. People that go out on pleasure boats. We are seeing a massive increase now in people using derivatives and that's another really good point - the more traffic that we have on the river, the more danger there is to swimmers. So it's even more important to pick your spot and and be cautious.

**Cllr Millard:** Absolutely, absolutely. So are you able to tell us what people can do to help? You've touched on this a bit when you were talking about the network of things that have been set up. What can people do to help - this is the key question - if they see someone in trouble on the River Thames?

**Robert Davies:** As I mentioned before, we have 17 throw line boards down the River Thames and there are other pieces of life saving equipment like life buoys etcetera. My advice would be – if unfortunately somebody gets into trouble - the RNLI do this great campaign called 'Float to Live' and that is to tell the person to relax, lie on their back with just with their ears submerged. Concentrate their breathing and spread their arms and legs. If people do that and relax, they can remain afloat. Keep talking to them. If you can get something to them, that's all well and good. Look out for one of our throw lines, but most importantly dial 999 and the emergency services. We have an RNLI station in Teddington and they're a fantastic crew. They get on the water very, very quickly and they can rapidly respond. London Fire Brigade will also respond at the same time as we are blue light partners. One piece of equipment that we are trialing at the moment, that your listeners might be interested in, is a what's called a REACH poll. It's a new piece of equipment up to 17 metres long made out of carbon fibre and it has all different connections that we can put on it to affect a rescue on someone. So even if someone is unconscious in the water, we can affect a rescue effectively using this new trial piece of equipment.

**Cllr Millard:** Is that something you carry on your fire engines?

**Robert Davies:** Yes, yes. So it's carried on the front-line fire engines, not only in our

borough, but we've actually pushed this out to our partners in Hounslow and Kingston. So the boroughs either side of us also have this piece of equipment.

**Cllr Millard:** Excellent. Excellent. Whilst the other boroughs obviously adjoin the river, we have an even more focused stewardship of the river because we're the only London borough that the river runs through the middle of and that defines a lot of aspects of the borough and how seriously we take water safety.

So I before we came on air, you briefly mentioned something else to do with water safety.

**Robert Davies:** Yeah. So London Fire Brigade's Water Safety Centre of Excellence opened yesterday. We had ourselves and we also had Councillor Roberts, Leader of the Council, Mike Jackson, the Chief Executive, along with Hierarchy of London Fire Brigade, Met Police, etcetera and even the Deputy Mayor of London Jules Pipe attended. So really exciting day, very busy. We showcased our new safety demonstration, where we target young males, generally at teenage age. The reason why we do that is because our data tells us that that is our target audience. That's our biggest risk. So out of the unfortunate deaths that we've had in and around the River Thames, certainly within this borough, a majority of them are unfortunately young teenage boys. So we had a school from a neighbouring borough come to us, we had a big water safety input to them. We've done a demonstration with the water safety demonstrator which essentially shows them the risks visually. And then we did some proline training with our partners in the RNLI. We had some great media coverage from the BBC and Rags Martel from ITV. So we've got some really good coverage and it's great that we're getting that and getting the word out.

**Cllr Millard:** Fantastic. And this is another opportunity to add to that, which is great, and demonstrate more about the tank that I'm hearing about.

**Robert Davies:** It is, yes, so.

**Cllr Millard:** So can you tell us more about it?

**Robert Davies:** OK. So essentially it's a simulation of a stretch of river so we can put currents in it. We can simulate weirs, strainers. So down in Sunbury we have a huge Thames Water plant that that intakes water from the Thames to process and to supply the reservoirs. Obviously the draw on that strainer is huge. So we have thousands and thousands of gallons of water being drawn in from the River Thames. That has an effect on the river, so that that causes a massive tidal flow and the pressure that that will cause in the water, if you are close to it, can be up to 400

tonnes. Now I'm quite fit. I've been a firefighter for nearly 27 years. I couldn't lift 400 tonne. Not too sure about yourself, Jim.

**Cllr Millard:** No, not anymore. Now I'm getting on a bit.

**Robert Davies:** But the danger of that, we can demonstrate that with our simulator, is that it that pull you in and trap you underneath the water, having devastating effects obviously.

We can show people visually what a stanchion of a bridge does to water. So it will be calm on one side but if you come too close to the stanchion that's in the water, the current and the speed of the water changes dramatically and that can be up to five times quicker. So all of a sudden – you're canoeing or swimming around – you get too close and you'll get pulled across and through the bridge, and then you end up in a place several 100 metres down the river and away from the other people that you were swimming with or canoeing with. So it's a visual demonstration of what we associate as 'hydrophenomenon' or risks within the River Thames.

**Cllr Millard:** That's amazing. That sounds like an amazing piece of technology. And what impact do you think it will have for young people?

**Robert Davies:** So the feedback that we're having has been really, really positive. I've stood in certain schools in the borough and tried to do a talk around risks and explain 'hydrophenomenon' and risk. And it's really difficult to get that message across but when we use that talk and that engagement alongside the simulator, you can actually see that light bulb moment where they actually get it and we can demonstrate even the strong swimmers can get pulled back by the current several times. And we talk about fatigue, even for those children that consider themselves to be strong swimmers. So that visual demonstration is really the key to getting our message across.

**Cllr Millard:** So in addition to you continuing with going out to schools as you described it, are you bringing groups of students to come to the fire station?

**Robert Davies:** Yes. So we will be targeting schools, scout groups etcetera, etcetera and also it's a real partnership with our RNLi partners. What I've done is I've opened up to them as well. So they are free to use that at any time. So it's a real borough asset for any of our partners to target groups to bring them into the station and to demonstrate the risks that we have.

**Cllr Millard:** Fantastic. And you know, if anyone's listening, whether you're part of a

school or any organisation that works with young people, I'm assuming you'd be very pleased to hear from them if they'd like to arrange something with you.

**Robert Davies:** Absolutely it would. Yes, they can contact me via e-mail or you can go on to London Fire Brigade's website. My contact details are in there. There's a borough profile. There's also a risk management plan. So you can see exactly what I'm doing in and around the borough in terms of risks. And the demonstrator is on there. There's a visual of the demonstrator on there. But all my contact details are on there. Feel free to contact me. We can book in and arrange a visit. I'd be more than happy to facilitate that, Jim.

**Cllr Millard:** Well, that sounds really amazing. Thanks, Robert. And do you have any other resources to teach residents about water safety?

**Robert Davies:** Yes. So as I say the room that we've created is really just dedicated to the big risk that is the River Thames. So we have a demo board on the wall inside the room where we can simulate somebody getting into trouble, somebody calling the emergency services, receiving the code, receiving life-saving equipment and then deploying it and actually practicing with it. So we've got a real root and branch process. We can use alongside our simulator, other visuals we got from the RNLI and their input because the water safety message really is for all partners and it's about everybody in the borough.

**Cllr Millard:** Absolutely well said. Well, I don't think we can say fairer than that, you've left that on a very good note. And I mean is there anything else you want to say as we draw to the end to the end of this particular podcast?

**Robert Davies:** No, just thank you to yourself for allowing me the air time and assisting with getting out that really crucial safety message.

**Cllr Millard:** Anytime, always. Always a pleasure, Robert, as you know. And it's been fantastic to talk to you. Thank you so much for joining us on Talk Richmond to talk about this incredibly important campaign and tell us about these fantastic resources that we now have in the borough to help raise awareness. And it's so incredibly important for young people to understand the hazards and stay safe around water. I'd encourage all of those of you listening to check the show notes for links to this campaign, as we've said. There's links to the video and full information about how to access training and support. If you have any questions or concerns. As always, please e-mail [talk@richmond.gov.uk](mailto:talk@richmond.gov.uk) and we will do our very best to help answer them. And as always, please do share this episode with any friends or family

if you think it would of help. And of course leave a review to help spread the word, help us make a splash. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks very much for listening.