

Memorandum

7 February 2018

To: Environment and Community Committee

Subject: Safeswim Programme Update

From: Barry Potter, Director Infrastructure and Environmental Services
Craig Mcilroy, General Manager Healthy Waters

Purpose

1. To provide the Environment and Community Committee with an update on the upgraded Safeswim programme's performance during the first three months of its operation.

Summary

- *The upgraded Safeswim programme went live on 1 November 2017. During the first three months of operation the upgraded programme performed well. Key highlights include:*
 - *Confirmation that Safeswim's water quality forecasts are accurate (85 to 95 per cent) at predicting pollution events through sampling.*
 - *165,000 hits on the safeswim.org website compared with 12-14,000 hits per season for the previous programme.*
 - *Advising the public correctly and rapidly of risks to public health at Takapuna, Castor Bay and Mairangi Bay following unpredictable events that would not have been captured using the previous system.*
- *Areas for improvement have also been identified, including:*
 - *the effectiveness of signage on beaches*
 - *operational responses and public messaging following pollution events.*
- *A report will be provided to Environment and Community Committee by April 2018 outlining next steps for the programme. Working objectives for the 2018 programme are:*
 - *increase the scope of the programme - capturing a broader range of contaminants and extending the platform to more freshwater sites*
 - *increase the coverage of the programme - extending from 97 to 200 plus sites by the end of 2018.*
 - *identification of opportunities to leverage further value from Safeswim.*

Context/Background

2. At its meeting on 14 February 2017, the Environment and Community Committee approved expenditure to upgrade the Safeswim programme in time for the 2017/2018 summer swimming season.

3. The committee also asked to be provided with regular updates on the Safeswim programme until March 2018.
4. The upgrade was completed by the end of October 2017 and the new Safeswim programme went 'live' on 3 November 2017.
5. The upgrade of Safeswim has ensured that Auckland Council satisfies its obligations to monitor and report on bathing beach water quality, but at the same time is able to:
 - effectively communicate health and safety risk to the public
 - highlight areas for investigation, remediation and investment
 - test the potential impact of different management interventions.

Discussion

6. The upgraded Safeswim programme has been operating for just over three months. During this time a series of summer storms and network issues have required the Safeswim programme to operate under the full spectrum of operational conditions - dry weather, sudden intense rainfall, sustained rainfall, unpredictable wastewater network failures, and dangerous swimming conditions.
7. Key achievements from the first three months of operation include:
 - The Safeswim validation sampling programme has collected up to five times more samples than the previous system would have over the same period of time. The results of this sampling confirms that Safeswim's forecasting system is predicting exceedances of national water quality guidelines with 85-95 per cent accuracy. This is a significant improvement as the previous system was identifying less than 5 per cent of exceedances at some of Auckland's most popular swimming beaches.
 - The media and publicity campaign associated with Safeswim's launch made use of physical media (flyers and cards), radio and digital advertisements, and written promotional content in council-owned channels. The campaign is 75 per cent complete (concluding at the end of February 2018) and has contributed to lifting public awareness of the programme. This is illustrated by the 43 independently published articles (TV, print and digital media) on Safeswim since its launch.
 - After three months of operation the Safeswim website, www.safeswim.org.nz, has gained 165,000 hits and 90,000 users. The previous programme had 12-14,000 hits per season. Significant spikes in new users and hits were observed following independent media articles publicising water quality issues and the rate of new users visiting the site continues to grow.
8. The first three months of the programme have also generated insights into areas for improvement and opportunities for trialing new approaches.
9. Initial media coverage of the programme has been mixed. Some commentators and members of the public have questioned the appropriateness of using models to predict water quality and others have expressed concern regarding the quality of water at some of Auckland's beaches. Recent media coverage is starting to show greater acceptance of the modelling approach and the focus of commentary is moving towards the need to tackle the problems causing poor water quality.
10. The transparency of the Safeswim programme has encouraged informed public debate, but more needs to be done to increase public understanding of the Safeswim programme, its implications and council's response to the water quality issues it is highlighting.
11. Results of Safeswim have also highlighted areas where action is required to address water quality issues. For instance, a cross-council task force has been created to investigate the

cause of pollution incidents at Takapuna Beach - an area where substantial investment has already been made to improve water quality.

12. The first three months of the programme's operation have also revealed an urgent need to review on-beach signage around the region. Public feedback has varied from complaints that there are too many signs at beaches to not enough signage.

Trial of Digital Signage

13. A digital sign trial has also been conducted, with signs initially placed at Mission Bay and then extended to St Mary's Bay and Takapuna Beach. Early indications are that digital signs are effective at generating interest and awareness but that manual signs managed by Surf Lifesavers are susceptible to user error and public interference.
14. Safeswim is also partnering with Auckland Emergency Management group to trial using the digital signs at Mission Bay to convey advice about tsunami risk and preparedness.

Next steps/implementation

8. The Safeswim governance group - comprising representatives from Auckland Council, Watercare, Surf Life Saving Northern Region, Auckland Regional Public Health Service and mana whenua - will meet in early March 2018 to consider the performance of the programme over its first summer period, and to provide guidance on future programme development.
9. A review is being conducted by council's Research and Evaluation Unit (RIMU) independently of the project team and this will provide initial findings in early April 2018.
10. Feedback will also be sought from local boards and mana whenua on programme performance and suggestions regarding the future scope and coverage of the programme. In particular, feedback will be sought from local boards on which local sites members believe should be monitored over the following summer.
11. The Safeswim project team will report to Environment and Community Committee again in April 2018, summarising results of the independent review and feedback from local boards and mana whenua. This report will outline the next steps in the programme's development.
12. Working objectives for the next phase of Safeswim's development are:
 - increasing the scope of the programme - capturing a broader range of contaminants and extending the platform to more freshwater sites
 - increasing the coverage of the programme - extending to 200 plus sites by the end of 2018
 - exploring opportunities to leverage the platform to generate more value for Auckland ratepayers.