

HEALTH, LEISURE, LIFE



Dave Candler, the newish CEO of STA, wants to keep the organisation focused on what it does best. By **Simon Griffiths**

H2Open spoke candidly to Dave Candler, the newish CEO of STA (Swimming Teacher's Association), who says that despite a fractious year with forced changes to their senior management team, they've had their most successful year financially with the organisation going from strength to strength in terms of the number of courses being run and people becoming qualified.

The STA exists for "the preservation of human life by the teaching of swimming, lifesaving and survival techniques" according to its charitable objectives. It was created in 1932 and is now the world's largest independent swimming teaching and lifesaving organisation. It also provides training in first aid and leisure management including pool plant operations where Candler estimates it has about 70% of the UK market.

Candler, who is now 41, has spent his entire career in the swimming industry, working his way up from an assistant and receptionist at Littlehampton Swimming and Sports Centre to centre manager. On the way he has been a lifeguard, swimming teacher and a swimming development officer. He is qualified as a swimming teacher with both the STA and ASA and has a long list of further STA qualifications including lifeguard tutor and open water coach tutor. He therefore has extensive experience of the STA as a user and thus a detailed understanding of what the organisation needs to deliver to the swimming industry.

He says: "Swimming is my life, and I am very passionate about it." He's even married to an ex-GB swimmer.

But having successfully climbed the ladder in a sports centre environment, what prompted the change to take the helm of a very different type of organisation?

"Basically, I really believe in what STA stands for and, given my leisure background, experience as a user of STA services and my knowledge of the organisation as a former trustee, I felt that I might be in a unique position to lead the STA forwards."

Although he's only been in post for a short time (since April 2016) Candler has already had a positive impact. For example, and relevant to H2Open readers, a few years ago STA became the first awarding body to develop an accredited open water safety and coaching course. As an open water swimmer himself, Candler has rejuvenated the course because he is passionate about ensuring everyone

involved in coaching is qualified and insured to teach.

"I'm extremely aware that the majority of people swimming in open water haven't received any coaching or training. In addition, much of the open water swimming advice that's given out on social media and elsewhere is from people who don't have a relevant qualification. This advice is usually based on experience and opinion, and is often (but not always) good advice, but that's not really the point. If you want to give advice, and certainly if you're charging for your advice, then having an

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appropriate qualification will give you insurance cover if you are ever sued. It's about protecting the person giving the advice as much as anything."

More broadly, Candler has invited a rethink of what the STA stands for and what it should do. He's taken his inspiration from the original founders.

"I discovered the old STA crest from 1932, which had three words in Latin on it. I don't read Latin but we looked up the words and found they mean: 'health', 'leisure' and 'life'. To me, this really captured what the STA is about. I want to get back to what we really stand for and do it properly. The staff are buzzing about it."

Candler has also been reaching out to other players in the swimming sector.

"It's important to me to build partnerships and positive relationships through the sector. I'm taking the approach of 'let's be friends,' he says.

Looking forward, Candler aims to expand the STA's qualification portfolio across its main areas of swimming, lifesaving and pool & plant, and he wants to ensure the STA provides an even better service to its members.

"One of my core beliefs is that training should be led by employers. It shouldn't be us telling leisure centre managers what training their staff should do. We should ensure the content of our training courses is designed according to what they tell us they need."

Finally, we asked Candler what he thinks about the current levels of swimming provision in schools and how all of us can stay safe in and around open water.

"Like everyone, I want to stop people drowning in lakes, rivers and reservoirs and I believe the best way to go about this is through training and education – not indiscriminate bans."

"When we talk about 'open water swimming' and 'drowning prevention', I also want to distinguish between open water swimming in a supervised environment as part of a group or club, which we wholly support and which many of us regularly partake in (including me), to teenagers and young adults 'playing' in unsupervised inland water environments who are not aware of the dangers – this is where education is needed and children need to be taught this from an early age.

"And therein lies part of the issue. Swimming teaching in primary schools is problematic as, although it's a national curriculum requirement, it doesn't have to happen. Costs and access to facilities are the main issues, especially as more pools come under private sector management.

"One problem I've seen is that where schools attempt to pass on the costs of swimming lessons to parents, then the parents pull their children out of private lessons, and the children's swimming levels can actually decline. Learning about how to be safe in and around the water is an important part of the learning to swim process, and if children are not getting access to lessons, as an industry we need to work closer together and do more."

Candler's conclusion is that if we really want more children learning how to swim then increased government funding is required. Until that happens (if it ever does), there are other options. For example, schools could put some of their staff through swimming teacher courses (the STA offers a relevant qualification) so that they can avoid the cost of paying for external coaches.

It's still early days for Candler, but it sounds like the STA is in good hands.