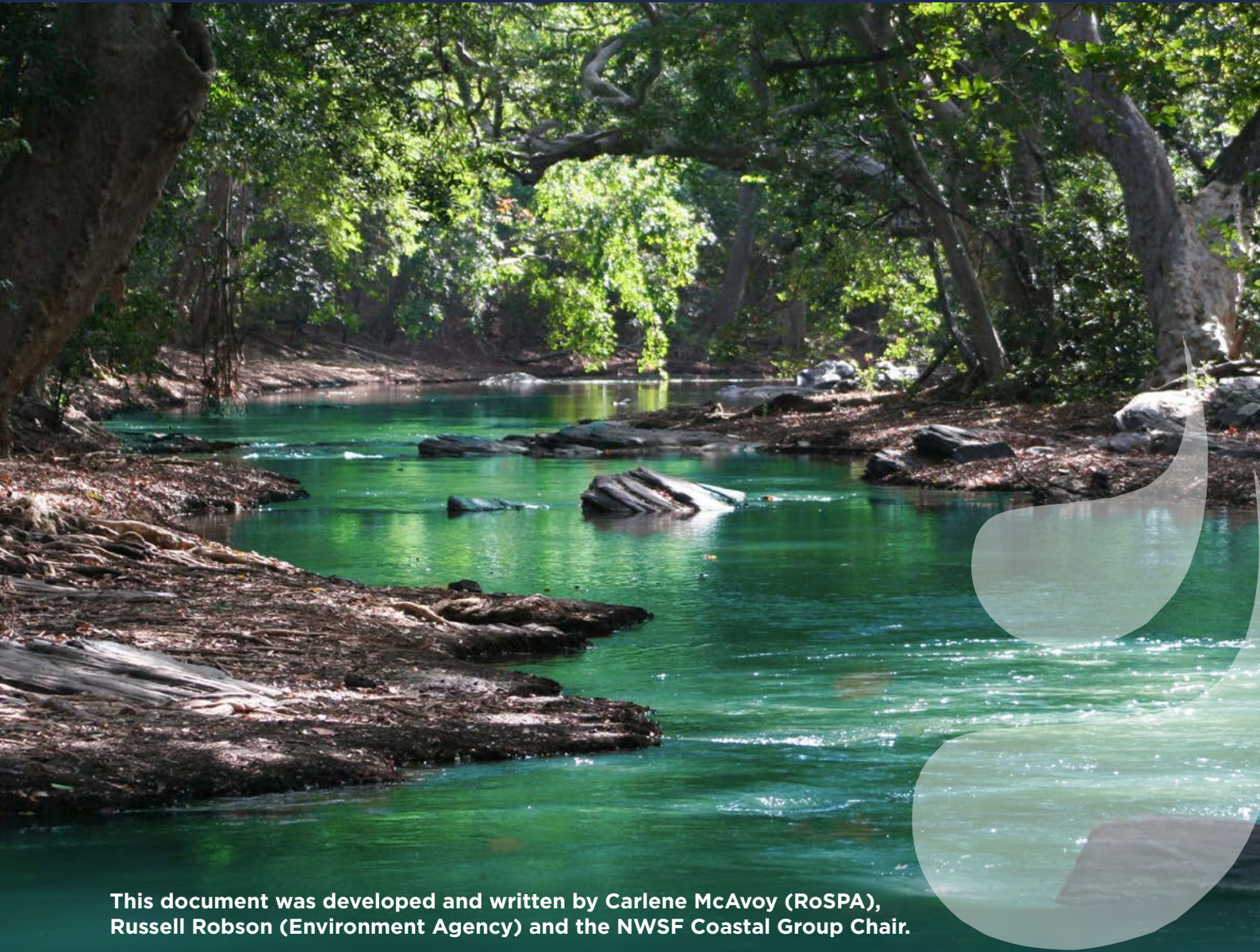




national
water safety
forum

Water safety partnerships – Guidance



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Introduction and background

On average, around 400 people drown in the UK every year and a further 200 take their own lives in our waters.

The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy (DPS), launched by the National Water Safety Forum (NWSF) in 2016, aims to reduce accidental drowning fatalities by 50% by 2026. [Water Safety Scotland](#) and [Water Safety Wales](#) have similar aims in their respective strategies.

Each of the strategies has a key focus on communities and partnership working. It is recognised that although strategic national direction is paramount, local ownership and partnership working are vital if the strategies are to be successful.

A water safety group is the best way to ensure collaborative working and buy-in from partners to tackle local water safety issues effectively. Accordingly, this document introduces three different approaches to setting up a water safety group, examines four case studies of water safety groups operating in the UK, and concludes with a thematic list of the top five elements that are recommended to be included in the development and success of water safety groups.



Three approaches to setting up a water safety group

The documents listed below presents three different frameworks/ approaches that can be used to plan and create a water safety group:

- [A practical implementation guide to setting up a Water Safety Action Group and designing a local Water Safety Plan](#) – RLSS UK.
- [Water safety toolkit](#) – Local Government Association.
- [Partnership Approach to Water Safety](#) – Water Safety Scotland.

Case studies

The following are examples of four water safety groups that have been set up across the UK.

1. Elmbridge Water Safety Group

Elmbridge in Surrey is in close proximity to rivers and open water. While many residents and visitors safely enjoy water activities, the dangers of open water should never be underestimated – cold water shock, currents, and the risk of being caught in rocks and trees are ever present. Over a number of years, the borough experienced four fatal drownings in the River Thames, adjacent to its landholding. In addition, the local riverside attracts large numbers of people from around the borough and the wider west London area.

This focused the authority on assessing whether it had the appropriate resources and priorities to reduce the number of incidents.

Elmbridge has a complex range of watercourses and a variety of landowners, each of whom has responsibility for river safety. In the absence of a single body responsible for water safety in Elmbridge, and in recognition for the important role that the rivers and other watercourses have in the borough, Elmbridge Borough Council is leading the way in Surrey with a Drowning Prevention Plan, which was agreed by Elmbridge Cabinet. Working with partners at the Environment Agency and Surrey County Council, the plan aims to

reduce the number of water incidents in the borough through training and improved awareness, and has committed £30k for 2023–2024 to deliver additional drowning prevention projects:

- **Drowning prevention strategy:** Elmbridge BC has a joint drowning prevention strategy (with RoSPA, RLSS and RNLI), and works with other partners to educate about the dangers of open water. This is regularly promoted in schools and through multi-agency campaigns.
- **Targeted communications:** During the summer months, Elmbridge BC carries out targeted communications activity in high usage areas, with water safety banners in place at high profile locations to advise users of the risk of open water. Additionally, Elmbridge BC reviews the provision of public rescue equipment (PRE) and provides targeted swimming lessons within the borough.

- **Multi-agency training:** The borough has worked closely with the local Fire & Rescue Service (FRS) and the Environment Agency to undertake a number of river site training exercises at key locations to improve understanding of the problems of key ‘honeypot’ sites and their constraints. These events have also been promoted to the public for demonstration purposes and to raise awareness.

- **Community involvement:** The partnership has also worked with RNLI and RLSS on training for the night time economy, on safety training with throwlines, and engagement with national water safety campaigns throughout the year.

Additionally, the plan is annually reviewed by the borough in partnership with other members of the group. This uses Water Incident Database (WAID) and local FRS data to look at trends and emerging patterns.





2. Pembrokeshire Water Safety Forum

Pembrokeshire is one of the most popular holiday destinations across the UK, with its rich Welsh heritage, majestic coastline, traditional seaside towns and many rivers. The area has many locations where watercourses can be utilised for leisure activities.

It was acknowledged in 2019 that many agencies in Pembrokeshire were undertaking water safety education and other drowning prevention initiatives, and it was decided that bringing the agencies together to discuss their activities would lead to more effective and efficient work in this area. As a result, Pembrokeshire Water Safety Forum was established in late 2019. Chaired by the RNLI, the

forum meets quarterly with various organisations and groups from a range of sectors. Pembrokeshire County Council has been involved in the group since its inception, with the Head of Leisure taking an active role.

As of 2023, there is an enhancement of the signage provision being conducted by Pembrokeshire County Council with the assistance of members from the Water Safety Forum.

Within the group, data and local knowledge are shared to identify changing trends and prioritise at-risk groups. Working groups have been formed with relevant forum members to progress work in relation to specific projects to mitigate these identified priorities.

Specific activities and interventions include:

- Open Water, Jet Ski and Stand Up Paddleboarding (SUP) subgroups running events, sharing resources, and promoting safety in the given activity.
- Improvements in signage and education interventions at the Blue Lagoon, Aberdeiddy, a prominent cliff-jumping location where a number of serious incidents have occurred in recent years – so far in 2023, thanks to education intervention by a member of the forum, there have been no calls made to the emergency services in respect of people getting into difficulty as a result of water-related activities.
- Breakwater and Wave Events – multi-agency water safety education events focused on cliff jumping and tombstoning in Tenby

and Milford Haven. These are led by Mid and West FRS and Milford Haven Port Authority. Attendees are local year 7 and 8 students.

- Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum ran an event for outdoor activity instructors. This focused on how to have good-quality water safety conversations with the public and the role outdoor educators can have in an emergency scenario.

Since the establishment of the Pembrokeshire Water Safety Forum, drowning prevention work in the area has been more joined up, visible and effective.

Organisations can draw on support and resources from other members in order to achieve goals; risks are understood and communicated; and best practice is shared to make activities more effective.



3. West Dunbartonshire PAWS

Group

West Dunbartonshire is composed of the towns of Clydebank and Dumbarton, and the Vale of Leven District. The area is home to a population of approximately 90,000 residents. The area includes rivers, lochs, reservoirs and canals, the dynamic nature of which present challenges to the agencies responsible for carrying out rescues and managing waterways safely.

In the aftermath of several fatal drownings and near misses, particularly in Loch Lomond and the River Leven, the Partnership Approach to Water Safety (PAWS) model – designed by James Sullivan from the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service – was agreed on as a tool to be used by partners in the local community to coordinate their efforts to understand local risks and build resilience into drowning prevention efforts.

PAWS looks at the three complementary aspects of water safety.

- **Prevention**

Raising water safety awareness through education, engagement, and media platforms.

- **Improved incident response**

Training the public in how to safely respond in the developing stages of a water emergency and conducting multi-agency training events with search and rescue partners.

- **Review**

Reviewing significant water events (Drowning and Incident Reviews) to gather information and gain an understanding of contributory factors or trends to allow a focused approach to drowning prevention.

An important part of the early success of the group was down to the support of the local Community Planning Partnership (CPP). The CPP provided vital support to the new group and ensured that progress was made through regular meetings and the delivery of meaningful activities in the area.

Local partners identified locations that required the provision of PRE based on risk assessment and experience of past incidents. The equipment was funded and implemented by local partners, with inspection and maintenance delegated to local community groups.



PAWS Group representatives next to newly installed PRE in Balloch Park/Loch Lomond.

Local schools are visited by partners to deliver safety messaging utilising Water Safety Scotland's education assets to ensure consistency and promote the use of Scotland's Water Safety Code.

Exercises are arranged with local partners to improve the interoperability of emergency service partners in locations that were known to have a higher probability of an incident due to local topography or activities being undertaken.

Reviews of incidents that occurred in the area are also undertaken by all partners in an open and honest forum to ensure that contributory factors are understood and that meaningful interventions are made to potentially prevent similar incidents occurring in the future.

Evidence of the success of the measures implemented by the PAWS Group came in the summer of 2022,

when a member of the public, Julie, was cycling through Balloch Park when she heard teenage girls in distress in the water. Julie quickly and decisively used the PRE that had been provided by the PAWS Group to rescue the three girls from the water. In addition, by following the emergency guidance on the signage beside the PRE, Julie was able to effectively direct emergency services to the incident location, with the initial responders, Police Scotland, on the scene within 90 seconds of the 999 call being placed. The availability of this equipment undoubtedly saved the lives of three young girls, who would otherwise have been lost to the waters of the river Leven. For more information on this incident, read [Julie's Story - Water Rescue at Balloch Park](#).

4. Greater Manchester Water Safety Strategic Partnership

The Greater Manchester Water Safety Strategic Partnership (GMWSSP) is a multi-agency partnership project which aims to support a consistent approach to water safety across Greater Manchester. The project was conceived in response to a steady increase in the numbers of fatal water incidents in the area in recent years. Between 2012/13 and 2021/22, the numbers of water incidents, fatalities, rescues and mobilisations had all increased significantly.

In September 2022, GM Fire & Rescue Service (GMFRS) hosted a Water Safety Summit that was attended by local and national stakeholders, including local authorities, GMP, North West Ambulance Service, RoSPA, RLNI, United Utilities, Canal & River Trust, RLSS UK and Swim England.

It was decided that funding should be raised to recruit a Water Safety Development Officer (WSDO) to set up the partnership and develop the project. It was also agreed that GMFRS's Leon Parkes would chair the partnership.

The inaugural GMWSSP quarterly meeting was held in June 2023, at which a draft Terms of Reference and Strategic Action Plan were agreed.

The principal aims of GMWSSP are to:

- reduce the number of drownings in Greater Manchester (GM)
- ensure residents and visitors are safe around water when they are in GM

- ensure GM residents are safe around water wherever they are
- increase awareness of the risks of open water
- help people enjoy water-related activities in a safe manner
- provide support to local water safety partnerships.

This strategy is based on three key pillars:

- **Information** – Research and engagement to better understand the risks and help drive the water safety agenda.
- **Education** – Education and campaigns to share understanding with communities.
- **Protection** – Practical initiatives to make communities safer in and around water.

The objectives of the Strategic Action Plan include:

- engaging with government and others to include water safety as part of the school curriculum across GM
- helping the GMWSSP set strategic direction and support for local community safety partnerships and water safety partnerships in all GM boroughs
- identifying funding streams to support water safety in GM
- supporting the work of water leisure organisations to promote water safety
- helping to promote greater access to swimming lessons for all young people and children.

Key elements to consider when setting up a water safety group

Through analysing the available guidance and current best practice, it is recommended that a water safety group take the following elements into account.

- **Data and insight** – The water safety group should profile the local area and understand the risks and demographics of the people it needs to reach. This may include a review of incidents to ensure sufficient insight, via the national WAID dataset.
 - **Structure** – A water safety group needs to have a Chair with overall responsibility for the group and the ability to feed local knowledge back to the national organisation (National Water Safety Forum, Water Safety Scotland, Water Safety Wales), where appropriate.
 - **Reporting** – To ensure appropriate change and a level of support, a water safety group should have an official reporting mechanism to the CPP, or similar community based partnership in England and Wales.
 - **Partners** – A stakeholder analysis for the local area should be undertaken. While no group will have the same stakeholders, consideration should be given to including local groups that have the insight and knowledge needed to help the partner group be successful.
 - **Prevention** – Prevention, whether through communications or education, needs to be paramount. Incident response does have a role, but prevention should be the primary aim of a water safety group.
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Conclusion

To find out more about setting up a water safety group, you can contact these local case study areas or the NWSF for further advice. There is no 'one' way to create a group but using the framework/approach documents linked in this guidance along with the key elements listed above, will help in the creation of a successful and impactful water safety group.

