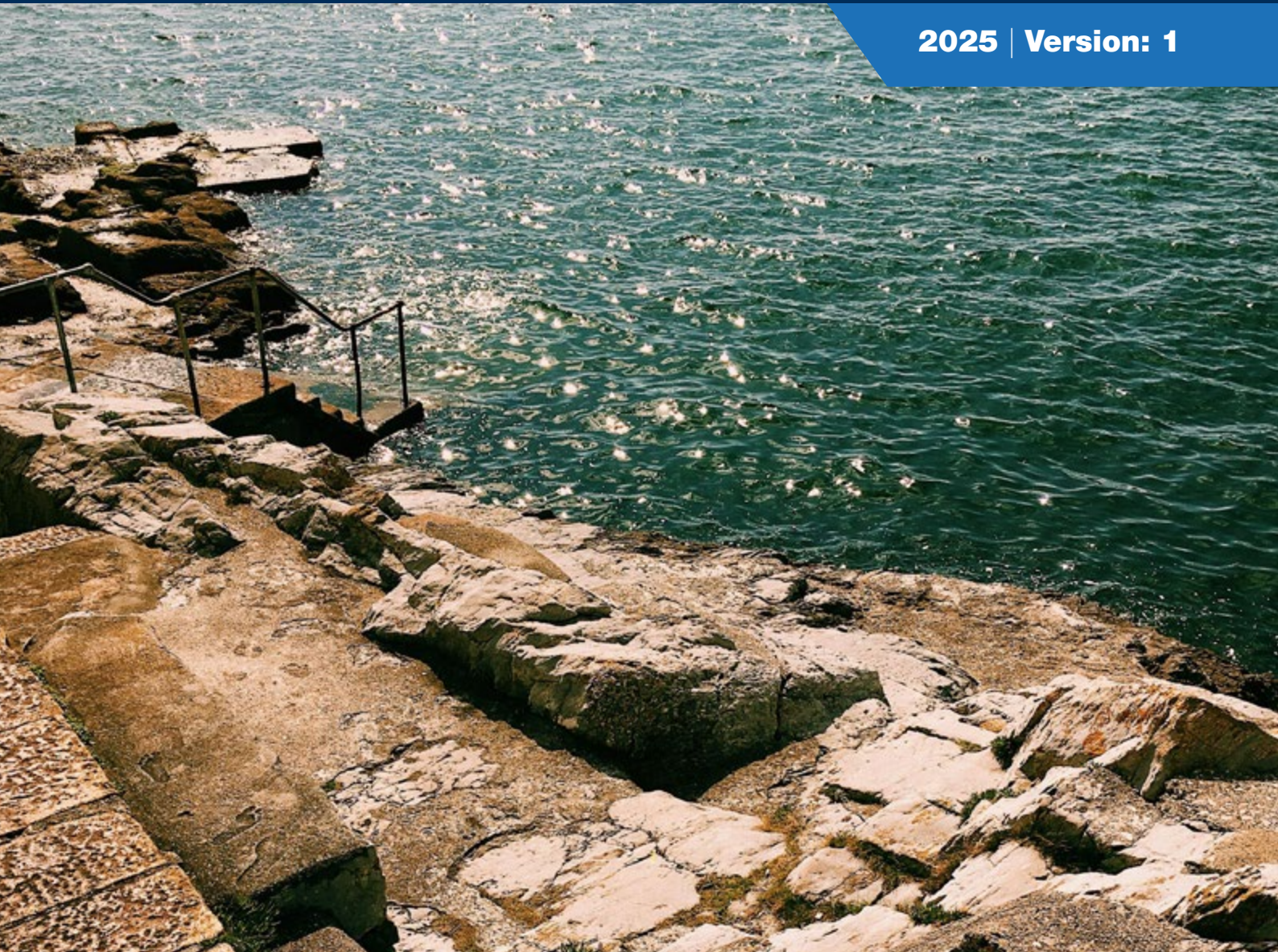


Establishing Water Safety Partnerships in England

2025 | Version: 1



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Introduction

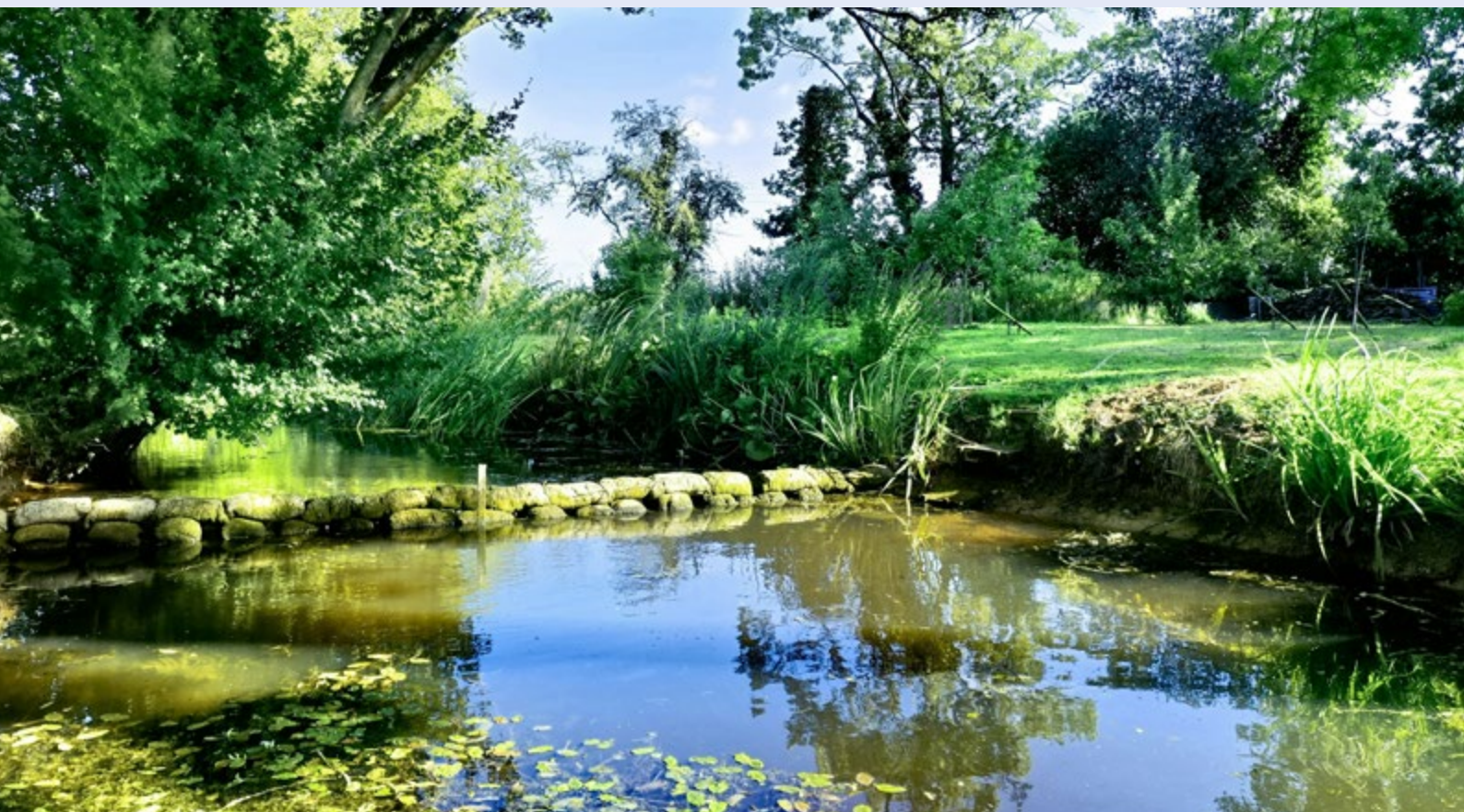
On average, 461 people drown in England every yearⁱ. The UK Drowning Prevention Strategyⁱⁱ, launched by the National Water Safety Forum (NWSF) in 2016, aims to reduce accidental drowning fatalities by 50 per cent by 2026. The most recent review of the strategy shows that progress is being made – accidental drowning fatalities reduced by 33 per cent over the five-year period 2019 to 2023ⁱⁱⁱ.

Local areas and regions have a pivotal role to play, providing the link from national strategic direction to local implementation in communities across the UK.

Scotland already has a well-established model for this through the Partnership Approach to Water Safety^{iv} and Wales has also published guidance for the establishment of Water Safety Partnerships in Wales^v. The NWSF released general guidance on Water Safety Partnerships in 2024^{vi} to provide an overview of the basic requirements for Water Safety Partnerships to function.

This document goes one step further, providing guidance from Water Safety England to regions and local areas for creating and developing their own Water Safety Partnership in England.

It is acknowledged that the local authority landscape in England is complex and so this guidance aims to help regions in England develop partnerships based upon national insight and the successful experiences of the Greater Manchester Water Safety Strategic Partnership.



The need for a Water Safety Partnership

Recent analysis from the Water Incident Database (WAID) enhanced dataset¹ shows that over a five-year period (2019 to 2023), there were 2306 water-based fatalities in England alone, giving an average of 461 per year.

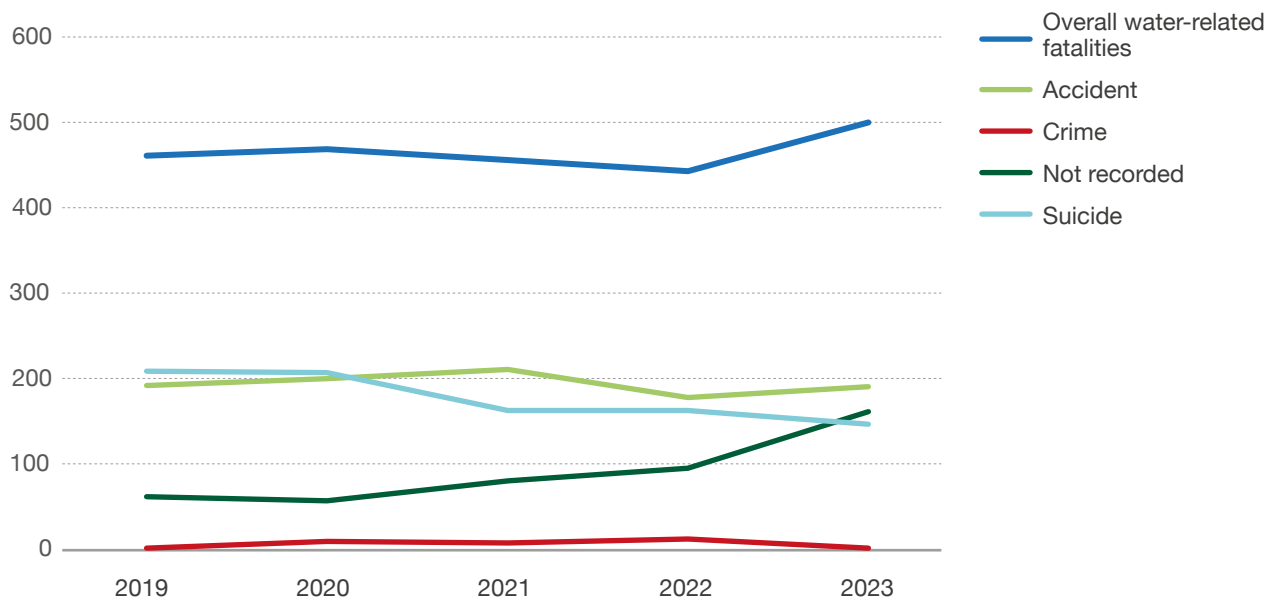


Figure 1: Water-related fatalities (all causes) by year, England (2019 - 2023)

¹ Please note that the following data are taken from the updated data set used in the WAID Enhancement Project. This is v2 of the published 2019-2023 data and is the most up-to-date and accurate dataset available.

When looking specifically at accidental fatalities² over the same period, there were 957, giving an average of 191 accidental water-based fatalities each year. This means that almost **four people lose their life to an accidental water-related fatality in England each week.**

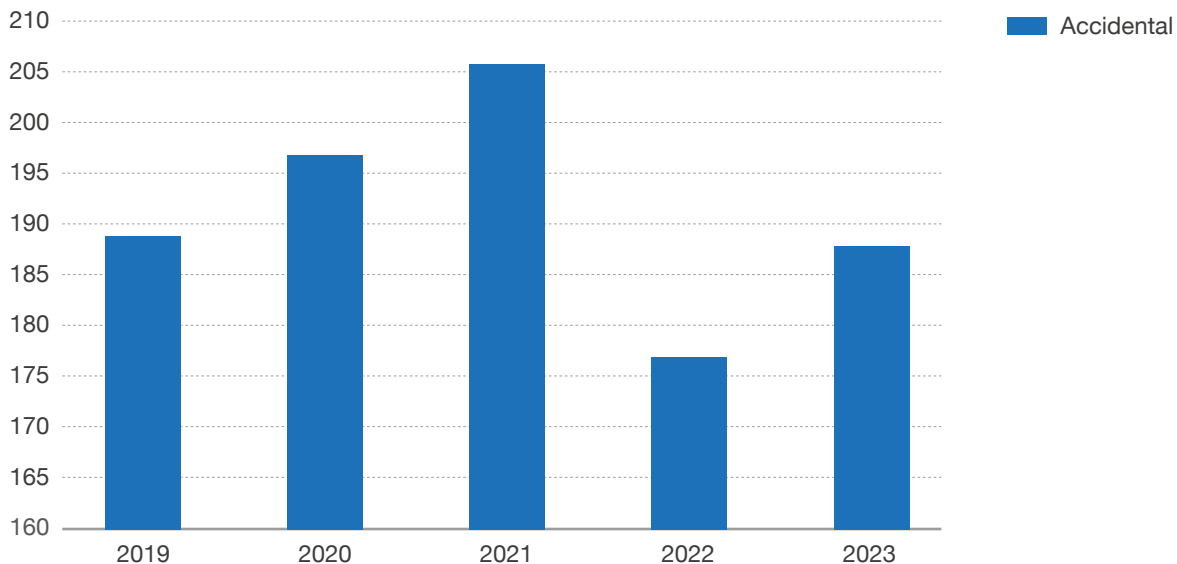


Figure 2: Accidental fatalities by year, England (2019 - 2023)

Local regions and areas have a pivotal role to play in the reduction of water-based fatalities through a Water Safety Partnership. A Water Safety Partnership can recognise existing good practice locally and build upon on it to consolidate a coordinated approach to water safety. It allows for those best-placed in the local area to use their knowledge and experience to reduce fatalities, whilst also ensuring a direct link to the strategic direction set by the NWSF.

The NWSF's most recent guidance suggests that the key elements a Water Safety Partnership should concentrate on are data and insight, structure, reporting, partners and prevention. This guidance document encapsulates each of these elements, and draws upon the Greater Manchester Water Safety Strategic Partnership as a case study, by focusing on five key steps in setting up a Water Safety Partnership:

- Stakeholder analysis
- Region and location
- Data and insights
- Structure and governance
- Local strategy and prevention focus

² Accidental refers to accidental and natural causes.



In practice

The Greater Manchester Water Safety Strategic Partnership (GMWSSP) is a multi-agency partnership project which aims to support a consistent approach to water safety. It was set up in 2023 in response to an increasing number of fatal water incidents in the area: in the preceding decade (2012 to 2022), the numbers of water incidents, fatalities, rescues and mobilisations in Greater Manchester had all increased significantly.

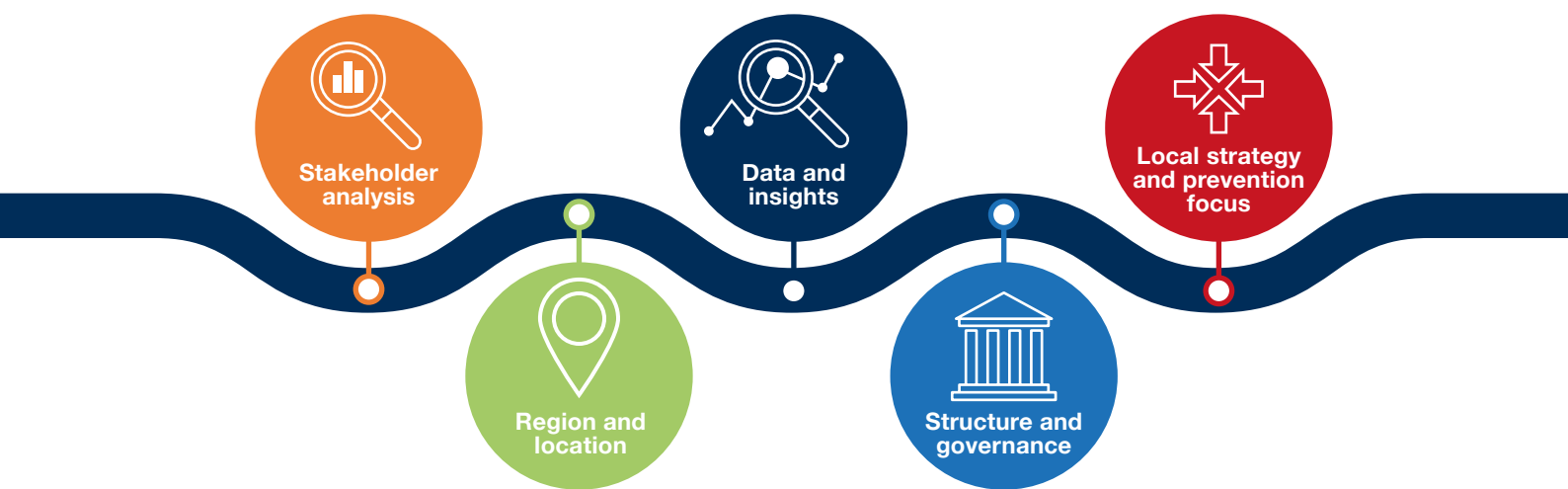
The GMWSSP encourages the sharing of best practice between all 10 local Water Safety Partnerships, using local knowledge of water risks and communities to enable local decisions regarding water safety. The GMWSSP facilitates the sharing of resources between Water Safety Partnerships – as well as access to communication teams, joint procurement and finance raising opportunities – and is supported by a dedicated full-time Water Safety Development Officer.

The GMWSSP is part of a national, regional and local governance structure which enables Water Safety Partnerships to influence regional and national policy making with strong links to, and support from, national water safety organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), the Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK), the Canal and River Trust, and the Environment Agency.

The GMWSSP approach facilitates closer interagency collaboration and better targeting of local community groups, making Greater Manchester safer and striving for a future without drowning.

Set up and establishment

The following should be considered for any organisation interested in developing and establishing a Water Safety Partnership:



Stakeholder analysis

The first step in the creation of a Water Safety Partnership should be for a stakeholder analysis to be completed by the interested organisations that wish to establish a Water Safety Partnership. This will establish which organisations should be involved.

There are a number of key stakeholders that are likely to be involved in most Water Safety Partnerships. These include the local authority, landowners and Search and Rescue organisations, such as HM Coastguard and Fire and Rescue Services.

Initial contact should be made to ascertain whether these organisations are interested in joining. This could be achieved through a preliminary meeting. At the meeting, other stakeholders should be established.

The stakeholder analysis can then be updated. A blank template for stakeholder analysis can be found in Appendix 1.

Region and location

A decision should be made by the local interested organisations and individuals on the geographical boundaries of the proposed Water Safety Partnership. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach, and several options exist, including:

- A city-wide approach
- A unitary authority approach
- A regional approach

Regardless of which approach is chosen, Water Safety England suggest that regional groups or Forums are established for local groups to feed into. These should be established in an agile way to reduce any impact of future changes in local governance structures. From there, regional groups can feed directly into Water Safety England, creating a clear and established link.



Figure 3: Water Safety Partnership structure

In practice

The development of the GMWSSP was a progression from some of the excellent water safety work already being achieved in Greater Manchester. Water Safety Partnerships had been set up in several local boroughs, all of which were making great progress, but the approach was not consistent across the Greater Manchester area.

Following the appointment of a full time Water Safety Development Officer, local Water Safety Partnerships were successfully established in all ten boroughs. The GMWSSP was established to bring together these 10 local Water Safety Partnerships, as well as regional and national partner agencies to provide strategic oversight and support. These include: Water Safety England, providing strategic leadership and setting the national agenda; Greater Manchester Police, Fire and Crime leads, to give oversight from a senior leadership perspective; the Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester; and local authority leads.

Within the 10 Water Safety Partnerships, council staff, Police, Fire Service, Ambulance staff, landowners and local organisations all attend. The GMWSSP gives strategic support and tactical direction to the 10 borough Water Safety Partnerships, with the Water Safety Development Officer attending all local Water Safety Partnership meetings.



Figure 4: Greater Manchester structure

Data and insights

Data and insights should be gathered and analysed to establish the issues in the local area. There are many different data sources available including:

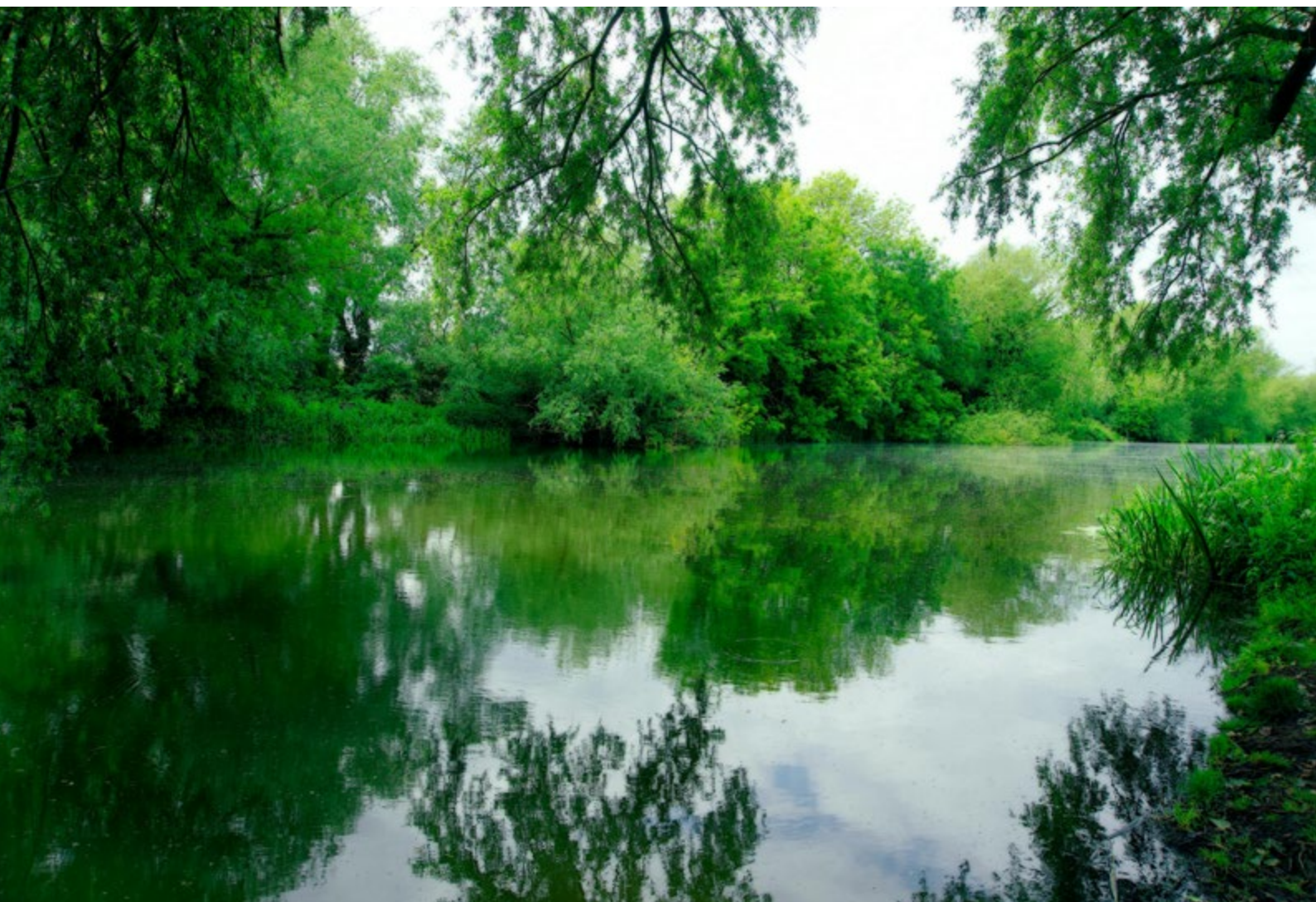
- WAID data – which provides water-based fatality data
- His Majesty's Coastguard data – which provides coastal water-based incident and fatality data
- Fire and Rescue data – which provides water-based incident and fatality data
- Ambulance service data
- Coroner reports on specific incidents and fatalities
- Media reports
- Active lives data
- School swimming and water safety education data.

Data analysis should then be undertaken to establish basic insights, including:

- Overall number of water-based incidents and fatalities
- Specific outcome numbers such as accidental or suspected suicide
- Demographic information such as age, sex and, if available, ethnicity data
- Location information such as the coastal/inland profile, as well as any high frequency locations
- Activities undertaken at time of incident or fatality.

From these data, the organisations involved should decide what outcomes their Water Safety Partnership will prioritise. For example, some areas may decide to focus only on accidental fatalities, whilst others may choose to focus on accidental and suicide fatalities.

Publishing the data as an internal report may be useful to help make the case for organisations to buy into. If the group decides to do this, it is important that, if small numbers are involved, suppression should be used so that individual incidents are not identifiable.



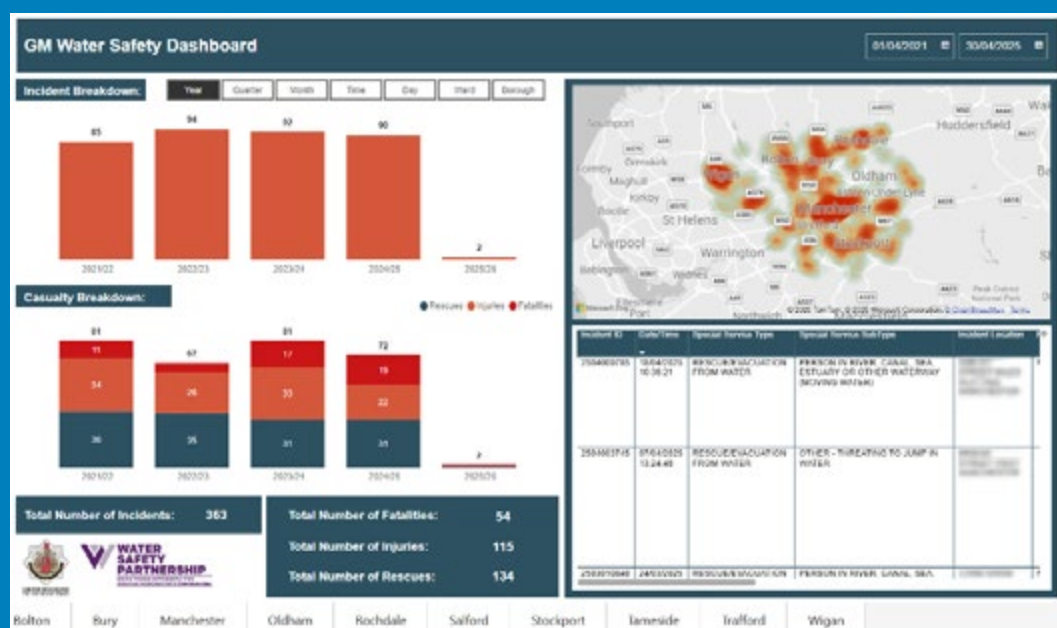
In practice

The key data insight that led to the establishment of the GMWSSP was that, from 2020 onwards, Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service attended more fatal water incidents than fatal fires. The data were presented to key stakeholders at a Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service-organised Water Safety Summit in September 2022, resulting in a consensus decision to raise funding for the Water Safety Development Officer role and the establishment of the GMWSSP.

Incident information gathering and data sharing have been key to the GMWSSP approach. The Water Safety Development Officer has worked with Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service to encourage more comprehensive information gathering incident scenes, whilst local Water Safety Partnerships work with a range of partners to share incident information locally. Additional data fields have been added to the UK Fire and Rescue Services' statutory reporting tool – the Incident Recording System (IRS) – to capture causality-related data and location of incident, and the Water Safety Development Officer is working with coroners to include them in information-sharing process.

The GMWSSP has also worked with Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Digital Services to create a Water Incident Dashboard (see screenshot below). This provides near real-time incident data on a regional, borough and ward level. Non-Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service partners may access the Dashboard by signing an Information Sharing Agreement.

This data-gathering allows Water Safety Partnerships and the GMWSSP to analyse incident trends, driving evidence-based decision-making, prevention activity, and resource targeting. Incident data is also used as part of the region-wide Risk Review process (see below).



Structure and governance

Water Safety England recommend that a Water Safety Partnership do the following:

- Elect a Chair
- Elect a minute taker and organisation responsible for providing agendas, accurate minutes and action logs (a template agenda can be found in Appendix 2)
- Agree a Terms of Reference (a template is provided in Appendix 3)
- Have a reporting mechanism into the unitary local authority
- Hold quarterly meetings
- Ensure a link to the Water Safety England through an appropriate structure, such as the one seen in Figure 3
- Investigate potential funding opportunities for the Water Safety Partnership
- Complete an annual risk register for the Partnership.

Local strategy and prevention focus

The Water Safety Partnership should focus on four main objectives:

- Tie into the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy, mimicking its timelines, targets and objectives
- Ensure the region and area's waterways are risk assessed
- Promote the need for the unitary authority in the area to have a Water Safety Policy
- Focus on promoting water safety education and communications using Water Safety England resources, where applicable.



In practice

The strategic aims and objectives for the GMWSSP were developed in line with the principles set out in the UK Drowning Prevention Strategyⁱⁱ, as well as the aims agreed at the Greater Manchester Water Safety Summit in September 2022, which brought together key local, regional and national partners.

The key strategic aims agreed were:

- Reduce the number of drownings in Greater Manchester
- Ensure residents and visitors are safe around water when they are in Greater Manchester
- Ensure Greater Manchester residents are safe around water wherever they are
- Increase awareness of the risks of open water
- Help people enjoy water related activity in a safe manner.

The 10 borough Water Safety Partnerships that form the GMWSSP are in the process of conducting a comprehensive Risk Review of all significant water risk locations within their districts. This involves following a simple inspection methodology and rating all risks as Low, Medium, High or Very High risk. Following the Risk Review, the Water Safety Partnership will use this to develop a Water Safety Action Plan with actions against every individual risk location. It is expected that these initial Risk Reviews will be completed by all Water Safety Partnerships by year end 2025/6.

The GMWSSP supports the promotion of key water safety messages both locally and nationally by sharing NWSF and Water Safety England-backed campaigns and assets. These include Float to Live (RNLI), Make the Right Call (NWSF), Don't Drink and Drown (RLSS UK), Find Your Float for World Drowning Prevention Day 2025, and various seasonal water safety messages.

Supported campaigns and assets

Water Safety Partnerships are encouraged to create local projects and campaigns as well as support national campaigns in water safety. There are several agreed campaigns that are supported by Water Safety England and can be promoted across local areas. Using such assets ensures consistency across the country through Water Safety Partnerships.

Communications toolkits also exist on the following topics:

- Ice safety
- Running and walking
- Heatwaves

Respect The Water

Respect The Water is the NWSF's overarching campaign identity for public-facing water safety communications and campaigns in the UK. The Respect The Water brand is used to tie together a diverse range of water safety messages from the NWSF, its member organisations and other external partners, increasing the reach, frequency and consistency of nationally agreed water safety messages.

Float to Live

Float to Live is the RNLI's flagship water safety campaign educating people on what to do if they find themselves in trouble in the water. The campaign emphasises the importance of fighting your instinct to swim and instead tells you to float on your back, allowing you to wait for the effects of cold shock to pass and regain control of your breathing before shouting for help or swimming to safety.

World Drowning Prevention Day

World Drowning Prevention Day takes place annually on 25 July. Established by the World Health Organization in 2021, it is a global advocacy event that aims to highlight the devastating impact of drowning on families, individuals and communities, as well as the lifesaving interventions that prevent it.

Water Safety England supports World Drowning Prevention Day every year – you can find the most recent campaign and resources on the [**Respect The Water website**](#).

Education Framework

Water Safety England also have an Education Framework which spans all curriculum phases and can be utilised by schools and teachers in the local area.

In practice

Mini Blue Light Project

Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service Safer Communities and Interventions Team worked with GMWSSP and Wigan Borough Council to run the Mini Blue Light Project. This involved coordinating a water safety event for young people at Howe Bridge Leisure Centre in Atherton. Students had water safety input from the Safer Communities and Interventions team, as well as a session in the pool with leisure centre staff. They learnt how to float, took part in throwline activities, and were taught some poolside first aid.

The education programme promotes positive behaviour change in young people from the Higher Folds estate in Wigan. By developing their resilience, knowledge and understanding, the programme promotes improved self-confidence and self-esteem. It also aims to break down barriers and address challenges between blue light services and the local community. There are plans to replicate this approach in other boroughs, with the potential to roll out across the whole of Greater Manchester. The GMWSSP also supports the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service annual summer water safety campaign.

Conclusion

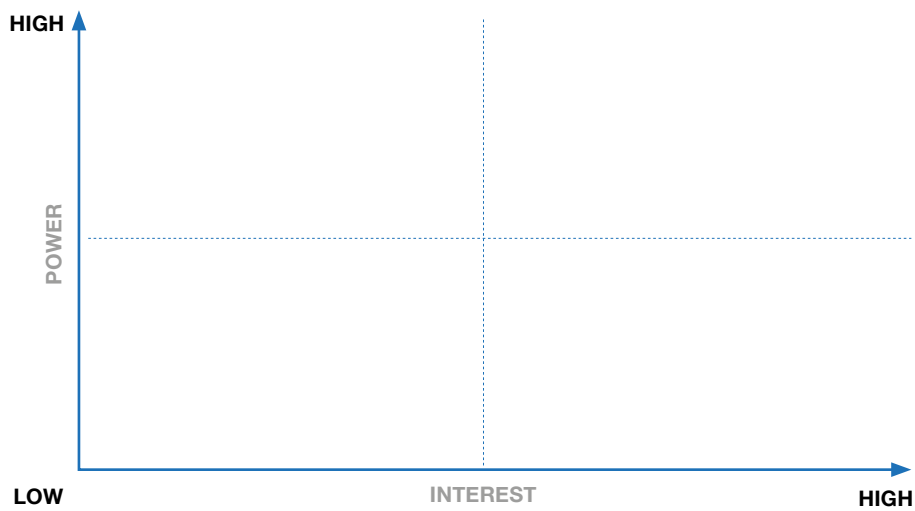
Local areas and regions have a pivotal role to play in ensuring effective delivery of drowning prevention work in the UK. Water Safety Partnerships provide the link between the national strategic direction and local implementation, working directly with communities and organisations to deliver both national and bespoke local initiatives.

Water Safety England has an aspiration to work nationally, regionally and locally with Water Safety Partnerships across England. Although there is no one single method for the creation and development of a Water Safety Partnership, this document provides step by step guidance on how an area may go about creating a functional and impactful one.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Stakeholder analysis

Stakeholder Analysis – Power-Interest Grid



Appendix 2 – Agenda template

[insert Water Safety Partnership name]

Agenda

[insert date]

[insert time]

[insert location]

Agenda item	Lead
Welcome and introductions	
Previous minutes and actions	
Data insights and new trends	
Delivery and promotion of water safety education assets	
Update from local authority on water safety policy	
Communication and event plans	
Update from Suicide Prevention lead	
Local to National link	
AOB	
Next meeting	

Appendix 3 – Terms of Reference

It is recommended the following to be included in the Terms of Reference for a Water Safety Partnership:

- Name of the group
- Aims of the group
- Geography of the group
- Governance and election of a chair
- Meeting frequency and arrangements
- Quorum
- Reporting and accountability
- Members of the group (and how members join)

Useful resources

Local Government Association. **Water safety toolkit**. www.local.gov.uk/topics/community-safety/watersafety-toolkit

National Water Safety Forum. **The UK drowning prevention strategy** 2016–2026. 2016. www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/strategy

National Water Safety Forum. **Water Safety Partnerships Guidance**. 2024. nationalwatersafety.org.uk/media/1390/water-safety-partnerships-guidance.pdf

RoSPA. **Managing safety at inland waters**. www.rospace.com/leisure-safety/water/inland

RoSPA. **Water Safety Policy: A Guide**. 2025. watersafetyscotland.org.uk/media/fvzaon3h/water-safety-policy-a-guide.pdf

The Drowning and Incident Review Dashboard tracks and reports on drowning fatalities in Scotland. It is updated monthly.

The Water Incident Database (WAID) tracks and reports on drowning and other water-related fatalities. Annual and bespoke reports, including community incident analysis, can be accessed via www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/waid

Water Safety Scotland. Guidance for Chairing a PAWS group. 2025. watersafetyscotland.org.uk/media/atzobak5/wss-partnership-approach-to-paws-guidance.pdf

Water Safety Wales. Establishing a Water Safety Partnership. 2025. nationalwatersafety.org.uk/media/1453/establishing-a-water-safety-partnership-guidance-document-v2.pdf

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