



**Towards zero drownings: a future where everyone
in England can be safe in, on and around the water**

England's Drowning Prevention Strategy

2026-2030

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Foreword

To be added.

Introduction

Water Safety England (WSE) is a voluntary network of organisations and individuals with expertise in drowning prevention, that work together to reduce death by drowning and water-related harm. As part of The National Water Safety Forum (NWSF), WSE provides a national mechanism for collaboration in England, helping to obtain data, align activity, share learning and support a more consistent, evidence-informed approach to drowning prevention.

Every life lost to drowning has long-lasting impacts on families, friends, communities, public services and the wider society and economy. In England 2,306 people died in water-related fatalities¹ between 2019 and 2023 and at least 5,464.3 years of life are lost each year to accidental drowning, with an estimated societal cost of around £327,858,000 annuallyⁱ. These impacts are unevenly distributed, with younger people bearing a disproportionate burden—leading to a significant loss of human potential.

England’s relationship with water is shaped by extensive coastline, busy beaches and a wide network of rivers, canals, lakes and open water sites. Drowning is not just a “coastal problem”, and the risk is not confined to recreation; many incidents happen in inland waterways and during everyday, unplanned encounters with water such as walking near rivers and canals or visits to the coast.

Drowning prevention in England is further complicated as responsibilities for water safety are shared across numerous landowners and evolving layers of local government with differing roles, remits, resources and priorities. This variation creates inconsistencies in practice with no single statutory organisation having overall responsibility for drowning prevention in England.

Over the last decade and guided by the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy (UK DPS)ⁱⁱ, WSE and its partners have made significant progress in drowning prevention by improving education resources, developing local partnership approaches and delivering high-impact campaigns. Global action has also spotlighted the issue, and in 2021, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the first ever resolution on global drowning preventionⁱⁱⁱ, recognising drowning as preventable, and calling for coordinated, multisectoral action. In response, the World Health Assembly (WHA) adopted its first drowning prevention resolution in 2023, supported by the UK, with a commitment to accelerate action on drowning prevention with immediate effect, this promoted the World Health Organization (WHO) to establish the Global Alliance (GA) for Drowning Prevention and publish the first Global Strategy for Drowning Prevention in 2025^{iv}.

Design note: A diagram illustrating the progression from Global → UK → National (England) will be added here.

¹ For the purposes of this strategy, the terms ‘drowning’ and ‘water-related fatalities’ are used interchangeably to describe deaths that occur in water.

Despite these positive actions, drowning remains a persistent cause of harm and loss of life in England. Ongoing and emerging risks and possible solutions such as changing recreational patterns, extreme weather, new technology and shifting social behaviours, mean we must remain vigilant, current and maintain our efforts in the areas of drowning prevention and water-related injuries. Drowning remains a preventable cause of death requiring urgent, coordinated action. Drawing on global guidance, and learning from the previous UK strategy^v, this WSE Drowning Prevention Strategy sets out a clear framework for England that is rooted in our risks, delivery landscape and opportunities to prevent harm.

Aligned to the NWSF's UK wide approach, the strategy is intended to help turn global ambition into practical action in England—strengthening collaboration, improving consistency, and focusing effort. WSE must not work in isolation; real progress will depend on shared ownership across sectors, organisations and communities. Working together to optimise and integrate valid efforts to reduce drowning risk, prevent water-related harm and save lives.

Anyone can drown; no one should.

Understanding the issue

Data are essential for understanding drowning, offering insights into patterns, environments and behaviours that relate to and help identify risks, guide targeted interventions and support ongoing monitoring of impact. The figures below are drawn from the WAID Enhancement Project (v2) dataset for 2019–2023.

Design note: This section will be presented as an infographic.

Key data insights

- Over the five years 2019–2023, there were 2,306 water-related fatalities in England
- Accidental outcomes² accounted for 42% (957 people)³, averaging 191 accidental fatalities per year whilst 38 per cent (874 people) were suspected suicide⁴, 19 per cent were inconclusive (448 people) and 1 per cent were crimes
- The five-year average accidental fatality rate was 0.34 per 100,000 people
- Eight in ten accidental fatalities are male; accidental drownings were most frequent in males aged 20–29
- Most accidental fatalities occurred at inland waters (59%); rivers were the leading inland location, followed by canals/aqueducts
- Coastal locations accounted for 35% of accidental fatalities, overwhelmingly at the coast/shore/beach

² Accidental refers to accidental and natural cause outcomes.

³ Calculations include rounding, which account for apparent differences.

⁴ WSE will work with suicide prevention experts and networks to ensure any contribution is compassionate, evidence-led and aligned with national and local suicide-prevention plans.

- Domestic locations accounted for 6% of accidental fatalities; within domestic settings, 43% occurred in baths
- 39% of accidental fatalities occurred in summer
- 47% of fatalities occurred during recreational activity⁵; swimming was the most frequent recreational activity
- 41% of accidental fatalities occurred during everyday activities; walking was the most frequent everyday activity
- Alcohol/drugs were reported as present in 34% of accidental fatalities; at rivers the proportion was higher (reported in 39%).

From insight to action

Once obtained, high quality comprehensive and valid data on drowning can be analysed and interpreted to identify interventions that have the greatest potential to reduce drowning. The global strategy framing of people, places and contexts, and combinations thereof, can help in this regard; but is intended to guide and focus, not exclude. It recognises that organisations have different roles, capabilities and expertise, and that tailored, customised action in key areas can help prevent more drownings. At the same time, the strategy addresses all drownings and water-related harm—no life, setting or circumstance is excluded. The long-term vision remains clear: reduce risk wherever it occurs and move towards zero drownings.

Design note: This section will be presented in three boxes.

People: Patterns of drowning differ by life stage, behaviour and vulnerability. In England, males—particularly those aged 20–29—experience a disproportionately high burden of accidental drowning, making this an important group for targeted prevention where organisations are well placed to influence behaviour, understanding and risk awareness. At the same time, preparing children and young people to be safer in, on and around water as they grow, gain independence and encounter a wider range of environments remains an essential “lesson for life”.

Places: Inland waters, especially rivers and canals, account for most accidental fatalities in England. Coastal environments, particularly beaches and the shoreline, also remain a major source of harm. Within domestic settings, a more targeted focus is also needed where baths account for a substantial proportion of fatalities in the home.

Contexts: A significant proportion of drowning happens during everyday, unplanned exposure to water, such as walking near rivers and canals, being alongside coastal paths or shorelines, or being in familiar environments where hazards may be underestimated. These contexts matter because prevention systems are often weakest where risk is not recognised. Understanding the

⁵ Recreational activity refers to adventure sports, angling, boating (other), motorboating, sailing, waterside activities.

circumstances in which people unexpectedly encounter danger is therefore essential to designing effective prevention approaches.

Vision

Our vision is: *Towards zero drownings: Building a future where everyone in England can be safe in, on and around the water.*

Outlined below is a summary of the key values and functions defined in the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy. These form the foundation of this strategy, guiding its direction and ensuring consistency with national priorities.

	VISION	Towards zero drownings: A future where everyone in the UK can be safe in, on and around the water.
	MISSION	The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy sets out the NWSF's key principles for preventing drowning by informing consistent and complimentary strategies across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
	VALUES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaboration• Equity• Informed action• Compassion
	SUPPORTING FUNCTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Data and evidence• Communication• Education• Policy

Table 1: The principles underpinning the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy

Using these principles as a foundation and informed by the key areas for action identified in the earlier “key data insights” section, this strategy establishes clear priorities and targeted interventions to reduce drowning. The primary functional groups of WSE, which are consistent with the UK strategy, are:

- Evidence, Insight & Data: providing high quality data on which to base decisions and actions

- **Communications & Campaigns:** communicating and coordinating water safety messaging
- **Education, Technical & Engagement:** providing educational content, technical advice and a two-way exchange of relevant information to those engaged in drowning prevention.

The remainder of this strategy sets out specific aims, objectives and actions, which will be translated into targeted projects delivered through the functional WSE groups as part of this strategy. This is illustrated in Figure x.

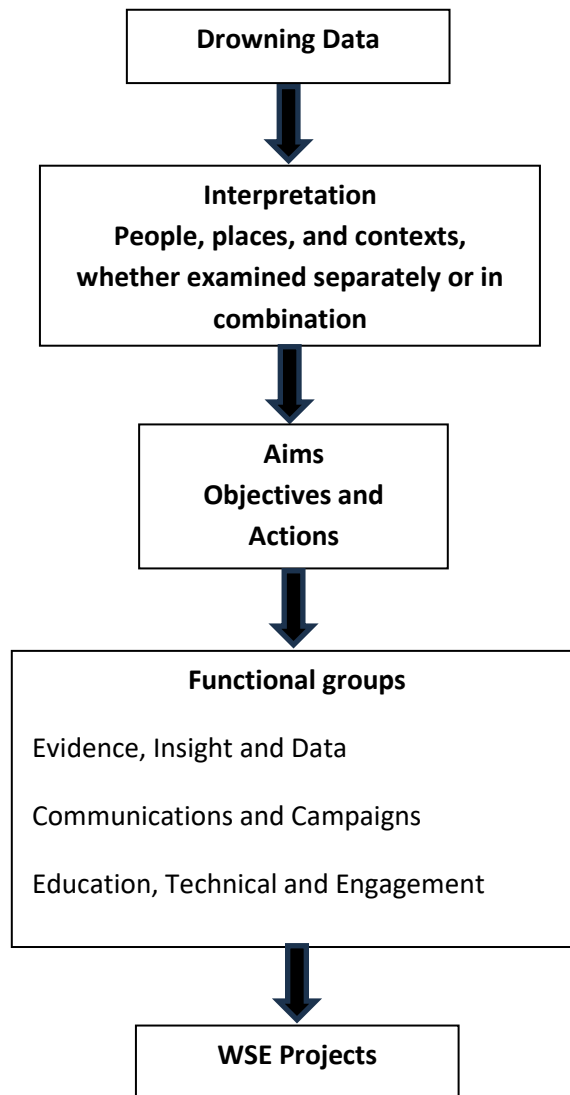


Figure x: England's Strategic Delivery Framework

Aims

To achieve our vision, WSE will work collaboratively with members and non-members of WSE to focus on the following aims. Each aim is supported by objectives and the main actions we expect to take, with delivery led by one of the supporting WSE functions. These aims are not listed in priority order.

- Strengthen data, evidence and insights to drive targeted action, measurable impact and continuous improvement in drowning prevention
- Put people affected by drowning at the heart of prevention
- Create equitable and inclusive opportunities for children and young people to learn water safety knowledge and swimming skills
- Educate people on how to stay safe in, on and around water through targeted awareness and knowledge building interventions
- Promote clear responsibility and proactive water-related risk management
- Understand how to adapt our approach to drowning prevention in response to changes in climate, water use and new technology
- Strengthen high-level leadership, influence and advocacy for drowning prevention
- Support efforts to reduce water-related suicide.

AIM

Strengthen data, evidence and insights to drive targeted action, measurable impact and continuous improvement in drowning prevention

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Secure the long-term future of the Water Incident Database (WAID) and provide comprehensive reporting on water-related fatalities

- Complete the development of the WAID system to ensure long-term sustainability
- Work with the coronial system to improve the completeness of the WAID dataset
- Collate, analyse, and publish WAID water-related fatality data annually in line with data governance best practice
- Explore methods for near real-time incident reporting and data sharing with appropriate partners.

Improve understanding of non-fatal incidents

- Investigate, develop, and pilot methods for capturing and reporting non-fatal water-related incident data.

Advance the evidence-base and research capacity for water safety in England

- Develop, maintain and implement a research agenda in priority areas and issues of concern in drowning prevention
- Review and incorporate learning from Prevention of Future Deaths notices to improve the quality and depth of insight
- Develop predictive methods for forecasting incidents to inform proactive interventions
- Develop a comprehensive evaluation framework for members to assess interventions and projects.

AIM

Put people affected by drowning at the heart of prevention

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Bring lived experience into delivery of drowning prevention

- Provide a clear and consistent way for people affected by drowning to shape future water safety priorities and messaging
- Provide appropriate care, support and stewardship to individuals who become water safety advocates.

Improve support and signposting for people affected by drowning incidents

- Improve clarity and consistency of support pathways by mapping current provision and issuing clear signposting
- Ensure partners have clear, up-to-date guidance on the support pathways through regular review and maintenance.

AIM

Create equitable and inclusive opportunities for children and young people to learn water safety knowledge and swimming skills

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Advocate and help the government to ensure every child receives equitable, age-appropriate and consistent classroom-based water safety education

- Publish and implement a National Competency Framework and Education Pathway to support consistent, age and stage appropriate delivery of the water safety code across a range of settings
- Agree an age-and-stage framework with partners, map existing resources to it, and publish a simple guide for schools and partners

- Align and embed evidence-based water safety education within teaching materials, training and CPD to support consistent delivery of statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education requirements
- Promote and enable the ongoing development of inclusive evidence-based methods and resources to tackle inequalities and increase access to water safety education in a variety of contexts and in support of a range of learning needs.

Advocate and help the government to ensure all children learn to swim through school swimming lessons

- Enable all swimming providers to embed and promote age and stage appropriate water safety messaging through effective use of the national competency framework and education pathway
- Support and contribute to collective efforts that advocate for sufficient, high-quality aquatic and swimming participation opportunities
- Support and promote work by partners to increase access to, and the development of, evidence-based methods to support inclusive swimming and water safety through key national projects and campaigns.

Improve support for key groups so learning informs safer decisions in higher-risk places and situations

- Promote stronger links between schools, colleges, universities and community partners (including family hubs, leisure providers, youth organisations, emergency services) to reinforce learning beyond the classroom
- Support consistent messaging during key stages of childhood such as early secondary school and late adolescence, when independence increases
- Promote and enable place based local strategies that recognise adolescence and seasonal weather changes as key periods of increased risk
- Enable partners to support an increased and inclusive offer for children and young people to experience swimming and water safety in an open water environment through immersive and outdoor learning.

AIM

Promote clear responsibility and proactive water-related risk management

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Work collaboratively with local authorities and landowners to ensure all have an active and effective water safety policy

- Analyse and report on the adoption of water safety policies
- Engage with relevant landowners and provide relevant guidance on policy and risk management

- Prioritise action by working closely with duty holders and relevant partners in areas with high frequency drowning locations or areas of emerging risk.

Strengthen and sustain Water Safety Partnerships across England by establishing a direct pathway between national and local level activity

- Establish a model for Water Safety Partnerships with a direct conduit between national, regional and local areas
- Strengthen regional coordination in areas where shared governance of waterways and risk systems will improve effectiveness
- Provide relevant guidance and data to enable Water Safety Partnerships to implement good practice and address community-specific risk
- Members of WSE to actively support Water Safety Partnerships in the areas they operate.

AIM

Educate people how to stay safe in, on and around water through targeted awareness and knowledge building interventions

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Develop and deliver impactful and evidence-based water safety campaigns to individuals and communities, with a particular focus on high-frequency locations, groups and emerging risks

- Develop data-informed campaigns that target high frequency **places, people and contexts** where drowning is most common
 - Places e.g. rivers, canals and coastal beaches
 - People e.g. 20 -29 year old men
 - Contexts e.g. everyday unplanned exposure to open water
- Support and amplify UK-wide water safety campaigns by NWSF and WSE partners, and support global awareness initiatives like World Drowning Prevention Day
- Support practical bystander rescue skills for relevant duty holders in high-footfall waterside settings
- Pilot parent/carer water safety webinars focusing on everyday risks, supervision and what to do in an emergency.

Ensure safety messages and advice are consistent, equitable and inclusive so water safety knowledge is accessible to all

- Develop toolkits and standardised advice for key water-related activities and risks and support consistent use of key messages

- Develop an inclusive approach to extend the reach and relevance of lifesaving water safety messages to people and communities who need them most.

Regularly review and evaluate water safety campaigns and guidance to ensure accuracy and strengthen future approaches

- Implement proportionate evaluation for WSE supported campaigns and communications in an annual report
- Consistently review and update water safety advice and resources to ensure they align with the latest drowning prevention data, research and expertise.

AIM

Understand how to adapt our approach to drowning prevention in response to changes in climate, water use and new technology

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Track and report how climate change, extreme weather, changing water and new technology is influencing emerging drowning risk

- Develop a consistent definition for climate-related drowning risk, taking into account drownings that occur during declared heatwaves, major flooding events and winter storms
- Build climate and exposure analysis into WSE research priorities and share learnings with resilience, local government and public health partners
- Share examples of new technology or changing water use that may create risks or opportunities for drowning prevention

AIM

Strengthen high-level leadership, influence and advocacy for drowning prevention

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Support UK wide advocacy to secure ministerial support for the UK DPS and aligned national strategies

- Develop an advocacy plan grounded in evidence, incorporating all relevant stakeholders and informed by a clear theory of change, to identify the policy levers and changes required to significantly reduce drownings.
- Develop a concise England focused Ministerial briefing to support the UK-wide advocacy plan

Identity and influence multi-sectoral partners who can contribute to drowning prevention

- Update any relevant WSE guidance to reflect emerging risks and promote sector-wide best practice guidance
- Strengthen collaboration with partners and duty holders to embed drowning prevention across relevant agendas, sectors and programmes.

AIM

Support efforts to reduce water-related suicide

Brief intro to be added

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Share place-based insight to support suicide-prevention leads and responsible authorities to reduce risk in and around water environments

- Explore options for sharing WAID insights with suicide prevention partners and support the ethical consideration of environmental measures at priority locations
- Develop and maintain connectivity with the suicide prevention sector to contribute to its prevention and to protect responding emergency services.

Ensure all reporting and learning is conducted in a safe, sensitive and responsible manner, aligned with established suicide prevention good practice

- Align Water Safety England outputs with Samaritans' media guidance^{vi} and local suicide prevention plans, with an internal review prior to publishing suicide-related content.

Monitoring, evaluation and review

Regular monitoring, evaluation and review are essential to ensure this strategy remains relevant and drives appropriate action. WSE will review progress annually through its Steering Group and will work with the NWSF to align reporting and learning across the UK nations, while also sharing insights and learning with international partners.

WSE will also review and report periodically on the adoption of water safety policies in high-risk local authority areas (for example, every five years) to support learning, accountability and targeted improvement.

Acknowledgements

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- Carlene McAvoy (RoSPA)
- Professor Mike Tipton (University of Portsmouth)

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References

ⁱ Reference to be added (not currently published)

ⁱⁱ National Water Safety Forum (2026). The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy 2026 - 2030. Available online: <https://nationalwatersafety.org.uk/strategy>

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations General Assembly (2021). Global drowning prevention: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly (A/RES/75/273), 29 April 2021.

^{iv} Global Alliance for Drowning Prevention (2025). Global strategy for drowning prevention. Available online: <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/global-strategy-for-drowning-prevention--turning-the-tide-on-a-leading-killer>

^v National Water Safety Forum (2016). The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy 2016 – 2026. Available online: <https://nationalwatersafety.org.uk/media/1005/uk-drowning-prevention-strategy.pdf>

^{vi} Samaritans (n.d.) Media guidelines for reporting suicide. Available at: <https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/media-guidelines-reporting-suicide/>