



water safety
Northern Ireland

Towards zero drownings: building a future where everyone in Northern Ireland can be safe in, on and around the water

Northern Ireland's Drowning Prevention Strategy 2026-2030





Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
Understanding the issue (data and context)	6
Vision and mission	7
Aims	8
Monitoring, evaluation and review	11
Acknowledgements	12
Appendix	13
References	14



Foreword

Drowning remains one of the most preventable causes of death, yet it continues to take a devastating toll on individuals, families and communities. Each incident represents not only a loss of life, but a profound and lasting impact on those left behind. When considered through the lens of years of life lost, the scale of this impact becomes even more stark, with thousands of potential years of life lost each year across the UK, often affecting younger people and those in the prime of life. As such, drowning prevention demands sustained attention, collaboration and evidence-informed action.

Northern Ireland is defined in part by its rich and diverse aquatic environments, from its coastline to its rivers, lakes and inland waterways. These environments offer significant social, economic and health benefits, but they also present inherent risks. Managing these risks effectively requires a coordinated and inclusive approach that brings together partners across sectors and communities.

This Northern Ireland Drowning Prevention Strategy sets out a clear and purposeful framework for action. It is grounded in the best available evidence and aligns with both the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy and the emerging global approach to drowning prevention. Importantly, it reflects the specific context of Northern Ireland, recognising the need for local solutions supported by national coordination.

What is particularly encouraging about this strategy is its emphasis on partnership. Water Safety Northern Ireland (WSNI) has established a strong foundation as a multi-agency collaboration, recognising that no single organisation can address drowning in isolation. The commitment to shared data, consistent messaging, education and targeted interventions is essential if meaningful progress is to be achieved.

The strategy also acknowledges the complexity of drowning. It is not solely an issue of water safety, but one that intersects with public health, behaviour, environment and, in some cases, mental health. Addressing this complexity requires compassion, insight and a willingness to engage with difficult issues, principles that are clearly embedded throughout this document.

The ambition of **Towards zero drownings** is both bold and necessary. Achieving it will require sustained commitment, innovation and accountability. Crucially, it will depend on translating strategy into action, ensuring that policies, education and interventions reach those most at risk and make a measurable difference.

I commend all those involved in the development of this strategy and encourage all stakeholders, across government, communities and organisations, to play their part in its delivery. By working together, sharing knowledge and maintaining focus on prevention, it is possible to reduce the burden of drowning and create safer environments for all.

Professor Mike Tipton, Chair of National Water Safety Forum

Introduction

Northern Ireland is a country of spectacular coastlines and beautiful inland waterways, many of which attract residents and tourists all year round. With a population of a little under two million residents, it is home to 250 miles of coastline – including the UNESCO-listed Giant’s Causeway – with the UK’s largest freshwater lake, Lough Neagh, numbering among its many rivers, canals, lakes, and loughs. But whilst communities in Northern Ireland benefit greatly from their relationship and proximity to these waterways, they also present risks.

Water Safety Northern Ireland (WSNI) is a voluntary network of organisations and individuals working together to reduce death by drowning and water-related harm. It was established in late 2023 and is in its early development phase, seeking government support. Drowning is a preventable public health issue that has a devastating impact on families, friends and communities. Every drowning is a tragedy and places a significant burden on society through years of life lost – 2023 data show 495.9 years of life lost each year to drowning in Northern Ireland¹. It is clear, therefore, that more must be done to ensure a reduction in water-related deaths.



Figure 1: Relationship between global, UK and Northern Ireland's Drowning Prevention Strategy



In 2025, the Global Alliance for Drowning Prevention, which was established in response to the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on global drowning preventionⁱⁱ, created the first ever Global strategyⁱⁱⁱ. The National Water Safety Forum (NWSF), of which WSNI is a member, has adapted this strategy into a UK-specific approach that reflects how impact is achieved across the country. This is outlined in the NWSF's UK Drowning Prevention Strategy^{iv}, which sets out guiding principles for the UK nations while maintaining a clear connection to global objectives.

Northern Ireland's strategy aligns with the UK, ensuring it is grounded in the practical realities of delivery in Northern Ireland, while remaining consistent with the aims and priorities of the global strategy. Crucially, the Northern Ireland Drowning Prevention Strategy takes new steps to engage partners and communities across Northern Ireland to work together to reduce water-related fatalities and drowning deaths.

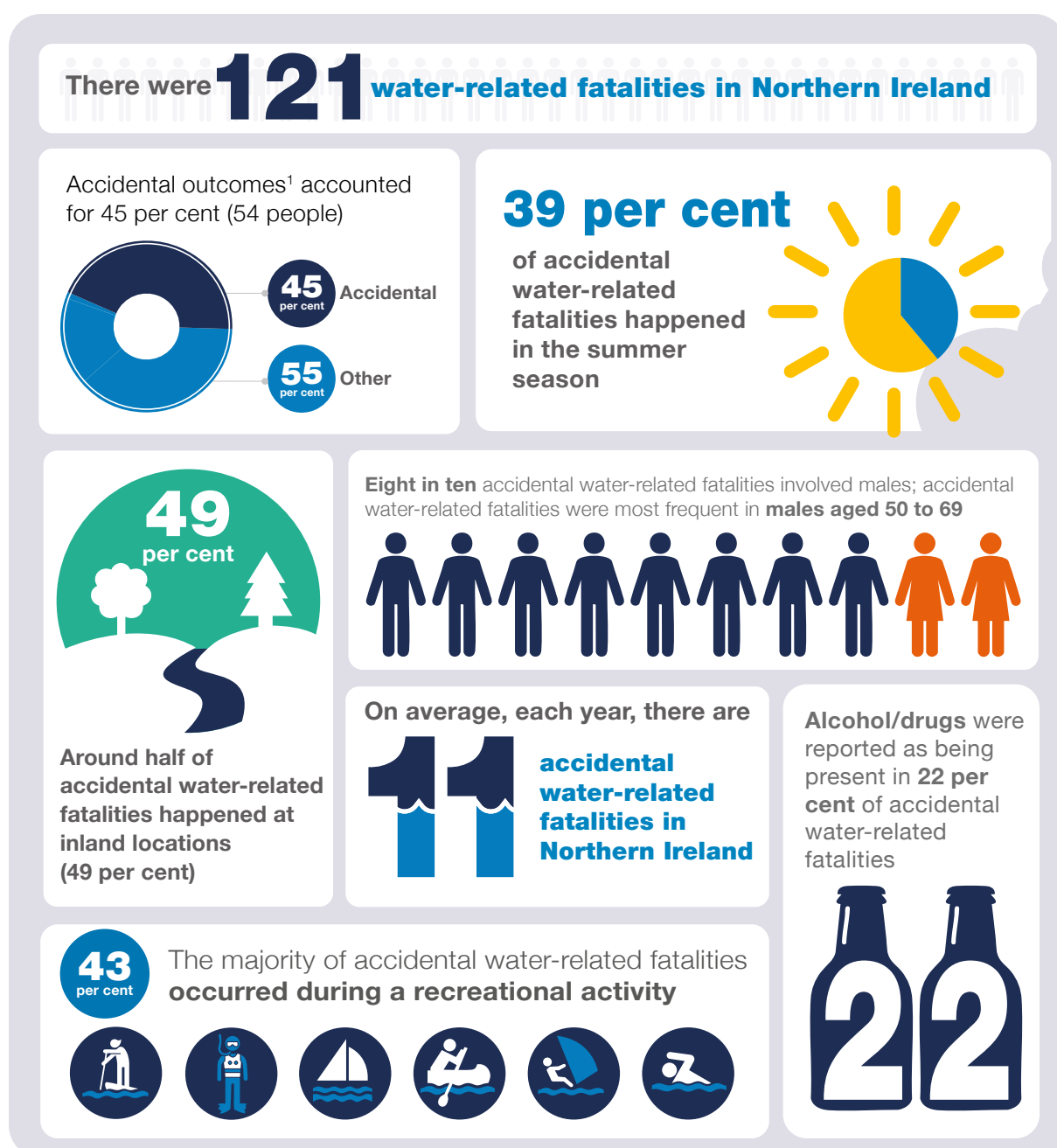


Understanding the issue (data and context)

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

Key data insights

Over five years (2019 to 2023):



A full data analysis is available for Northern Ireland: [Northern Ireland Drowning Prevention Strategy 2026 Annex 1: Northern Ireland Data Tables](#)

¹ Accidental refers to accidental and natural cause outcomes.



Vision and mission

Our vision is:

Towards zero drownings: building a future where everyone in Northern Ireland 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 Strategyⁱⁱⁱ. These form the foundation of this strategy, guiding its direction and ensuring consistency with national priorities.



VISION

Towards zero drownings: building 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 complementary strategies across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.



VALUES

- Collaboration • Equity
- Informed action • Compassion



SUPPORTING FUNCTIONS

- Data and evidence • Communication
- Education • Policy

Figure 2: The principles underpinning the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy

Aims

The following aims will achieve the vision of **Towards zero drownings: building a future where everyone in Northern Ireland can be safe in, on and around the water.**

- Promote a consistent, collaborative approach to water safety
- Increase education and awareness across all communities
- Use data to identify and address risk
- Promote safe participation in water activities
- Secure government support and engage families.

AIM 1

Promote a consistent, collaborative approach to water safety

WSNI will continue to build on the foundation it has set since 2023, engaging partners across Northern Ireland to establish a consistent, national approach to drowning prevention. As local organisations best understand the specific risks in their communities, WSNI will support partners to develop their own local water safety plans and partnerships, providing national coordination and advice in line with NWSF guidance.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

- Strengthen WSNI as a multi-agency partnership, engaging with counterparts in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland
- Develop local and appropriate water safety plans using adapted NWSF guidance for inland and coastal risk management.

AIM 2

Increase education and awareness across all communities

Education and communication are vital to improving water safety awareness. WSNI will ensure people in Northern Ireland have access to clear advice on water-related risks, promote inclusion of swimming and water safety in the curriculum, as well as support public campaigns that deliver targeted, evidence-based messages for high-risk behaviours.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

- Integrate water safety into education, advocating for swimming and water safety in primary and secondary curricula, including water competence and self-rescue skills (e.g. Float to Live and Water Safety Code) through both pool and classroom-based education.
- Address climate-related risks and partner with experts to anticipate and mitigate emerging hazards.

Deliver targeted campaigns:

- Promote public-facing water safety campaigns under the Respect the Water brand (e.g. Phone Float Throw).



- Leverage Water Incident Database (WAID) data and professional insight to focus on high-risk locations and behaviours
- Support partner initiatives, such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's (RNLI) Float to Live, Royal Life Saving Society UK's (RLSS UK) Drowning Prevention Week, National Fire Chief Councils' Be Water Aware Week, and World Drowning Prevention Day
- Promote the consistent use of nationally agreed water advice on social media by both WSNI and partners
- Highlight everyday risks, educating the public on common scenarios such as ending up in the water unexpectedly and heat-related dangers.

AIM 3

Use data to identify and address risk

The collection and analysis of data provide valuable insights into patterns, risks and behaviours that can inform targeted interventions to reduce drowning incidents. Strengthening data collection on fatalities, rescues and near misses will help identify high-risk groups and locations, enabling more focused prevention efforts and improving water safety across Northern Ireland.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

- Enhance data collection by contributing to and using the WAID for fatal and non-fatal incidents
- Produce annual Northern Ireland-specific reports to identify trends and inform interventions
- Target high-risk groups and locations, focusing on vulnerable demographics (e.g. young men, disadvantaged communities, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities or mental health challenges)
- Improve understanding of water-related suicide and suicidal behaviour by working with mental health experts to inform prevention strategies.

AIM 4

Promote safe participation in water activities

WSNI seeks to ensure that everyone in Northern Ireland can enjoy its coastal and inland waters safely. WSNI will collaborate with national governing bodies and organisations responsible for sport and tourism to develop consistent and comprehensive guidance on the responsible use of water environments, alongside resources that highlight the risks and good practice associated with popular water-based activities.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

- Encourage responsible recreation by collaborating with sports bodies and tourism organisations to promote safe practices
- Provide activity-specific guidance and develop safety codes for popular activities (e.g. stand up paddleboarding) in collaboration with national governing bodies
- Create a digital hub for resources, campaigns and incident trends.

AIM 5

Secure government support and engage families

Consistent government support is essential for reducing drowning rates. WSNI will campaign for named and sustained government backing of drowning prevention in Northern Ireland, ensuring that the voices of those with lived experience of loss to drowning are foregrounded as we advocate for meaningful change compassionately and sensitively.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

- Advocate for sustained government backing, including financial support, drawing on successful models in Wales and Scotland
- Work with bereaved families to incorporate lived experience and storytelling into prevention efforts, potentially through a dedicated forum.

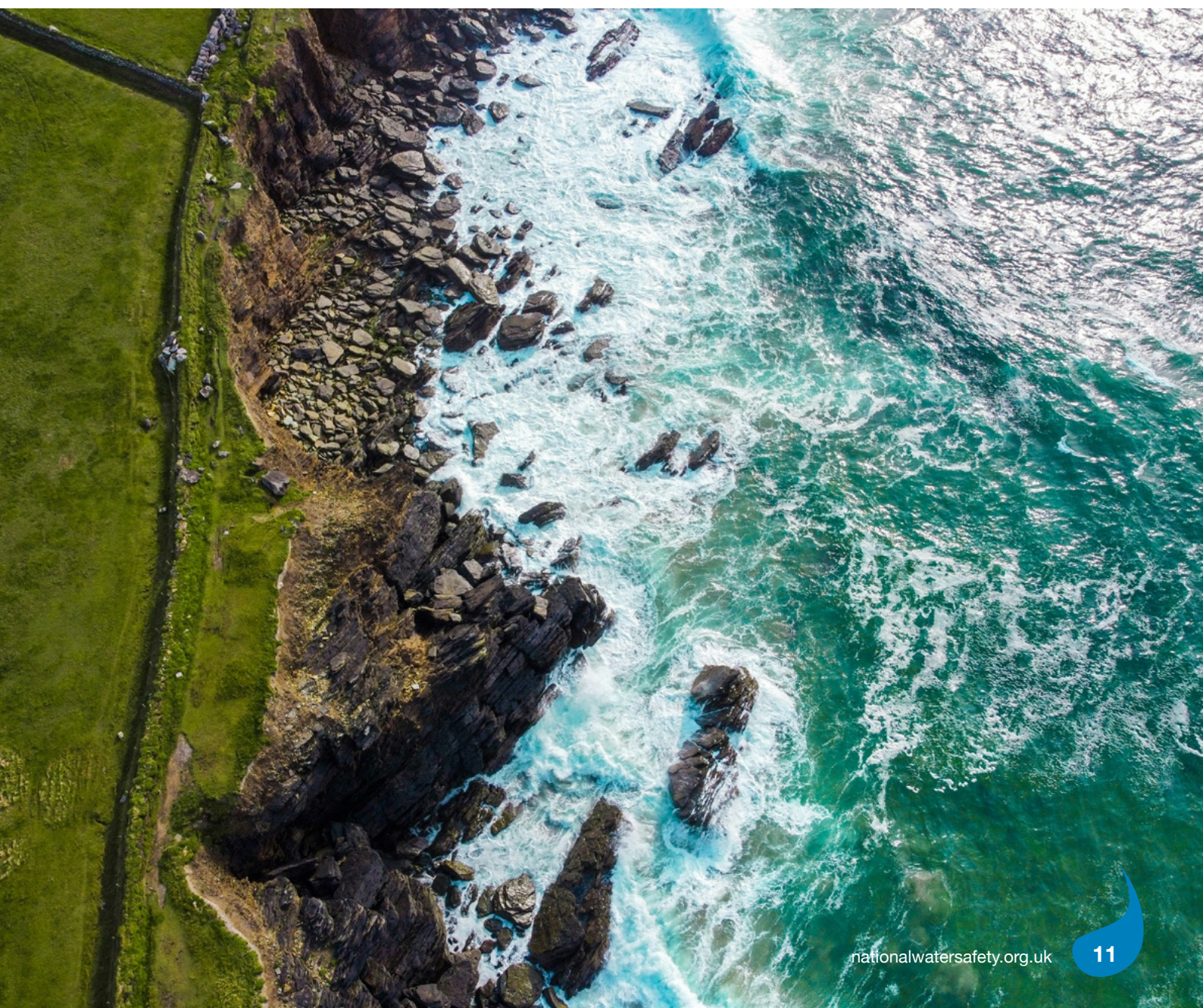




Monitoring, evaluation and review

Regularly monitoring, evaluating and reviewing this strategy, its framework and function are essential to ensuring its continued relevance and usefulness with changing demands, trends and technologies.

WSNI will review this strategy annually, with a full evaluation in 2030. KPIs will be developed to measure progress. WSNI will also work with the NWSF annually for a full UK review of the strategic framework.



Acknowledgements

This document was developed and written by members of Water Safety Northern Ireland (WSNI), including, but not limited to:

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, Ards and North Down Borough Council, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, Department for Infrastructure, Derry City and Strabane District Council, Local Resilience Team, Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), Mental Health Champion Northern Ireland, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Mid Ulster District Council, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS), Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), Royal Yachting Association (RYA), Sport NI, Swim Ulster, Waterways Ireland.





Appendix

Notes on the data

WAID data

All data used are from WAID 2019 to 2023 (v2) unless otherwise noted.

Population rate figures use ONS mid-year data from the Mid-2024 edition of the data.

Overall water-related fatalities include: accidental, suicide, crime and inconclusive. Accidental fatalities refers to suspected/confirmed accidental causes and natural water-related causes.

Suicide fatalities refers to suspected/confirmed suicide causes.

Inconclusive refers to incidents where intent has not been able to be categorised.

Where figures have been excluded due to limited information, this has been clearly indicated by category (e.g. n=394; 13 excluded).

WAID taxonomies for activity:

- Commercial activities where the activity of the deceased was recorded as commercial
- Domestic activities where the activity of the deceased was recorded in a domestic/residential setting
- Everyday activities where the deceased did not intend to be in the water (e.g. people who were walking, running and cycling next to water)
- Exceptional activities where the activity of the deceased was recorded as exceptional e.g. person/animal rescue
- Recreational activities where the activity was recorded as sports or a water-based activity.

References

- i. Based on 2023 v2 (enhanced) WAID data and government analysis indicating that each year of life lost is valued at £60,000, as per HM Treasury guidance in The Green Book: Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation (2022).
- ii. United Nations General Assembly (2021). Global drowning prevention: resolution/adopted by the General Assembly (A/RES/75/273), 29 April 2021.
- iii. Global Alliance for Drowning Prevention (2025). Global strategy for drowning prevention. Available online: [who.int/publications/m/item/global-strategy-for-drowning-prevention--turning-the-tide-on-a-leading-killer](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/global-strategy-for-drowning-prevention--turning-the-tide-on-a-leading-killer)
- iv. National Water Safety Forum (2026). The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy. Available online: nationalwatersafety.org.uk/strategy





water safety
Northern Ireland