



**national
water safety
forum**

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

UK Drowning Prevention Strategy 2026-2030





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Foreword

Each life lost to drowning is a tragedy, an avoidable loss that leaves lasting impact on families, friends and communities. Across the UK, the National Water Safety Forum (NWSF) remains committed to reducing these deaths and preventing harm in, on and around the water.

The NWSF, supported by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), has been the conduit and driving partnership behind this strategy. As the collaborative network of the UK's leading experts and organisations in drowning prevention, the NWSF provides a collective voice for water safety organisations and practitioners across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Through partnership working, education, communication and data-driven research, we continue to bring critical water safety issues to the attention of governments, stakeholders and communities.

This strategy builds on the first UK Drowning Prevention Strategy (2016–2026), recognising both the progress achieved and the challenges that remain. It takes a refreshed approach, serving as a “guiding-principles” document that sets out a shared framework for action, rather than a single strategic plan. In doing so, this strategy enables each of the four nations to develop their own strategies that are tailored to reflect their own people, places and contexts, and that respond effectively to local needs. It reflects our belief that a unified vision, combined with targeted national action, offers the strongest foundation for meaningful and lasting change for drowning prevention and water safety.

Our shared ambition across the UK is clear:

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

Achieving this vision for the UK requires collective effort. Everyone has a role to play in reducing drowning deaths. By working together with national leads, emergency services, governments, local authorities, charities, educators, those affected by drowning and the public, we can reach more people and prevent the tragedy that is drowning.

We therefore strongly encourage organisations, communities and individuals across the UK to engage, collaborate and play their part in saving lives. Together, we can make our waters safer and save lives.

Signed on behalf of the National Water Safety Forum and the four UK nations:

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Introduction and background

The United Nations General Assembly recommends that every nation develop a national drowning prevention strategy or planⁱ to reduce and prevent drowning deaths. In 2025, the Global Alliance for Drowning Prevention, which was established in response to the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on Global drowning preventionⁱⁱ in 2021, created the first ever global strategy. The Global Strategy for Drowning Prevention was released in November 2025ⁱⁱⁱ and is the first worldwide framework aimed at reducing drowning deaths through coordinated, evidence-based action.

The National Water Safety Forum (NWSF) aligns with, and fully supports, the Global Strategy for Drowning Preventionⁱⁱⁱ, recognising the importance of its global domains, terminology and overarching framework. The centrality of people, places and contexts as interconnected domains through which drowning prevention impact is achieved is acknowledged. The UK has taken this global strategy and adapted it to its own national context to help create this UK principles document which will be used by the four nations of the UK. The vision, values and supporting functions set out in this UK strategy cut across the global domains and are designed to operate within and contribute to them. As a UK-focused strategy, the document is intentionally organised around supporting functions and the aims they support. This structure reflects how impact is most effectively delivered in the UK context, while remaining consistent with the priorities of the Global Strategy for Drowning Preventionⁱⁱⁱ.



Figure 1: Strategic alignment from Global to the UK



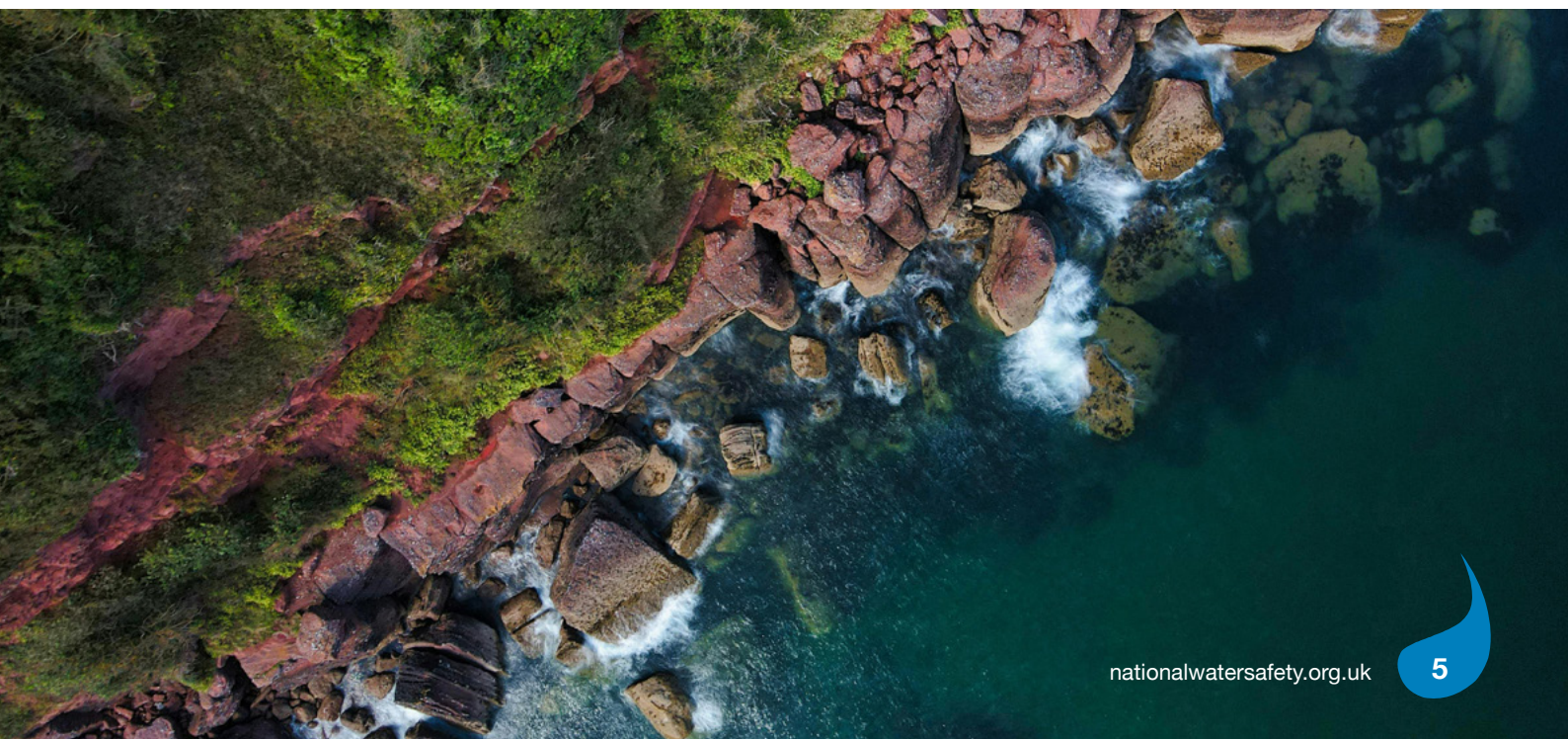
The UK is an island nation with more than 68.5 million residents with access to some of the world's best inland and coastal waters. Sadly however, each year more than 600 people lose their lives to a water-related fatality.

Although the drowning rate in the UK is less than many other countries globally (0.4 per 100,000 people vs a global rate of 3.8 per 100,000 people)^{iv}, the impact of drowning is significant – affecting families, friends and communities, **as well as placing a significant burden on society through the 7,945 years of life lost each year in the UK to drowning, valued at more than £475million each year^v.**

The NWSF is a collaborative and integrated network of the UK's leading experts in drowning prevention, including those with responsibility for and experience of all aspects of drowning and its prevention. It provides a collective voice into government for water safety organisations and practitioners across the UK, helping identify and resolve key issues related to drowning through education, communication and data-driven research. The NWSF offers the structure and governance needed to ensure that drowning prevention is effectively managed and coordinated across the UK while also promoting the sharing of best practices and lessons learned.

Over the last decade, the NWSF and its partners have been working, in many cases voluntarily, to develop important initiatives to prevent drownings, including the release of the first ever UK Drowning Prevention Strategy^{vi}. A recent review^{vii} provided insights into many of these successful initiatives, including guidance on the creation of water safety partnerships, immersive swim programmes, free education resources for schools, guidance for the management of water safety, and establishing and promoting national campaigns such as Respect The Water.

The coordinated efforts of the NWSF and its partners have managed to prevent an ongoing increase in drowning deaths in the UK, despite increasing pressures from a growing population, climate change and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which have led to more people engaging in outdoor water-based recreation across the nation's coastal and inland waterways^{viii}. More must therefore be done to ensure a reduction in water-related deaths.

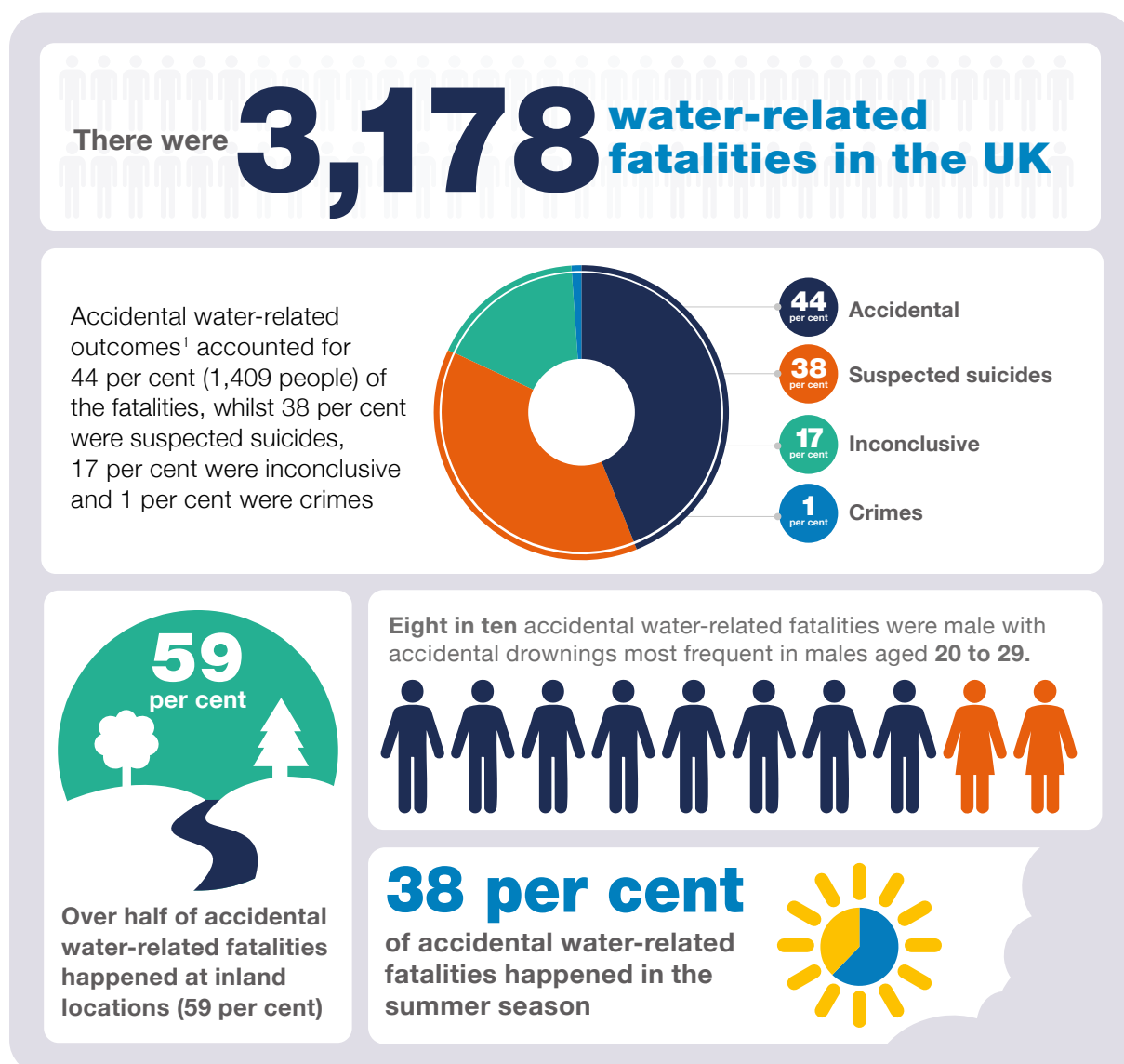


Understanding the issue

Data play a critical role in understanding the issue of drowning by providing insights into patterns, risks and behaviours which can help to inform targeted interventions to save lives. Data collection systems are the first essential step to preventing drowning because they establish the scale of the problem and allow for prioritisation and optimisation of targeted interventions to those most at risk. To be of use, such data must be complete, valid and quickly available.

Key data insights

Over five years (2019 to 2023):



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

¹ Accidental refers to accidental and natural cause outcomes.

² Recreational activity refers to adventure sports, angling, boating (other), motorboating, sailing, waterside activities.



On average, each year,
there are at least

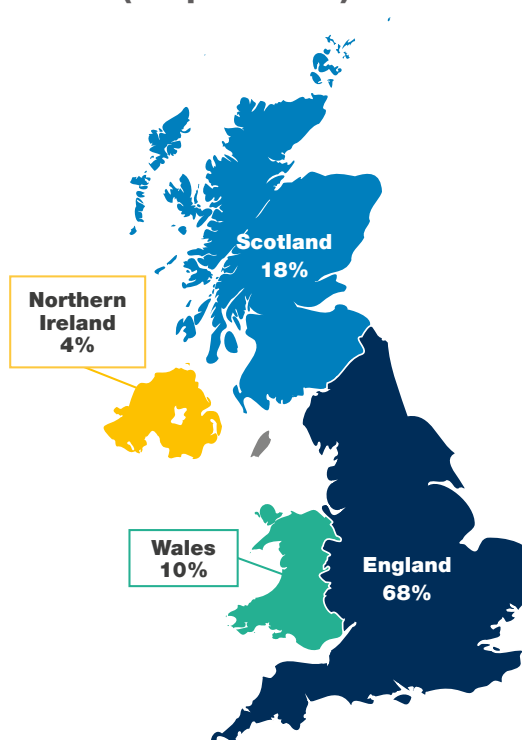
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● accidental water-related
fatalities in the UK

Alcohol/drugs were reported
as being present in **31 per cent**
of accidental water-related
fatalities



Across the UK nations,
England accounted for most
accidental water-related
fatalities over the five-year
period (68 per cent)



The majority of accidental water-related fatalities
occurred during a recreational activity²



46
per cent

The strategy

This strategy succeeds the first UK Drowning Prevention Strategy (2016–2026)^v. It differs in that it does not provide specific actions or targets. Instead, it serves as a “guiding-principles” document, providing a broad strategy with agreed principles for each of the UK nations to adopt and to tailor implementation.

Our Guiding Principles are embedded in our vision, mission, values and supporting functions for the UK (Figure 2). This framework is based on decades of expertise and collaboration, including consultation with organisations and families with lived experience.

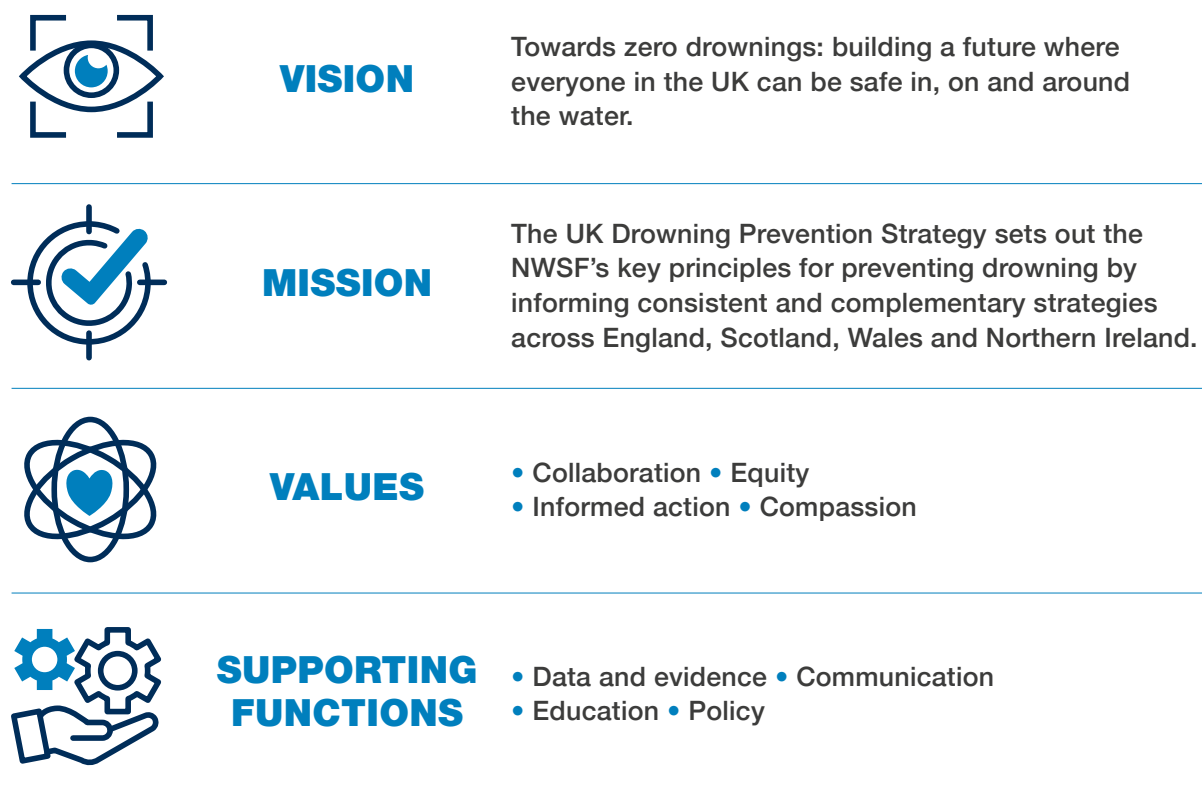


Figure 2: The principles underpinning the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy



The work of the NWSF, enacted collectively and collaboratively through the individual nations, focuses on four core values. These should be considered nationally, regionally and locally at every action level.

Collaboration: Drowning is complex and its prevention involves multiple individuals and organisations locally and nationally. Collaboration across multiple sectors is fundamental to ensuring consistency and alignment.

Equity: Drowning prevention should be equitable, ensuring that all communities have fair/appropriate access to lifesaving resources and safe environments.

Informed action: Actions to prevent drowning should be evidence-based, informed by research, and regularly evaluated to measure effectiveness and guide policy decisions.

Compassion: Drowning affects many people and communities, and prevention efforts should be empathetic and guided by the experiences of those who have been directly affected.

The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy has four key supporting functions for achieving its vision (Table 1).

Data and Evidence	Accurate, complete data with relevant knowledge and experience are fundamental to informing effective and optimised preventative practice that helps to keep people safe around UK waterways.
Education	Equipping people with knowledge, skills and experience in water safety, swimming, water competency and related technical aspects will contribute to their safety in, on and around the water.
Communication	The promotion of water safety-awareness campaigns and advocacy will help drive forward and disseminate critical drowning prevention advice and behaviours.
Policy	Facilitating collaboration between government, landowners and other responsible parties to ensure proactive management of risks in and around water.

Table 1: Key supporting functions for achieving the vision

Monitoring, evaluation and review

The contents of this strategy should represent a framework that guides and informs the work of the NWSF and the four nations to help ensure an integrated and coordinated approach to drowning prevention. 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.

The NWSF will review this strategy annually through its Steering Group. The individual nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will review their individual strategies to feed into the full UK review of this strategic framework.





Acknowledgements

This document was developed and written by members of the National Water Safety Forum Steering Group:

- Professor Mike Tipton (National Water Safety Forum and Water Safety England Chair)
- Carlene McAvoy (RoSPA, Water Safety Scotland Founder, National Water Safety Forum Secretariat)
- Chris Cousens (RNLI, Water Safety Wales Chair)
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With thankful contributions from:

- Ross Macleod (RNLI)
- Georgie Beardmore (RoSPA)
- Rachael Brogan (RoSPA)
- Professor Martin Barwood (Leeds Trinity University).

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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.



References

- i United Nations General Assembly (2021). Global drowning prevention: resolution A/RES/75/273. Available online: digitallibrary.un.org/record/3925005?ln=en&v=pdf
- 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
- iv World Health Organization (2024). Global status report on drowning prevention. Available online: who.int/publications/i/item/9789240103962
- v 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).
- vi National Water Safety Forum (2016). The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy 2016–2026. Available online: nationalwatersafety.org.uk/media/1005/uk-drowning-prevention-strategy.pdf
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