

Exploring a Structured Regional Water Safety Framework for England 2026





Introduction

Water Safety England (WSE) is a collaborative network of organisations and individuals dedicated to reducing accidental drownings across the country. Bringing together many of England's leading voices in drowning prevention, WSE works to establish a consistent and coordinated approach to water safety education, communications and data collection, helping to build a future where everyone is safe in, on, and around water.

Water Safety Partnerships play a crucial role in this vision. They form the essential link between national strategic direction and local delivery, ensuring that communities benefit from evidence based, context specific interventions. Following the publication of [WSE's guidance on Water Safety Partnerships](#), the Education, Technical and Engagement (ETE) Subgroup of WSE launched a project to engage with both existing and emerging partnerships. The aim of the project was to understand how best to strengthen the relationship between national leadership and local action and to explore the development of a more consistent WSP model, drawing inspiration from successful approaches in Scotland and local areas of England.

Through this work, the ETE Subgroup aims to enhance coordination, improve impact and support a more connected network of water safety practitioners across England. By working together more effectively, national insight and local expertise can combine to deliver meaningful and sustained progress in drowning prevention.

Methodology

An online survey consisting of 16 questions was developed to gather insights from existing and prospective Water Safety Partnerships. The survey was live from February 10th to March 23rd, 2026, and was designed to explore current structures, needs and opportunities to strengthen the relationship between local partnerships and WSE.

The survey was distributed to all known Water Safety Partnerships identified through the collective knowledge of the WSE Steering Group, with each member contributing details of Water Safety Partnerships from within their networks. To widen reach and ensure strong representation across England, the survey was also disseminated through the Local Government Association Coastal Special Interest Group (LGA Coastal SIG) and promoted by the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) to their local areas.

Survey responses were analysed in Microsoft Excel. Quantitative data were summarised using descriptive methods, while qualitative open-ended responses were reviewed using a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring themes, insights and areas of consensus.

Results

Current Water Safety Partnerships

Respondents were asked whether an active Water Safety Partnership was in place within their area. 86 per cent of respondents reported that they currently have an active Water Safety Partnership, indicating existing structures for local coordination on water safety (see Figure 1). The remaining 14 per cent of respondents stated that no active Water Safety Partnership operates in their area, highlighting some gaps in local provision and opportunities for further development.

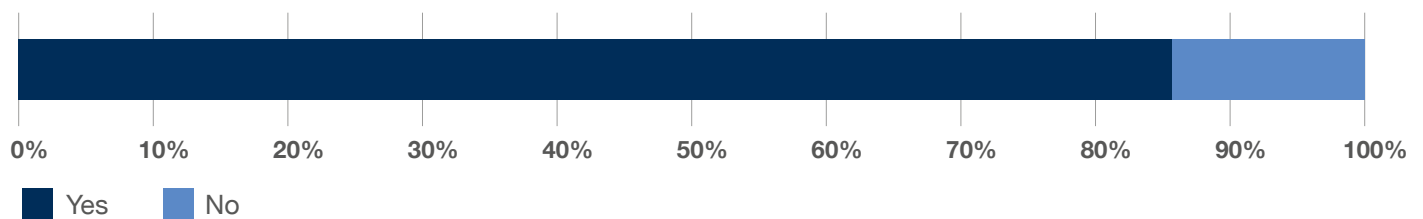


Figure 1: Respondents reporting an active Water Safety Partnership in their area, n=35

Respondents were asked whether they felt there was a need for a Water Safety Partnership in their area. 94 per cent of respondents indicated that a Water Safety Partnership was needed, reflecting a clear recognition of the value that coordinated local water safety activity could bring.

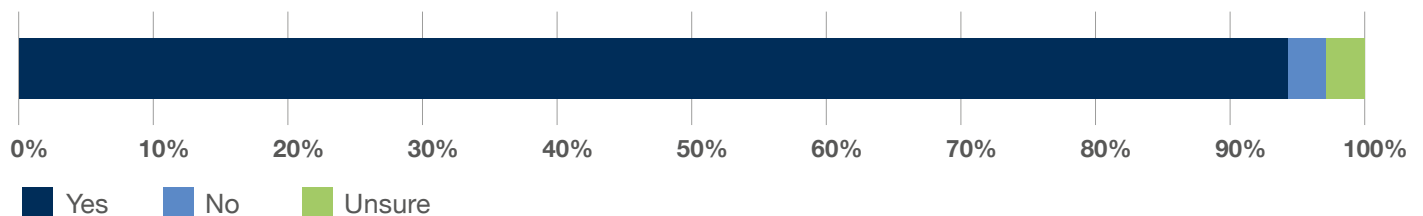


Figure 2: Respondent views on the need for a local Water Safety Partnership, n=35

Respondents were asked who they believed should be responsible for establishing a Water Safety Partnership in their area. The top three organisations mentioned were Fire and Rescue Services, the local authority and Police.

Structure

Respondents were asked whether a more structured approach to improving communication between WSE and Water Safety Partnerships would be helpful. 94 per cent of respondents indicated that such an approach would be beneficial, reflecting a clear need for stronger, more consistent national to local coordination.

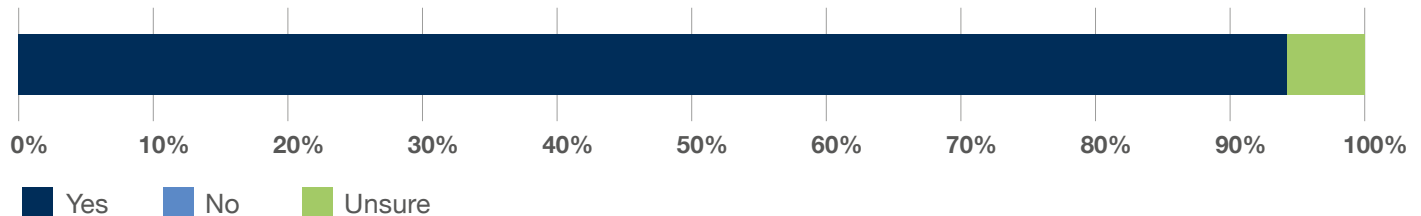


Figure 3: Respondent views on the value of a structured national to local communication approach, n=35

Respondents were then asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “A suitable way to support communication would be for information to flow from the national level, through regional groups, and then to local groups.” 88 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this approach indicating broad support for a structured communication pathway. 6 per cent were neutral and the remaining 6 per cent disagreed.

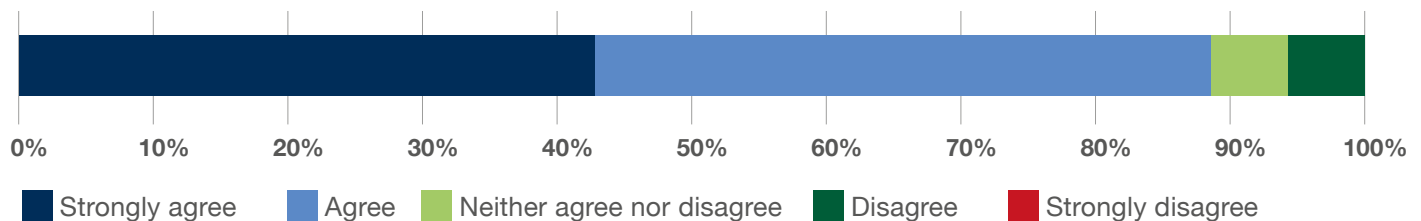


Figure 4: Support for a national-to-regional-to-local communication structure, n=35

Respondents were asked what benefits or opportunities they felt could arise from establishing a regional structure between WSE and local Water Safety Partnerships. Respondents felt that a regional structure would enable clearer and more consistent water safety messaging, better coordination and more effective sharing of best practice. It was believed that this could also help to reduce duplication and ensure more alignment to maximise limited resources.

Respondents were also asked what risks or challenges they associated with introducing a regional structure between WSE and local Water Safety Partnerships. Respondents felt that there could be a potential loss of local focus and that Water Safety Partnerships could become detached from the local community. Concerns were also raised around increased bureaucracy with smaller areas concerned they may be overlooked and their priorities diluted.



Respondents were asked whether they foresaw any challenges or barriers in implementing a regional structure between WSE and local Water Safety Partnerships in the form of a regional Water Safety Group. Respondents highlighted a range of challenges and barriers to implementing a regional structure, most notably limited time, resources and capacity. Respondents also felt differences in regional approaches, government structures and devolution arrangements could complicate this and that there could be a potential loss of local focus, with a danger that the Water Safety Partnership could either become detached from the local community or may be overlooked by any proposed regional Water Safety Group.

Respondents were then asked whether their Water Safety Partnership would be interested in being part of a regional Water Safety Group. 76 per cent of respondents said they would be interested, indicating an openness to greater collaboration and coordination at a regional level. 24 per cent respondents said that they were unsure, reflecting a need for more information about how such a group would operate and the benefits it could provide.

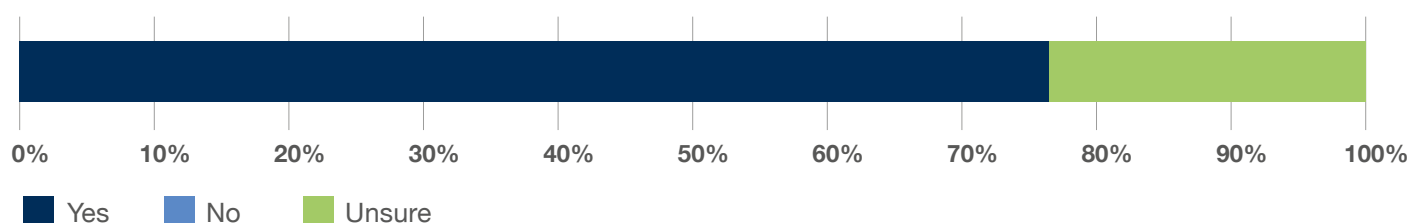


Figure 5: Respondent views on participation in a regional Water Safety Group, n=34, 1 no response

The organisation of potential regional Water Safety Groups

Respondents were asked how they would prefer any future regional Water Safety Groups to be organised. Options included structuring regions based on existing local authority boundaries, geographical features (such as river catchments or coastal areas), emergency service regions, or proposing an alternative approach.

51 per cent preferred the emergency service regions, 31 per cent preferred local authority boundaries followed by 9 per cent who had a preference on geographical features and 9 per cent offered alternative solutions. The alternative solutions included agreement for the emergency service regions, with one respondent suggesting mayoral local authorities as an alternative.

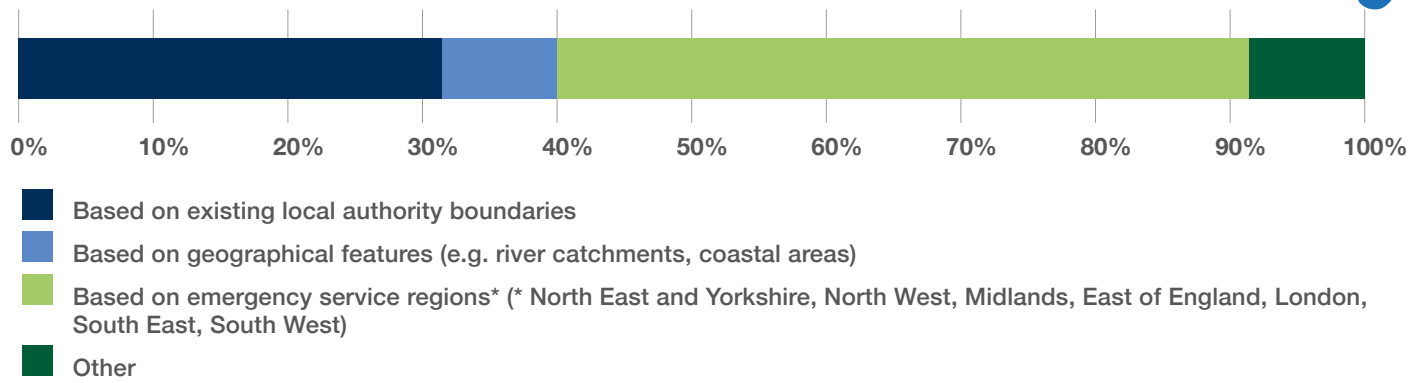


Figure 6: Respondent preferences for the organisation of regional Water Safety Groups, n=35

Impact of local government restructuring

Respondents were asked whether their local authority was currently being affected by local government reorganisation or devolution. 54 per cent of respondents indicated that their area was affected, while 37 per cent were unsure and 9 per cent were unaffected, reflecting varying levels of awareness of restructuring across regions.

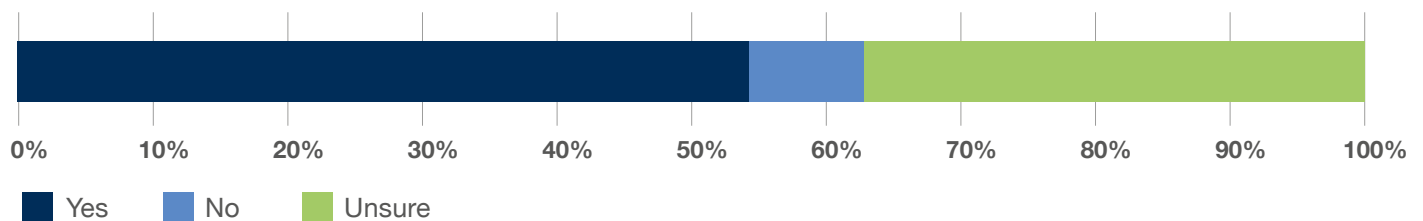


Figure 7: Impact of local government reorganisation or devolution on respondents areas, n=35

For those respondents who indicated that their local authority was being affected by local government reorganisation or devolution, a follow up question asked what impact this might have on their current Water Safety Partnership.

Respondents noted concerns that larger local government boundaries could dilute focus, stretch resources, and risk losing vital local knowledge. The respondents emphasised the need to preserve expertise, maintain continuity and ensure that any new structures are resilient and future proofed.



Support required for a regional Water Safety Groups

Respondents were asked what support their Water Safety Partnership would require to participate effectively in a regional Water Safety Group. The suggestions included:

- The need to secure organisational commitment and resources from key stakeholders
- Clear national guidance, a defined structure for the regional Water Safety Groups, and clarity on roles and responsibilities
- Strong, consistent communication and messaging, including support for WSE communications and sharing of best practice campaigns
- Regular regional meetings (ideally online for efficiency and accessibility).

Finally, respondents were invited to share suggestions on how WSE could facilitate the development of regional Water Safety Groups. The suggestions included:

- Strengthen national leadership and buy in by engaging senior officers, using NFCC, Local Government Association (and its associated Special Interest Groups), National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) and other national forums to encourage attendance and commitment across agencies
- Provide a clear model and offer strategic intent, guidance and templates for setting up regional structures
- Create opportunities for collaboration through webinars, workshops and conferences to share learning and to connect current chairs and groups
- Establish practical support mechanisms, including setting up an implementation subgroup to drive the setup of the regional Water Safety Groups
- Provide communications support from WSE with toolkits and good practice examples.



Discussion

The survey confirmed that the majority of respondents already have a Water Safety Partnership in place, which was expected given that they were the main target group. Importantly however, 94 per cent felt that Water Safety Partnerships are necessary to reinforce the value and relevance of water safety collaboration.

The survey's focus was on exploring a national-to-regional-to-local model, and 94 per cent of respondents agreed that a more structured approach would be beneficial, indicating strong support for coordination. 88 per cent felt that a national-to-regional-to-local structure was a good way forward, providing that it is implemented fairly, supports smaller areas, and does not dilute existing local practice or expertise.

Interest in participating in a regional group was high. 76 per cent said they would be interested while the remainder were unsure, which suggests that most see clear benefits. However, further work may be needed to explain the value and purpose of such a structure to those that are unsure.

In terms of a potential structure for regional Water Safety Groups, 51 per cent preferred emergency service regions, compared with 31 per cent favouring local authority boundaries. Consideration should be given to which of these models is best suited for water safety and drowning prevention purposes.

The survey also highlighted that 54 per cent of respondents are affected by reorganisation and devolution, indicating that shifting governance structures will need to be monitored carefully as the model develops. Respondents also emphasised that for any new structure to succeed, key national organisations such as the NPCC, NFCC and the Local Government Association must be aligned. The need for strong communications support from WSE, a clear operating model, guidance on roles and responsibilities, templates for regional use, and the creation of an implementation subgroup made up of existing Water Safety Partnerships, was also seen as needed.

Recommendations

- Determine the regional boundaries, likely based on emergency service regions or local authority groupings with a clear rationale
- Establish an agreed England-wide water safety partnership framework with key national stakeholders, securing their commitment to work with WSE from national through to local partnership level
- Develop and implement WSE led communications toolkits, best-practice materials, and standardised resources for consistency and efficiency across England
- Produce a model and guidance pack, including terms of reference, templates, role descriptions and expectations for regional Water Safety Groups
- Consult with existing Water Safety Partnerships and establish a working group to support implementation of the new structure.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the survey demonstrates strong support for a more coordinated national-to-regional-to-local approach to water safety. The findings show an appetite for improved consistency, shared guidance and stronger national leadership to support the development of regional Water Safety Groups. With careful planning, communication and collaboration, the proposed structure from WSE offers significant opportunity to improve communication at all levels, whilst protecting local knowledge and strengthening water safety delivery in England.

