



accidents don't have to happen



water safety
England

Local Authority Approaches to Managing Water Safety (England)



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Introduction

This research provides the first full insights into the current management of water safety in England. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) has been at the heart of accident prevention in the UK for over 100 years. The responsibility for managing water safety has been a key policy issue for RoSPA for many years and aligns with the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy (2016–2026) target that –

“every community with water risks should have a community-level risk assessment and water safety plan”.¹

Background

Water safety and drowning prevention have attracted increased public and political attention both globally and nationally. In April 2021, the United Nations General Assembly, for the first time in its 75-year history, affirmed drowning as a preventable global public health issue.² This declaration was supported across the United Kingdom (UK) by the National Water Safety Forum (NWSF), Water Safety Wales and Water Safety Scotland, and aligns with the UK’s Drowning Prevention Strategy.

Water Safety England (WSE), which was established in 2025, is a network of organisations and individuals working together to advance drowning prevention in England. This research falls under the group’s function of Education, Technical and Engagement and aims to advance policy work with local authorities. The report focuses on responsibility for managing water in England and follows a snapshot survey completed in 2021,³ as well as comparable research undertaken in Scotland^{4–6} and Wales.⁷

The report provides the first full insight into how water safety is managed in England and the level of policy commitment. Please note that this report supports the Local Government Associations Coastal Special Interest Group’s forthcoming (2026) report on Coastal and Estuarine Water Safety and Drowning Prevention: A Local Authority Perspective Report which also considers similar research with a focus on coastal local authorities.

Context of the UK

England makes up around a half of the UK’s landmass and has extensive coastlines and tidal estuaries. The country also features a wide variety of inland water bodies, including lakes, reservoirs, canals, rivers, and streams. Both rural and urban communities across England are located close to these water sources.

Drowning fatality data

Data from the Water Incident Database (WAID) show that there were 2,306 water-related fatalities in England between 2019 and 2023. Of these 42 per cent were accidental (n = 957)*. As can be seen in Figure 1, although there have been small decreases in fatalities, it is clear that drowning and water-related harm, such as suspected suicide, are still serious issues for England.

*Calculations include rounding, which may cause minor variances.

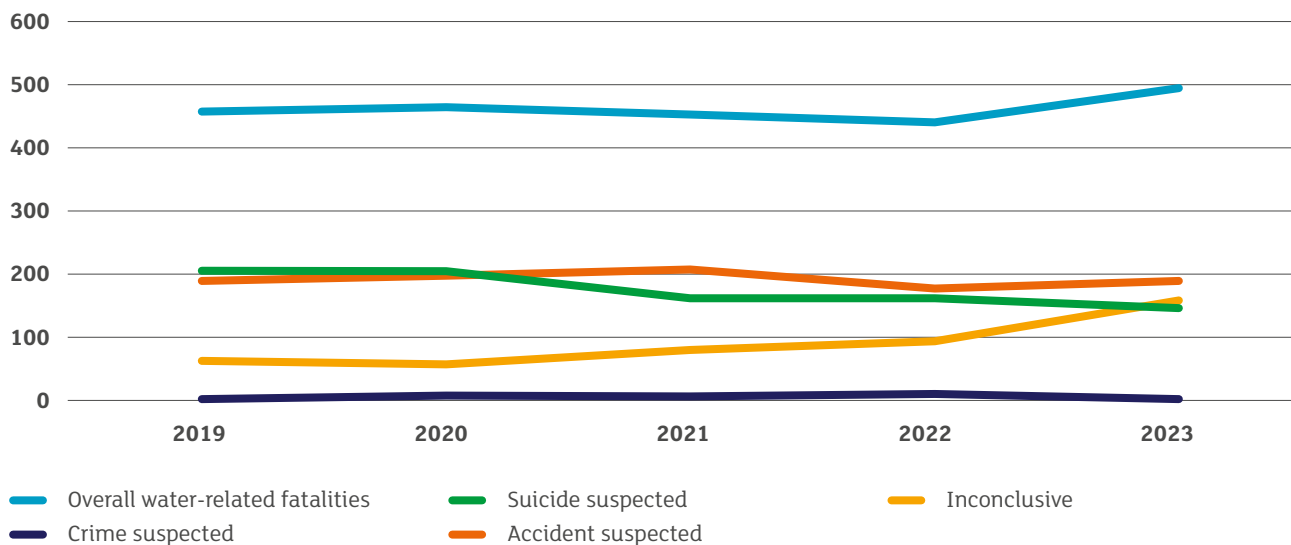


Figure 1: England water-related fatalities, 2019–2023 (Source: WAID)

UK Drowning Prevention Strategy

The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy was launched in 2016 by the NWSF and has two overall ambitions:

- To reduce the number of accidental fatalities by 50 per cent by 2026
- To reduce risk amongst the highest risk population groups and communities.

The strategy has five specific activity areas or themes that it focuses on. One of these is that “every community with water risks should have a community-level risk assessment and water safety plan”. Both Scotland⁸ and Wales⁹ have country-specific strategies, underpinned by the ongoing development of local water safety policies and plans.

As the strategy comes to an end in 2026, the NWSF is preparing the next iteration of the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy. As part of this, WSE will release its first ever nation specific strategy which will include the importance of water safety policies at a local level.

Research aims

This research aimed to understand how local authorities plan for and address drowning prevention activity in their areas.

The key aims of this research were to understand the current picture of water safety at local government level, in particular:

- The responsibility for water safety, current policy arrangements and commitments made towards managing water safety
- To understand shared approaches to the implementation of water safety work.

Methodology

Data sample

The research focussed its approach on the 317 local authorities in England, as this would likely capture the full diversity of the local government landscape. The 317 local authorities encompassed every category of principal authority including: metropolitan districts, London boroughs (including the City of London), unitary authorities and the two-tier areas formed by county, borough and district councils. Given the large number of local authorities, a decision was made to sample the 317 authorities using a 95 per cent confidence level and a 5 per cent margin of error, resulting in the sample size of 174 local authorities. This sample size was intended to help the generalisation of findings, with an appropriate degree of confidence, to England's local authorities.

Data collection

A self-completion questionnaire was used. The online questionnaire and an accompanying letter were sent directly to the Chief Executives of a random selection of 174 local authorities on May 29, 2025.

By October 20, 2025, 91 local authorities had responded. This response rate was lower than anticipated, which limited the robustness of the dataset. To address this issue and ensure comprehensive coverage, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were subsequently submitted to the local authorities that did not respond. This approach enabled the collection of the necessary data from the full cohort of local authorities, ensuring the completeness of the final analysis.

It should be noted that as the survey included all administrative types of councils, in areas governed by unitary authorities, there are no separate district or county councils as the unitary body carries out the responsibilities of both tiers. As a result, when a response was received from a unitary authority, the response was mapped onto the corresponding district and county entries within its jurisdiction. This approach ensured representative coverage without duplication and also accurately reflected England's local government structure.

All FOI and final responses were submitted by January 30, 2026, providing the full 174 respondents.

Analysis

All responses were analysed in Microsoft excel. Charts and graphs have been used to illustrate data due to their easy interpretation. All responses to open-ended questions were thematically analysed and then categorised. All null responses have been noted.

Results

Leadership and organisation

Local authorities were asked whether there was a specific officer, group or committee that deals with water safety within their area.

Half (49 per cent) of the respondents noted that there was a person or department responsible for water safety whilst 44 per cent did not have a person or department responsible. The remaining 7 per cent of respondents stated that responsibility for water safety did not fall within their remit and therefore considered the question not applicable to their local authority (see Figure 2).

Local authorities that responded positively were then asked to expand on who had this responsibility. A range of departments and individuals were identified, with the majority being based within Community safety, the Environment or Health and Safety.

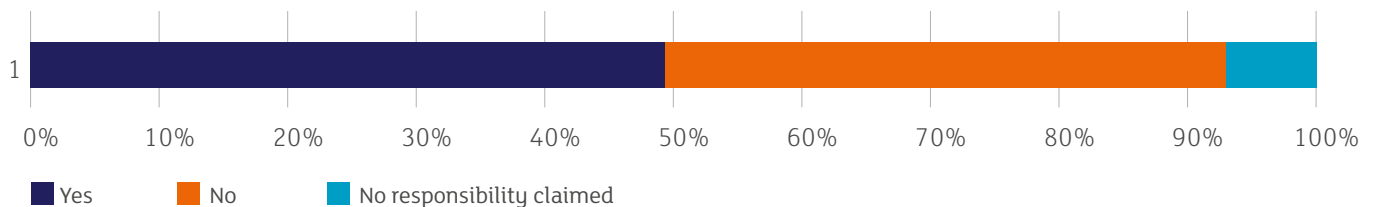


Figure 2: An identifiable water safety lead, n = 170, 4 respondents did not answer¹

Corporate priorities

Each local authority was asked whether they have a specific water safety policy. The majority (52 per cent) noted that they did not have a specific policy, whilst 27 per cent did have a water safety policy and 9 per cent were currently developing a water safety policy. 7 per cent of respondents stated that responsibility for water safety did not fall within their remit and therefore considered the question not applicable to their local authority and 5 per cent of respondents did not know the answer (see Figure 3).

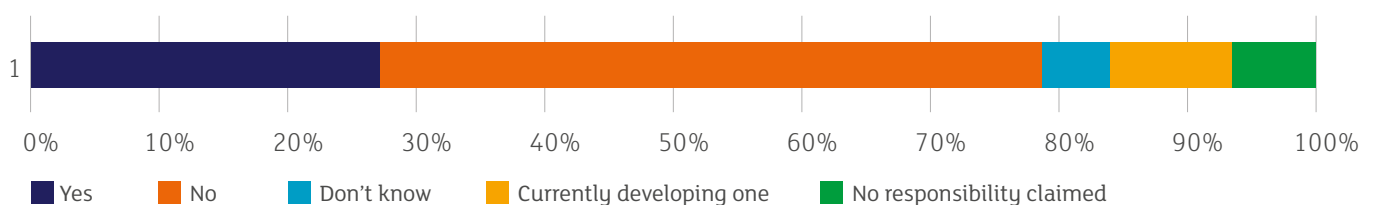


Figure 3: Policy level commitment to water safety, n = 169, 5 respondents did not answer

¹ Where it notes “respondents did not answer” throughout the document, this refers to a non-response to the question referenced.

Good practice

It is recommended that risk assessments are reviewed on a regular basis to take account of technological advances and changes to work practices.¹⁰

Respondents were asked whether they had risk assessed their open water in the last 24 months. 55 per cent of respondents reported that they had (see Figure 4).

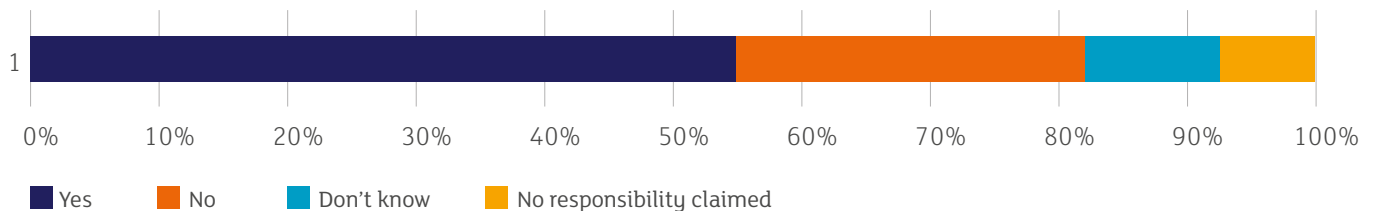


Figure 4: Risk assessments of open water reviewed in the last 24 months, n = 162, 12 respondents did not answer

Key Points:

- **49 per cent** of local authorities had a person or department designated as the lead on water safety issues
- **27 per cent** of local authorities had a policy commitment on the issue
- **55 per cent** of local authorities had risk assessed their open water in the past 24 months.

Partnership working

This section of the report explores partnership working and how local authorities work with external organisations on water safety and drowning prevention.

Inter-agency working

Respondents were asked whether they had a water safety group in their local authority area.

34 per cent had a water safety group (Figure 5).

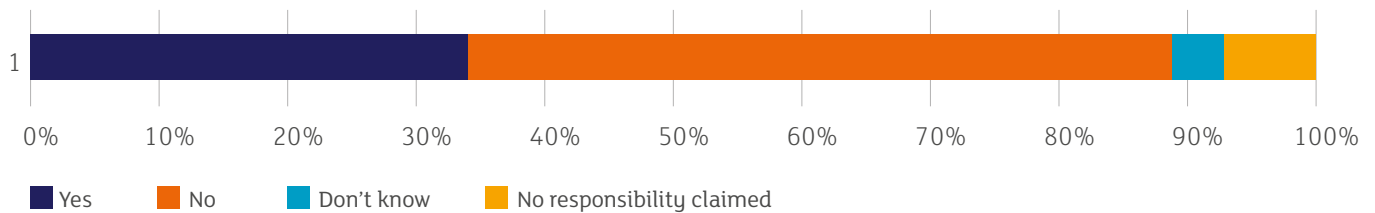


Figure 5: Water safety groups within the local authority area, n = 170, 4 respondents did not answer

Provision of information

Participants were asked if their local authority had run a water safety campaign in the last three years. This was to gain an understanding of what practical work local authorities were doing in water safety. **53 per cent of local authorities had run a water safety campaign in the last three years** (Figure 6).

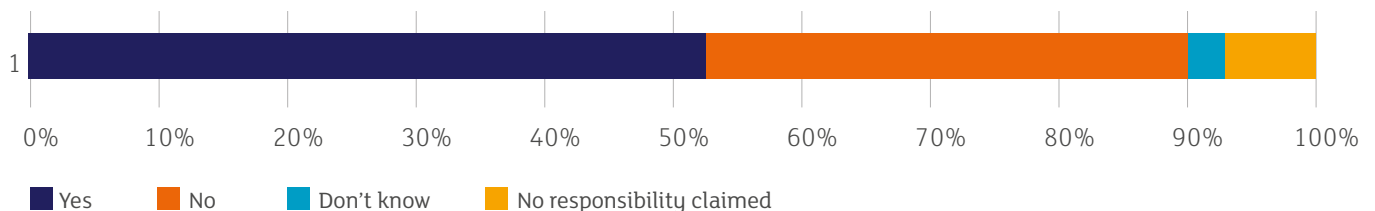


Figure 6: Water safety campaign run within the last three years, n = 171, 3 respondents did not answer

Participants were asked if their local authority provided water safety information to key groups e.g. young people, recreational users in the local area. **63 per cent of local authorities noted that they did provide information to key groups** (Figure 7).

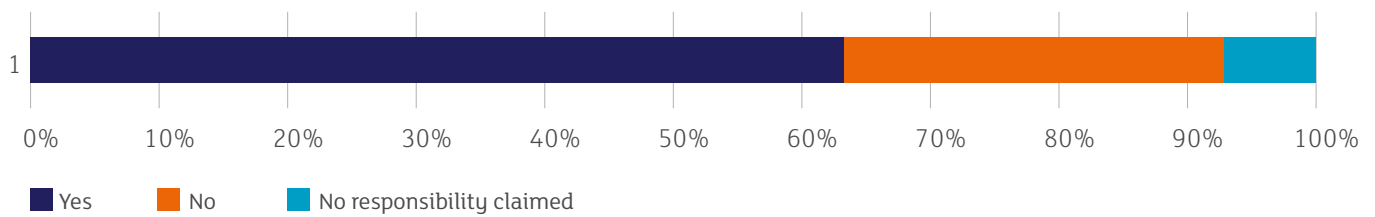


Figure 7: Provision of water safety information to the public n = 169, 6 respondents did not answer

The most common ways in which local authorities share water safety information is through the following methods:

- Social media
- School presentations and demonstrations
- Signage and information boards
- Safety bulletins.

Key Points:

- **34 per cent** of local authorities had a water safety group for the local area
- **53 per cent** of local authorities had run a water safety campaign in the last three years
- **63 per cent** of local authorities provided information to key groups on water safety.

Discussion

This study is the first full insight into the management of water safety in England's local authorities. A total sample size of 174 responses was secured.

Around half of the respondents (49 per cent) noted that there was a person or department responsible for water safety in their local area.

Importantly, the research found that only 27 per cent of local authorities have a water safety policy, a similar figure to the previous snapshot study.³ It is encouraging to note that 9 per cent of local authorities in England are currently developing a water safety policy.

It is recommended that risk assessments are reviewed on a regular basis. This research found that 55 per cent of the respondents stated that they had reviewed their risk assessments of open water in the previous 24 months.

Encouragingly, over half (53 per cent) of the respondents noted that their local authority had run a water safety campaign in the last three years and 63 per cent provide information on water safety to key groups.

However, only 34 per cent of local authorities have a water safety group for their local area despite recent guidance from Water Safety England.¹¹

Notably, several local authorities reported that water safety was not within their remit, noting that responsibility lay with another local authority, the Environment Agency, the National Fire Chiefs Council, or were unclear. This suggests a lack of clarity regarding legal responsibilities for water safety and the role of local authorities in England in delivering these functions.

Recommendations

Following these results, we propose the following key recommendations:

- Local authorities that do not currently have a policy should aim to have one by 2030 (in line with England's Drowning Prevention Strategy, due to release July 2026)
- WSE and RoSPA should consider hosting a workshop for local authorities on how to develop a water safety policy, as well as promoting currently available guidance
- WSE should continue to promote the need for water safety groups and provide assistance to ensure a link between local and national strategic direction
- WSE should consider providing a suite of resources including social media material, communication assets and consistent signage to improve consistency across England's local authorities
- The legal responsibilities for water safety across local authorities and relevant agencies should be clarified with accountabilities and responsibilities placed on agencies, landowners and local authorities.

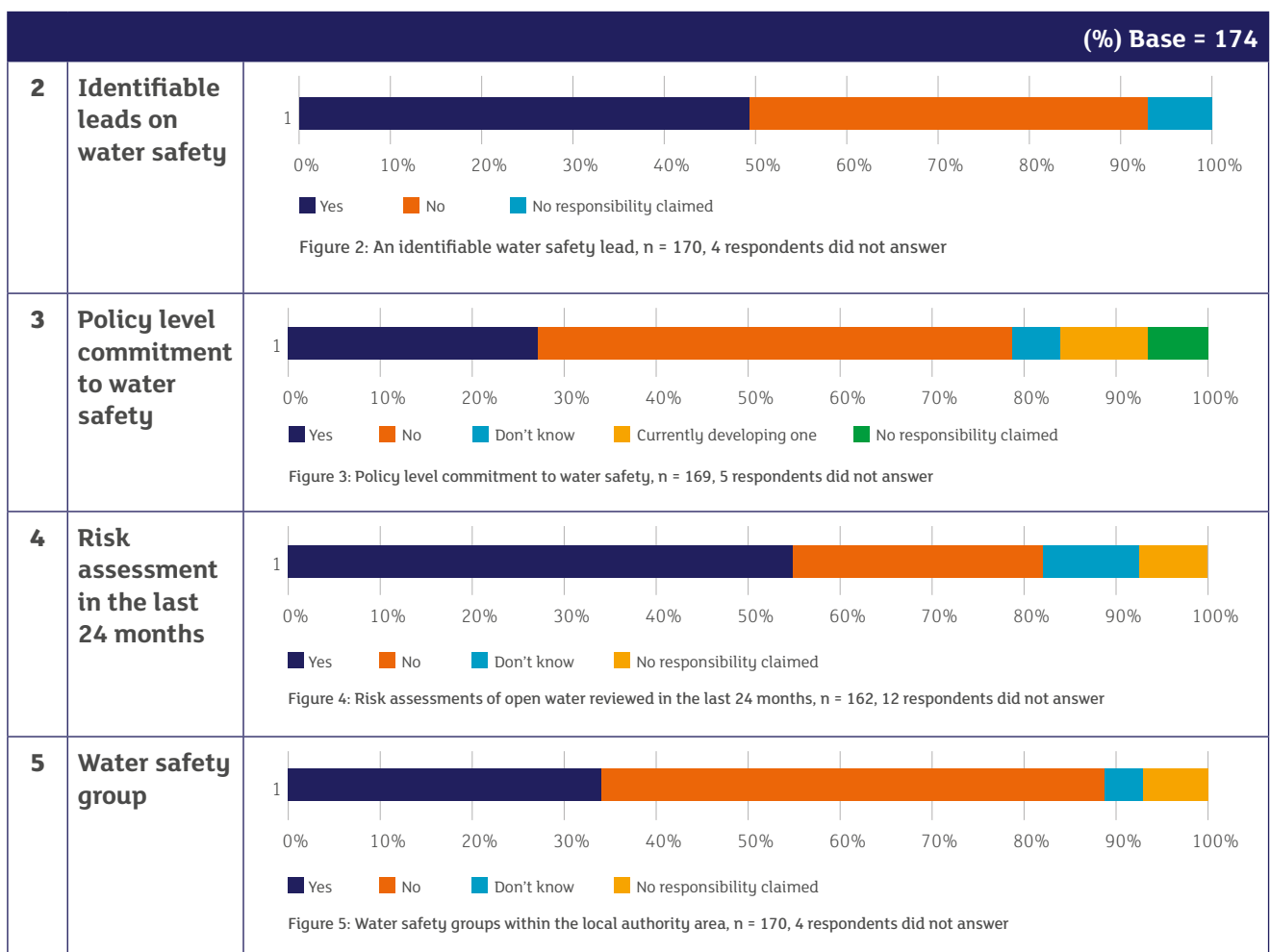
Conclusion

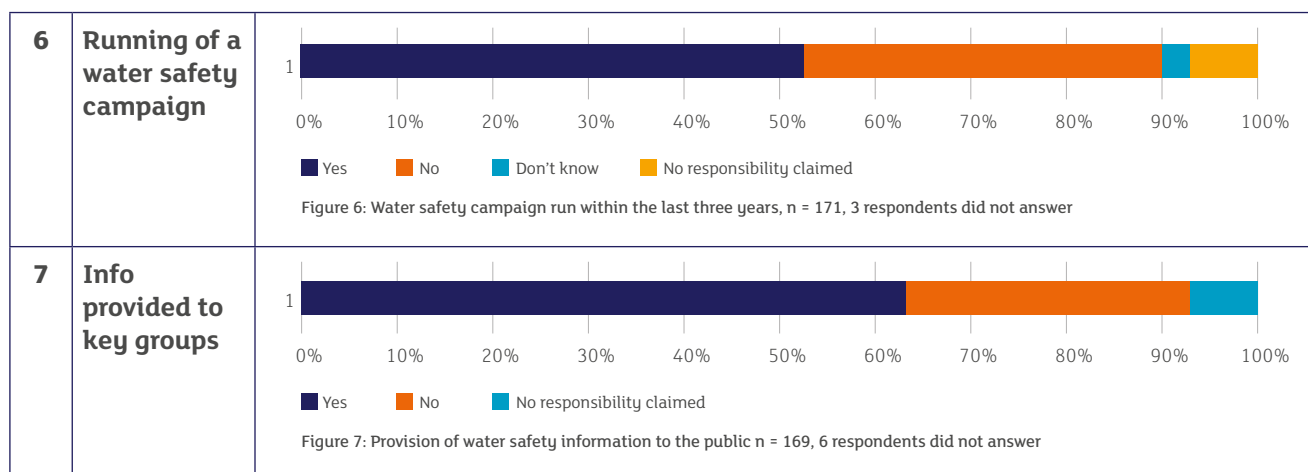
This research aimed to provide the first full insights into the current management of water safety locally across England. It is concluded that many local authorities are involved in water safety and recognise the importance of the topic. However, many do not have specific policy-level commitments on the issue.

We have proposed a number of recommendations to help local authorities strengthen their approach to water safety and prioritise the importance of drowning prevention.

Appendix 1

2025 Key results dashboard





References

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