

Public Rescue Equipment usage at open water sites

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Introduction

Public Rescue Equipment (PRE) is often promoted as a central intervention within drowning prevention, yet its availability, effectiveness and impact are not well understood. Whilst there are regular calls from the media for increased provision of lifebuoys, throw lines and other rescue equipment, the evidence supporting their effectiveness is not always clear and their successful use relies on several factors outside the control of landowners and duty holders. This short paper provides a high-level overview of Water Safety England's perceived benefits and limitations of PRE at open water sites and its position.

Benefits and limitations of PRE

Benefits of PRE	Limitations of PRE
May provide a means of assisting a person in difficulty without the rescuer entering the water	Effectiveness depends on a capable bystander being present, recognising the emergency and acting appropriately and promptly.
Can provide an immediate intervention before emergency services arrive.	Many incidents occur when individuals are alone, meaning no one is available to deploy the equipment.
May reduce the likelihood of would-be rescuers entering the water themselves.	Most members of the public receive little or no training in the use of rescue equipment.
May provide reassurance that a rescue option is available at high-risk locations.	Equipment selection is not a "one-size-fits-all" solution and may not be suitable for every water environment.
Can support a positive outcome where a casualty remains conscious and able to cooperate.	Casualties experiencing cold water shock may deteriorate rapidly, leaving very little time for intervention.
May support safer bystander intervention where equipment is visible and accessible.	Equipment can be vandalised, stolen, damaged, removed, inaccessible or poorly maintained. There are significant costs associated with maintaining functionality.
Can contribute to a sense of preparedness at managed sites.	Installation, inspection, maintenance and replacement create ongoing financial and operational costs.
Provides a visible indication that risks have been considered.	The presence of PRE and signage may alter perceptions of site safety, potentially encouraging greater use of higher-risk locations.

Key concerns

- PRE is a reactive control, only used after a person has entered the water. Priority should be given to preventing access to water through appropriate environmental and physical controls wherever reasonably practicable.
- Equipment can be subject to vandalism, misuse, deterioration, or theft, reducing its availability when needed.
- PRE should be considered as one element of a wider site-specific risk assessment and water safety policy

rather than a standalone control measure.

- Calls for universal installation of PRE raise significant questions regarding practicality, maintenance costs, replacement costs and long-term sustainability.
- The effectiveness of PRE needs to be considered alongside emergency service response times and the likelihood that a bystander will be present and capable of intervening.

Conclusion

Weighting the benefits and limitations, Water Safety England's position is that PRE can have a role in managing water safety risk, particularly at locations where a site-specific risk assessment identifies a need. However, PRE should not be viewed as a standalone solution to drowning prevention. Its effectiveness is dependent upon a range of factors including the presence and competence of bystanders, the suitability and condition of the equipment, casualty condition and behaviour, environmental conditions and emergency response arrangements.

The preferred approach is for landowners and managers to develop comprehensive water safety policies supported by robust risk assessment and risk management processes. This should ensure that decisions regarding PRE, signage, education, environmental modifications and other controls are evidence-based and proportionate to the risks present at each site. While PRE may provide a valuable last line of defence, priority should generally be given to preventing people entering the water unintentionally and reducing exposure to risk in the first place.

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