Local Authority Approaches to Managing Water Safety

England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Introduction

This research provides the first insight into the current management of water safety locally across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) has been at the heart of accident prevention in the UK for over 100 years. Our vision is:

> "Life, free from serious accidental injury."

The responsibility for managing water safety has been a key policy issue for RoSPA for many years, which 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".[i]

Background

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

This report focuses on responsibility for managing water safety across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the current picture of water safety and drowning prevention at local government level. It follows on from comparable research undertaken in Scotland in both 2013[iii] and 2018. In 2018,[iv] the key finding from the research in Scotland was that only 40% of local authorities had a policy-level commitment to water safety.[iv]

Context of the UK

As an island nation, the UK – consisting of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – is estimated by the Ordnance Survey to have a coastline length of around 31,368km (approximately 19,500 miles)[v].

Although the UK government and devolved nations oversee and are responsible for policy, local government carries out decisions on the provision of local services. Local authorities, therefore, have wide-ranging responsibilities for their local waterway assets.

Drowning fatality data

The most recent figures from the Water Incident Database (WAID) show that there were 631 water-related fatalities in the UK. Of these 631 fatalities, 254 were accidental and a further 232 were suspected suicides. As can be seen in Figure 1, although there have been small decreases in fatalities, it clear that drowning and water-related harm are still serious issues for the UK.
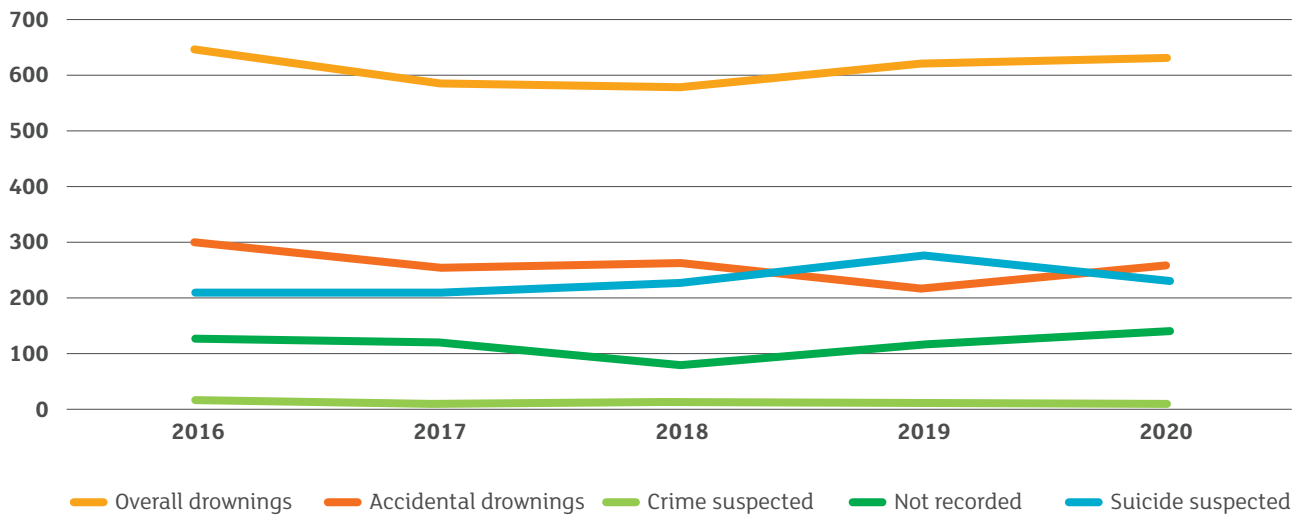
Figure 1: UK water-related fatalities, 2016–2020 (Source: WAID)

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% by 2026.
- To reduce risk amongst the highest risk population, group 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 Scotland[vi] and Wales[vii] have country-specific strategies that have similar focus on local water safety policies and plans.

Research aims

This research aimed to understand how local authorities plan for and address drowning prevention activity in their areas. Scotland already has a baseline and completed a five-year audit study in 2018,[iv] and thus has not been included in this research paper. It is anticipated that Scotland will complete its next five-year audit in 2023.

The research aimed to understand the current picture of water safety at local government level in an aggregated format, in particular:

- the responsibility for water safety, current policy arrangements and commitments made towards managing water safety
- an understanding of the barriers to the implementation of water safety work.

Methodology

This research used a mixed methodology through the use of an online survey that included predominately quantitative questions, with some opportunity for the collection of qualitative data.

Data collection

The purpose of the survey was to gather information and gain insight into the collective management of water safety. All responses were therefore treated as confidential and were not shared with any third party.

This research attempted to be representative and therefore we aimed to gather data from all local authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (all tiers). A letter outlining the research was sent to all local authorities that had online contact details, along with an online link and copy of the questions in order to aid internal discussion. Two reminder emails were also sent out, and the survey featured in a water safety update via the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) and separately via the Local Government Association (LGA).

We were unable to contact all local authorities due to a number of limitations, including a small number of local authorities that had no obvious way of getting in contact with them. Table 1 shows the number of local authorities in each nation, the proportions we were successful in contacting, and the proportions that responded.

Country	Number of local authorities	% of local authorities contacted	% response
England	343	97%	19%
Wales	22	100%	18%
Northern Ireland	11	100%	36%

Table 1: Local authority contact and response proportions

Analysis

All responses were analysed using Excel. All responses to open-ended questions were thematically analysed and categorised. Charts and graphs were then produced to illustrate the data. These are shown on the next page.

Results

Response rate

Seventy-eight participants responded to the online survey. Six responses were removed from the analysis for the following reasons:

- duplication (n = 3)
- no information on who was responding (n = 2)
- not a local authority (n = 1).

The final sample consisted of 72 responses. These responses were categorised according to country and the proportion of responses, as shown in Table 1.

Response demographics

Respondents were analysed against the top 10 fatality locations using five-year WAID data (2016–2020).[1] The following results were found:

- three of the top 10 overall fatality locations responded to the survey

- three of the top 10 accidental fatality locations responded to the survey

- three of the top 10 suicide fatality locations responded to the survey.

This means that 70% of the top overall fatality locations in the UK did not respond to this survey and therefore the results do not reflect the frequency of drownings.

Of the respondents, 64% were classified as 'inland' local authorities, while the remaining 36% were classified as 'coastal'[2] (see Figure 2). Fourteen of the local authorities were members of the LGA Coastal Special Interest Group (SIG). As this group currently has 57 members,[viii] the response rate from coastal local authorities was 25%.

Three of the respondents were from organisations that were members of the NWSF, while a further 12 were signed up as NWSF mailing list members.
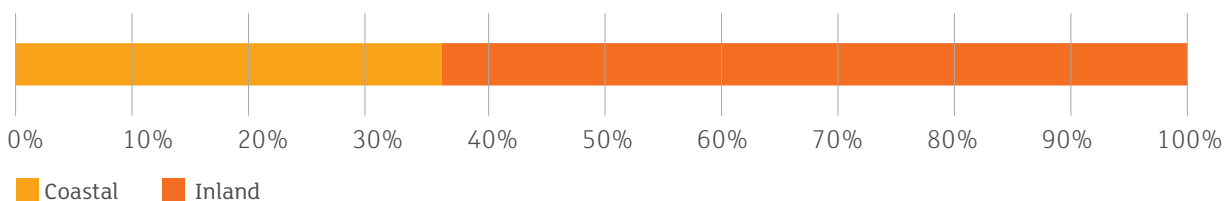

Figure 2: Coastal and inland split (n = 72)

Relative importance of water safety

Local authorities were asked how they rate the importance of water safety, in relation to other services provided by the authority. As shown in

Figure 3, 89% responded positively to the importance of water safety, with 47% placing water safety as 'very important'.
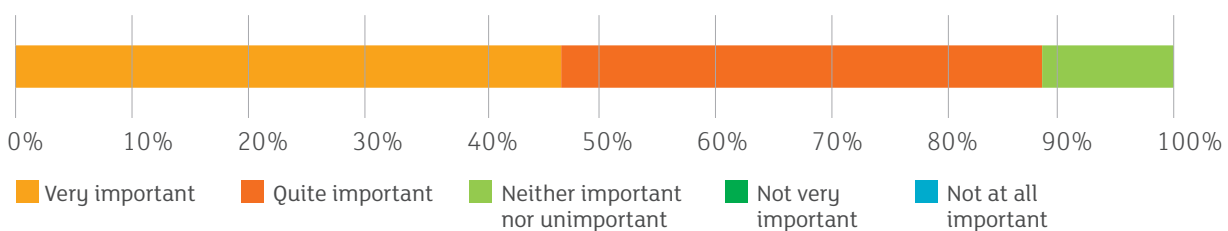

Figure 3: Importance of water safety (n = 72)

1 Not including Scotland.
2 Coastal local authorities were identified on the basis of membership of the LGA Coastal SIG and classification by the MCA.

Leadership and organisation

Local authorities were asked whether there was a specific officer, group or committee that deals with water safety in their council area. Exactly half of the respondents (50%) noted that there was a person or department responsible for water safety in their local area; 6% were unsure if there was a specific lead for water safety.
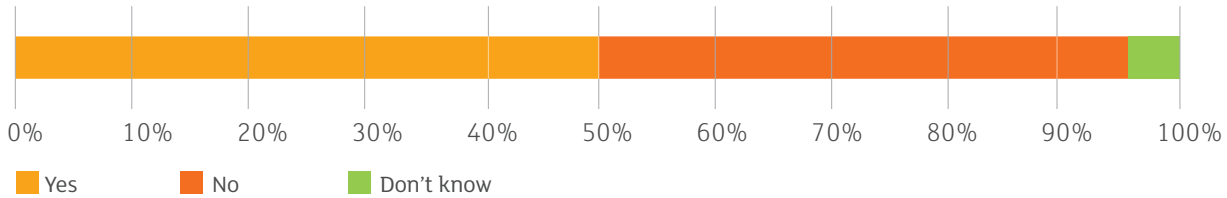
Yes   No   Don't know

Figure 4: Is there a specific officer, department, group or committee responsible for water safety in your local authority? (n = 72)

Local authorities that responded positively were then asked to expand on who takes this responsibility. A range of departments and individuals were identified, including: the Environment Department; Leisure, Health and Safety; Community Safety; Harbour Authority; Parks and Services.

Water safety policy

Each local authority was asked whether they had a water safety policy for their area. In total, 22% of local authorities noted that they did have a specific policy, and a further 19% noted that they were in the process of developing one. The majority of local authorities (49%) did not have a water safety policy, while 10% did not know whether they had such a policy.

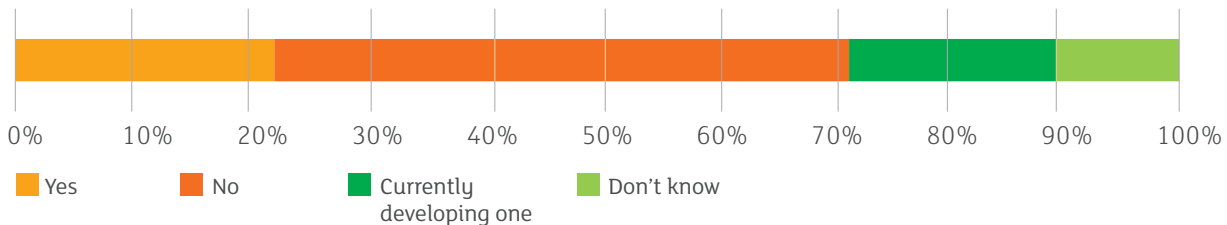Yes   No   Currently developing one   Don't know

Figure 5: Does your local authority currently have a water safety policy? (n = 72)

Local authorities that responded positively to having a water safety policy were then asked what year the policy was established.

The year range was 2006 to 2020. As can be seen in Figure 5, there was an even split as to whether the policies were established before or after publication of the UK's Drowning Prevention Strategy.

Pre UK Drowning Prevention Strategy (up to 2015)   Post UK Drowning Prevention Strategy (2016 onwards)
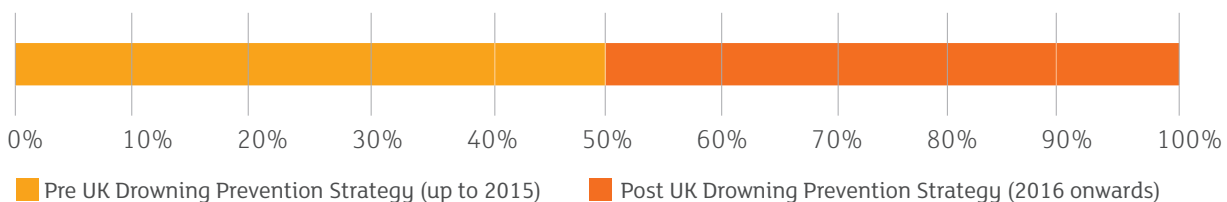
Figure 6: Water safety policy by timeframe against the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy (n = 14, 2 removed due to respondent being unsure)

Risk assessments

It is recommended that risk assessments are reviewed on a regular basis in order to take account of technological advances and potential changes to work practices.[ix] A total of 65% of the respondents noted they had reviewed their risk assessments of open water in the previous 24 months, while 17% had not, and 18% were unsure.
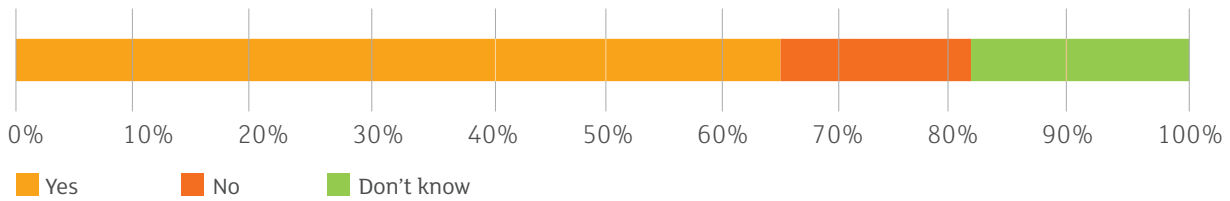

Yes   **No**   **Don't know**

Figure 7: In the past 24 months, has your local authority reviewed its risk assessments of open water? (n = 72)

National Strategy

Local authorities were asked whether they were aware of the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy – 74% of respondents were aware, with 26% unaware.
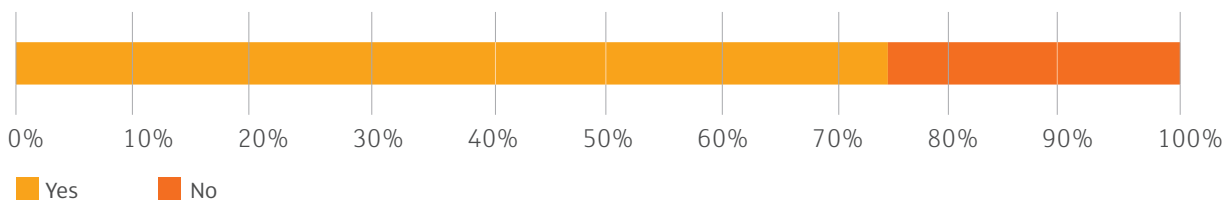

Yes   **No**

Figure 8: Are you aware of the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy? (n = 72)

Barriers to water safety

Local authorities were asked what they believed were the most important barriers to water safety.

A number of key barriers emerged from the analysis. These include:

- **The environment** – respondents noted that the interface with bars/restaurants can cause significant issues for water safety, as well as seasonal weather variation and the impact of climate change. Many respondents noted that their local authority area had a wide variety of open water locations – many of which were remote, making management difficult.

- **Legislation** – respondents noted that there was conflicting advice, blurred lines of responsibility and a lack of awareness of statutory responsibilities for water safety. Others took this further and noted that a lack of enforcement by local authorities was a key barrier, while others suggested that there was an overall lack of accountability due to the non-statutory nature of water safety.

- **Competing demands and resources** – this was summed up well by one respondent who noted: "All local authorities have reducing operating budgets and competing commitments given finite resources. For example, our Environment department has a very large remit. Water safety is one of many important priorities."

- **Local fragmentation** – some participants noted that, from a legal perspective, the 'ownership' of open water is very complex, and the confusion it creates results in a lack of co-ordination. This was argued both nationally, with the need for "a joint multi-agency effort not just local authority", as well as locally, where often "no one department [has] overall responsibility" and instead different departments have varying remits, with no consistency. This issue was seen as more complicated by some local authorities that noted that the majority of open water in their local authority was owned by private landowners or third parties, resulting in responsibility for water safety in their area being complex and inchoate.

- **Public awareness of water safety** – many argued that the public's lack of awareness was a key barrier. This included information on the public not following safety signage, language barriers around signage, the purposeful damage and vandalism of public rescue equipment, a lack of understanding of specific water hazards, and the "individualism of people who want to take unacceptable risks".

Country comparisons

In addition to the above charts, respondents were compared by country. Data from the RoSPA 2018 Scotland report,[iv] which employed the same question set, were used to provide a comparison to Scotland. Caution is therefore warranted when considering interpretation of the following findings due to the difference in the years the research was undertaken. The full results and charts can be found in the Appendix. However, the following findings are of note:

- Respondents from Wales ranked the importance of water safety highest; participants from Scotland and England ranked it lower.

- Respondents from both Northern Ireland and Wales had the highest proportion of identifiable leads in water safety.

- Wales had the highest percentage of policy-level commitments, closely followed by Scotland. England recorded the lowest percentage.

Discussion

The main focus of this research was in understanding local authorities' management of water safety. A total of 89% of respondents agreed on the importance of water safety.

Exactly half of the respondents (50%) noted that there was a person or department responsible for water safety in their local area. A small proportion of respondents (6%) were unsure if there was a specific lead for water safety.

Importantly, the research found that 22% of local authorities have a water safety policy. This is significantly less than the 40% that the research in Scotland revealed. However, it is encouraging to note that a further 19% of local authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are currently developing a water safety policy.

It is recommended that risk assessments are reviewed on a regular basis. This research found that 65% of the respondents noted they had reviewed their risk assessments of open water in the previous 24 months.

Local authorities were asked whether they were aware of the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy. Almost three quarters (74%) of respondents were aware. However, this suggests that some promotion of the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy is needed among local authorities so that they have a better understanding of the national strategic direction and how this can then be translated locally into policy.

Conclusions

This research aimed to provide insight into the current management of water safety locally across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Overall, the research indicates that many local authorities are involved in water safety and recognise its importance. However, at the same time, many do not have specific policy-level commitments on the issue.
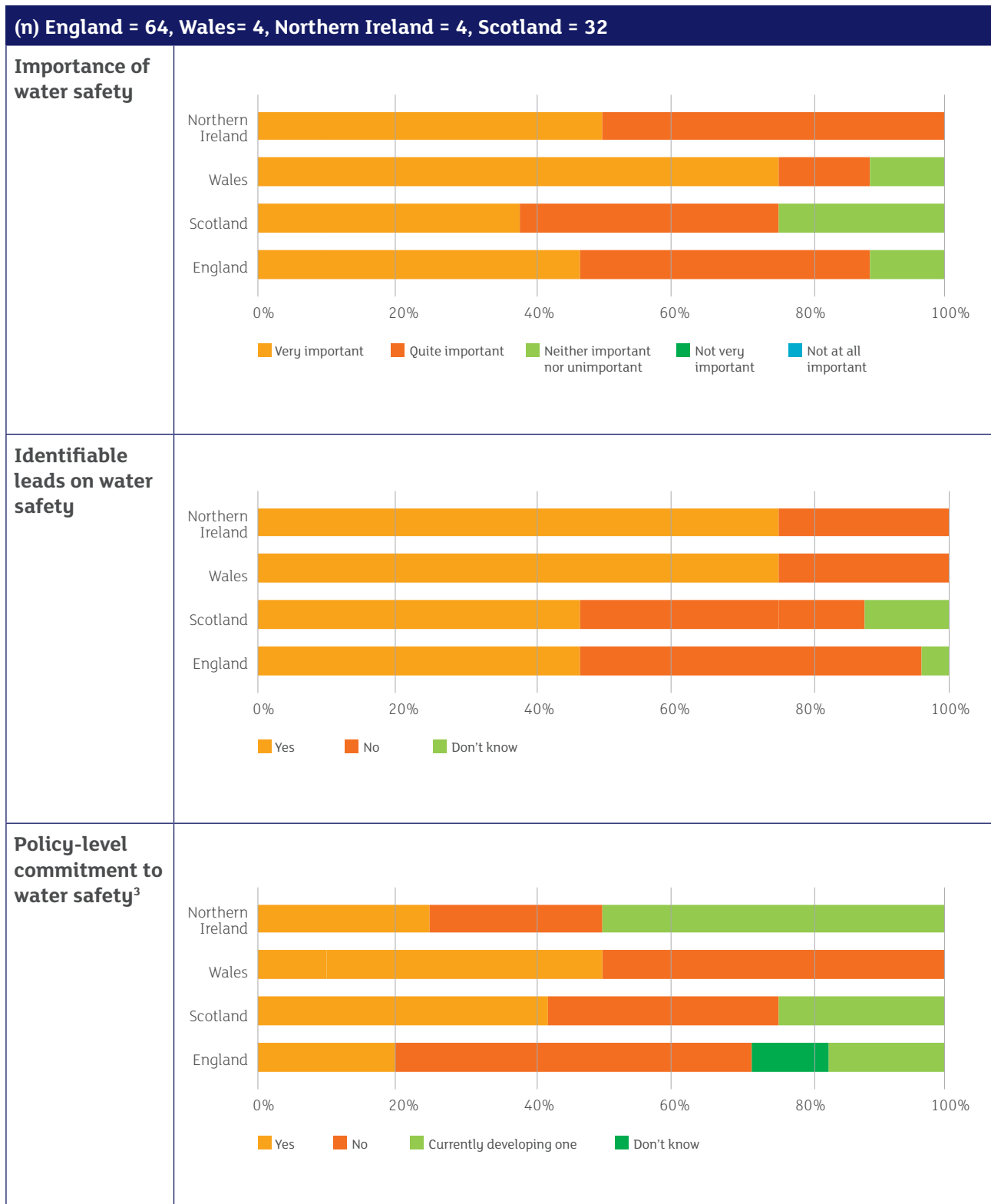
Risk assessments of water sites are reviewed on a regular basis by the majority of local authorities, and most authorities are aware of the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy. A number of barriers were found in relation to water safety and the implementation of practice, namely legislation, competing demands, the environment, local fragmentation, and public awareness of water safety.

Appendix:

Key results dashboard with country comparisons

Scotland data is based on the 2018 report.[vii] All of the following questions were asked in each of the four countries.

(n) England = 64, Wales= 4, Northern Ireland = 4, Scotland = 32

Importance of water safety

Legend: Very important · Quite important · Neither important nor unimportant · Not very important · Not at all important

Identifiable leads on water safety

Legend: Yes · No · Don't know

Policy-level commitment to water safety³

Legend: Yes · No · Currently developing one · Don't know

3 The comparable question in the 2018 survey conducted in Scotland did not provide the option "currently developing one".

References

i National Water Safety Forum (2016) A future without drowning: The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy 2016—2026. Available online: https://www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/media/1005/uk-drowning-prevention-strategy.pdf

ii United Nations General Assembly (2021) Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 28 April 2021. A/RES/75/273. Available online: **undocs.org/en/A/RES/75/273**

iii RoSPA (2013) Local authority approaches to managing water safety. Available from: **www.rospa.com/rospaweb/docs/advice-services/leisure-safety/approaches-to-managing-water-safety.pdf**

iv RoSPA (2018) Local authority approaches to managing water safety – Scotland five years on. Available from: **www.rospa.com/rospaweb/docs/about/around-the-uk/scotland/local-authority-approaches-to-managing-water-safety.pdf**

v Ordnance Survey (2017). In: The Telegraph (2017), 27 things you'd never know about Britain if it were not for Ordnance Survey. Available from: **www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/united-kingdom/articles/ordnance-survey-facts-about-great-britain**

vi Water Safety Scotland (2018) Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy. Available from: **watersafetyscotland.org.uk/media/1213/scotlands-drowning-prevention-strategy.pdf**

vii Water Safety Wales (2020) Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy. Available from: **nationalwatersafety.org.uk/media/1236/water-safety-strategy-2020-2026.pdf**

viii LGA Coastal SIG (2021) LGA Coastal SIG Membership 2021/22. Available from: **coastalsig.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/lga-coastal-sig-membership-202122_updated.pdf**

ix RoSPA (2018) Managing safety at inland waters. Available from: **www.rospa.com/rospaweb/docs/advice-services/leisure-safety/managing-safety-at-inland-waters.pdf**

Authors: C McAvoy, R Brogan, D Walker

RoSPA

accidents don't have to happen

RoSPA Headquarters

28 Calthorpe Road,
Birmingham,
B15 1RP
Telephone: +44 (0)121 248 2000

RoSPA Scotland

Livingstone House,
3 Discovery Terrace,
Heriot-Watt University Research Park,
Edinburgh,
EH14 4AP
Telephone: +44 (0)131 449 9378

RoSPA Wales

2 Cwrt-y-Parc,
Parc Ty Glas,
Cardiff Business Park,
Llanishen,
Cardiff,
CF14 5GH
Telephone: +44 (0)2920 761306

www.rospa.com

Registered Charity No. 207823
VAT Registration No. 655 131649