



water safety
Scotland

Partnership Approach to Water Safety (PAWS)

Guidance for establishing a PAWS Group

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Contents

Foreword	1
1. Introduction	2
2. PAWS Group Establishment	3
2.1 Creating a PAWS Agreement	3
2.2 Identifying Partners	3
2.3 Partner Assets and Logo	3
2.4 Introduction and Aim	4
2.5 Outcomes	4
2.6 Incident Reviews	4
2.6.1 Drowning & Incident Review (DIR)	4
2.7 Statistics	4
2.8 Suicide Prevention	5
2.8.1 Locations of Concern (LOCs)	5
2.9 Identified Risks	5
2.9.1 Water Safety Hot Spots	5
2.10 Action Plan	5
2.11 Sub Group Leads	5
2.12 Appendices	5
3. Summary	6

Foreword

Partnership Approach to Water Safety (PAWS) is a multi-agency approach to raising water safety awareness that combines the knowledge and experience of those individuals and organisations in our communities that best understand the risks.

Written in 2021 by James Sullivan, of the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service, PAWS was initially implemented in West Dunbartonshire where it proved to be a popular model and was subsequently adopted in other local authority areas in Scotland shortly thereafter.

PAWS is recognised by subject matter experts as making a meaningful contribution to drowning prevention efforts and has been adopted by Water Safety Scotland (WSS) as the preferred method of delivering a local water safety group and also features within the Community Safety Minister's [Action Plan on Water Safety](#).

Carlene McAvoy

Founder and Secretariat of Water Safety Scotland

1. Introduction

Scotland, which makes up the northern third of the United Kingdom, has a vast coastline, as well as various bodies of inland waterways, including rivers, canals and an estimated 30,000 freshwater lochs.

Statistics show that Scotland has a disproportionately high rate of drownings compared to other parts of the United Kingdom, so meeting the goals of increasing water safety awareness and reducing instances of drowning will require a commitment to strong partnership working and the sharing of information, good practice and resources.

In recent years, water safety has gained increased focus both politically and publicly due to the 2018 release of [Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy](#).

The Strategy has two overall targets:

- reduce accidental drowning deaths in Scotland by 50 per cent by 2026 and reduce risk among the highest-risk populations, groups and communities
- contribute to the reduction of water-related suicide.

This guidance document has been developed to assist water safety partners with the development and implementation of their own PAWS, guided by overarching data and local knowledge. PAWS will identify and recognise existing good practices currently undertaken by partner agencies in the local area to promote water safety awareness and to respond to emergency incidents, and formalise them into a co-ordinated approach that is reported into the existing local Community Planning Partnership (CPP).

This will require “buy in” from partners, allowing for joint tasking of resources to ensure that all water safety concerns are addressed and those agencies best placed to manage risk are kept up to date with any changing or newly emerging hazards or trends. Where applicable, this may also require the sharing of resources between partner agencies to meet common goals.

PAWS has three key stages:

- **Prevention**
Raising water safety awareness through education, engagement and media platforms.
- **Improved incident response**
Training the public how to safely respond in the developing stages of a water emergency, and conducting multi-agency training events with Search & Rescue partners.
- **Review**
Reviewing significant water events to gather information and gain an understanding of contributory factors or trends to allow a focused approach to drowning prevention.

2. PAWS Group Establishment

The following areas should be investigated to enable the establishment of a partnership approach:

- Identify partners, either locally or nationally, currently working in the area to promote water safety awareness, reduce water-related suicide, and respond to emergency incidents in water.
- Identify any good practices currently undertaken and examine how these can be developed and strengthened via a partner approach.
- Identify with partners any known local issues and allocate appropriate actions.

The issues may be:

- geographic risks
- specific group or individual behaviours
- specific types of incidents
- locations of concern (LOCs)
- water safety hot spot locations.

The actions may be:

- joint training/multi agency exercises
- safety demonstrations/public training
- specific action plans for LOCs and hot spots
- media/press releases
- leaflets
- signage
- public rescue equipment (PRE)
- schools engagement
- community group engagement
- CPP engagement.

To ensure that the PAWS remains current and reflects known risks, new practices and resource allocation, an annual review should be carried out in May each year to coincide with the release of RoSPA's Annual Trend Report. The revised document will outline the approach for the forthcoming 12 months and seek to build on identified good practice and partner co-operation.

2.1 Creating a PAWS Agreement

WSS has created an editable template for use by water safety partners when they are setting up a local PAWS Group. The template can be easily updated with relevant local information, such as geography, location, risks and partners, and will form the agreement between, and expectations of, all partners.

2.2 Identifying Partners

Water safety partners should identify landowners or stakeholders, and agencies or individuals currently delivering water safety activities, raising awareness, or responding to water-related incidents within their area and invite them to take part in the PAWS Group. It should be made clear that the Group's intentions are to build upon existing good practices and broaden their reach by taking a co-ordinated approach that is agreeable to all partners locally. This may lead to variations in delivery between PAWS Groups, but the aims of prevention, improved incident response and review will remain consistent in all Groups.

2.3 Partner Assets and Logo

A request should be sent to all partners to list their assets on a blank appendix from the editable template and to supply their preferred logo, which will assist in the creation of an accurate PAWS document. Suggested examples are included within the PAWS editable template.

2.4 Introduction and Aim (Sections 1 & 2 of PAWS)

The 'Introduction' section should be adapted to reflect the local authority area(s), while the 'Aim' section sets out the intentions for partners to work collectively and remain consistent with the targets in Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy.

2.5 Outcomes (Section 3 of PAWS)

The agreed outcomes of the PAWS Group should be recorded in the 'Outcomes' section, including type, frequency and timescales of meetings, intentions and methods of raising awareness, and commitment to work using a multi- or single-agency approach, as appropriate.

There are two types of meetings:

- **Periodic** – routine scheduled reviews of Group progress
- **Incident reviews** – held in response to a significant incident in the area, following the **Drowning & Incident Review (DIR)** process.

2.6 Incident Reviews (Section 5 of PAWS)

PAWS supports the use of the DIR process to both understand water safety incidents and to ensure that relevant data is collected for statistical analysis by WAID (Water Incident Database).

In the event of a fatality, or a significant near miss involving water, the PAWS Group should consider the following:

- Are immediate actions required to reduce the likelihood of a recurrence/similar incident?
- Are immediate actions required to raise awareness?
- Does the PAWS Agreement need to be altered to reflect newly learned information?

2.6.1 Drowning & Incident Review (DIR)

DIR is a process that will assist partners to answer these and other related issues, and provides an opportunity to implement actions that may reduce the likelihood of a similar event in the area. The interventions can be immediate, short, medium or long term in scope and may include matters such as the replenishment of PRE, repair to existing infrastructure/safety systems, or the provision of new measures, so far as is reasonably practicable.

DIR allows partners to form a better understanding of the water safety risks within their area. Data will be held by SFRS and will assist in focusing national water safety prevention efforts.

The DIR process was developed by SFRS and RoSPA for WSS, and for use by PAWS Groups. It is supported by a comprehensive DIR guidance document.

2.7 Statistics (Section 6 of PAWS)

RoSPA will analyse the data contained within WAID and provide updated statistics and summaries in its Annual Trend Report in May of each year. This report will be made available to all PAWS Groups to tie in with their annual reviews and refresh of their PAWS documents.

2.8 Suicide Prevention (Section 7 of PAWS)

Within the Drowning Prevention Strategy, WSS states its aim to contribute to the reduction of water-related suicide and advocate that the most effective way to do so is by working together and utilising the skills and knowledge of a wide range of partners.

It is advisable that a member of the local suicide prevention group is enrolled as a partner in PAWS to ensure that an effective link is made between both groups to allow information sharing and access to subject matter expert support.

2.8.1 Location(s) of Concern (LOCs)

An LOC is any location at which two or more incidents have occurred where people have become involved in a water emergency, or where people have attempted to enter the water with the intention of causing themselves harm. If an intervention is made that prevents entrance into the water, this should still be considered as an incident at that location. Partners should consider the need for a specific action plan based upon local knowledge for any sites identified within their area to reduce the likelihood of incidents at the location.

2.9 Identified Risks (Section 8 of PAWS)

Any geographical risks, behaviours or additional considerations highlighted by partners should be included in this section. Partners should consider the need for a specific action plan to reduce harm from any identified risks in their area.

2.9.1 Water Safety Hot Spots

Where a water safety hot spot location has been identified, partners should consider introducing a site-specific action plan to reduce the activity in that area.

A hot spot can be categorised as follows:

- any location (5km radius) that has two or more water fatalities in a calendar year
- any location (5km radius) that has three or more fatalities in a five-year period
- any location that local partners have specific concerns over due to geographic or behavioural characteristics.

2.10 Action Plan (Section 9 of PAWS)

The Action Plan contains a list of agreed actions to be carried out, and agreed timescales for completion. The Agency Lead Person should be recorded in the plan, along with a contact email address to ensure all partners are able to communicate with them as necessary.

2.11 Sub Group Leads

A lead for each of the agreed sub groups should be allocated and establish the actions required and persons responsible for their delivery. Suggested sub groups are included in the editable template.

2.12 Appendices (Section 10 of PAWS)

Partners should individually list within an appendix the assets that they have available, or practices that they undertake, to allow an understanding of resources within their PAWS Group.

4. Summary

Water Safety Scotland (WSS) recognises that drowning prevention is a complicated subject and is one that is best tackled collectively by joining the knowledge, experience, and resources of the many partner agencies concerned.

PAWS provides a clear framework for the co-ordination of these joint efforts to enable local partners to effectively target specific concerns and to understand the combined knowledge, resources and assets available within the group.

WSS is committed to supporting PAWS Groups and will provide ongoing guidance, data, and access to a wealth of free resources, including

a comprehensive package of learning materials designed in partnership with Education Scotland.

Any enquiries can be directed to the WSS representative on the local PAWS Group, or by emailing info@watersafetyscotland.org.uk

