



accidents don't have to happen

Local Authority Approaches to Managing Water Safety

A 10-year comparative analysis



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Executive Summary

Local authorities taking responsibility for managing water safety in Scotland has been a key policy issue for RoSPA over the last ten years. This research is a 10-year follow-on study from the original research which took place in 2013¹. It also follows on from the five-year follow-up study conducted in 2018².

Overall, the 2023 data shows an improved picture of water safety in Scotland. Many of Scotland's local authorities are addressing water safety, with clear increases across the board on the majority of indicators. Interagency working, responsibility and evidence of good practice has all improved and become more consistent across Scotland. Additionally, the research suggests that the strategic direction of water safety at national level has increased in parity with local level; most local authorities are aware of the national direction of water safety and are actively contributing to this.

However, it is concerning that the research found that policy level commitments to water safety have decreased since the original 2013 research and the follow-on study in 2018. The reasons for this disparity are unclear but it is reassuring to note that 31 per cent of local authorities have noted they are developing a water safety policy in 2023.

The key findings of the study are:

- Scotland's local authorities ranked water safety as an important issue in respect to other demands.
- Leadership of water safety was still mixed, with a range of different departments involved. However, around 70 per cent of local authorities reported having a lead person or department.
- 25 per cent of local authorities have a water safety policy.
- 41 per cent of local authorities had risk assessed their bodies of open water in the last 24 months.
- Interagency working was strong. Almost all local authorities worked with local agencies or groups in water safety in their local area. 88 per cent were members of their local Partnership Approach to Water Safety (PAWS) group and two thirds (66 per cent) had run a water safety campaign in the last three years.
- Almost all local authorities were aware of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy and the work of Water Safety Scotland. Over half (62 per cent) stated they had contributed to the strategy.

Our key recommendations include:

- Water Safety Scotland should continue to bring together national and local perspectives to push the strategic direction of water safety.
- All local authorities should aim to have a water safety policy by 2026; PAWS groups should highlight the need for a policy with their local PAWS group.
- RoSPA, and partners, should continue to host an annual workshop to help local authorities share learning to enable them to develop a water safety policy.

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Introduction

Water safety and drowning prevention has a clear and consistent focus in Scotland due to the strategic direction set by [Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy](#) and the 2022 release of the Minister for Community Safety's [Water Safety Action Plan](#). These complimentary documents set the strategic direction for Water Safety, and in particular Water Safety Scotland, who lead on the implementation of the aims and targets set.

Water Safety Scotland, and its partners, have created several water safety groups throughout Scotland, known as Partnership Approach to Water Safety (PAWS) groups. These PAWS groups take national direction from Water Safety Scotland and implement outputs locally to ensure consistency with national recommendations. Each PAWS group works with their local authority to improve water safety. However, despite this, it is still unclear how local authorities interpret water safety and execute drowning prevention work in their local areas.

Background

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents' (RoSPA) mission is to exchange

“life-enhancing skills and knowledge to reduce serious accidental injuries”

RoSPA is keen to enable healthy, active lives through the promotion of key skills and knowledge whilst seeking reasonable limits to potential harms.

RoSPA is committed to the aims of the Scottish National Performance Framework and in particular the Communities outcome which states that:

“We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe”.

As the host of Water Safety Scotland, we have a committed effort to lead and implement both Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy and the Water Safety Action Plan.

The responsibility for managing water safety is a key part of the strategy. This research follows on from the original research report that was undertaken in both 2013 (and subsequently 2018) on the same issue. The underlying aim is to understand the current picture of water safety at local government level with the intention of enabling those responsible to develop policies and programmes which better address the issue of drowning.

Original Research

The original research, [Local Authority Approaches to Managing Water Safety](#), was released in 2013 and found a mixed picture of water safety policy in Scotland with several local authorities addressing water safety yet with little in the way of uniformity. The [research was repeated](#) in 2018, finding very little change.

Geographic Context

Scotland makes up the northern third of the United Kingdom and has an estimated 30,000 freshwater lochs³ and a huge coastline which accounts for 60% of the UK coastline. Scotland's coastal and inland

waterways also tend to be colder than other parts of the UK and the 'right to roam' allows access to the public to the majority of land and waterways for recreational purposes.

Drowning Fatalities

Scotland carries a disproportionate rate of accidental drowning fatalities in comparison to the other nations within the United Kingdom. The most recent Water Incident Database (WAID) report showed that Scotland's rate of accidental drowning is 0.82 per 100,000 which is triple the rate seen in England and almost double that of Northern Ireland (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Rate of accidental drowning fatalities per 100,000. (Source: WAID 2022, ONS/NRS data from mid-year 2021)

WAID data shows that there were 45 accidental drowning fatalities in Scotland and a further 37 water related suicides in 2022. Although there have been

small decreases in accidental fatalities, it is clear that drowning fatalities and water-related harm remains a serious issue in Scotland.

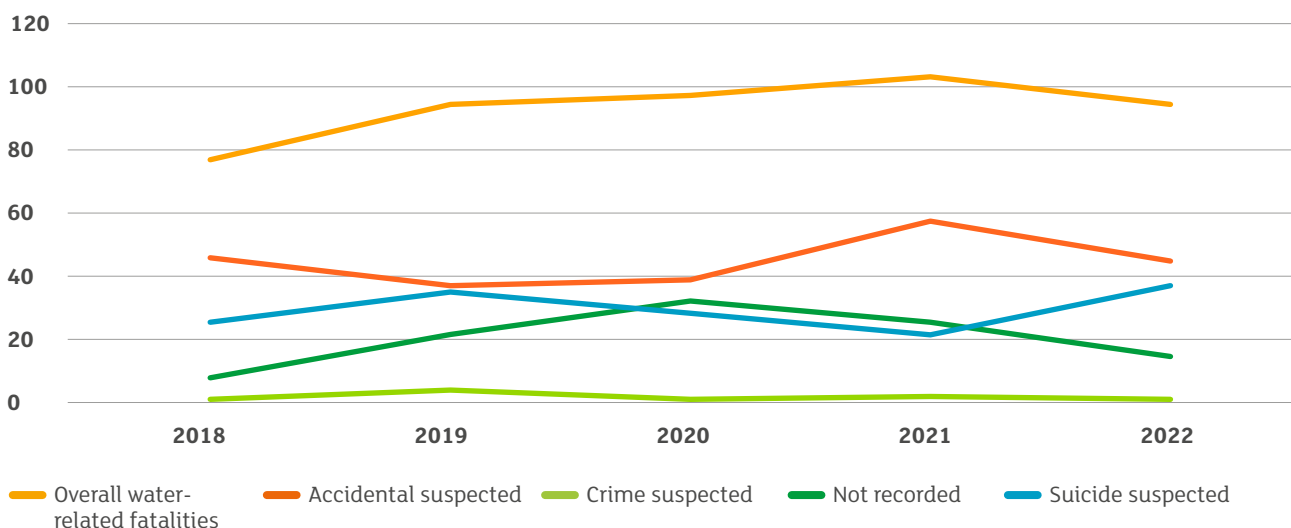


Figure 2: Scotland Water-related fatalities 2018 - 2022 (Source: WAID)

Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy

Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy was launched in 2018 with the intention of reducing drowning fatalities in Scotland. 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.

The strategy has six main objectives. One of these objectives is to

“develop water safety across Scotland's 32 local authority areas and promote the development of water safety policies”.

RoSPA's research into the management of water safety is anticipated to provide up to date information on how water safety is currently managed in Scotland's local authorities. This will provide a focal point for advocacy and promotion and assist with policy development.

National Programmes

As already outlined, Water Safety Scotland is fortunate to have the support of Scottish Government via the Water Safety Action Plan, released in March 2022 and specifying a series of outcomes to be addressed. Many of these outcomes have been successfully achieved, such as the creation of water safety education packages and the creation and implementation of the Drowning and Incident Review⁴. Another key focus is to undertake research into the status of water safety policies across Scotland.

Scotland comprises 32 local authorities which take responsibility for local public services and provisions. Each local authority in Scotland is collectively represented by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).

In line with Scotland's National Performance Framework, community safety plays a key role. Each local authority has a Community Safety Partnership (CSP) which is associated with a number different agencies, such as Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Police Scotland and NHS Boards. The purpose of a CSP is to create a safer and healthier local community. CSPs feed into the Community Planning Partnerships (CPP).

Scotland has a number of PAWS groups which, as noted, take national direction from Water Safety Scotland and implement recommendations locally to ensure consistency with national resources. Each PAWS group works with the local authority to improve water safety. As of August 2023, PAWS groups (or equivalent) exist in 72% of Scotland (23 local authorities). A further five areas are in the process of creating a PAWS group.

The objectives of the research

The key objectives of this research are to understand the current picture of water safety in Scotland at local government level and in particular:

- To understand the responsibility for water safety, current policy arrangements and also commitments that have been made towards managing water safety
- To understand shared approaches to the implementation of water safety work
- To identify a clear understanding of the strategic national direction in Scotland and how this relates to local government.

Methodology

This research focused on an online survey which was distributed to Scotland's 32 local authorities.

Data Collection

In order to ensure anonymity, a self-completion questionnaire was used. The purpose of the survey was to gather information and insight into the management of water safety without singling out a specific local authority. All responses were treated as confidential and were not shared with any third party.

The online questionnaire and an accompanying letter was sent directly to the Chief Executives of all 32 local

authorities. Chief Executives then cascaded the letter and survey to the relevant department and responsible person to respond. All 32 local authorities responded with 100 per cent completion rate.

Analysis

All responses have been 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.

Responsibility for Water Safety

Corporate Priorities

Each local authority was asked how they rate the importance of water safety, in relation to other services provided by the authority, such as environmental protection and school provisions.

91 per cent responded positively to the importance of water safety with the majority believing that it was very important. The remaining 9 per cent of local authorities responded neutrally or negatively to the question as can be seen in figure 3.

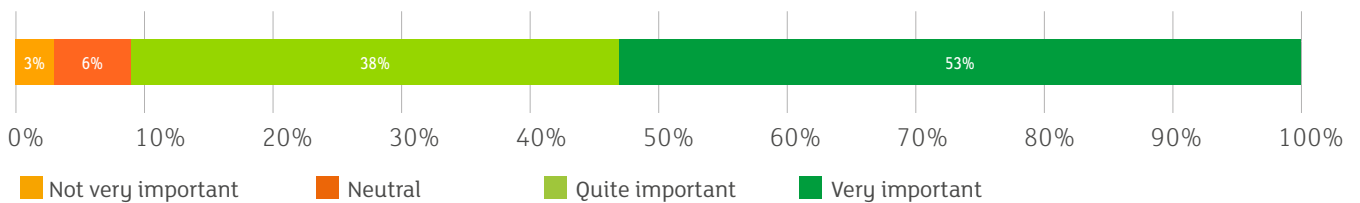


Figure 3: Relative importance of managing water safety, n = 32

These figures are very encouraging and show that water safety is considered a serious issue within local authorities in Scotland. This is a 22 per cent increase

since the question was asked in 2013¹ and 16 per cent increase since 2018².

Leadership and Organisation

Local authorities were asked whether there is a specific officer, group or committee that deals with water safety within their council area. **Just under 70**

per cent of the respondents noted that there is a person or department responsible for water safety.

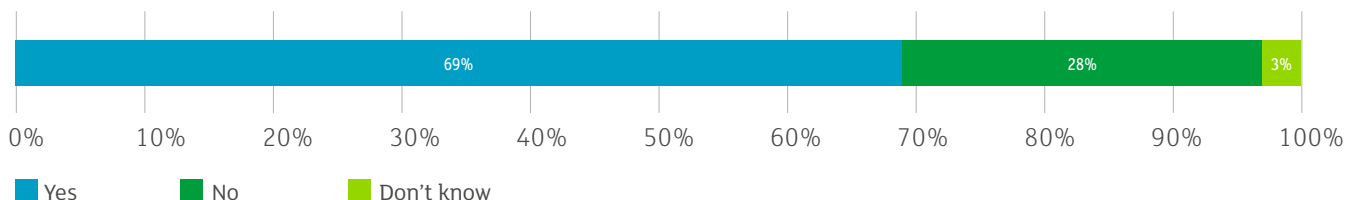


Figure 4: Is there an identifiable Water Safety lead? n = 32

Local authorities that responded positively were then asked to expand on who has this responsibility. A range of departments and individuals were identified.

The most frequently named were the Water Safety Groups, including PAWS groups and Community Safety Teams and Partnerships (see figure 5).

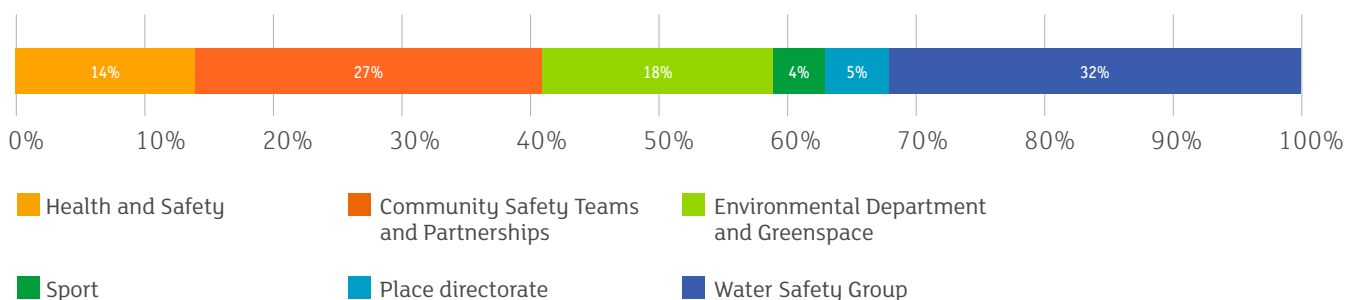


Figure 5: Involvement in managing water safety, n = 22 (10 did not have a lead)

These results are encouraging in comparison to previous years. The original 2013 research found 44 per cent of local authorities had a person or department responsible for water safety, whilst the 2018 research found 47 per cent had a person or department responsible.

Of those that did not have a specific officer or department, reasons included it being a shared

responsibility between departments or the roles and responsibilities were in the process of being allocated.

Each local authority was asked whether they have a specific water safety policy. Eight of the local authorities noted that they do have a specific policy (25 per cent) with the majority noting they do not (41 per cent) and 31 per cent noting they are developing a policy.

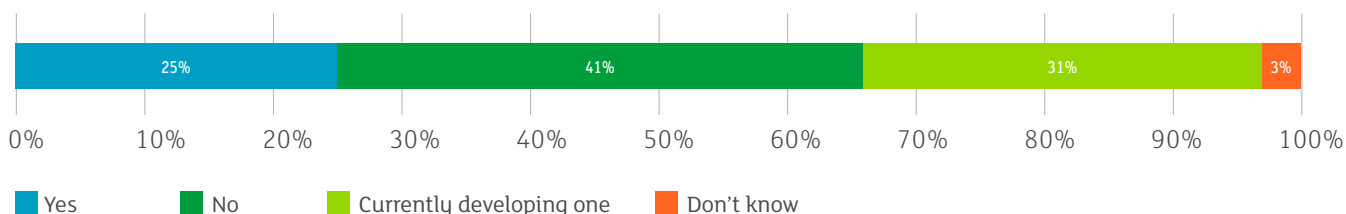


Figure 6: Is there a Water Safety Policy? n = 32

This is a 19 per cent drop since the original research in 2013 which found 44 per cent (14 local authorities) had a water safety policy. The 2018 research also showed that 41 per cent (13 local authorities) had a

water safety policy². This means that the number of local authority areas with a water safety policy has decreased over the last 10 years. It is unclear why this may be the case.

Good Practice

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 practices⁵.

Respondents were asked whether they had risk assessed their open water in the last 24 months. Almost half (41 per cent) of respondents reported that they had (see figure 7).

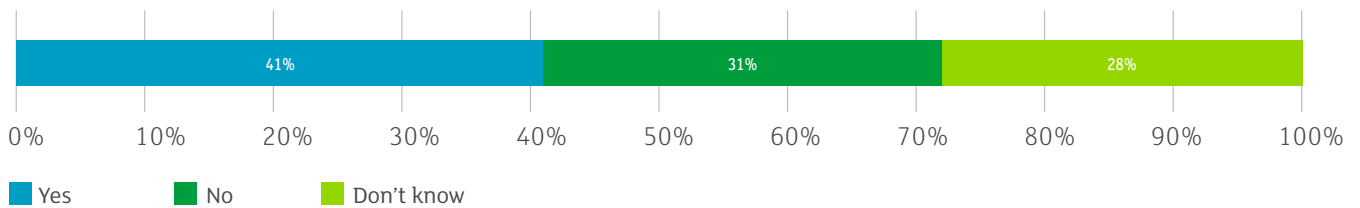


Figure 7: In the last 24 months, has your local authority reviewed its risk assessments of open water? n = 32

Key Points:

- The importance of the management of water safety was ranked positively in relation to other service demands. This has increased over the past 10 years.
- Just under 70 per cent of local authorities have a person or group designated as the lead on water safety issues.
- Roughly 25 per cent of local authorities have a policy commitment on the issue, which is a clear decrease from previous years.
- 41 per cent of local authorities had risk assessed their open water in the past 24 months.

Partnership Working

This section explores partnership working and how local authorities work with external organisations and agencies to help reach the community.

Inter-agency working

Respondents were asked whether there were specific

groups in their area that they worked with in regards to water activity. **Almost 100 per cent of respondents worked with local agencies or groups in relation to water safety** (figure 8).

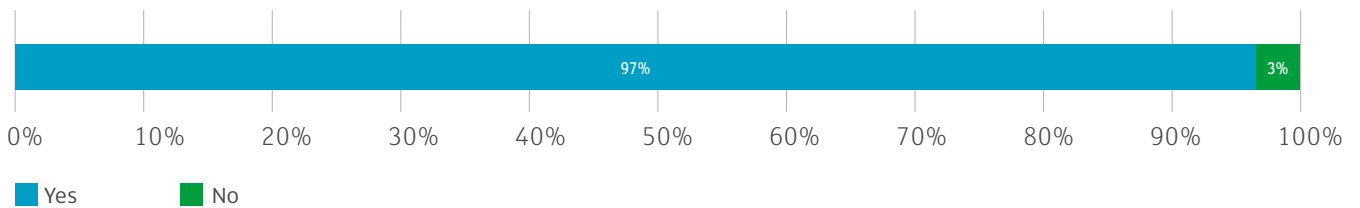


Figure 8: Are there any specific organisations and agencies that you work with in regards to water safety?, n = 32

A range of groups and agencies were identified including: search and rescue organisations, third sector agencies, local landowners, NHS, recreational water groups, water safety groups and local rescue teams and leisure centres. The wide range of different groups identified as being involved in water activity is extremely positive.

Respondents were also asked if they were members of their local PAWS (or equivalent) group. 28 local authorities (88 per cent) were members of their local PAWS group. This is consistent with known PAWS (or equivalent) groups that exist in 72% of Scotland (23 local authorities). An additional five areas in the process of the development of a PAWS group.

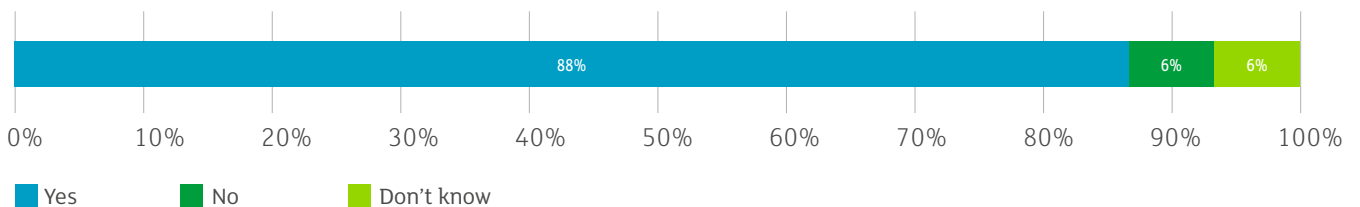


Figure 9: Is your local authority a member of your local PAWS group (Partnership Approach to Water Safety) or equivalent water safety group?, n = 32

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 on what practical work local authorities were doing in water safety. **Two thirds of local authorities (66 per cent) have run a water safety campaign in the last three years** (figure 10).

This is an increase from the original research in 2013 where only 25 per cent of local authorities had run a water safety campaign in the last three years¹ and 2018 where 38 per cent had run a water safety campaign².

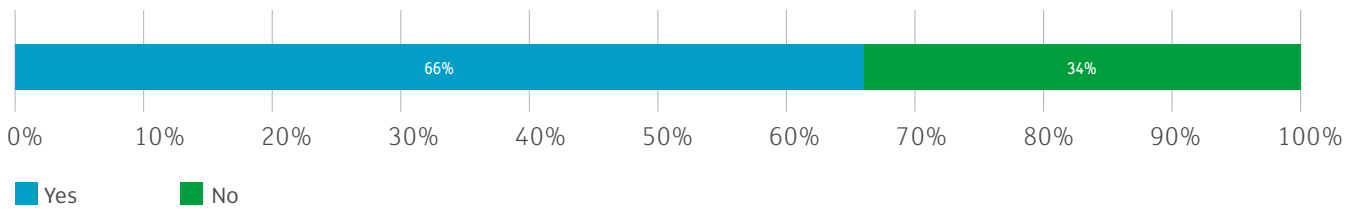


Figure 10: Have you run a water safety campaign within the last three years? n = 32

Of the local authorities that did participate in recent campaigns to raise awareness of the dangers of water, there were several positive practices and ideas. The campaigns included the following:

- Water Safety Scotland targeted monthly comms messaging
- World Drowning Prevention Day
- Water Safety Scotland education and school talks
- Experiential learning

Local authorities were asked if they gave water safety information to key groups. **84 per cent noted that they did** (see figure 11). This is 20 per cent more than the original 2013 research found¹ and 34 percent more than the 2018 research².

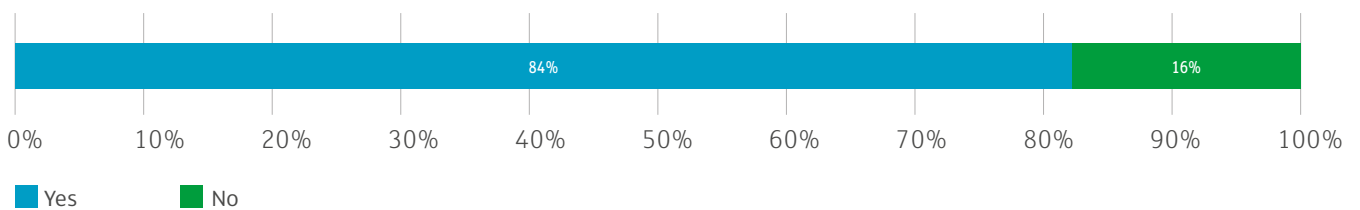


Figure 11: Do you provide water safety information to key groups? n = 32

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

- School presentations and education
- Community workshops
- Posters, noticeboards and signage
- Social media
- Recreational activities.

Key Points:

- Almost all local authorities (97 per cent) worked with local agencies and groups in water safety, and 88 per cent were members of their local PAWS group.
- Two thirds of local authorities had run a campaign in the last three years and the majority (84 per cent) provided information to key groups.

Strategic Direction

Local authorities were asked if they were aware of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy which was launched in January 2018 and developed to reduce drowning fatalities across Scotland. **30 local authorities (94 per cent) were aware of the national strategy** (figure 11).

This is a substantial increase. In 2018 only 56 per cent of respondents were aware of the strategy².

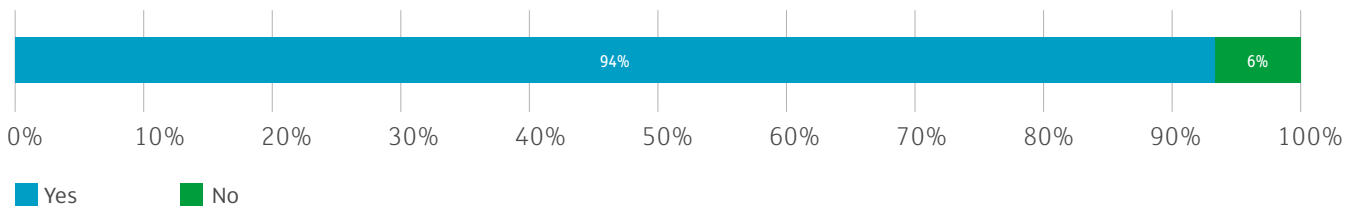


Figure 12: Are you aware of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy?? n = 32

Respondents were then asked if they contribute to Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy. **62 per cent of respondents said they contributed** but the remaining 38 per cent did not.

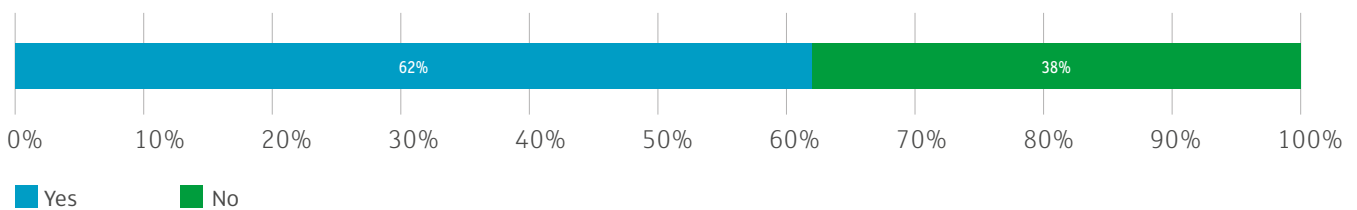


Figure 13: Do you contribute to Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy? n = 32

Finally, respondents were asked a new question for 2023, to ascertain if they were aware of the work of Water Safety Scotland. The majority (94 per cent) were aware of the work of Water Safety Scotland.

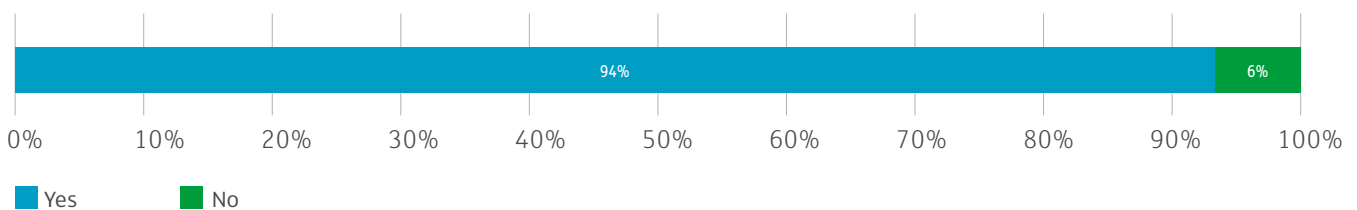


Figure 14: Are you aware of the work of Water Safety Scotland? n = 32

Key Points:

- The majority of local authorities (94 per cent) were aware of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy.
- 62 per cent of local authorities contributed to the implementation of the strategy.
- The majority of local authorities (94 per cent) were aware of the work of Water Safety Scotland.

Discussion and conclusions

This study was a ten year follow on from the original 2013 research¹. It also makes comparison to the 2018 research which looked at the five-year way point. Caution should be noted with regards to deducing too much from this study.

The study found the following:

- Scotland's local authorities ranked water safety as an important issue in respect to other demands. This reported ranking has increased since the original research was undertaken.
- Leadership of water safety was still mixed, with a range of different departments involved. However, around 70 per cent of local authorities had a person or department responsible which is an encouraging increase of 25 per cent since the 2013 research.
- 25 per cent of local authorities have a water safety policy. This is a stark decrease from both the 2013 and 2018 research where 44 per cent and 41 per cent had a policy respectively. The reasons for this disparity is unclear but it is reassuring to note that 31 per cent of local authorities have noted they are developing a water safety policy in 2023.
- 41 per cent of local authorities had risk assessed their bodies of open water in the last 24 months
- Interagency working was strong. Almost all local authorities worked with local agencies or groups in

water safety in their local area. 88 per cent were members of their local PAWS group and two thirds (66 per cent) had run a water safety campaign in the last three years. These have both increased since the original 2013 research and the follow-on research in 2018.

- Almost all local authorities were aware of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy and the work of Water Safety Scotland. Over half (62 per cent) said they contributed to the strategy.

Overall, this evidence indicates that many local authorities in Scotland have increasingly become involved in the promotion and awareness of water safety since 2013. Indicators have positively increased since 2013 and the follow-on research in 2018, except policy level commitments on the issue. This means that inter agency working, responsibility and good practice has all improved and become more consistent across Scotland. Additionally, the research suggests that the strategic direction of water safety at national level has increased in parity with local level. However, policy level commitment has decreased and lags behind the other areas.

Recommendations

Water Safety Scotland, hosted by RoSPA, is an essential platform that should continue to push the national strategic direction of water safety in Scotland. Water Safety Scotland, with input from local areas via PAWS groups and local authorities, will continue to share ideas and practice as well as maintain consistency of approach across the country.

Local authorities that do not currently have a policy should aim to have one by 2026 (in line with

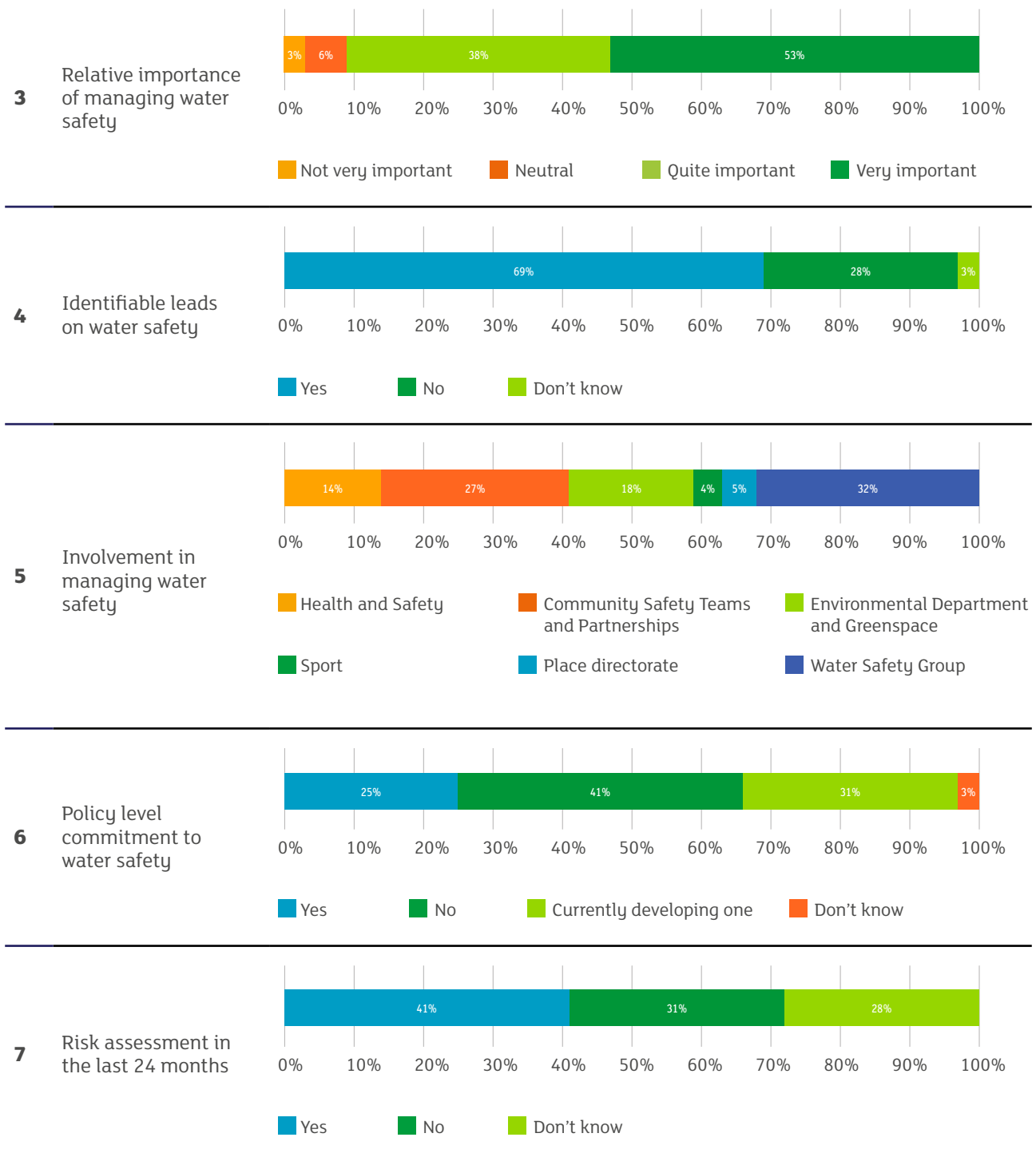
Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy). Water Safety Scotland should call on its PAWS groups to highlight this issue locally and insist on the importance of the creation of a water safety policy.

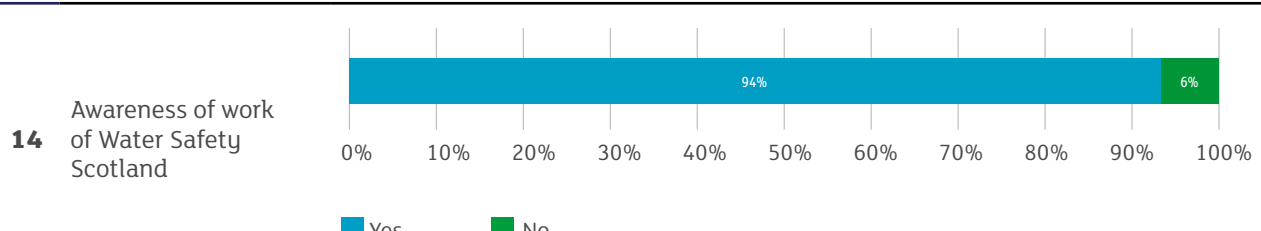
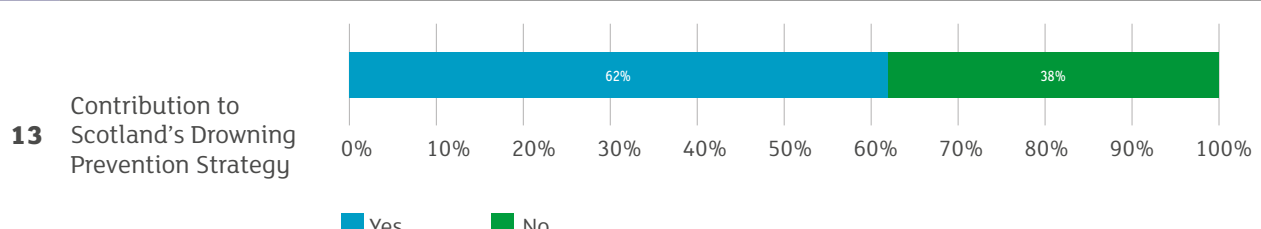
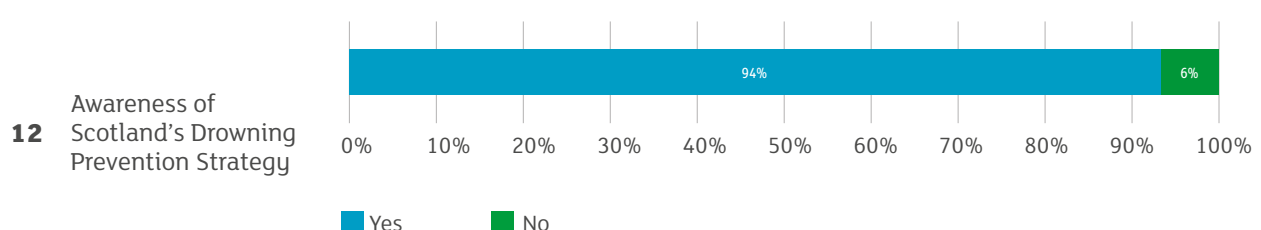
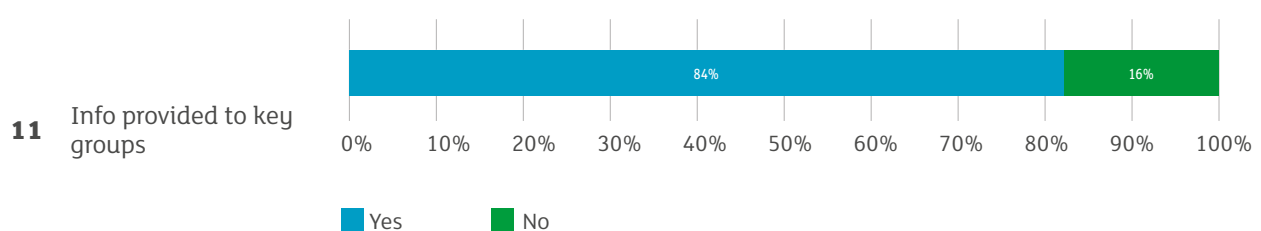
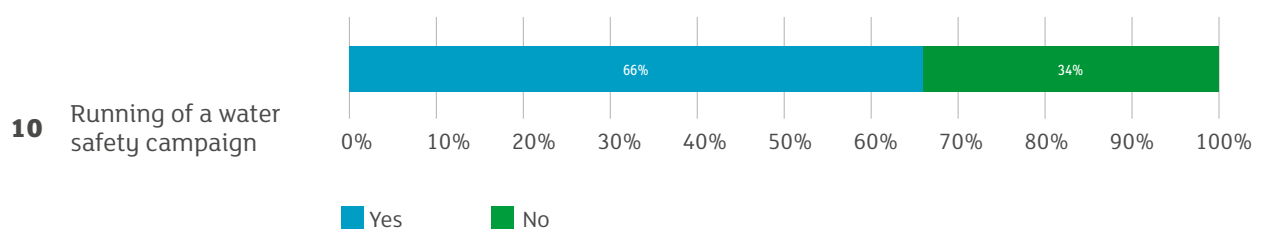
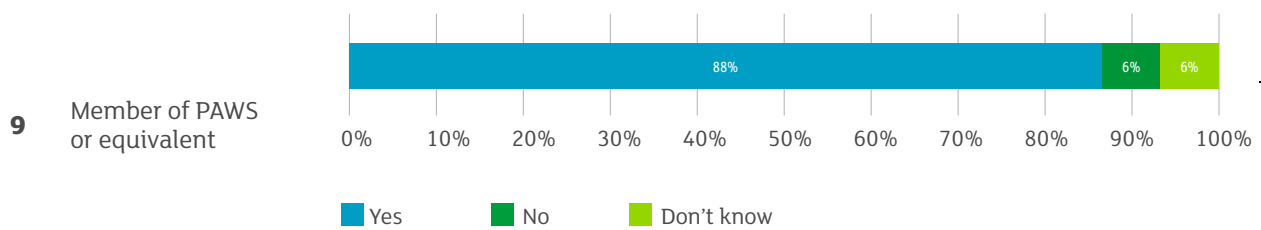
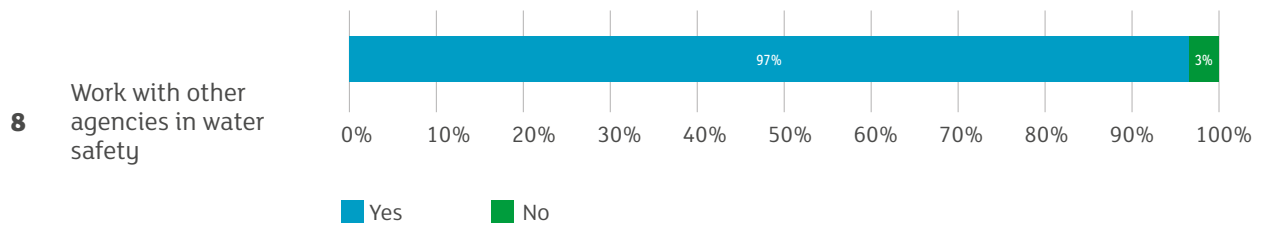
Water Safety Scotland, via RoSPA and partners, are urged to continue to host an annual workshop to help local authorities and provide expertise and assistance in the development of a water safety policy.

Appendix One

2023 Key Results Dashboard

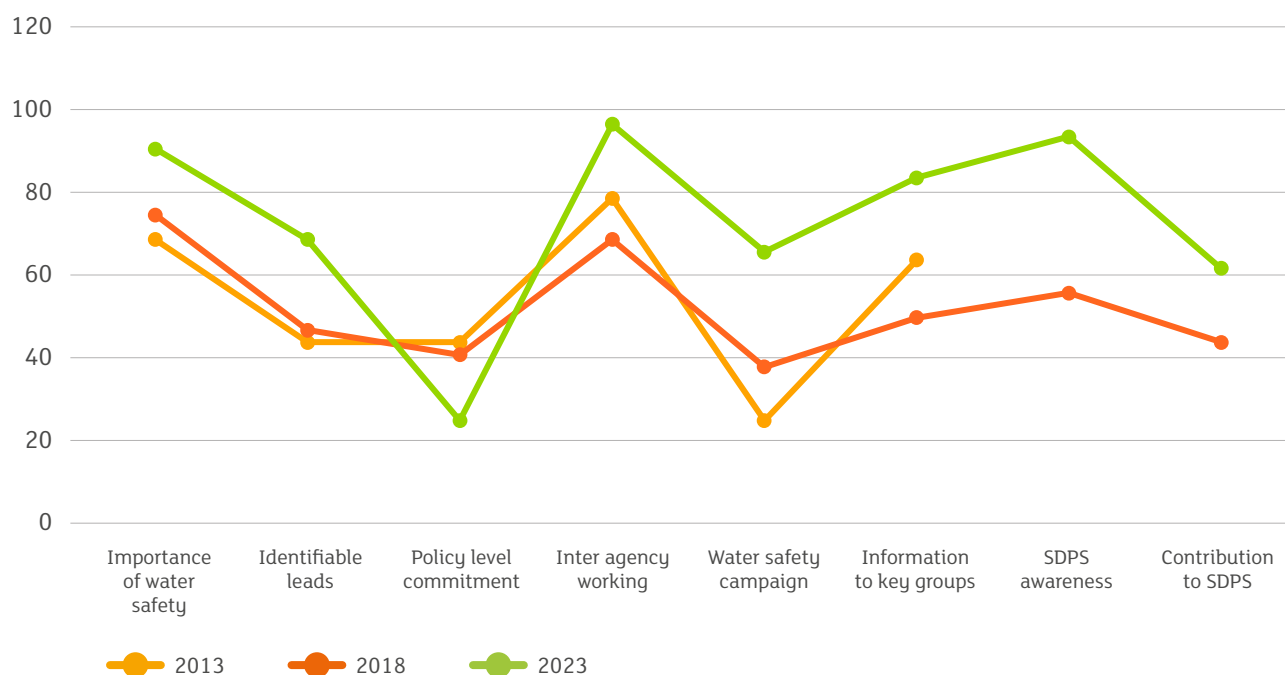
(%) Base = 32





Appendix Two

2013, 2018, 2023 Dashboard Key Results



Question	Percentage 2013	Percentage 2018	Percentage 2023	Percentage Difference (from 2013)	Percentage Difference (from 2018)
Relative importance of managing water safety	69	75	91	22	16
Identifiable leads on water safety	44	47	69	25	22
Policy level commitment to water safety	44	41	25	-19	-16
Work with other agencies in water safety	79	69	97	18	28
Running of a water safety campaign	25	38	66	41	28
Info provided to key groups	64	50	84	20	34
Awareness of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy	N/A	56	94	N/A	38
Contribution to Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy	N/A	44	62	N/A	18

References

- 1 RoSPA (2013) Local Authority Approaches to Managing Water Safety. Available at: www.rospa.com/rospaweb/docs/advice-services/leisure-safety/approaches-to-managing-water-safety.pdf (accessed 30/07/2018)
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