



accidents don't have to happen

National water safety conference 2026

From Strategy to Prevention:
Shaping the Future of Drowning Prevention in the UK

Wednesday, October 07, 2026

Keynote Speakers

Anyone can drown, no-one should, but tragically my son Joe did

Vanessa Abbess

Vanessa Abbess is the mother of Joe Abbess, who tragically drowned aged 17 after being caught in a rip current at Bournemouth beach in 2023. Since Joe's death, Vanessa has shown remarkable courage in sharing his story to help prevent other families experiencing the same heartbreak. She has supported water safety advocacy and campaigns with organisations including RLSS UK, HM Coastguard, the National Water Safety Forum and the RNLI, speaking to MPs, media and practitioners about the importance of education, rip current awareness and simple survival advice. Her work in Joe's memory has helped bring a deeply human voice to national efforts to reduce drowning.

Water safety: Theory to practice

Professor Mike Tipton, Chair of the National Water Safety Forum

Professor Mike Tipton has worked at the Universities of Surrey and Portsmouth. He is a visiting professor at King's College London and SETU Waterford, Ireland. He was Consultant Head of the Environmental Medicine Division at the Institute of Naval Medicine from 1996 to 2004. He has published over 850 scientific books, papers, reports and abstracts on drowning, thermoregulation, environmental and occupational physiology, and survival in the sea. Professor Tipton was a Trustee/Director of Surf Lifesaving GB, a member of the medical committee and Council of the RNLI, and a Consultant to the Medical Director of the RNLI, for whom he is now an honorary lifetime Governor. He has been a consultant in survival and thermal medicine to the Royal Air Force, UKSport and the English Institute of Sport.

Professor Tipton is Chair of the National Water Safety Forum and of Water Safety England, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, and a Fellow, Trustee and President of The Physiological Society. He has been awarded his MBE for services to physiological research in extreme environments, the Ireland Medal for saving lives from drowning worldwide, and the H&L Swiftwater rescue lifetime achievement award from the USA.

Water safety: Leadership in practice

Alison Lowe OBE, Deputy Mayor for Police and Crime (West Yorkshire Combined Authority)

Alison Lowe is the Deputy Mayor for Police and Crime in West Yorkshire. She started her role in July 2021 and was appointed by the new Metro Mayor, Tracy Brabin, because of her extensive voluntary sector, political and policing experience. In this role, Alison holds a variety of leadership responsibilities, including chairing the Vision Zero Board, which aims to end all road death in West Yorkshire by 2040.

Alison worked in the third sector for more than 30 years, most recently as Chief Executive of Touchstone, a mental health charity working across West Yorkshire. She has been involved in local government for 29 years and was a councillor with the Labour Party, as well as the Chair of the Police and Crime Panel, the body that scrutinises the performance of the Police and Crime Commissioner and represents the interests of all the 2.4 million people across West Yorkshire. Alison was the Deputy Lord Mayor of Leeds in 2003/04 and was made an Honorary Alderwoman of the city in 2020. Alison is a Non-Executive Director with Leeds Community Health NHS Trust.

Over the years, Alison has been a well-known campaigner on equal rights and chaired the Leeds Domestic Violence Forum that raises awareness of domestic violence against women and children by known men for over 25 years.

Men's Health and Water Safety

Amy O'Connor, Movember

Amy O'Connor has been working in public health campaigns since 2012 across the UK, Europe, US and APAC. She previously worked in women's health, sexual health and diagnostic, and now leads the Policy and Advocacy team at Movember, the world's largest Men's Health Charity,

At Movember, Amy works with the Movember community, researchers, MPs, Cabinet Ministers and a global team to turn evidence into action, delivering the first Men's Health Strategy for England and securing Australia's biggest ever government funding commitment to men's health, with policy traction now building across six countries.

Parallel Sessions: Morning

Data, Evidence and Insight

Moderator: Professor Mike Tipton, NWSF

This session focuses on data and evidence from the water safety field. It covers a wide range of insights into drowning prevention, including insights on the determinants of floating, high frequency locations, child drownings, and the Drowning and Incident Review process.

Data and insights on child drownings in England

Pete Kennedy (RLSS UK)

Tom Williams (National Child Mortality Database)

This project uses data from the National Child Mortality Database (NCMD) to inform public policy interventions to prevent drowning. The aim of the project is to 1) identify key risk factors, patterns and trends using robust statutory data; and 2) persuade policymakers that drowning is a preventable public health issue requiring government intervention.

NCMD collates data from Child Death Overview Panels, a statutory review process following every death of a child in England. The Royal Life Saving Society UK analyses this data to inform drowning prevention.

Results show that, between 1 April, 2019, to 31 March, 2025, 196 child drowning deaths were recorded. The data shows: under 5s and 13-17 years were most at risk of drowning; Black children drown at more than three times the rate of White children; children in the most deprived communities drown at twice the rate of the least deprived; boys drown at twice the rate of girls; 71% were known to social care at some point; 87% of cases identified modifiable factors; inland open water is the most common location where children drown, followed by the bath; and Covid-19 restrictions appear to have significantly impacted drowning risk, with unequal distribution between different risk groups and locations.

This paper concludes that drownings are not random accidents. They follow clear patterns of risk depending on physical, environmental, economic and social factors. This reinforces the World Health Organization's position that drownings are a preventable public health issue requiring systemic intervention and government leadership.

References : National Child Mortality Database (2025) Child Drowning Deaths April 1st 2019-March 31st 2025. Available at: <https://www.ncmd.info/publications/child-drowning-deaths-2019-2025/> (Accessed: 18/05/2026).

The Drowning and Incident Review: new directions and opportunities

Carlene McAvoy, RoSPA

Authors: Carlene McAvoy, RoSPA; Professor Martin Barwood, Leeds Trinity University

The Drowning and Incident Review (DIR) process was introduced in Scotland in 2023 following many “inconclusive” outcomes in water-related fatality data making it more challenging to carry out effective prevention work. After every accidental water related fatality, the DIR process involves a thorough review to 1) collect key information that can inform prevention work at both national and local levels, and 2) identify specific contextual recommendations aimed at reducing the likelihood of similar incidents occurring in that area in the future.

Water Safety Wales is exploring the DIR process to address similar challenges with incomplete data and to establish a system that can help prevent future fatalities. RoSPA and Leeds Trinity University are currently conducting research to determine the feasibility and acceptability of implementing the DIR system in Wales, including any adaptations needed to make the system suitable for the Welsh context.

This presentation will provide an overview of the DIR process, along with the research methods being used in Wales, early insights (if available) will also be presented and as well observations on the importance of a such a system for the future vision towards zero drownings — a future where everyone in the UK can be safe in, on and around the water.

Mapping the evolution of high-frequency locations for unintentional and intentional drowning in the United Kingdom: findings from stakeholder engagement meetings and their impacts on prevention

Professor Martin Barwood, Leeds Trinity University

Authors: Professor Martin Barwood, Leeds Trinity University and International Drowning Research Alliance; Dr Sam Hills, Bournemouth University; Dr Matt Hobbs, Sheffield Hallam University and University of Canterbury (Christchurch); Dr. Lukáš Marek, University of Canterbury (Christchurch)

Drowning is a significant cause of unintentional and intentional death in the United Kingdom with a total of 659 drownings, including water-related fatalities, in 2023. Available resources for prevention are limited with the rescue effort falling to publicly funded agencies. Therefore, knowledge of the high-frequency (HF) locations where drownings tend to occur is valuable to inform strategy and policy.

We previously confirmed the existence of these HF locations from data spanning 2012 to 2019, separated into three priority categories for intervention. The present study repeated this analysis using more recent data (up to 2023). We aim to report the impacts HF location-specific stakeholder feedback meetings and evaluate prevention efforts in these locations.

We received anonymised 2012 to 2023 data comprising 7,559 fatalities. Fatality geo-locations were extracted, mapped and tested for the presence of HF locations using a density-based

spatial clustering algorithm. Intentional and unintentional events were separated into clusters of events occurring within a 500-metre radius of each other.

HF location data indicated a net reduction, by five HF unintentional drowning locations, between 2012 to 2019 and 2016 to 2023 analyses with at least one fewer HF location(s) in each priority category: very-high priority three to one, high-priority five to four, moderate-priority 19 to 17. Intentional drowning HF locations had increased by one HF location overall; 52 to 53. Stakeholder feedback meetings indicated effective prevention plans, through the formation of water safety partnerships in some areas, had reduced drowning fatalities in unintentional drowning HF locations including checks for event displacement.

References

National Water Safety Forum (2024). Annual fatal Incident Trend and Summary Report 2023. National Water Safety Forum. UK; Hobbs, M., Hills, S.P., Tipton, M.J. & Barwood M.J. (2023). Investigating the spatial clustering of drowning events in the United Kingdom: a geospatial and cross-sectional study. *Applied Geography*, volume 158 [available online July 31st, 2023]. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2023.103006>.

Determinants of floating in people of African, Caribbean and Asian Heritage

Heather Massey, University of Portsmouth
Seren Jones, The Black Swimming Association

Authors: Heather Massey, University of Portsmouth; Clare Eglin, University of Portsmouth; Geoff Long, University of Portsmouth and BAE systems; Danielle Obe, The Black Swimming Association; Ed Accura, The Black Swimming Association; Seren Jones, The Black Swimming Association; Alice Dearing, The Black Swimming Association; Jo Melchior, The Black Swimming Association; Lee Bailey, The Black Swimming Association; Bobbi-Jo Allen, The Black Swimming Association; Damian Stevenson, The Black Swimming Association; Ruth Williamson, Hampshire Hospital NHS Foundation Trust; Shelly Blaine, Health Sciences University, Bournemouth; Ross D. Pollock, King's College London; Gareth Morrison, RNLI; Liam Fayle-Parr, RNLI; Nick Ayes, RNLI; Professor Mike Tipton, University of Portsmouth.

In the West, a longstanding belief among people of African and Caribbean heritage and beyond suggests they cannot float due to higher bone mineral density (BMD). This study examined whether BMD is a major determinant of buoyancy or floating competence in individuals of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage.

Ninety-six adults (43 men, 53 women) participated in this ethically approved study. Each completed dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry body composition and BMD scans and buoyancy assessments. Participants received 30 to 120 minutes of floating instruction before being filmed for two minutes in an indoor pool (30 °C), out of their depth, from four angles. Float outcome (did not float/floated with [no/little/some/lots] of effort) was subsequently assessed.

Mean values [range] were: age 37 [19 to 60] years; BMI 27.7 [16.7 to 51.3] kg·m⁻²; BMD 1.2 [1.0 to 1.5] g·m⁻²; body fat percentage 33 [16.0 to 57.8] %. BMD showed weak correlations with float outcome and buoyancy. Float outcome was moderately correlated with body fat percentage,

while buoyancy showed strong correlations with both body fat percentage and float outcome. Participants floated horizontally, vertically, or at an angle; 59 floated passively (14 men, 45 women) and 37 needed to be active to stay afloat (29 men, 8 women).

BMD has little influence on float outcome. Body fat percentage is strongly associated with buoyancy and ease of floating. Higher body fat supports passive floating, while leaner individuals can float, but may need to be more active. Practising different floating techniques may help individuals identify the approach best suited to them.

Education

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Moderator: Adam Goymer, Swim England

This session focuses on classroom-based water safety education across the UK, including how it is being delivered in schools and other settings, as well as the teaching approaches used to support learning and engagement.

Developing a national, evidence-informed model for water safety education in England

David Bullen, Durham County Council

Authors: Sam Johnson, RNLI; David Bullen, Durham County Council; Carlene McAvoy, RoSPA; Ashley Jones, RLSS UK; Adam Goymer, Swim England

Drowning is a cause of unintentional injury globally, and WHO identifies age-appropriate swimming, water safety, and rescue skills as key interventions.

In the UK, the 2016 Drowning Prevention Strategy aimed for all children to learn to swim and receive water safety education in primary school, but delivery has been inconsistent, with variation in access and content. A cohesive, evidence informed model was needed to align the sector and ensure equitable learning.

England-based water safety organisations formed a multi-agency partnership to engage government and design an age and stage appropriate educational framework spanning classrooms, swimming pools, and environments. Child centred qualitative research (2017) examined young people's perceptions of open water and associated risks, highlighting the need for clear messaging. In 2018, Swim England, the RNLI, and RLSS UK launched the Water Safety

Code to unify learning. Quantitative research (Tipton et al., 2022) validated classroom-based instruction and supported universal provision. Input from bereaved families shaped priorities and strengthened policy engagement.

In 2024/25, three million children in England accessed Water Safety Code aligned education through school swimming, learn to swim pathways, outdoor learning, community outreach, and campaigns. Ministerial engagement in 2025 accelerated curriculum progress and enabled age-appropriate guidance. Curriculum changes planned for 2026 will embed classroom-based water safety education for all pupils. A supporting competency framework and pathway was launched in June 2026 to support practitioners to deliver consistent water safety to school aged children.

Shared messaging, collaboration, and evidence driven design improved reach and consistency. Bereaved families were instrumental in raising awareness and influencing political action. Continued national scaling, supported by evaluation, should enhance alignment across schools, swimming providers, and communities, with lived experience remaining central.

The effectiveness of water safety education: comparing the impact of three UK teaching approaches

Jenny Smith, University of Chichester

Authors: Jenny Smith, University of Chichester; Jo Talbot, RLSS UK; Paul Griffiths, Aspire Active Education Group; Carla Rue, University of Chichester.

Water safety education plays a critical role in reducing drownings, yet 41 children in England died from drowning from 1 April, 2022, to 31 March, 2023. Although the National Curriculum requires swimming instruction in Key Stage 1 or 2, the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching water safety knowledge remains unclear. This project examined three delivery methods: traditional school swimming lessons (TSL), pop up pool lessons (PUP), and RLSS UK's Rookie Lifeguard programme (RLG).

Focus groups with teachers, instructors, and children were used to co-develop a water safety knowledge questionnaire. Questionnaire data were then collected at four time points: pre programme, mid programme, post programme, and follow up. Water safety knowledge increased from pre to post programme by 5% for TSL and 7% for RLG but decreased by 1% for PUP. A repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant between subjects' effect of group on knowledge ($F(5.088, 175.536) = 1.85, p = 0.09, \eta^2 = 0.05$). Bonferroni adjusted post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that RLG scored significantly higher than both PUP ($MD = -5.63, p = 0.031, d = -0.57$) and TSL ($MD = 9.43, p < .001, d = 0.95$), whereas the PUP-TSL difference was not statistically significant ($MD = 3.80, p = 0.296$). Knowledge gains were retained at follow up.

Overall, the findings suggest that while TSL and RLG improve children's water safety knowledge, the RLG programme generates the largest and most sustained gains. The marginal improvement

across groups indicates a need to optimise the delivery of swimming lessons to ensure children receive adequate water safety education.

Increasing school engagement with a formalised water safety programme ahead of the RSHE Curriculum change in September 2026

Ashley Jones, RLSS UK

The RLSS UK Water Smart Schools programme is a free to access water safety education resource. It aims to provide sustained learning, where essential skills and knowledge are embedded in the curriculum to encourage informed decision-making and responsible behaviours.

This paper aims to identify methods of increasing school engagement with a formalised water safety programme ahead of the RSHE Curriculum change in September 2026. It assesses two methods of enhancing engagement: 1. Enhanced offer with free Continuing Professional Development (CPD) session for educators (E1); and 2. Partnering with locally trusted organisation (LTO) to offer local in person, practical delivery that supports digital resources (E2).

For E1, sign up rates following email promotion to schools were compared. An initial communication in January 2026 highlighted the September 2026 RSHE curriculum change. A second email to English schools in February identified the curriculum change and offered the additional free CPD. For E2, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service were engaged as a partner to enhance the WSS digital resources by promoting the programme and providing in person, practical sessions for schools.

E1 increased programmes registrations by 600%, against the monthly average of 21. E2 increased year on year sign up rates from two in 2023/24 to 20 in 2024/25, a 900% increase. These results show that enhanced offers that go beyond print or digital resources increase engagement in water safety campaigns aimed at schools. LTOs are a powerful partner in gaining local engagement. Where LTOs are not present, providing training to enhance local capability is recommended.

Reaching those most at risk: the IHA Portal and cold water shock education for young people

Robin Jenkins (Atlantic Pacific)

Cold water shock remains one of the most underestimated yet deadly hazards in open water environments, and young people continue to be disproportionately represented in UK drowning statistics. Despite growing public awareness campaigns, this demographic remains stubbornly

difficult to reach through traditional safety messaging. Closing this gap requires innovative, targeted approaches that meet young people where they are, and equip the educators around them with the tools to do the same.

This presentation introduces the newly launched portal at apiha.org, developed by the Institute of Humanitarian Action (IHA), a brand of Atlantic Pacific. The portal is designed to bridge the gap between evidence-based drowning prevention and the communities most in need of it. Built for both young people and the educators who work with them, it delivers free, ready-to-teach resources on cold water shock, including lesson plans, films, and assembly presentations, enabling schools, youth leaders, and parents to act immediately without barriers to access.

We will outline the rationale behind IHA's development, the principles that shaped its content and user experience, and the early findings from its launch. Sponsored by the Port of London Authority, the portal reflects a collaborative model of drowning prevention, one that recognises the specific challenges of engaging young people at highest risk, a group often underserved by conventional safety messaging.

Attendees will leave with insight into how freely accessible digital tools can complement national water safety strategies, and how a joined-up approach between young people and educators can drive lasting behaviour change around cold water risk.

Campaigns and communications

Moderator: Chirs Cousens, RNLI and Chair of Water Safety Wales

This session will focus on key drowning prevention campaigns across the UK, alongside efforts to improve how water safety advice is communicated and understood amongst different groups.

Empowering bystanders to act in water emergencies

Tim Parry, Claremont Communications

Accidental drowning remains a preventable cause of death across coastal and inland waters. Many are witnessed by bystanders who present an opportunity to help through effective action, and this action needs to be clear and memorable.

The National Water Safety Forum has sought to strengthen understanding of bystander action for water related emergencies by reviewing its Call Tell Throw campaign, within its wider Respect The Water programme. This presentation outlines the insight driven, behaviourally-designed process used to undertake that review.

The project aimed to (1) improve clarity and recall of bystander instructions, (2) shift behaviour toward safe and effective action, and (3) support consistent adoption across NWSF.

A multi-stage behavioural insight process was employed, including a previous campaigns and evidence review, stakeholder and member interviews/workshops, and extensive qualitative research with the public. Core messaging and creatives were iteratively tested through audience focus groups.

Testing showed a repositioning of bystander instructions to Phone, Float, Throw improved comprehension and was more intuitively associated with effective action. Public testing highlighted increased confidence to act and improved recall. NWSF members have supported the change and the creative campaign. The campaign launched publicly via paid advertising channels and through Forum member sharing, results are being amassed and will be shared at conference.

The work demonstrates that behaviour change principles, design and testing conducted with stakeholders and audiences can strengthen comprehension and salience in water safety communication. Phone, Float, Throw provides a unified approach for reducing risky public behaviours and increasing bystander efficacy in these emergencies.

Understanding water safety communication preferences among men aged 50 and over: findings from a focus group

Emma Dudley, RoSPA

Authors: Emma Dudley, RoSPA; Carlene McAvoy, RoSPA

Since its inception, Water Safety Scotland has strived towards reducing the rate of drowning in Scotland's inland and coastal waters. One particular project that has helped improve drowning prevention knowledge involved a focus group with men over the age of 50 who reside in Scotland. The aim of the focus group was to understand the water safety communication preferences of this particular demographic.

The focus group, which featured five men, were asked general questions regarding their experiences and interactions with water bodies in Scotland. The discussion then progressed into specifics regarding their thoughts and opinions on water safety communications and safety messaging in general. This included looking at examples of social media communications from Water Safety Scotland's existing Communications Toolkit.

We found there was a preference for positive communication messaging that fostered independence as well as encouraging community. Furthermore, there was discussions on the importance of local in person engagement. The insights gained from this focus group have led to a number of changes to Water Safety Scotland's messaging, communications, and engagement. This presentation will provide an overview of the results from the focus group and changes that have occurred as a result. These findings may provide valuable insights for others in the UK, illustrating how attitudes, behaviours, and risk perceptions in this demographic could inform water safety and drowning prevention strategies more broadly.

Find Your Float: evaluating two years of the National Water Safety Forum's World Drowning Prevention Day campaign

Georgie Beardmore, RoSPA

Find Your Float is the National Water Safety Forum (NWSF)'s public awareness campaign for World Drowning Prevention Day. The campaign encourages people to mark World Drowning Prevention Day by learning a practical lifesaving skill – the science-backed self-rescue technique of floating – either by attending an event hosted by NWSF partners, or by practising in a supervised environment like a swimming pool or lifeguarded beach.

Following a successful pilot year in 2025, the NWSF elected to run the campaign for a second year in 2026, aligning with the release of the new UK Drowning Prevention Strategy. NWSF partners were encouraged to host events that matched their organisational aims and resource, and to create educational resources to share with their networks from July 20 to 25, 2026.

This paper will share how insights from the pilot campaign in 2025 drove the delivery and development of the 2026 campaign, as well as key metrics from 2026's events, digital activity and media coverage. It will also aim to demonstrate the value of direct, in-person initiatives as part of the NWSF's communications strategy, and how this type of campaign can deliver value for both partners and the public. ,

From lab to lifesaving: the evolution of Float to Live, a UK public health campaign by the RNLI to reduce drownings

Ross Macleod, RNLI

For years, hypothermia was widely understood as the principal danger. However, research led by Professor Mike Tipton demonstrated that Cold Shock Response (CSR) is often the more immediate and critical threat. Sudden immersion can trigger involuntary gasping, hyperventilation, impaired swimming ability and cardiac strain, significantly increasing the risk of drowning. Since 2017, the RNLI has used this evidence to promote the lifesaving advice: Float to Live.

This project aimed to develop, test and evaluate an evidence-based public safety intervention that reduces drowning risk following sudden cold-water immersion. The objective was to improve public understanding of CSR, increase awareness and recall of Float to Live, refine the message for target audiences, and assess whether the campaign influences survival knowledge and behaviour.

The approach combined practical floating studies across open-water conditions, qualitative focus groups to optimise message clarity and acceptability, and biannual quantitative tracking over eight years to assess recall, recognition and sentiment. Survivor testimonies were also collected and stewarded as real-world evidence of impact.

Evidence supports the message across varied open-water contexts. Audience insight improved delivery and technique cues, including relaxed breathing and keeping the ears in the water. Independent tracking found increased water-safety awareness and improved survival-skill knowledge following campaign exposure, with over 90% agreeing the message is credible, clear and worth sharing. More than 50 people have contacted the RNLI to report that the campaign helped save their life. Float to Live has evolved from a campaign into a national water-safety message with relevance for policy, education and prevention

Education (Swim Specific)

Moderator: Anna Smee, CEO Surf Life Saving GB

This session focuses on swimming-specific educational initiatives, including frameworks in Scotland, Swim Safe programmes in Wales, and the use of pop-up pools to support water confidence and skill development.

Breaking down barriers to school swimming and water safety through temporary pop-up pools

Andrew Stanton, Aspire Active Education Group

In England, school swimming is a vital part of drowning prevention, yet provision remains inconsistent and under-resourced. In 2024, 30% of Year 7 pupils were unable to swim 25 metres unaided, while child drowning deaths had doubled in the last four years. Pool closures, transport costs, instructor shortages, and restricted access continue to prevent schools from delivering effective swimming and water safety education.

This paper aims to show how Swim:ED uses temporary above-ground pools, delivered to school sites with rigorous safety protocols, secure infrastructure, qualified staff, and curriculum-aligned teaching, as a credible model for schools in England facing barriers to traditional provision.

Since 2023, Swim:ED has engaged 22,971 children. In 2024/25, the programme reached 15,382 children across 118 schools through intensive school-based delivery. Year 6 outcomes were assessed against the national curriculum and Swim England criteria across swimming proficiency, stroke development, water safety knowledge, and safe self-rescue.

In 2024/25, 91.1% of children improved in at least one key programme outcome. Among Year 6 pupils, 25 metre proficiency rose from 23% to 59%, multiple stroke proficiency from 31% to 69%, safe self-rescue from 16% to 70%, and water safety knowledge from 13% to 78%.

When delivered to high standards, temporary above-ground pools can do more than widen access. They can help shape future practice in school swimming and water safety education, offering the sector a practical, evidence-led model for strengthening drowning prevention nationwide.

References

Sport England Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2023/24; RLSS UK Child Drowning Update 2024; Aspire Active Education Group, Swim:ED Impact Report 2024/25.

Strengthening water safety in Scotland: evaluating the RLSS UK–Scottish Swimming AquaMark partnership

Graham McCallum, RLSS UK

Paul Donald, Scottish Swimming

Reducing drowning in Scotland requires coordinated action across education, communication, and policy, supporting the aims of Water Safety Scotland and the Scottish Drowning Prevention Strategy. The partnership between RLSS UK and Scottish Swimming strengthens collaborative efforts to promote water safety and lifesaving skills within aquatic environments.

Scottish Swimming is committed to developing clubs that are strong, sustainable, and inclusive. Its Aquamark accreditation framework sets nationally recognised standards for governance, development, and club environments. This initiative focuses on integrating the RLSS UK Aquamark Additional Module into the existing accreditation process.

The module supports clubs to embed water safety and lifesaving awareness into their activities, encourages engagement with structured safety education, and creates opportunities for members and volunteers to gain RLSS UK lifesaving qualifications. It also recognises clubs demonstrating commitment to water safety education and community engagement.

Feedback from two Scottish Swimming clubs that completed the module indicates positive outcomes. Both reported increased competence and confidence in delivering lifesaving and water safety activities. Volunteers highlighted the benefits of dual-organisation qualifications and associated financial support. Enhanced joint communication improved public visibility of water safety messaging, while early policy insights reflected a shared commitment to aligned standards and future collaboration.

Initial findings suggest the partnership strengthens educational impact, expands communication reach, and supports policy development. Early engagement from clubs highlights strong potential for wider national adoption and meaningful, long-term contributions to drowning prevention, supported by national frameworks, partnership documentation, and Aquamark accreditation materials.

North Wales Fire and Rescue, Swim Wales and Conwy Local Authority water safety pilot scheme

Kim Jones, North Wales Fire and Rescue Service

Hanna Guise, Swim Wales

Drowning remains a leading cause of accidental death in the UK, with younger children particularly at risk due to limited water safety education. In response, North Wales Fire and Rescue Service (NWFRS), in partnership with Swim Wales and Conwy Local Authority, developed a pilot initiative for children aged seven to 10 across Conwy.

This initiative aims to improve children's understanding of water hazards, strengthen safe decision making, and teach reliable floating survival techniques (Find Your Float). Objectives include equipping children with essential lifesaving skills, encouraging knowledge sharing with peers, multi-agency collaboration, and embedding a consistent message across North Wales and beyond.

The pilot uses a blended model of classroom teaching followed by practical pool-side training. NWFRS staff complete a one-day course delivered by Swim Wales to ensure consistent delivery. Weekly term time sessions are jointly run by NWFRS staff and leisure centre instructors. The pilot aims to engage with Year 4 pupils across 50 primary schools in Conwy, with bookings managed by Ffit Conwy Leisure.

Early evaluation shows strong pupil engagement, increased confidence in floating skills, and better understanding of water hazards. NWFRS involvement strengthens the message and boosts participation. Feedback has been very positive with the results supporting planned expansion into other North Wales counties.

This initiative shows that structured, multi-agency water safety education improves children's readiness for water emergencies and supports wider drowning prevention efforts. This pilot is developing across Wales and beyond.

Improving water safety education for every child in Scotland: a national framework approach

Erin Cummins, Scottish Swimming

Gordon Hunter, Scottish Swimming

Scotland's landscape, with extensive inland waters and coastlines, requires a coordinated approach to water safety education. Scottish Swimming, in partnership with Scottish Water, has developed two national frameworks that place water safety at their core: the National Learn to Swim Framework (NLTSF) and the National Primary School Swimming Framework (NPSSF). Together, these frameworks are ensuring children across Scotland receive vital lifesaving skills and knowledge.

This presentation demonstrates how integrated national frameworks, strategic partnerships and recent committed government investment are improving children's knowledge, skills and practical competence in, on and around water.

The NLTSF, delivered in 90% of local authorities, engages around 85,000 children weekly through community-based learn to swim programmes. Partners embed water safety messaging year-round alongside dedicated water safety lessons during Drowning Prevention Week, ensuring consistent national reinforcement.

The NPSSF, now benefiting from long-term Scottish Government investment, will provide a standardised, curriculum linked approach for approximately 55,000 P5 pupils annually. It places water safety and basic swimming skills at the centre of learning, combining classroom education with structured in-pool sessions. Both frameworks integrate Water Safety Scotland resources to ensure consistent national messaging.

Implementation to date shows increased reach, improved consistency in delivery, and strengthened collaboration across sectors towards water safety education. The NPSSF's structured approach, including the Basic Water Competency Award, provides measurable, safety-focused outcomes and equitable access nationwide.

Embedding water safety within two national frameworks, supported by strong partnerships, ensures all children can develop essential swimming skills, improving confidence and competence in, on and around water.

Parallel Sessions: Afternoon

Data, Evidence and Insight

Moderator: James Bridge, GM Water Safety Strategic Partnership

This afternoon session focuses on further data and evidence from the water safety field. It covers a wide range of insights into drowning prevention, including narrative-rich insights, WAID, Years of Life Lost, and somatic trauma informed approaches to grief.

Water Incident Database Enhancement Project: approach and learning

Rachael Brogan, RoSPA

The Water Incident Database (WAID) data enhancement project was undertaken by RoSPA, on behalf of the National Water Safety Forum between August 2024 and February 2025 to improve the 2019-2023 dataset. This was done for two primary reasons: To reduce the "Not recorded" outcomes, for a more robust data set (to better measure against the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy baseline) and to match updates made to the WAID taxonomy in 2023.

The five-year dataset was downloaded and updated, incident-by-incident, incorporating previously captured incidents and newly identified cases. Missing information was provided by Coroners and, where appropriate, media research. Records were revised to align with the new taxonomy, and regional classifications were reconfigured to ensure consistency across the dataset.

Overall fatality numbers increased across all years, the largest rise of 3% occurring in 2021. "Not recorded" outcomes declined each year, with a notable 49% reduction in 2020, while "Accidental" outcomes increased annually, with 2019 showing the greatest uplift at 20%. The updated taxonomy provided clearer insight into activities— e.g. distinguishing Paddleboarding and Kayaking within the broader "Manually Powered Boating" category—and improvements to regional mapping ensured all incidents were aligned with the post-April 2023 authority structures.

This presentation will provide an overview of the project, giving more detail into the process and insights. It will note observations on the importance of keeping data as up-to-date as possible and how this could look in the future.

Unlocking the value of narrative-rich incident reporting to strengthen water safety research and prevention

Jim Watson, British Sub Aqua Club

Sophie Heptonstall, British Sub Aqua Club

BSAC (British Sub Aqua Club) has maintained a database of diving and related incidents for almost 30 years and produces an Annual Diving Incident report that combines trend analysis with anonymised case summaries. While statistical analysis highlights patterns over time, the true depth of insight lies within the narrative descriptions, built from primary and secondary verified sources, of each event.

By capturing not just what happened, but how and why, the database supports learning from real-world events, informs training development, and contributes evidence-based safety advice—both within diving and across wider water-based activities.

Data is accepted from a range of verified sources and is used to write the synopsis and populate data fields allowing detailed analysis. The content follows rules regarding format and standardised word forms. Extensive validation is used prior to publication to ensure correlation between synopsis and data fields. The validation framework is updated when additional data fields are identified.

The published annual report includes a word-rich synopsis for each incident. Should new risk factors or safety questions arise; historic narratives can be systematically searched to retrospectively identify relevant cases across decades of data. This enhances both reactive investigation and proactive prevention strategies.

This approach strengthens the capacity of water safety organisations to learn from experience, adapt training, and build a more resilient, evidence-informed safety culture across all water environments.

Understanding the true burden of drowning: years of life lost and economic impact in the UK

Professor Mike Tipton, University of Portsmouth

Authors: Professor Mike Tipton, University of Portsmouth; Carlene McAvoy, RoSPA; Professor Martin Barwood, Leeds Trinity University

Drowning, whether fatal or non-fatal, remains a major yet often underestimated public health challenge. Although it is widely recognised as a largely preventable cause of death, its impact continues to be felt by individuals, families, and communities across the globe. In the UK alone, approximately 600 people lose their lives to drowning each year.

Focusing only on fatalities, however, provides an incomplete understanding of the overall burden associated with drowning. To capture a more comprehensive picture of drowning's impact, it is essential to assess Years of Life Lost (YLL). This measure reflects the gap between

an individual's age at death and their expected remaining lifespan, offering a clearer sense of the societal and economic implications of premature mortality.

Calculating YLL also enables the estimation of the Value of a Life Year (VOLY), a metric used to quantify the economic burden associated with lost life years.

In this presentation, we share new findings on the YLL attributable to drowning in the UK and outline the corresponding VOLY estimates. Our analysis aligns with World Health Organization perspectives, reinforcing the conclusion that drowning leads to substantial economic losses. These results strengthen the argument for increased investment in effective, evidence-based drowning prevention strategies.

Why a somatic trauma-informed approach is required in understanding and dealing with grief relating to both families and service personnel

Debbie Anne Turnbull MBE, River and Sea Sense

Drowning incidents expose bereaved families and service personnel (fire, police, rescue) to acute and cumulative trauma. While trauma-informed approaches address psychological impact, a somatic trauma-informed approach is essential, recognising trauma as embodied within the nervous system, influencing emotional regulation, behaviour, and long-term wellbeing.

This paper explores the necessity of a somatic trauma-informed approach in supporting grief, loss, and occupational trauma within drowning prevention, informed by both professional training and lived experience of bereavement. It highlights the role of body-based awareness in enhancing resilience, safety, and recovery.

A qualitative review of trauma theory and neurobiological research was undertaken, integrating Polyvagal Theory (Stephen Porges), the ACE Study (Felitti et al., 1998), and somatic frameworks. Key texts include *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk, alongside data from the World Health Organization.

Findings indicate trauma responses such as hypervigilance, dissociation, and emotional dysregulation are mediated through the autonomic nervous system. Somatic approaches, including breathwork and grounding, support safe processing, reduce re-traumatisation, and enhance emotional regulation and decision-making under pressure.

A somatic trauma-informed approach is critical in drowning prevention, addressing both physiological and psychological trauma. A qualified somatic trauma-informed practitioner with lived experience, is ideally equipped to deliver this approach effectively across both family and service contexts.

References : van der Kolk (2014); Porges (2011); WHO (2014); Felitti et al. (1998).

Policy and Practice

Moderator: Anna Smee, CEO Surf Life Saving GB

This afternoon session covers policy and practice across the UK, specifically exploring how local water safety partnerships operate across the nations, as well as the important role of search and rescue organisations.

The Partnership Approach to Water Safety (PAWS): Successes and future direction

Grant Cotter, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Authors: Grant Cotter, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service; Carlene McAvoy, RoSPA

The Partnership Approach to Water Safety (PAWS) is a multi-agency framework designed to promote water safety awareness by bringing together the knowledge and expertise of individuals and organisations within local communities who best understand their specific risks. It aligns with the national strategic direction set by Water Safety Scotland (WSS) and is the preferred model for delivering water safety initiatives at a local level in Scotland.

PAWS groups have been successfully operating for many years in Scotland, and as of 2026, every local authority now has an established PAWS group with strong and consistent links between local delivery and the national strategic direction set by Water Safety Scotland (WSS). These groups provide a coordinated, place-based approach to identifying water-related risks, implementing targeted interventions, and strengthening community resilience.

This presentation will outline how the PAWS structure functions in practice, the support offered by WSS and partner agencies such as the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) as well as the core responsibilities and activities undertaken by the PAWS groups. It will also discuss emerging priorities and future developments shaped by the new iteration of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy.

Strengthening coastal water safety: Local Authority evidence on governance, consistency and collaboration

Bethany Handson and Cllr Derek Bastiman, Local Government Association Coastal Special Interest Group

As the sector moves from the current UK Drowning Prevention Strategy into a national direction, the focus is shifting from strategy to action. For coastal and estuarine local authorities, this highlights the need for governance, practice, and collaboration. Building on preliminary insights shared at the National Water Safety Conference 2025, the LGA Coastal SIG has completed analysis of its survey to understand how councils are implementing water safety and drowning prevention responsibilities during this transition.

The study aimed to: establish a baseline of local authority arrangements; identify gaps and variations in governance, risk-mitigation practice, and partnership working; and generate evidence-led recommendations to support the forthcoming Water Safety Strategy for England.

A 74-question survey captured strategic and operational data from 21 coastal authorities. Findings were analysed across three pillars: Leadership and Organisation, Water Safety and Risk Mitigation, and Partnership Working, with qualitative comments providing additional context to quantitative results.

Analysis highlights strong recognition of water safety but differing levels of organisational capacity, with responsibilities often shared across teams and knowledge varying according to individual roles. Approaches to risk assessment, control measures, incident recording, public information, and education show broad commitment, but varied consistency. Partnership working is valued, though awareness and availability of local forums differ, and integration of water safety into wider planning is still developing.

From local to national: A model for England's Water Safety Partnerships

Carlene McAvoy, RoSPA

Authors: Carlene McAvoy, RoSPA; Bethany Handson, Local Government Association Coastal Special Interest Group; Sam Johnson, RNLI

Water Safety England (WSE), established in 2025, has identified effective water safety activity and practice across local areas of England, alongside growing calls for a clearer and more consistent connection between local activity and national coordination. To better understand current structures and needs, a survey was issued in February 2026 to local authorities, partnerships, and community groups to explore how water safety and drowning prevention work is organised, the challenges faced, and the level of support required.

This project is being delivered collaboratively by RoSPA, the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC), the RNLI, and the Local Government Association Coastal Special Interest Group (LGA Coastal SIG). The project and survey examines whether a more structured approach through a tiered framework is feasible in England. Such a system would allow flow from national level (WSE), through regional groups and onward to local areas, making a more manageable and coherent structure. However, it may also introduce challenges, particularly in regions where no formal groups exist, potentially placing new pressures on local areas and partners.

This presentation will provide an overview of the project, the survey findings and outline the next steps the project group intends to take. Strengthening the national to local link through WSE is essential for the successful implementation of England's Drowning Prevention Strategy, which seeks greater consistency, coordination, and collaboration across England.

The contribution of Search and Rescue (SAR) partner collaboration to water safety in Scotland

Richard Wasson, HM Coastguard

Michael Avril, RNLI

Authors: Richard Wasson, HM Coastguard; Carlene McAvoy, RoSPA; Michael Avril, RNLI

This presentation will outline the contribution of Search and Rescue (SAR) to water safety in Scotland, highlight examples of prevention focused collaboration and present new developments shaped by the next iteration of Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy (SDPS). This collective learning provides important insights for partners throughout the UK.

SAR plays a vital role in Scotland's approach to water safety, providing lifesaving response during incidents while also contributing essential operational insight post response, that strengthens preventative activity. The unique experience that SAR organisations bring through incident response, debriefs, and multi agency reviews gives a critical multi-layered perspective on risk, behavioural patterns, and intervention opportunities helping to shape national and local prevention work.

SAR agencies have been integral to the SDPS and Drowning and Incident Review (DIR) process, contributing directly to reviews of accidental water related deaths. Their operational understanding enhances quality of learning and provides valuable insight for future prevention efforts. Beyond DIR, SAR organisations have played an influential role in wider water safety initiatives across Scotland. Their collaboration has supported the development of Unique Location Codes, improvements to water safety signage, enhanced hotspot action planning and strengthened multi agency partnership working (including within the Partnership Approach to Water Safety (PAWS) groups).

SAR input ensures prevention measures are operationally compatible, practical and informed by experience gained from responding to incidents across a range of environments.

Innovative Approaches and New Areas of Focus

Moderator: Claire Gauci, Canal & River Trust

This session covers new approaches and areas of focus, including an innovative community education model for water safety open days, new technological solutions and collaborative partnerships, and potential approaches to suicide prevention within water safety practice.

Doing it for Dylan and Beneath the Surface

Rebecca Ramsay, Doing it for Dylan

Phil Jones, Beneath the Surface

This powerful and thought-provoking presentation brings together lived experience and professional expertise to address the devastating impact of child drowning and the importance of water safety education.

Drawing on her personal journey following the loss of her son, Dylan, Rebecca Ramsey shares the harsh realities of child bereavement and the determination that transformed tragedy into meaningful change. Over the past 15 years, she has become a leading advocate for drowning prevention, influencing national policy, securing the inclusion of water safety within the national curriculum, and supporting the development of educational resources that continue to save lives. Her dedication has been recognised with the RoSPA Arch Angel Award.

Having spoken to more than 500,000 people across the UK, Rebecca has used her experience to raise awareness, support numerous families affected by drowning incidents, and provide guidance to local authorities on water safety, risk assessment, and the management of water-based hazards.

Joining Rebecca is Phil Jones from Beneath the Surface, an organisation often called upon when search and rescue missions have ended. Together, they provide a unique perspective by combining real-life experiences with insights into the groundbreaking technologies and techniques used in water recovery operations.

The presentation explores the human impact of drowning incidents, the lessons learned from frontline experiences, and the vital role that education, prevention, and innovation play in reducing future tragedies. Their work has received outstanding feedback and has contributed to the creation of educational programmes, while a film based on Dylan's story is currently in development.

Water Rescue Assist

Robert Adshead, Water Rescue Assist

Water Rescue Assist CIC is developing a prototype app-centred water-safety platform. The project aims to improve public engagement, enhance delivery of official safety information, and explore a new supervised volunteer capability to strengthen drowning prevention and rescue outcomes, particularly on inland waterways. The presentation seeks to summarise key water-safety functionality, the volunteer roles and invite collaboration and stakeholder input.

The proposed platform combines a mobile app and website delivering location and activity-specific safety guidance aligned with official best practice and existing campaigns. Planned features include real-time hazard alerts, lifeguard information, and tools promoting safer behaviours. The project central mission also proposes a digitally coordinated volunteer group drawn from inland water-activity clubs with safety-support boats, commercial boatyards, and private boaters. Volunteers would receive appropriate training and oversight to support official responders safely and effectively.

Although not yet operational, the prototype demonstrates potential to improve targeted safety messaging, strengthen community engagement, and expand response capacity on inland waterways. This reflects priorities identified within UK drowning prevention strategies, which highlight the high proportion of drowning deaths occurring on inland waterways and the significant resource demands these environments place on rescue agencies.

Water Rescue Assist CIC proposes a collaborative digital approach combining technology, public engagement, and supervised volunteer capability to complement existing prevention and rescue efforts. The project aligns with the objectives of the National Water Safety Forum by supporting safer behaviours, partnership working, and enhanced inland water safety resilience.

Loch Ken Family Water Safety Day: An Innovative Community Education Model Supporting UK Drowning Prevention Priorities

Leanner Pumpr, Loch Ken Trust
Lindsay Stewart, Loch Ken Trust

Accidental drowning remains a leading cause of preventable death in Scotland and across the UK, particularly during peak recreational periods and warmer weather when open-water activity increases. The Loch Ken Family Water Safety Day was established in 2023 in response to growing participation in inland water recreation and the need for accessible, community-based education aligned with Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy and national drowning prevention priorities.

Delivered annually during the summer holidays, the initiative aims to increase water safety knowledge, skills and confidence among families; promote the Scottish Water Safety Code; and encourage safer behaviours around open water through practical, fun, experience-based learning. The event uses a multi-agency approach involving emergency services, community partners and water safety organisations. It combines classroom-style education with instructor-

led on-water activities using rafted canoes and interactive safety sessions designed to support family engagement and risk awareness. Educational resources and key safety messaging are informed by Water Safety Scotland (WSS) to ensure consistency with Scotland's national approach to drowning prevention. Accessibility is prioritised through open to all participation and strong local community involvement.

Since its pilot, the event has engaged more than 1,500 participants, with annual attendance exceeding 500. Observations indicate improved awareness, confidence and engagement with water safety messaging among attendees. The Loch Ken model demonstrates an effective and scalable approach to community water safety education, supporting Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy through early intervention, partnership working and seasonal prevention activity.

Water-related suicide: Can traditional drowning prevention strategies be effective, or is a different approach needed? Reflections from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and UK National Water Safety Forum

Ross Macleod, RNLI

Authors: Ross Macleod, RNLI; Martin Barwood, Leeds Trinity University

Suicide is a major UK public health issue, with more than 7,000 deaths recorded in 2023, equivalent to 13.0 per 100,000 population. Male suicide rates remain disproportionately high, and water-related suicides account for an estimated 3 to 5% of all suicides. Data from the UK Water Incident Database (WAID) show that, over an eight-year period, 35% of water-related fatalities were suspected suicides, often clustering at high-frequency locations. In 2019, for the first time on record in the UK, more people died in water-related suicides than in accidental drownings. The RNLI also responds to over 800 non-fatal incidents annually involving people in crisis in, on or near the water.

This paper aims to examine whether traditional drowning prevention approaches are sufficient for water-related suicide, or whether a distinct public health approach is required. It endeavours to improve understanding of the scale and pattern of water-related suicide, strengthen collaboration between drowning prevention and suicide prevention sectors, and identify opportunities for targeted intervention.

The approach combined data-driven situational analysis with advocacy and engagement across the suicide prevention sector, informed by the WHO LIVE LIFE Implementation Guide for Suicide Prevention. This work contributed to improved recognition of water-related suicide in England's Suicide Prevention Strategy 2023–2028, which names the National Water Safety Forum and the RNLI as lead organisations. It also supported responsible media practice and improved data sharing to inform real-time suicide surveillance.

This paper demonstrates that water-related suicide requires a distinct, multi-sector public health response. Advanced analytics, strategic partnerships and targeted interventions can help prevent deaths.

Education (Swim Specific)

Moderator: Kirsty Aitken, Founder/ CEO Darcey Sunshine Foundation

This afternoon session focuses on swimming and brings insights into how inequality impacts access to swim education, swimming pool infrastructure, and a critical analysis of age guidance.

Swim Safe with Onboard: a collaborative partnership with the Royal Yachting Association

Adam Goymer, Swim England

To raise awareness and partnership opportunities for Swim Safe 2027.

Children love swimming outdoors, but swimming in the sea, rivers and lakes is different to swimming in a pool where most swimming lessons take place. However, each year, RNLI lifeguards and lifeboats rescue children and adults who find themselves in difficulty in and near the water.

As a result, in 2013, Swim England (the national governing body for swimming in England) and the RNLI (the charity that saves lives at sea)) launched Swim Safe.

Swim Safe is a fun and free water safety activity for children that takes place in the summer, providing an outdoor swimming and water safety opportunity for children aged between 7 and 14. Children learn how to keep safe when swimming outdoors and know what to do if they get into trouble. Swim Safe runs at beaches, lakes and other inland outdoors water locations across the UK.

In 2024 Swim Safe partnered with the RYA to integrate Swim Safe into the RYA's OnBoard (a grassroots junior sailing and windsurfing programme, offering young people the opportunity to explore life on the water through their local club or centre). Through this partnership Swim Safe has reached a new audience. The sessions aim to increase awareness of water safety and boost confidence around open water.

Governing unequal protection: School swimming, water safety and inequality in Scotland

Orla Suttie (University of Aberdeen)

School swimming and water-safety education are central to Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy and the priorities of Water Safety Scotland and Scottish Swimming. Despite this, access to school swimming remains uneven across the country.

This study examines how policy constructs responsibility for school swimming and water-safety education, and how these governance arrangements shape access to provision. Using an interpretivist approach, 54 national, local-authority and sectoral policy documents were analysed to explore how expectations, duties and delivery mechanisms are defined.

Findings show that while national policy strongly promotes swimming and water-safety education, delivery is organised through non-statutory, locally mediated arrangements. Responsibility is dispersed across governance levels, and provision is shaped by local resources, infrastructure and priorities. As a result, variation in access persists despite national drowning-prevention objectives. The study highlights the need for stronger alignment between national strategy and local delivery to support equitable access to life-saving water-safety skills.

Rethinking swimming infrastructure: rapidly deployable mobile pools as an innovative policy instrument for drowning prevention

Christophe Lecoque, Swimwise

Limited access to swimming infrastructure remains a significant barrier to effective drowning prevention, particularly in underserved communities where permanent aquatic facilities are unavailable, oversubscribed or financially unrealistic. While temporary pools are sometimes used for school swimming in parts of the UK, broader community access to safe, inclusive and rapidly deployable swimming infrastructure remains limited.

This presentation introduces an innovative approach using fully integrated mobile swimming pools designed for rapid deployment and flexible community use. Developed through multiple real-world implementations in Belgium, the model enables local authorities and partners to create temporary aquatic hubs for swimming education, water safety training and community engagement without reliance on permanent construction.

Each installation integrates the complete aquatic ecosystem — including pool structure, water treatment, heating, changing facilities, sanitary infrastructure, showers and inclusive access via a disability lift — within a modular transportable system operational within one day to one week.

Deployments across urban districts, municipalities and socially vulnerable communities demonstrated strong participation, increased accessibility and reduced logistical barriers linked to transport and facility shortages. The approach proved particularly effective for neighbourhood-based interventions, temporary capacity expansion and reaching populations with limited prior access to swimming education.

By reframing swimming infrastructure as a flexible and scalable community asset, this model offers practical insights into how innovative infrastructure can support implementation of drowning prevention strategies in a faster, more inclusive and cost-effective way.

Measuring drowning prevention with the wrong ruler: A critical analysis of age guidance and the evidentiary framework excluding the highest-risk children

Ashley Jones, RLSS UK

Authors: Acacia Landfield (Clark), Drowning Research & Injury Prevention Policy Institute

Drowning remains a leading cause of preventable child mortality globally, with children aged one to four disproportionately affected. The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy 2016–2026 prioritised reducing risk among highest-risk populations and universal access to aquatic education. Achieving these goals requires an evidence base for age guidance that adequately reflects those most at risk.

This paper examines methodological foundations of current age guidance for early childhood aquatic intervention; explores structural implications of the current evidentiary framework; and proposes a pathway toward a more inclusive, interdisciplinary evidence base aligned with public health implications across resource settings.

Critical methodological analysis was applied to two principal retrospective case-control studies underpinning current “swim lesson” age guidance (Brenner, 2009; Yang, 2007). Findings were contextualised within 90-year interdisciplinary literature spanning motor learning, developmental science, kinesiology, and aquatics. Cross-field parallels were used to examine the structural implications of exclusion-by-evidentiary-standard.

Both foundational studies presented significant methodological limitations: Brenner produced a confidence interval of 3–99%; Yang relied on a single exposed case in the relevant subgroup. A broader interdisciplinary literature supporting early aquatic competency development exists but remains outside the prevailing evidentiary framework followed by most countries and international guidance, compounded by funding structures oriented toward school-age provision.

This paper concludes that interdisciplinary evidence review is warranted, alongside exploration of funding frameworks that reflect the full spectrum of relevant evidence. Developing fit-for-purpose age guidance for the youngest and highest-risk children would strengthen the field's collective capacity to reduce preventable fatalities, thereby raising population-level aquatic competency and extend drowning reduction across age groups longitudinally.

References : Brenner (2009); Criel et al (2025); Denny (2021); Langendorfer & Bruya (1995); WHO (2024); Yang (2007).