



LGA Coastal SIG Coastal and Estuarine Water Safety: A local authority perspective



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Clearer standards, stronger leadership, and more coordinated action are needed to support improvements in water safety across England's coasts and estuaries

The Local Government Association Coastal Special Interest Group (LGA Coastal SIG), working with external partners and its dedicated Working Groups, provides the only democratically elected voice for England's coast on the issues facing our unique coastal communities. Coastal Water Safety and Drowning Prevention requires a united approach across coastal local authorities and partners to make our coastal and estuarine waters safer for everyone.

The UK National Drowning Prevention Strategy 2016–2026 has shaped much of the sector's work. Developed collaboratively by the National Water Safety Forum with relevant organisations and communities, it aims to reduce accidental drowning fatalities in the UK by 50 per cent by 2026. Progress has been made, but significant opportunities remain.

Our report reflects the experiences of our local authority members and highlights where further progress is needed. As the management of water safety and drowning prevention is not statutory, sustaining vital life-saving services is challenging. Awareness and education sit at the heart of prevention and rely on strong partnership working. The introduction of Water Safety into the curriculum from September 2026 is a welcome step but more remains to be done.

We will continue to champion coastal and estuarine water safety and work proactively with partners to influence national management and support local delivery. In January–February 2025, the LGA Coastal SIG, supported by the Beach and Water Safety Working Group, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), ran a survey of its' membership to inform this report.

We thank all participants and the officers who responded and we see this publication as an expansion of our presentation at RoSPA's National Water Safety Conference in March 2025 and of our role on the working group developing a new water safety strategy for England.

Together, through genuine collaboration and co-design, we can create a safer coastal environment – improving Leadership and Organisation, Water Safety and Drowning Risk Mitigation (Control Measures), and Partnership Working. This commitment is strengthened by our appreciation of how vital effective water safety measures are for every coastal community to prevent drowning.



Cllr Derek Bastiman,
Interim Chair and Member Champion for
Beach and Water Safety Group of the LGA
Coastal SIG, North Yorkshire Council

Executive Summary

The LGA Coastal SIG **Coastal and Estuarine Water Safety and Drowning Prevention Survey** has provided a snap-shot in time on the leadership, organisation and delivery of water safety by coastal Local Authorities. This Report consolidates all the information provided to deliver a baseline and gap-analysis from which the LGA Coastal SIG's Working Group on Beach and Water Safety, and our partners, can progress to ensure appropriate water safety mitigation on the coast.

The survey received **23 responses** from **21 Local Authorities**. Respondents represented a wide range of roles, including elected members, officers, technical specialists, and environmental health teams – showcasing the breadth of expertise and commitment across councils.


The survey responses demonstrate a **strong commitment among coastal local authorities to improving water safety and drowning prevention**, despite the challenges of limited resources and varying approaches.

Many councils already deliver vital services such as lifeguard provision, signage, and public rescue equipment, and there is clear enthusiasm for collaboration and knowledge sharing. Building on this momentum, the next phase following this Report should focus on creating a more consistent, joined-up approach that empowers local authorities and partners to work together effectively

The key pillar themes, the main findings and challenges are summarised below:

Theme 1: Leadership and Organisation

Key findings:

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- The importance of **water safety is rated highly** (average 8.13/10), reflecting strong recognition of its importance to local authorities.
 - Many councils have proactive mitigations and measures in place, but **40 per cent do not have a dedicated lead officer or team**, and responsibilities are often shared across departments.
 - **70 per cent** of respondents reported **no formal water safety/drowning prevention plan**, and 17 per cent were unsure, suggesting scope for clearer governance.
 - Awareness of national guidance is growing, but currently **only 52 per cent** of respondents are **aware of the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy**, and two councils have pledged support.

Challenges experienced by local authorities:

- **Roles and responsibilities** are **not always clearly defined**, and without statutory requirements, water safety can compete with other local authority priorities.
- **Resource constraints** can prevent councils from prioritising water safety alongside other mandatory services.

Theme 2: Water Safety and Risk Mitigation



Key findings:

Councils are actively managing risks, with some inconsistencies in approach and frequency of mitigation measures:

- 82 per cent oversee open water sites open to the public, and **83 per cent have current risk assessments**.
- **Lifeguard provision** was planned by **70 per cent respondents** for 2025, showing strong intent, though funding models vary.
- **Signage and rescue equipment are widely used** (100 per cent and 94 per cent respectively), but **monitoring approaches differ**.
- **Education remains a challenge**: only **one council** reported **input into curriculum delivery**, and over **60 per cent were unaware of requirements**. However, it was noted that county councils are often responsible for curriculum content, therefore not all respondents would have awareness of this in district and borough council areas.
- **Few councils** currently **integrate water safety into climate adaptation plans**, despite growing risks to lifesaving infrastructure from climate change.

Challenges experienced by local authorities:

- While councils are committed to safety, there is **no consistent national framework for monitoring** signage and rescue equipment.
- There are **limited resources** for education and training at present. Councils need support to prepare for curriculum changes and climate resilience.

Theme 3: Partnership Working



Key findings:

Partnerships are valued and effective where they exist:

- **74 per cent** of councils **lack or are unaware of local water safety forums**, but positive examples such as Norfolk Water Safety Forum and Herne Bay and Whitstable Committee show what is possible.
- Respondents strongly **support best practice sharing** and webinars, with many describing partnership working as “very beneficial.”

Challenges experienced by local authorities:

- **Partnership working is fragmented**, and councils want help to connect with successful models and maintain continuity in their local areas with coastal and estuarine water safety.
- **Resource constraints, continuity issues**, and **limited awareness** of existing networks prevent councils from sharing best practice and leveraging multi-agency expertise, leaving gaps in joint planning and consistent messaging. There is a clear appetite for collaboration and shared learning.

Priority Recommendations

Following thorough analysis of the LGA Coastal SIG survey, conversations with our external partners, and using the three pillar themes of analysis woven throughout this report, the LGA Coastal SIG will be looking to:

- 1 **Champion for the development of National Guidance on Water Safety Plans/Policies, including practical steps for risk assessments.**
- 2 **Champion for the review and update a consistent approach to water safety signage and public rescue equipment in England.**
- 3 **Host a Coastal Local Authority Water Safety Summit with our partners to share best practice and strengthen collaboration.**

[See page 15 for further detail.](#)



Why this matters now

By **September 2026, classroom-based water safety education will become a mandatory** part of the national curriculum. While this change does not in itself, give councils a direct lead on wider prevention and public safety activity, it does create useful momentum that can support other actions identified in this report. However, our respondents have indicated that most Local Authorities currently lack the resources, plans, and training required to deliver water-safety responsibilities effectively. We aim to work with our partners to change this.

At the same time, **climate change, and extreme weather events such as storms and heatwaves are increasing coastal risks**, including flooding, erosion, and infrastructure challenges that affect lifeguard stations and rescue services.

Acting now ensures councils are proactively championing and supporting effective local delivery of statutory water safety education requirements, protecting public safety, and building resilience against future environmental pressures – ensuring communities are **safer** and **better prepared** for the future.

Background



Coastal and estuarine water safety and drowning prevention have long been recognised as critical issues for local authorities, yet responsibilities remain complex and inconsistent. The UK National Drowning Prevention Strategy (2016–2026) set an ambitious target to reduce accidental drowning fatalities by 50 per cent, shaping much of the sector’s work over the past decade. While progress has been made, survey responses and wider engagement show that gaps remain in governance, resourcing, and delivery.

Local authorities operate under guidance rather than statutory requirements, though still owe a general “duty of care” under the Occupiers’ Liability Act 1957 and Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. There is **no legal obligation to provide lifeguard services or maintain public rescue equipment**, though councils are encouraged to undertake risk assessments and follow best practice guidance such as Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA’s) Managing Beach Safety. This **absence of a statutory framework** means responsibilities are often spread across multiple teams – environmental health, leisure and coastal services – leading to **variation in priorities and approaches**. Some councils have dedicated water safety plans, while others embed responsibilities within broader strategies, making it harder to build a complete picture of risks and interventions.

Emerging challenges add complexity. Climate change is reshaping coastlines, increasing risks from flooding and erosion, and threatening lifeboat stations and rescue infrastructure. Education changes, including mandatory water safety in schools from September 2026, represent progress but require greater awareness and implementation.

To address these issues, the LGA Coastal SIG, supported by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) and RoSPA carried out a survey (January–February 2025) to evaluate how water safety is managed, where guidance is needed, and where approaches work well. Responses were analysed across three themes: **Leadership and Organisation, Water Safety and Risk Mitigation**, and **Partnership Working**. The findings will help inform the first England Water Safety Strategy alongside new national strategies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, replacing the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy in 2026, and support collaboration with partners to achieve consistency in drowning prevention, education, communication, and data collection.

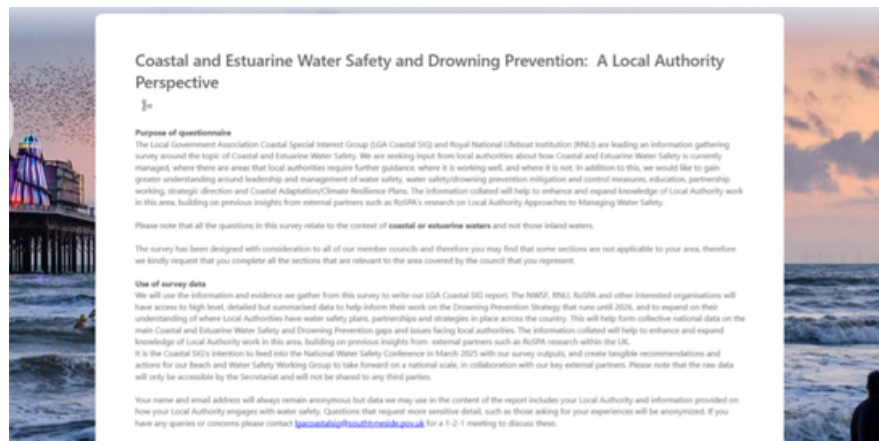
While the survey cannot provide a complete national picture, it offers valuable **insight into common challenges and opportunities for improvement**. Early findings have already shaped discussions at the National Water Safety Conference (Spring 2025) and the Water Safety England Workshop (November 2025), ensuring this report contributes directly to future strategy and practical action.

Engagement Approach

To build a clear picture of how coastal and estuarine water safety is currently managed, the LGA Coastal SIG, supported by the RNLI, RoSPA, and the National Water Safety Forum, developed an online survey targeting all member councils. The survey ran between January and February 2025 and was designed to capture both strategic and operational perspectives across local authorities.

Respondents were asked a total of 74 questions, with most being optional to allow flexibility for elected members and officers with varying remits.

Survey Front Page – designed to capture input from coastal local authorities on water safety and drowning prevention.



Questions focused exclusively on coastal and estuarine waters, structured around three core themes: Leadership and Organisation, Water Safety and Risk Mitigation, and Partnership Working. These core pillars provided a clear framework for analysis and ensured alignment with emerging priorities shaping the forthcoming Water Safety Strategy for England.

To make the survey more accessible, each theme was broken down into subcategories, covering areas such as water safety and drowning prevention plans, incident reporting, public information campaigns, signage, public rescue equipment, lifeguard services, education, and strategic direction.

The survey also explored how water safety considerations are integrated into climate adaptation planning. Collectively, these elements feed directly into the three overarching pillars, enabling a consistent and strategic approach to improving water safety.

By co-designing the survey with sector partners, we were able to promote a consistent, cross-organisational approach, avoiding duplication of existing work and enabling shared access to relevant data where appropriate. This collaborative process ensures that actions within the water safety sphere, whether directed to government or delivered by responsible bodies, are coherent and universally applied. Beyond identifying gaps and challenges, the survey sought to capture examples of good practice that could inform both national guidance and local implementation.

Early insights were presented at the National Water Safety Conference (March 2025) and later fed into discussions at the Water Safety England Strategy Workshop (November 2025), reinforcing how this engagement underpins the three pillars of this survey analysis; Leadership and Organisation, Water Safety and Risk Mitigation, and Partnership Working, and contributes directly to the development of future strategy.

While the survey does not provide a complete national picture, it offers **valuable insight** into common issues and opportunities for improvement. These findings **underpin the recommendations** set out in the next section of this report and will **inform collaborative work** to deliver a more consistent and effective approach to water safety across England’s coastal communities.



RoSPA’s National Water Safety Conference – March 2025: Ross MacLeod (RNLI and Water Safety England deputy chair), Bethany Handson (Coastal SIG Officer Lead for Beach and Water Safety), and Cllr Derek Bastiman (Coastal SIG Member Champion for Beach and Water Safety and LGA Coastal SIG Interim Chair) discussing early survey findings and shaping priorities for the England Water Safety Strategy.



How this report is being used

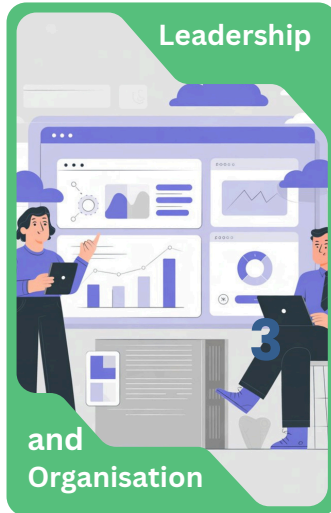
Our feedback to Water Safety England will **help inform a new National Strategy for England**, will be a **key component** in **addressing the currently fragmented approach**, and **giving stronger direction for Local Authorities** to follow. Based on the analysis of our survey, we feel that **strengthening leadership, standardising practices, and fostering partnerships** can help **create meaningful progress** toward safer coastal and estuarine environments for all.

Using the three pillars of analysis woven throughout this report, the LGA Coastal SIG will be looking to champion a series of recommendations and actions through its’ Beach and Water Safety Working Group.

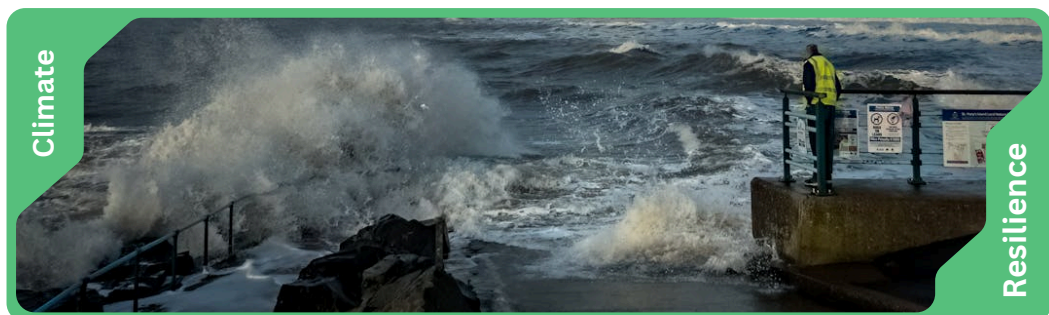
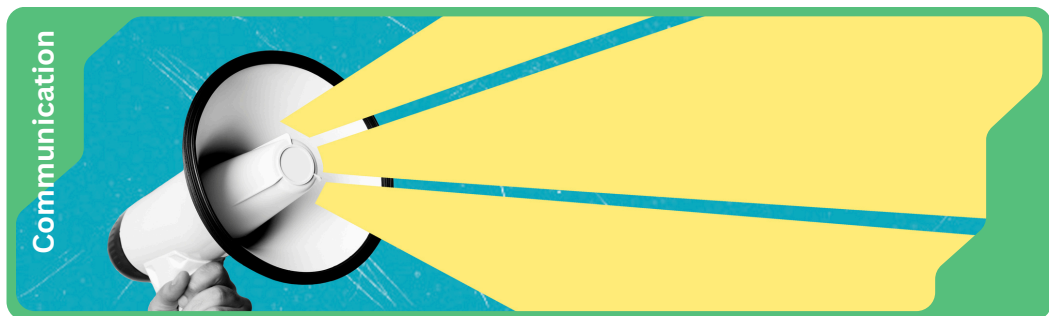
Data analysis: thematic overview

To ensure the results of this survey are summarised effectively, and appropriate action is taken through the collaborative LGA Coastal SIG Beach and Water Safety Working Group, we have analysed the data and identified three emerging pillar themes, alongside four cross-cutting themes, that enable us to effectively collate and focus our outputs :

Pillar themes



Cross-cutting themes



Each of these themes will now be analysed in detail to determine the viewpoint of local authorities, leading to wider recommendations and actions for the LGA Coastal SIG.

1. Leadership and Organisation

Overview: Future progress depends on clear governance and strategic planning.

Councils need practical tools and national guidance to define roles, responsibilities, and reporting lines. Embedding water safety into organisational frameworks will help ensure it is prioritised alongside statutory services and climate resilience planning.

Priority and ownership

Water safety is taken seriously, with local authority respondents providing an **average priority rating of 8/10**. The organisation of that priority varies:

- **40 per cent** of local authorities **do not have a dedicated lead water safety officer or team**, while **nine** local authorities reported **having dedicated roles** such as *Foreshore Officer, Quality and Safety Officer and Coastal Protection Officer*.
- Responsibilities are often **split across multiple teams** where no dedicated resource exists.
- Representation in the LGA Coastal SIG Beach and Water Safety Working Group is limited – 62 per cent of respondents said their local authority is not represented, though seven respondents expressed interest in joining.

Planning and review

A formal water safety/drowning prevention plan or policy is uncommon:

- **70 per cent of responding local authorities do not have a dedicated plan**, and 17 per cent were unsure. **Only 13 per cent** of responding local authorities **have a current water safety plan or policy**.
- Where plans exist, **review cycles vary** – two local authorities review annually, one maintains a living document.
- **Barriers** include **resource constraints** and **reliance on multi-agency approaches**.
- Main **areas of focus** for existing plans within local authorities include **signage, public rescue equipment, drowning prevention**, and **water safety management** such as lifeguard services.

Strategy signals

- **Awareness of the UK Drowning Prevention Strategy: 52 per cent** of respondents said that yes they **are aware**, **40 per cent** were **unsure**, and **8 per cent** said **not aware**.
- Formal pledge to support the strategy: Only two LAs have pledged support.
- **Ranking of national priority targets:**
 1. **Increase awareness of everyday risks** in, on and around the water
 2. All recreational activity organisations should have a **clear strategic risk assessment and plans** that address key risks
 3. **Every child** should have the opportunity to **learn and receive water safety education** at primary school and, where required, at Key Stage 3
 4. Every community with water risks should have a **community-level risk assessment and water safety plan**
 5. To better **understand water-related self harm**

2. Water Safety and Risk Mitigation

Overview: Consistency in control measures is critical. While risk assessments are widely adopted, signage, lifeguard provision, and public rescue equipment lack universal standards. Education and training gaps also persist, particularly as water safety becomes part of the national curriculum in 2026. Councils need support to implement robust, evidence-based measures that protect the public and prepare communities for emerging risks.

Responsibility and risk assessment

- Most authorities **oversee public open water sites** and report **current risk assessments** (produced/reviewed within the last 12 months). Where assessments are **absent**, respondents cite **resource or legacy constraints**.

Control measures – deployment

- At risk assessed sites, **core controls** are widely used: **Signage, Public Rescue Equipment (PRE), Lifeguard services, and Public information campaigns**.
- Wellbeing wardens/emotional support feature infrequently.
- Training for licensed venue door staff near open water was queried through the survey but no training schemes reported.

Incident recording

- Around **60 per cent** have a **local mechanism** to record incidents, but **only around 35 per cent report into a national system**.
- A majority were **uncertain** whether **recorded figures match actual incidents**, suggesting **under reporting** and **gaps** in benchmarking and reassessment triggers.

Suicide risk and guidance

- A **minority identify** high-risk suicide **sites**.
- Water related suicide **prevention plans** are **rare**, and media **guidance usage** (e.g., Samaritans) is **limited**.

Asset management – signage and Personal Rescue Equipment (PRE)

- The **majority** of responding local authorities **hold records** for **signage** and **PRE**, conducting **annual audits** to monitor use/condition.
- **Funding** routes for signage and PRE mostly come from internal **local authority budgets**, with **some** stating funding from **external partners**.
- Respondents emphasise the need for monitoring the accuracy of content and condition for signage and carry out tamper monitoring, and response checks for PRE.
- **Local volunteer schemes** e.g., defibrillator adoption are mentioned as **effective** to **support** maintenance schedules.

Lifeguard services

- Most report **lifeguard provision** in 2024 and expected provision in 2025, **delivered** via **RNLI contracts** or **in-house**.
- Where lifeguard provision was **not** going to be **provided**, **budget** was the reason provided.
- Many indicate they **manage/fund provision directly**, with some funding from the local authority or jointly with partners such as the RNLI. However this funding is not secure and could be a barrier in the future.
- **Training/upskilling pathways** were listed by **some** local authorities as a **free activity** for local stakeholders.



3. Partnership Working

Overview: Collaboration is a proven enabler, but many councils lack access to local forums or networks. Strengthening partnerships through structured opportunities for knowledge exchange will help councils share best practice, pool resources, and deliver consistent messaging. National coordination can amplify these efforts and ensure local priorities inform strategic decisions.

Networks and roles

- **Local** water safety **forums/groups** are **less common**; where forums exist, councils report membership and active participation—split between leading and contributing roles.

Practice and barriers

- Authorities describe **positive collaboration**, **pooled resources**, and **shared messaging**.
- **Barriers** include **funding constraints**, **partner turnover**, and **communication continuity**.



Crosscutting Themes

Education and curriculum readiness

- Only a **minority** report a local **requirement** for **water safety education** with many local authorities uncertain about input to delivery.
- Where education is present, **approaches** range from **swimming attainment** and **in-class prevention** to **assemblies**; **open water training** is **less common**.

Communications and public awareness

- Local authorities **widely use** external **campaign** materials with **positive experiences**.
- Where a water safety **communications plan** exists and is coproduced, councils **can better target high-risk behaviours** (e.g., tombstoning, tidal cutoff) and sustain seasonal messaging.

Adaptation and climate resilience

- Around a **quarter to a third** report a **climate/coastal adaptation plan**.
- Of those with plans, about **half** consider **impacts on lifesaving services**.
- **Consultation/engagement** with lifesaving providers **during plan development is rare** or unclear.
- **Where plans are absent**, some authorities note **active plans to develop adaptation/resilience strategies**.



Conclusion

The survey results demonstrate a **strong commitment among coastal local authorities to improving water safety and drowning prevention**, despite the challenges of limited resources and varying approaches.

Many councils already deliver vital services such as lifeguard provision, signage, and public rescue equipment, and there is clear enthusiasm for collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Building on this momentum, the next steps for the LGA Coastal SIG should focus on creating a more consistent, joined-up approach that empowers local authorities and partners to work together effectively. **By strengthening leadership, standardising practices, and fostering partnerships, we can make meaningful progress toward safer coastal and estuarine environments for all.**

Our Priority Recommendations

Through our analysis of the information provided by our member coastal local authorities, the LGA Coastal SIG will endeavour to raise awareness of the following recommendations:



Champion the development of National Guidance on Water Safety Plans/Policies including practical steps for Risk Assessments

Survey findings show that **70 per cent of local authorities lack a dedicated water safety or drowning prevention plan**, with responsibilities often **fragmented across departments**. To address this, **national guidance is needed** to support councils in developing effective water safety plans. This should provide **clear governance arrangements, practical guidance on risk assessment and review**, and **flexibility for site-specific approaches**, enabling consistent implementation and alignment with the forthcoming **England Water Safety Strategy**.



Champion the review and update of a consistent approach to water safety signage and public rescue equipment in England.

While all local authorities use **signage and public rescue equipment**, there is **no consistent national approach** to their design, monitoring, or maintenance. Variations in messaging and inspection practices can create inconsistency and undermine public safety. To address this, a **national signage standard for England** should be introduced, drawing on **RNLI, Water Safety England, RoSPA and partner best practice**. The standard should set out **clear guidance on design, placement and inspection**, ensure alignment with **public rescue equipment**, and allow **flexibility for locations with unique coastal or tidal conditions**, supported by the use of **digital monitoring tools** where appropriate.



Host a Coastal Local Authority Water Safety Summit

Partnership working emerged as a critical enabler, yet **74 per cent of local authorities lack or are unaware of local water safety forums**. To strengthen collaboration, the **LGA Coastal SIG will look to convene a national summit for coastal local authorities**, bringing together **councils, RNLI, RoSPA, Water Safety England and associated organisations**.

This event would **provide a platform for sharing best practice, showcasing successful partnership models**, and **addressing emerging challenges** such as climate resilience and education gaps. The summit should also **facilitate networking** and **co-design of solutions**, ensuring that **local priorities inform national strategies**.

Next steps for the LGA Coastal SIG

The following actionable points set out how the LGA Coastal SIG Beach and Water Safety Working Group, and external partners will take this work forward.

Leadership and Organisation



- **Feed into Water Safety England discussions** around the need for development of a **clearer governance framework** that **defines roles and responsibilities** for water safety **across local authorities and partners**.
- **Help develop and promote a unified Water Safety Strategy for England**, ensuring local priorities are reflected and supported.
- **Encourage local authorities to adopt or update water safety and drowning prevention plans/policies**, supported by national guidance.
- **Support partners in updating guidance and influencing legislation**, ensuring local authority needs are represented in national strategies.
- **Encourage local authorities to adopt or refresh water safety and drowning prevention plans/policies**, using updated guidance.
- **Ask Beach and Water Safety Group** for those willing to **share best practice** from their authorities to **act as points of contact** for collaboration and implementation.

Water Safety and Risk Mitigation



- **Promote the need for risk assessment processes for open water sites** and **encourage annual reviews** allowing for site specific approaches where required.
- **Help partners ensure their guidance documents, strategies and policies are up to date** to set local authorities up for success.
- **Help disseminate education resources** (RNLI, RoSPA, curriculum guidance) through Coastal SIG channels to improve awareness.
- **Link with LGA on their Water Safety Toolkit** which may require updates in line with the England Water Safety Strategy.
- **Share best practice** on **signage, lifeguard provision, and public rescue equipment** via webinars and member updates.

Partnership Working



- **Host a Coastal SIG webinar series** with RNLI, RoSPA, and Water Safety England to share best practice, case studies, and practical solutions.
- **Use webinars as a platform for peer learning**, enabling councils to showcase successful approaches and innovative ideas.
- **Facilitate networking by connecting councils** that lead water safety partnerships with those seeking to establish them.
- **Disseminate updated guidance** and support from partner organisations to local authorities.
- **Promote the creation or strengthening of local water safety partnerships and forums**, ensuring multi-agency collaboration.

LGA Coastal SIG Beach and Water Safety Working Group

The findings of this Report have been taken to the LGA Coastal SIG's collaborative Working Group on Beach and Water Safety. We thank our membership for approving the recommendations and look forward to progressing the actions together. Our membership currently includes over 25 local authorities and partners including:



Lifeboats



South Tyneside Council

Working in partnership with



Acknowledgments

Thank you to all our member councils who participated in the survey and to all those who have supported the development of this Report including:



Local Government Association Coastal Special Interest Group
c/o South Tyneside Council
Town Hall and Civic Offices
Westhoe Road
South Shields
Tyne and Wear
NE33 2RL



<https://lgacoastalsig.com/>

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