



accidents don't have to happen



Local Authority Approaches to Managing Water Safety (Wales)



Version: 1

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Executive Summary

Local authorities taking responsibility for managing water safety has been a key policy issue for RoSPA for over the last ten years. This research provides the first full insights into the current management of water safety in Wales.

The research shows that whilst water safety is important to nearly all local authorities within Wales, few have a water safety policy or are working with other agencies to promote water safety.

The key findings of the study are:

- Wales' local authorities ranked water safety as an important issue in respect to other demands
- Leadership of water safety was mixed, with a range of different departments involved and only 50 per cent having a designated lead
- Only 9 per cent of local authorities have a water safety policy
- Just under two thirds (64 per cent) of local authorities had risk assessed their bodies of open water in the last 24 months
- Interagency working is developing – just under a quarter of Wales' local authorities have a water safety group. Positively however, over two thirds (77 per cent) provide information to key groups and around half have run a water safety campaign in the last three years
- Just over half of local authorities were aware of Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy (59 per cent) and 64 per cent were aware of the work of Water Safety Wales.

Our key recommendations include:

- Local authorities should work towards a policy level commitment
- Water Safety Wales and RoSPA should host a workshop for local authorities on how to create a water safety policy
- Water Safety Wales should promote the need for water safety groups, in high-risk areas
- Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy could be further promoted to link up the national and local approach.



Introduction

This research provides the first full insights into the current management of water safety in Wales. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) has been at the heart of accident prevention in the UK for over 100 years. The responsibility for managing water safety has been a key policy issue for RoSPA for many years, which aligns with Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy (WDPS) and one of its targets to “*promote and support the development of water safety plans*”.¹

Background

Water safety and drowning prevention have attracted increased public and political attention both globally and nationally. In April 2021, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, for the first time in its 75-year history, affirmed drowning as a preventable global public health issue.²

Water Safety Wales (WSW), originally established as the Wales Water Safety Group in 2015, is a collaboration of organisations. The group includes charities, campaign groups, public bodies, and emergency services, all dedicated to reducing drowning incidents. WSW's main focus is to implement WDPS which has a key aim to 'promote and support the development of water safety plans'.

This research report centres on the responsibility for managing water safety in Wales and follows a previous snapshot report completed by RoSPA in 2021³ and comparable research undertaken in Scotland in 2013⁴, 2018⁵ and 2023⁶.

It provides the first full insight into how water safety is managed in Wales and the level of policy commitment.

Geographic context

Wales boasts 870 miles of coastline and is home to the second largest tidal estuary in the world. The country also features a diverse range of inland water bodies, including lakes, reservoirs, canals, rivers, and streams. Both rural and urban communities in Wales are situated in close proximity to these water sources.

Drowning fatalities

Wales carries a disproportionate rate of accidental drowning fatalities in comparison to the United Kingdom as a whole.



The recent Mid-Strategy Review of WDPS⁷ showed that the average rate of accidental drowning is 0.81 per 100,000 which is over double the rate of the UK as a whole (See Figure 1).

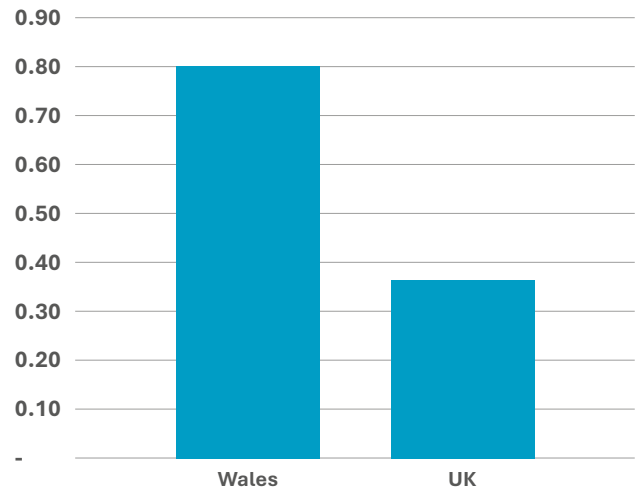


Figure 1: rates of accidental water-related fatalities per 100,000 in UK and Wales using a three-year average (2021-2023)⁷

WAID data shows that there were 28 accidental drowning fatalities in Wales and a further 11 water-related suicides in 2023. Drowning fatalities and water-related harm remain a serious issue in Wales.

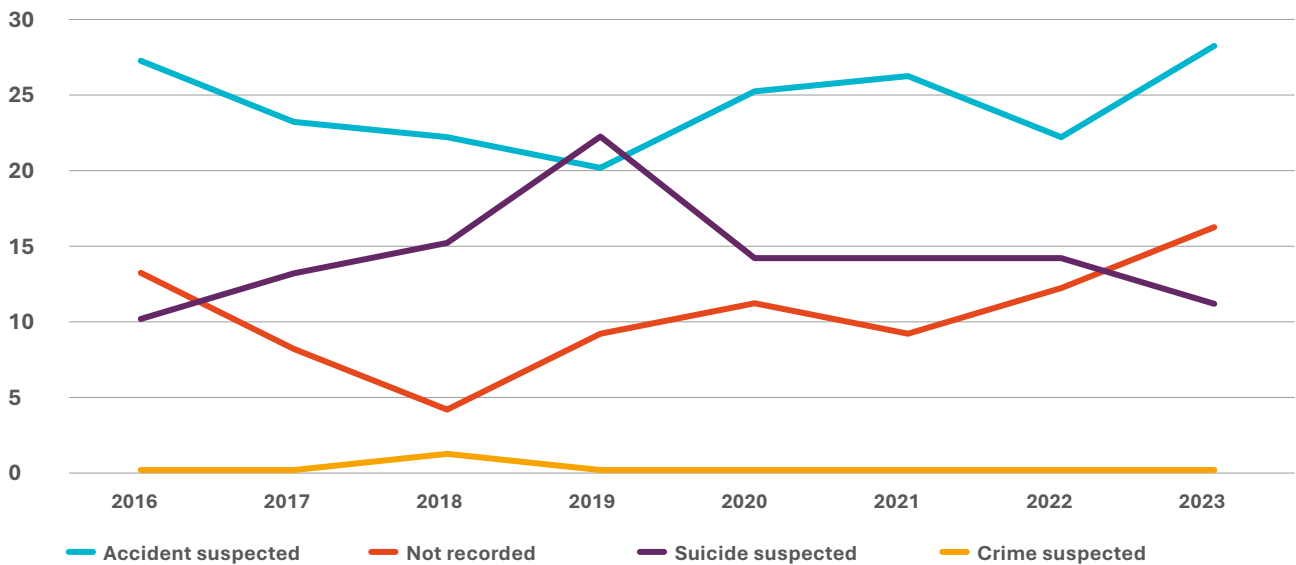


Figure 2: Water-related fatalities, Wales, 2016-2023⁸

Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy

Wales' Drowning Prevention Strategy (WDPS) was launched in 2020 by WSW and has one key vision: an aspiration of zero water-related deaths.

The strategy has seven specific activity areas or themes that it focuses on and including the need to:

- Improve water incident data and intelligence in Wales
- Promote and develop learning to swim and water safety education
- Promote and support the development of water safety plans
- Promote public awareness of water-related risks and ensure consistent messages reach the right people at the right time
- Promote the safe participation in water activities across Wales
- Contribute to the reduction of water-related suicide
- Work with families affected by water-related incidents.

Although the UK and Welsh Government oversee and are responsible for national policy, local government carries out decisions on the provision of local services. Local authorities, therefore, have wide-ranging responsibilities for their local waterway assets. This research is focused on the key activity from the WDPS to “*Promote and support the development of water safety plans*”, an activity that necessitates the involvement of local authorities.

Objectives of the research

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

- To understand the responsibility for water safety, current policy arrangements and also commitments that have been made towards managing water safety
- To identify an understanding of the strategic national direction in Wales and how this relates to local government.

Methodology

Data collection

A self-completion questionnaire was used. The online questionnaire and an accompanying letter was sent directly to the Chief Executives of all 22 local authorities in late summer 2024. Chief Executives then cascaded the letter and survey to the relevant department and responsible person to respond. All 22 local authorities responded with 100 per cent completion rate.

Analysis

All responses were analysed in Microsoft excel. Charts and graphs have been used to illustrate data due to their easy interpretation.

All responses to open-ended questions were thematically analysed and categorised.



Responsibility for Water Safety

Corporate Priorities

Each local authority was asked how they rate the importance of water safety, in relation to other services.

91 per cent responded positively to the importance of water safety. The remaining 9 per cent of local authorities responded neutrally as can be seen in figure 3.

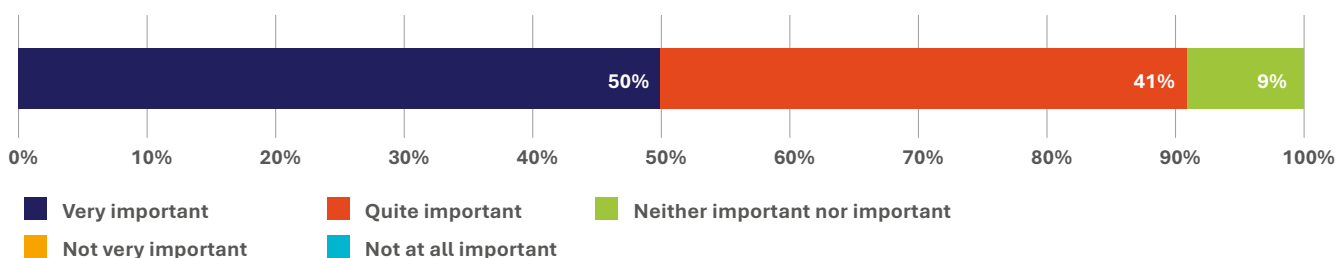


Figure 3: Relative importance of managing water safety, n=22

Leadership and Organisation

The local authorities were asked whether there is a specific officer, group or committee that deals with water safety within their area. **Exactly 50 per cent of the respondents noted that there is a person or department responsible for water safety** whilst 32% did not. A further 18% did not know.

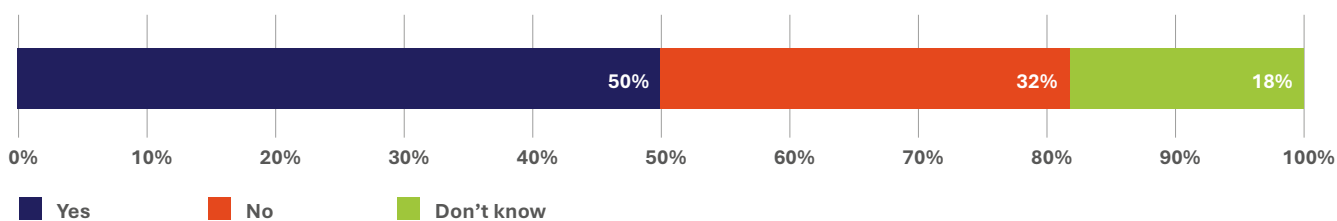


Figure 4: An identifiable water safety lead, n=22

Local authorities that responded positively were then asked to expand on who has this responsibility. A range of departments and individuals were identified. Around 36% noted that one department had the overall responsibility (see figure 5).

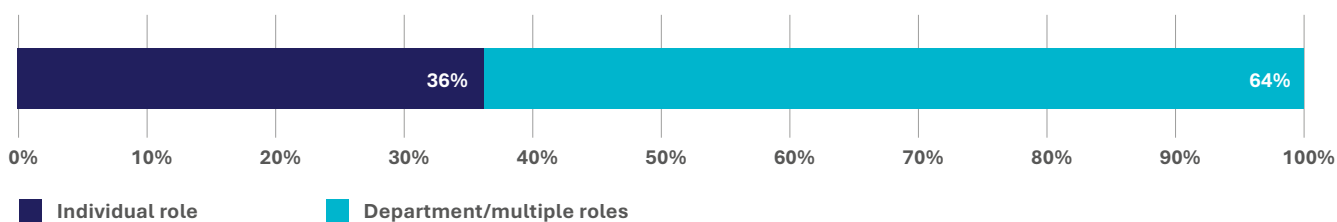


Figure 5: Organisational leads, n=22

Of those that did not have a specific officer or department, reasons included it being a shared responsibility between departments or the area having a small amount of waterways.

Each local authority was asked whether they have a specific water safety policy. Two of the local authorities responded that they do have a specific policy (9 per cent) with the majority responding that they do not (59 per cent). The remaining 18 per cent are developing a policy.

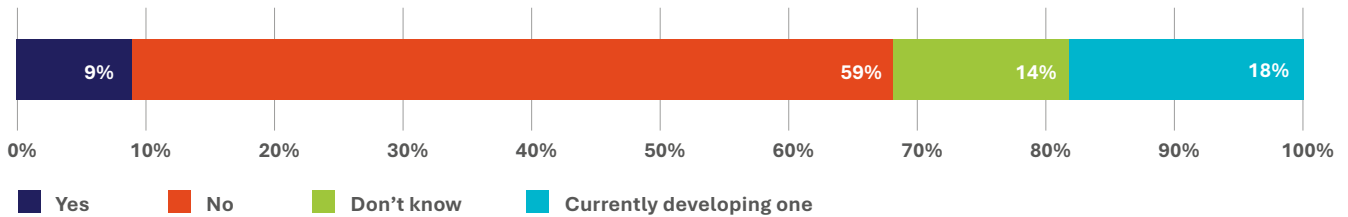


Figure 6: Is there a water safety policy? n=22

Good practice

It is recommended that risk assessments are reviewed on a regular basis to take account of technological advances and changes to work practices⁸.

Respondents were asked whether they had risk assessed their open water in the last 24 months. 64 per cent of respondents reported that they had (see figure 7).

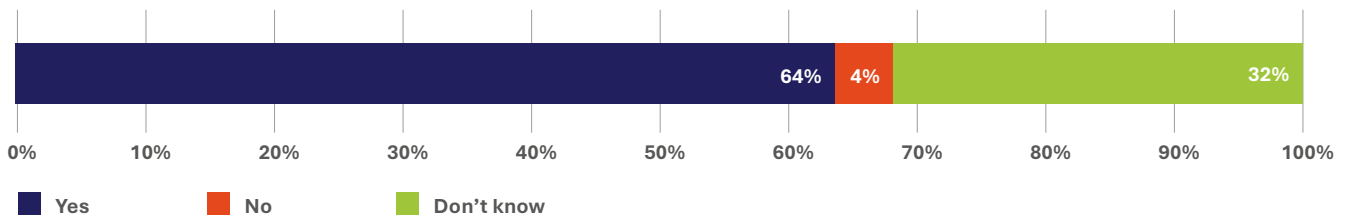


Figure 7: In the last 24 months, has your local authority reviewed its risk assessments of open water? n=22

KEY POINTS:

The importance of the management of water safety is ranked positively in relation to other local authority service demands.

50 per cent of local authorities have a person or department designated as the lead on water safety issues.

Only 9 per cent of local authorities have a policy commitment on the issue.

64 per cent of local authorities had risk assessed their open water in the past 24 months.

Partnership Working

This section of the report explores partnership working and how local authorities work with external organisations on water safety and drowning prevention.

Inter-agency working

Respondents were asked whether they have a water safety group in their local authority area. **Only 23 per cent have a water safety group** (figure 8).

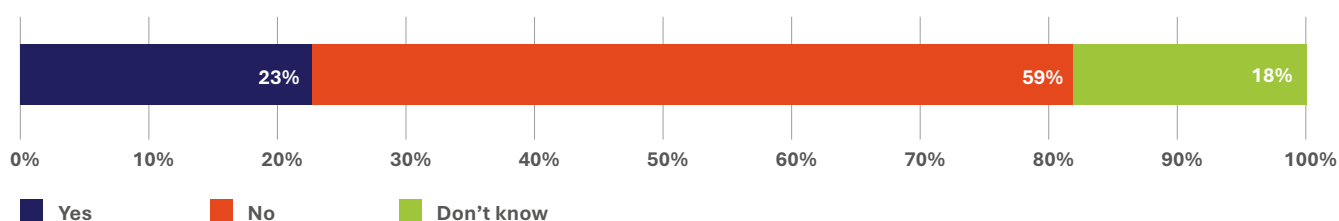


Figure 8: Does your local authority have a water safety group?, n=22

Provision of information

Participants were asked if their local authority had run a water safety campaign in the last three years. This was to gain an understanding on what practical work local authorities were doing in water safety. **50 per cent of local authorities had run a water safety campaign in the last three years** (figure 9).

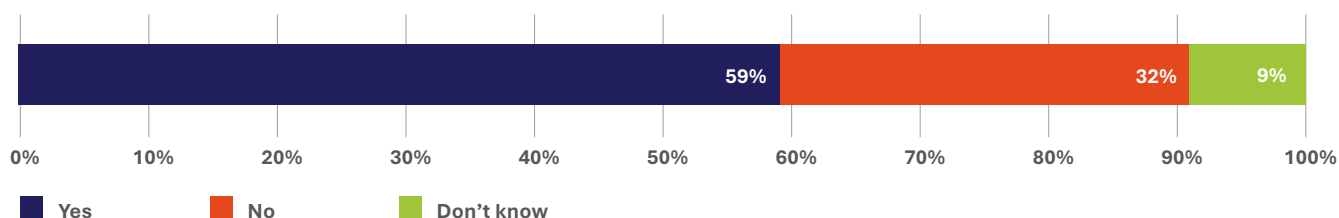


Figure 9: Have you run a water safety campaign within the last three years? n=22

Of the local authorities that had run a water safety campaign in the last three years, there were several positive practices. The campaigns included the following:

- Safe swimming campaigns
- RNLI and RLSS UK messaging
- What to do in an emergency messaging

Local authorities were then asked if they gave water safety information to key groups. **77 per cent noted that they did give water safety information to key groups.** (see figure 10).

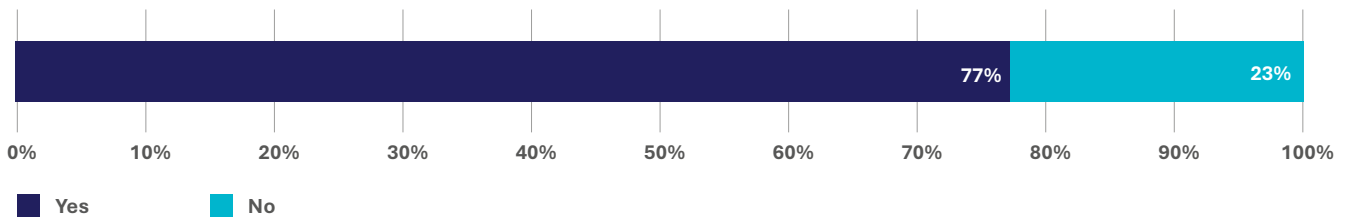


Figure 10: Do you provide water safety information to key groups? n=22

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

- Social media
- School presentations and demonstrations
- Experiential learning days
- Information boards
- Recreational activities.

KEY POINTS:

Only 23 per cent of local authorities have a water safety group in the local area.

Half of local authorities have run a water safety campaign in the last three years.

Over two thirds of local authorities (77 per cent) provided water safety information to key groups.

Strategic Direction

Local authorities were asked if they were aware of WDPS which was launched in January 2020 with a vision of zero water-related deaths. **13 local authorities (59 per cent) were aware of the national strategy** (figure 11).

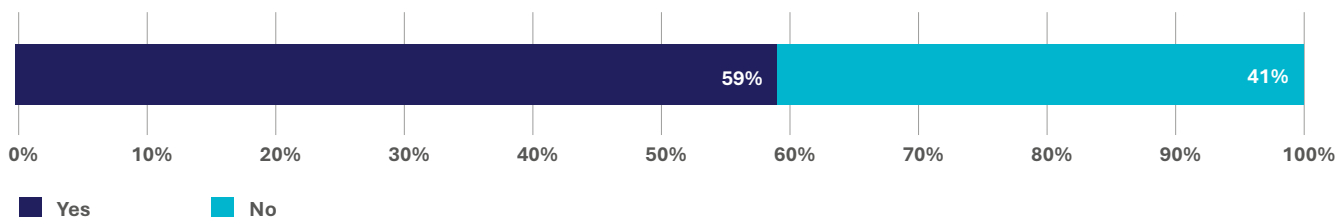


Figure 11: Are you aware of WDPS? n=22

Finally, respondents were asked if they were aware of the work of WSW. 64 per cent were aware of the work of WSW (see figure 12).

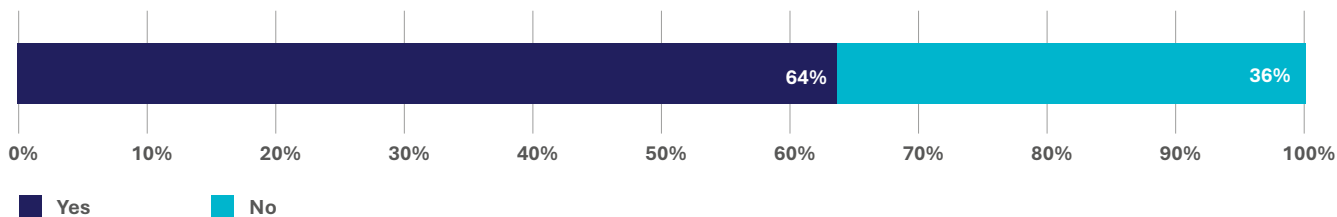


Figure 12: Are you aware of the work of WSW? n=22

KEY POINTS:

Just over half of local authorities (59 per cent) were aware of Wales’ Drowning Prevention Strategy.

64 per cent of Wales’ local authorities were aware of the work of Water Safety Wales.

Discussion and conclusions

This study is the first full insight study in the management of water safety in Wales' local authorities. Caution should be noted with regards to deducing too much from this study. The study found the following:

- Wales' local authorities ranked water safety as an important issue in respect to other demands
- Leadership of water safety was mixed, with a range of different departments involved and only 50 per cent having a designated lead
- Only 9 per cent of local authorities have a water safety policy
- Just under two thirds (64 per cent) of local authorities had risk assessed their bodies of open water in the last 24 months
- Interagency working is developing – just under a quarter of Wales' local authorities have a water safety group. Positively however, over two thirds (77 per cent) provide information to key groups and around half have run a water safety campaign in the last three years

- Just over half of local authorities were aware of WDPS (59 per cent) and 64 per cent were aware of the work of WSW

Overall, this evidence indicates that whilst water safety is an important issue for the majority of local authorities across Wales, there is a significant opportunity to do more at a local level to reduce drowning. Comparable research conducted in Scotland in 2023, revealed that 69% of Scottish Local Authorities had an identifiable lead water safety, 25% had a water safety policy and 97% contributed to local agencies or groups in relation to water safety⁶. One significant difference between Scotland and Wales is the strategic direction and assistance provided by Water Safety Scotland (WSS). WSS has been in receipt of governmental funding and support for several years and this has allowed the organisation to help support local authorities in taking measures to prevent drowning. Positively, WSW, as of 2024, having been in receipt of governmental funding and is now able to provide a similar level of support to Welsh local authorities.

Recommendations

Local authorities that do not currently have a policy should aim to have one by 2026 (in line with WDPS). It is recommended that RoSPA and WSW host a workshop for local authorities on how to develop a water safety policy.

WSW should promote the need for water safety groups, in high-risk areas, along with an agreed structure and approach to ensure some consistency across Wales.

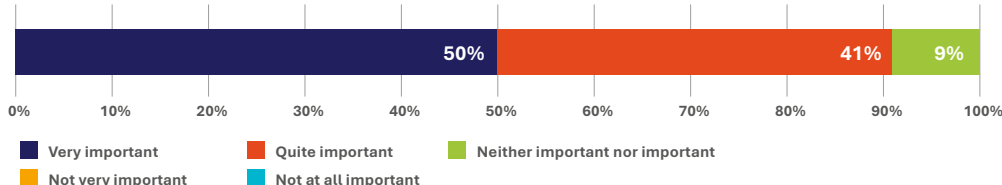
Finally, WDPS should be further promoted to the local authorities so that they have a better understanding of the national strategic direction and how this can then be translated locally into policy and practice.

Appendix 1

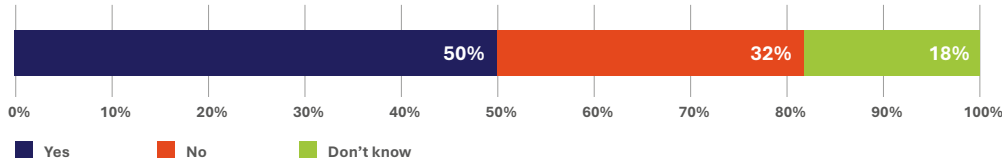
2024 Key results dashboard.

(%) Base = 22

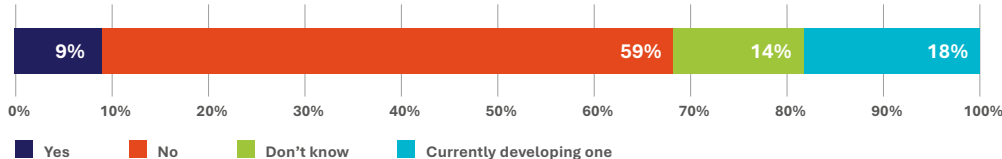
3 Relative importance of managing water safety



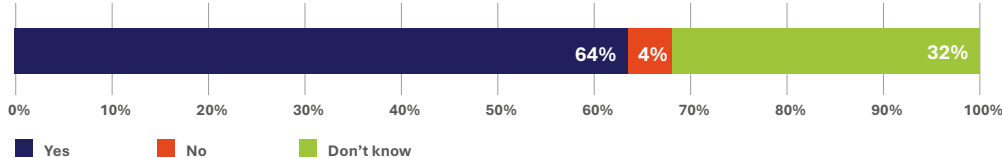
4 Identifiable leads on water safety



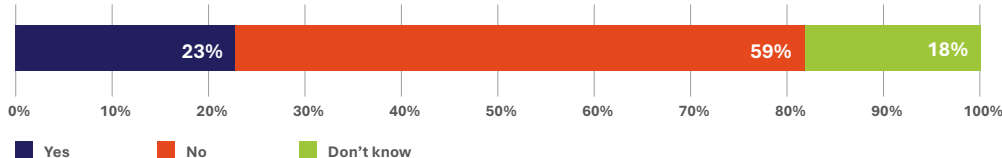
5 Policy level commitment to water safety



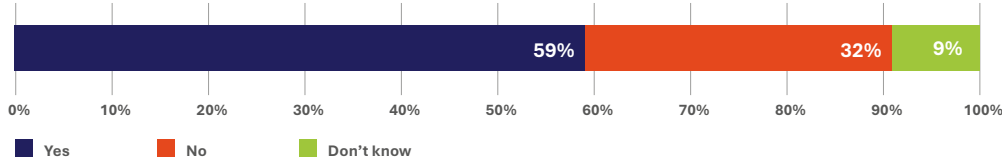
6 Risk assessment in the last 24 months



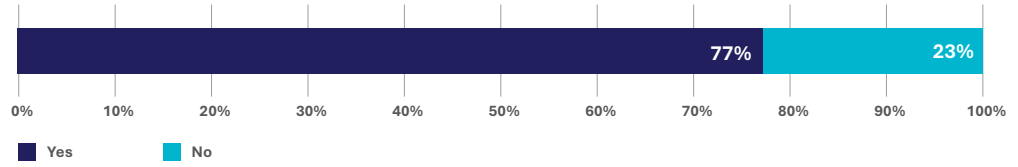
7 Water safety group



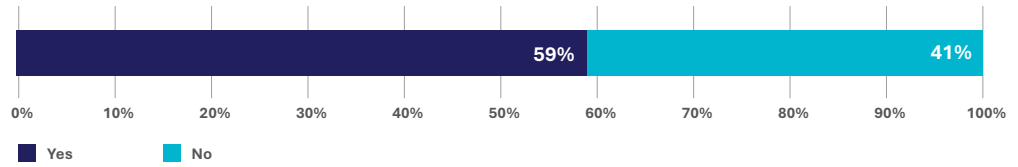
8 Running of a water safety campaign



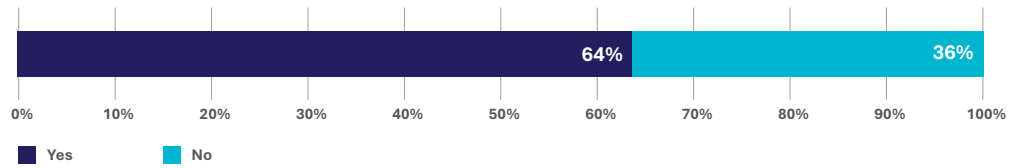
9 Info provided to key groups



10 Awareness of WDPS



11 Awareness of work of WSW



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



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