

**Safer and Stronger Communities
Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

7 September 2023

Open Water Safety Update Report

Ordinary Decision



**Report of Amy Harhoff, Corporate Director of Regeneration,
Economy and Growth**

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide.

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide members of the committee with information regarding the actions taken by Durham County Council (The Council) and its partners in relation to Open Water Safety.

Executive summary

- 2 The city safety group and county wide open water safety group continue to convene on a quarterly basis during the reporting period to review open water safety interventions.
- 3 A revised city centre action plan was delivered by the city safety group following an independent assessment of the river corridor within the city centre by RoSPA. Assessments and inspections of both the city centre and county wide open water locations continue to be undertaken.
- 4 A continuation of a proactive approach to open water safety education and awareness remains a crucial intervention and is being applied by both open water safety groups.
- 5 Statistically there has continued to be a positive trend in relation to the number of open water related incidents across the county. Of note there remains to be an increase in mental health related open water safety incidents.
- 6 There remains a positive approach to partnership working and collaboration amongst the safety groups, with new partners being identified and incorporated into activities.

Recommendation(s)

- 7 Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:
 - (a) note the reported progress made to date by CSG and OWSG.

Background

- 8 There are currently two multiagency water safety groups within County Durham. In terms of governance, both water safety groups report into the Safe Durham Partnership (SDP) as required.
- 9 The City Safety Group (CSG) was formed in January 2015 and comprises of Durham County Council, Durham Constabulary, Durham University, Durham Students Union, Durham Cathedral and County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service. The CSG is now chaired by Alan Patrickson, Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change. The CSG continues to meet on a quarterly basis.
- 10 From a County wide perspective, the open water safety group (OWSG) is chaired by the Council's Corporate Health & Safety Manager. It was established in February 2015, with a remit of reviewing the Council's internal open water safety policy and focusing on safety relating to areas of open water (e.g., lakes, rivers, reservoirs) other than in Durham city centre. The OWSG also meets on a quarterly basis.
- 11 National guidance such as [Managing Safety at Inland Waters](#) and best practice has been used to form open water safety policy and risk assessment methodology across the County. Visits to other areas which have high risk profiles such as York, Manchester and Bath have been undertaken to benchmark safety control measures, learn from incident causation and use best practice approaches within the County. Engagement with independent bodies such as RoSPA, RLSS and National Water Safety Forum remains a key element of the approach to open water safety related risks.
- 12 Table 1 below indicates the number of non-fatal and fatal water related incidents in County Durham since 2013. This data has been validated using the national water accident & incident database (WAID), regional emergency service and Council incident reporting data.

Table 1- Open Water Incident Statistics 2013/14- 2021/22

Year	Durham City Centre			County Durham (Exc. Durham City centre)		
	Near miss	Injury	Fatality	Near miss	Injury	Fatality
2013/14	13	1	1	3	1	2
2014/15	5	1	4	5	2	3
2015/16	3	1	0	8	5	2
2016/17	2	1	0	1	2	1
2017/18	2	3	0	3	5	0
2018/19	3	6	1	1	1	2
2019/20	2	4	0	6	3	1
2020/21	2	0	0	8	3	2
2021/22	9	4	0	7	1	1
2022/23	2	0	1	7	5	3

13 UK statistics indicate that there are on average 650 water related fatalities per year, of which an average of 200 are suicide related incidents. Other key national headlines for 2022 are:

- There were 226 accidental drowning fatalities and 212 suicide related fatalities involving open water
- 83% of accidental fatalities were male
- Males 20-29 and 50-59 were the highest group for accidental fatalities
- 60% of accidental fatalities happened at inland waters
- Recreational activities accounted for 58% of accidental fatalities
- 58 accidental fatality reports noted the presence of drugs or alcohol
- The rate of accidental drowning has increased slightly since 2018 (0.40 per 100,000) to 0.34 in 2022

14 Whilst walking and running close to open water remain the highest cause of accidental drowning in the UK, swimming (which includes open water swimming) accounts for 53 in the latest year compared to 61 in

the previous 3-year average in the UK. Given the widespread media and leisure industry reports regarding the psychological and physical benefits of open water swimming as a recreational activity, this is an area that requires monitoring in County Durham going forward.

- 15 Fatal incidents are, where appropriate, subject to scrutiny by HM Coroner for Durham and Darlington in terms of prevention of future deaths. Updates have been provided by CSG and OWSG, where required, to keep HM Coroner up to date with progress being made in relation to water safety within the County.
- 16 Similar to national statistics, it is apparent from analysis of an increase in mental health related incidents which continue to be a lead cause of water related incidents within the city centre and county wide. Work with public health mental health and suicide prevention colleagues has been undertaken to ensure that multiagency support and interventions are in place and continue to be reviewed for any specific locations or cohorts in the county.
- 17 Following confirmed suicide related deaths, HM Coroner issues information to the Council public health team and where appropriate multiagency assurance review groups are convened to investigate the causes and take further actions and interventions as appropriate. In relation to Newton CAP further infrastructure works have been agreed and works have started on site. There are other areas of interest where further interventions are undertaken, for example various bridges within the river corridor of Durham city. The suicide prevention alliance continues to meet quarterly, and the county's suicide prevention plan has been peer reviewed by the local government association. Further community development work is also ongoing in a number of targeted areas in County Durham.

City Safety Group

- 18 The CSG was chaired throughout 2022/23 by the Council's Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change and continues to have representation from the Council, emergency services and riparian landowners such as Durham University and Cathedral. Durham University student union is also a key member of the CSG.
- 19 Throughout 2022/23, the CSG has been continuing to monitor the riverside development projects to ensure that any public safety issues and impacts were identified with the developers. A monthly cycle of inspection and monitoring continues in relation to the completion of all physical safety infrastructure works in the city centre. This provides the CSG with assurance that the control measures identified in 2016/17

remain effectively in situ and proactively identifies any further actions required.

- 20 Additional works have been undertaken in relation to the independent assessment of the river corridor and new developments within the city that may have an impact on river related safety. The CSG has delivered, where appropriate, actions from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) assessment of river corridor related risks.
- 21 The CSG has once again reviewed arrangements for student induction weeks to ensure that appropriate arrangements had been put in place and partners were working in collaboration. A specific student induction task and finish group was established and work was undertaken to ensure that safety related controls were in place for freshers week. This involved collaborative work with the police, university, business and licensed premises. The work particularly focused on the high footfall night-time economy areas within the city and it was positive that the activities went safely and without incident.
- 22 Linked to the work of the CSG, water safety awareness training was delivered for a range of partners. Following a series of incidents in the city in and around the river and several bridges, a request was made by city hub team members for water safety awareness and rescue training to be provided along with the provision of throw line rescue equipment. As a result, two sessions were held at has been arranged during quarter one and attendees included hub staff, police, neighbourhood wardens and licensed premises management. The training was hosted by CDDFRS and incorporated general water safety awareness, rescue methods and deployment of throw lines for river rescue scenarios. Throw lines were then provided to attendees for use in emergency situations and first responder scenarios.
- 23 It is AGAIN positive to report that since the formation of the CSG, there has been a continued reduction in water related incidents within the city centre overall. Whilst the introduction of physical safety improvements cannot be attributed in isolation to the reduction in incidents, these have had a significant impact in conjunction with the broader range of educational and awareness initiatives.
- 24 Licensed premises in close proximity of the river corridor have also been approached as part of the revised action plan to review risk assessments of their public realm spaces in relation to water safety. Previous risk assessments have resulted in physical safety improvements to four licensed premises in a higher risk location of the river corridor within the city centre. Safety improvements introduced by

licensed premises include introduction of physical barriers, improved lighting, public rescue equipment and water safety signage.

Open Water Safety Group

- 25 The OWSG continues to manage and monitor County wide open water safety risks. A schedule of monitoring and reassessment of priority risk locations identified in the initial county wide assessment process continues to be applied in order to provide assurance. The OWSG has incorporated further partnership work with Northumbrian water in order to enhance and provide consistent water safety campaigns and messaging across the county.
- 26 From a county wide perspective, the reassessments of priority risk open water locations commenced with a view to completion before the summer holiday period when weather temperature increases and at risk groups such as young persons are likely to frequent locations during summer schools holidays.
- 27 Work was also completed to develop a new water safety awareness video which could be utilised by schools prior to the summer holiday period and used by the council and its partners to educate the general public via social media. Further interventions, particularly regarding education and awareness for young people in the Chester-le-Street riverside complex area. With the support of AAP coordinators, local councillors and residents, group leaders delivered plans to provide all schools in this area with the opportunity to have open water safety assemblies. These were delivered by Council officers, emergency services and featured the Council's dying to be cool campaign, supported by Fiona Gosling who assisted in the presentations.

Conclusions

- 28 Recent national statistics in June and July 2023 have indicated that open water safety related risks very much remain and there is a requirement on responsible organisations to impart risk-based education and awareness into their communities and settings. It is apparent from city centre and county wide incidents that mental health and suicide related incidents are increasing, in line with the national statistics also.
- 29 Statistics indicate that the formation of CSG and OWSG continue to play an important role in terms of reducing risks and subsequent non-fatal and fatal incidents involving open water. However, it remains the view of both groups that even one fatality is always one too many in terms of the devastating impact on families, friends and the community.

It places a significant burden on society both in terms of direct costs and the years of life that are lost.

- 30 The characteristics and factors regarding drowning risks remain complex and multi-factorial. It is unequivocal that drowning prevention cannot be achieved by the introduction of physical safety controls in isolation. Focus must remain on a long term strategy of education and awareness, particularly at high risk groups, to ensure that fatalities and life changing injuries are minimised as much as possible.
- 31 The CSG and OWSG will continue to meet on a quarterly basis and monitor and review the physical and cultural safety improvements introduced. In terms of the OWSG, collaborative working with partner organisations will continue in 2023/24 and beyond, with particular emphasis being placed on preventative and educational initiatives for local schools and to ensure key water risks are appropriately managed and communicated to stakeholders. The development of a calendar of water safety initiatives and events for 2023/24 will be effective in coordinating approaches and avoidance of duplication of campaigns and activities.

Background papers

- None.

Other useful documents

- None.

Author(s)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Compliance with statutory legislative requirements reduce risks of enforcement action and/or prosecution against the Council or individuals. It will also assist in defending civil claims against the Council from employees and members of the public, including service users.

Finance

Compliance with legislative requirements will reduce increased service delivery costs, financial penalties associated with H&S sentencing guidelines 2016 and successful civil claims against the council. Financial costs may be insured to some degree and uninsured in some cases, with poor outcomes possibly leading to increased insurance premiums. Financial implications also include staff absence associated with physical and mental ill health, staff training, retention, recruitment and productivity.

Consultation

None.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

None.

Climate Change

None.

Human Rights

None.

Crime and Disorder

None.

Staffing

None.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

This report considers physical and psychological risks to member of the public, employees and service users. Risks also relate to the failure to comply with statutory legislative requirements, which may result in civil action being brought against the Council and enforcement action, including prosecution against the Council or individuals. These enforcement actions may result in financial penalties, loss of reputation and reduction in business continuity.

Procurement

Minimal procurement and supplier related issues which are associated with purchase and maintenance of safety related infrastructure in city centre and county wide locations.