

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

9 September 2024

Open Water Safety Update Report

Ordinary Decision



**Report of Kevin Lough, Corporate Health, Safety and Wellbeing
Manager, 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 (CSG) and county wide open water safety group (OWSG) continue to convene on a quarterly basis during the reporting period to review open water safety interventions and risk mitigation.
- 3 Durham city centre continues to be subject to proactive inspections of public realm spaces, footpaths and public rescue equipment in close proximity of the river corridor. This approach is also undertaken right across the county following annual risk profiling.
- 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 continues to be 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 and Compliance 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 from groups such as national water safety forum 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. There were two fatal incidents relating to water in separate areas of the county on land not belonging to the council, with no trends identified and currently subject to HM coroner inquests.

Table 1- Open Water Incident Statistics 2013/14- 2023/24

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
2023/24	6	1	0	5	1	2

13 The county durham incident data is analysed annually in order to:

- determine the nature and outcome of drowning related incidents
- identify populations, activities and/or locations at risk
- identify underlying causes of incidents, and incident trends
- identify and monitor potential and emerging risks
- inform the development and targeting of prevention interventions
- track the impact of prevention activities and strategies
- communicate/raise awareness of trends, risks and other factors related to fatal and non-fatal water-related incidents

14 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 2023 are:

- There were 236 water-related fatalities in the UK in 2023.
 - There were 208 suicide suspected fatalities at or near water in the UK.
 - Of the 236 drownings, 157 were in England; 47 in Scotland; 28 in Wales; and 4 in Northern Ireland.
 - Males continue to over represent, with 83% of accidental fatalities.
 - Everyday activities, such as walking and running, accounted for 48% of accidental fatalities.
 - Males aged 60-69 were the highest group for accidental fatalities.
 - 63% of accidental fatalities happened at inland waters.
 - Recreational activities accounted for 44% of accidental fatalities.
 - 32 accidental fatality reports noted the presence of alcohol.
 - The rate of accidental water-related fatalities has increased slightly since 2018 (0.40 per 100,000) to 0.35 in 2023.
- 15 Whilst walking and running close to open water remain the highest cause of accidental drowning in the UK accounting for 48%, swimming (which includes open water swimming) accounts for a significant proportion also. 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.
- 16 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.
- 17 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. This reflects the national picture in terms of in excess of 200 suicide suspected fatalities at or near open water. 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.
- 18 A paper on suicide prevention from public health is being prepared and is based on Office of Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) to reduce access to means of suicide. Other potential high frequency locations for suicide have been identified and assessed on OHID guidance. Newton Cap Viaduct has had suicide prevention measures installed to reduce the access to means of suicide by jumping from a

height. Work on Newton Cap viaduct was originally initiated via a request made by HM Coroner. Since then, no further requests have been made by HM Coroner regarding any other high structures in County Durham.

- 19 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

- 20 The CSG was chaired throughout 2023/24 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.
- 21 Throughout 2023/24 the CSG has been continuing to monitor the progress of 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 across the city centre river corridor. This provides the DCSG with assurance that the control measures implemented previously in response to HM coroner concerns remain effectively in situ and assists in proactively identification of any further actions required.
- 22 Although there were no fatalities, there continued to be a number of incidents within the city centre, primarily near various bridges, associated with mental health and emergency services being called out to assist individuals in mental health crisis requiring support which was provided.
- 23 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 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.

- 24 A multi-agency group was convened again to review student activity during student induction week. This was to ensure so far as reasonably practicable that appropriate control measures were put in place to manage nighttime economy related activities and any associated risks such as the river corridor. The group worked with university representatives to understand the volume of students during each particular day of the week and key factors such as the capacity of licensed premises, security and queue management arrangements in place. Guardianship and safeguarding arrangements were also reviewed to ensure safety controls were in place
- 25 There was a social media launch of the Royal Life Saving Society's national Don't Drink and Drown water safety campaign during December 2023. The campaign which was supported by the city safety group members and promoted directly by the council, encourages smart decision-making whilst being drunk or under the influence of alcohol in and around water. It is aimed at targeting individuals to be responsible for their friends if they have had too much to drink; helping them to return home safely.

Open Water Safety Group

- 26 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.
- 27 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.
- 28 The council and partners promoted various national water safety campaigns in the form of world drowning prevention day, drowning prevention week and drowning prevention day. The councils communications team linked with counterparts at the Police and CDDFRS communications teams around these. The council, via its schools aquatic manager, has also been involved in a national group in developing the information for water safety to be added into the school's curriculum. The 'dying to be cool' cold water shock safety campaign was also launched ahead of the summer holiday period through a

variation of social media, posters and alerts at high footfall open water sites across the county.

Conclusions

- 29 Recent national statistics from 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.
- 30 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.
- 31 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.
- 32 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 2024/25 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 2024/25 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.