



SUPPORTING
water safety
Scotland

Water Safety Signage: Audit Report RoSPA, SCSN, RNLI

Supporting Water Safety Scotland

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accidents don't have to happen



Scottish Community
Safety Network



Lifeboats

Executive Summary

This report outlines research carried out in 2022 into water safety signage across Scotland. The research is a ‘snapshot’ of the current signage in place across key areas of owned land in Scotland.

The report found that water safety signage in Scotland is not uniform and lacks clarity. The key findings were that:

- water safety signs had little consistency in terms of font size, sign size, colouring and amount of written information
- 63% of the signs were not specific to water safety
- 69% of the signs included the correct use of British Standard symbols

- 19% of the signs did not include information on what to do in an emergency
- Only 44% of the signs included a location code, although there was little consistency in terms of the type of location code.

The report recommends that funding should be sought to explore the minimum critical information needed for inclusion on water safety signs, and investigate options for reforming and simplifying water safety signage across Scotland.

Introduction

On average, 96 people in Scotland lose their lives in a water-related incidents each year. In the summer of 2021, there were many high-profile water-related fatalities in Scotland. In response, the Minister for Community Safety, Ash Regan MSP, convened a working group to review and understand the issues surrounding this spike in drownings, and to develop a Water Safety Action Plan to complement Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy.

The working group discussions included the issue of water safety signange, due to perceived inconsistencies across the regions of Scotland and the United Kingdom (UK). Arguably, improving water safety signage so that safety signs have a consistent, coherent, universal design could help to reduce drowning incidents by providing unambiguous, clear and easily understood warnings and advice.

Water Safety Scotland (WSS), the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), the Scottish Community Safety Network (SCSN) and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) agreed to collaborate on a project to understand water safety signage in more depth.

The project plan focused on three distinct phases:

- a 'call for evidence' in order to analyse the consistency of the current water safety signage used by the Scotland's main landowners
- co-design and co-facilitate a series of workshops with key stakeholders to explore the minimum critical information needed on water safety signs (and ensure this complies with the British Standard), and investigate options for reforming and simplifying signage design across Scotland
- investigate the potential to work with a university or college on the design aspects of the signage.

This report focuses on phase one, the 'call for evidence'.

The research aims of this phase were to audit the water safety signage used by the main landowners in Scotland, in order to:

- get a 'snapshot' of the current picture of water safety signage in Scotland
- identify areas of inconsistency or where signage could be improved.



Data collection methodology

The research team used a snowball sampling technique to compile the list of landowners to contact across Scotland. In total, we contacted twelve private landowners and all 32 local authorities (LAs) between December 2021 and February 2022 (total landowners contacted: 44).

Landowners were asked to provide a typical example of water safety signage used on their land to highlight hazards and dangers.

All responses were treated as confidential and were not shared with any third party.

Data analysis

All responses were analysed in Excel. Bar charts were used to illustrate the data, as they are easy to interpret. All responses to open-ended questions were thematically analysed and then categorised.

Results

In total, 23 landowners responded to the research request. Seventeen were local authorities (see Table 1 for response rate), while six were other landowners.

Table 1: Response rate

Landowner contacted	Responses	Response rate
32 local authorities	17	53%
12 other landowners	6	50%

Of the 23 responses that were received:

- four landowners confirmed they had no water safety signage
- one landowner confirmed they had signage but did not share it
- two landowners had either a poor-quality picture, a picture that was not a water safety sign, or a sign belonging to another landowner

This left 16 responses for analysis.





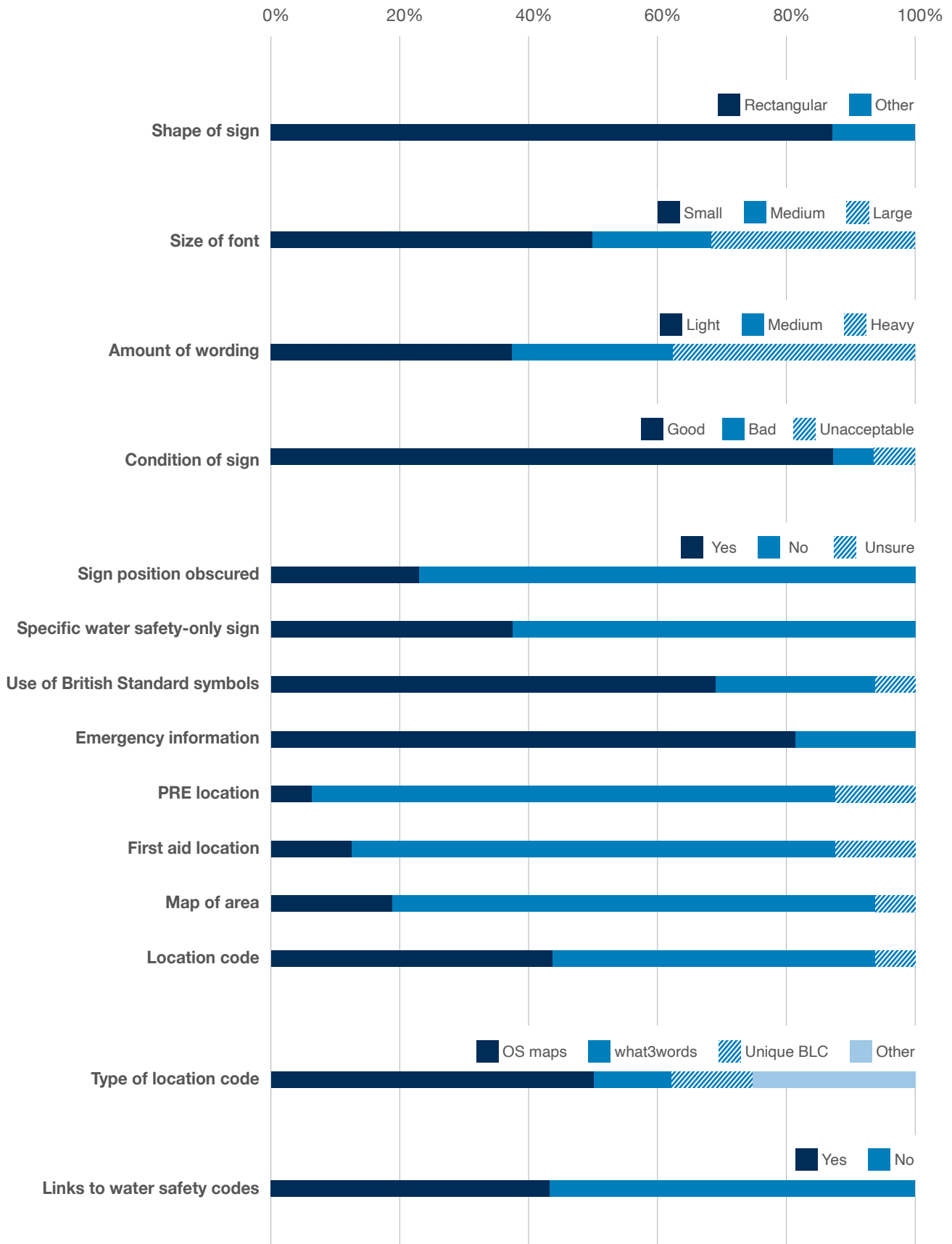
Key results

- Almost all the signs (87%) were rectangular – the size of the signs was inconsistent and no specific colours were dominant.
- Most of the signs featured a small font size (50%) and no consistency was found in the amount of written information used (which ranged from light to heavy).
- 88% of the signs were in good condition and the majority were unobscured (77%).
- 63% of the signs were not specific to water safety.
- Over two thirds (69%) of the signs included the correct use of British Standard symbols.
- 81% of the signs included emergency information; 19% of the signs contained none.
- Only 6% of the signs included the location of public rescue equipment (PRE); equally, only 12% included the location of first aid.
- The majority (75%) of the signs did not include a map of the area and only 44% included a location code. There was little consistency in the type of location code, however the most common used code was Ordnance Survey (OS) location code.
- Just under half (44%) linked their sign to a water safety code.

Please see Figure 1 for charts.



Figure 1: Key result data (responses n = 16)



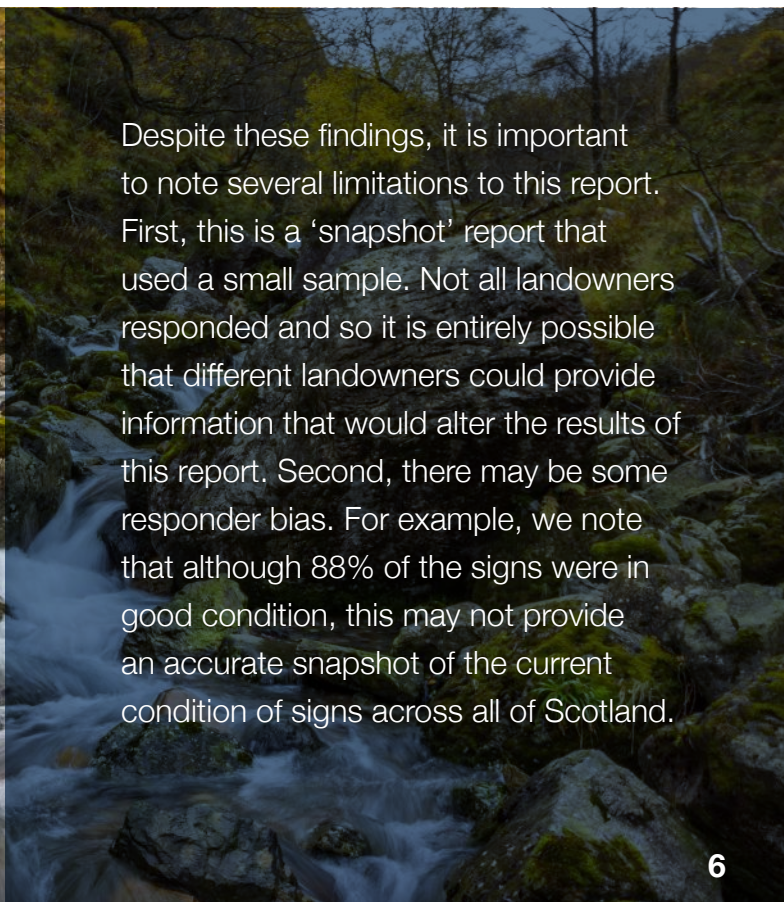
Discussion

The main findings were as follows. First, although a rectangular format for signage was consistent, other areas of design – such as font type, size and colours used – were inconsistent and varied across the different local areas. Unlike road safety signs and workplace safety signs, there is no uniformity in the use of water safety signs, and therefore a light lack of recognition of water safety signage by the public.

Second, it was positive and encouraging to see several British Standard symbols incorporated into the water safety signs. The use of symbols is beneficial, as it makes water safety information more readily understood by people with little or no understanding of written English.

Third, the signage studied rarely contained a specific sign relating to water safety. The majority of the signs were designed for multiple purposes, and therefore the water safety message was not prominent.

Finally, it is important to note that 1 in 5 of those surveyed included no information on what to do in an emergency. Linking to Water Safety Scotland's Water Safety Code could help address this issue and provide some consistency. Additionally, only 44% included a location code (and of those that did, there was no consistency in the type of location code). Having no location code cause delays when people contact the emergency services to advise them that someone is in trouble in the water.



Despite these findings, it is important to note several limitations to this report. First, this is a 'snapshot' report that used a small sample. Not all landowners responded and so it is entirely possible that different landowners could provide information that would alter the results of this report. Second, there may be some responder bias. For example, we note that although 88% of the signs were in good condition, this may not provide an accurate snapshot of the current condition of signs across all of Scotland.

Conclusions

The results suggest that Scotland's water safety signs are inconsistent. Data collected from across the country's regions demonstrates that the content and design are not uniform.

The risks of this are clear. Without standardised, regular, clear and obvious signage, the chances of injury and fatality increase. Signs are often the final, silent reminder – in the absence of supervision –

to give people pause before entering the water, to highlight dangers and share advice.

There is an opportunity to develop what an 'ideal' water safety sign might look like for Scotland. With additional resources, we could collaborate with stakeholders and an academic institution to create a model sign, one that is universal, recognisable, easily understood, and joined-up in purpose and intention.



