



Canal &
River Trust

Changing the conversation

A pilot approach to keeping young
people safe by water

Preface

The Trust is too often faced each summer with the desperate news of teenagers and young people losing their lives in our waters. It could be that they've imagined it would be good to have a cooling dip with friends on a hot day, or perhaps triggered by the euphoria of finishing school or the last exam; it might be as a dare by their peers or to avoid standing out as the one who won't join in. However it happens, it's heartbreaking for their family and friends, for the schools they attend and the communities they are part of, and to all of us at the Canal & River Trust. As owners of an open-access network, we have a moral responsibility to educate other young people about the risks of choosing to go into our canals, rivers, docks and reservoirs. Yet it is a challenge to create effective messaging and content that teens and young people engage with. So how do we reach this age group with important safety messages in a way that will encourage them to make better choices?

We chose to work with Claremont based on their track record of successful evidence-based behaviour change communications work. Their work on this topic has provided valuable insight into the way teens will best

receive this type of safety information, which is crucial to moving us forward in getting safety messages to them. Leaning into a peer-led approach, identified as a key opportunity for connection in the research, allows young people to discuss situations with their friends and see the importance of keeping their friends safe as well as themselves.

This research provides a strong evidence-based foundation for our communications and outreach work with teenagers and young people around making safer choices by water. The Trust is committed to working with schools, communities and local Water Safety Partnerships to help young people understand the importance of keeping their friends safe. We're pleased to publish this insights report with Claremont and hope the information is helpful to other organisations trying to reach the same age group with these critical life-changing messages.

Richard Parry,
Chief Executive, Canal & River Trust

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Introduction



The UK's largest canal charity, looking after 2,000 miles of canals, rivers, reservoirs and docks across England and Wales. Along these waterways there are a multitude of features, including:

- 71 reservoirs
- 1,589 locks
- Around 3,000 bridges
- 280 aqueducts



Claremont is a behaviour change communications agency. They help local and national government, charities, public sector organisations and social impact brands to tackle social issues using behavioural science and co-design with those who have lived experience of the problem. Together they develop innovative interventions and communications that change behaviour for social good – at the individual and system level.

Introducing the problem

Sadly, every year young people lose their lives in Canal & River Trust waters. We want to find a way to pass on water safety information to young people in a way that works for them.

Overview of the work

In 2024, Canal & River Trust have been working with Claremont to research and design a pilot campaign to support the Trust's efforts in reducing the number of deaths and injuries among young people across the UK's inland waterways.

The scope of the campaign is initially a localised pilot focused on the Wigan area.

We began by gathering insights through desk research; workshops and interviews with professionals (including those within and outside Canal & River Trust). Once we had a strategic direction, we developed some concept ideas to take into a co-design process with young people in Wigan.

The young people shaped the choice of messaging and imagery and helped identify suitable channels for delivery.

Later in the year, we returned to Wigan Youth Zone who supported the pilot throughout. Here we put up posters with the pilot messaging and visuals and let them become part of the landscape for a few days. Then we spent time with young people discussing the concepts and getting their views on what was landing, and what needed further development before a wider launch.



The objective

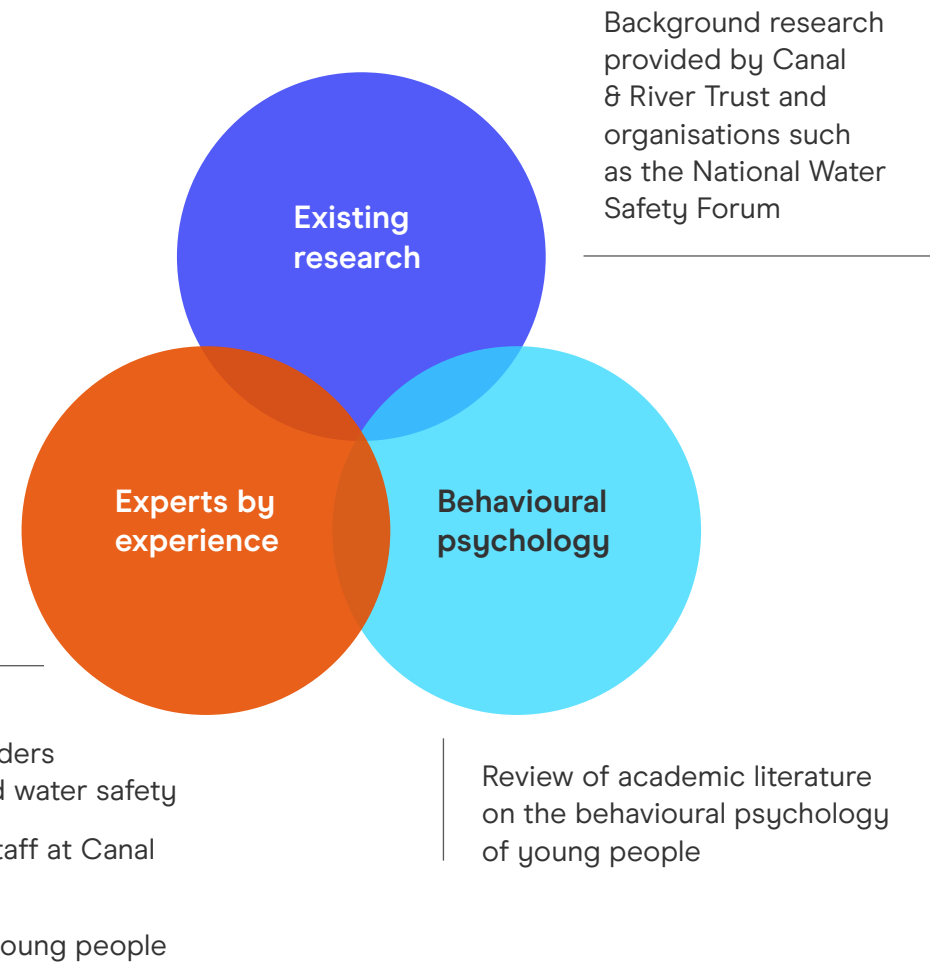
Reduce the number of deaths caused by drowning and water-related injuries among young people in and around the Canal & River Trust's waterways.



Research methodology

We drew insights from academic and grey literature, experts by experience and behavioural psychology to help us understand the problem we were trying to address. Experts by experience were engaged through co-design activities with young people living in Wigan.

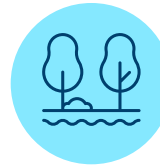
All of our internal and external contributing stakeholders, and our reading list are in the appendix.



Insights from the research phase

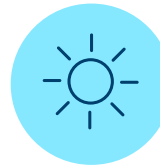
Insights from existing sector evidence

Data from the National Water Safety Forum - Water Incident Database



Keep it inland

Inland water, such as rivers, canals, lakes, reservoirs, and quarries are the leading locations for accidental drownings in the UK (63%)



Launch in time for summer

46% of UK accidental drownings in 2022 took place in the three summer months of June, July and August



Reach young males

Males continue to over-represent with 83% of accidental fatalities. Drowning incidence for males increases dramatically in 15- to 22-year-olds, whereas for females drowning incidence peaks in pre-school years.



Go local

Challenges differ by region and waterways/ bodies and require an approach that fits the local context

Key insights from staff at the Trust and sector experts

Canal & River Trust staff and volunteers from across the UK who had seen how young people behave by the water gave us their viewpoint on what was happening and why:

“

I think when it's big groups, it's girls and boys, but I think it's boys that do the more risky behaviour.

”

“

A lock, a bridge, a building, a wall or basically anything with height above the water – it was a really clear theme – the jumping in from a height.

”

“

How many of them haven't had arms and legs sliced off by propellers... they just don't care. They will not listen to reason or logic.

”

“

It's a cheap day out, isn't it? They're having fun, like they're at a theme park.

”

Insights from behavioural psychology

Desire for new experiences

Teenagers are at a stage in life where they are exploring their limits and abilities, looking for new experiences and challenges. The desire to experience novel and rewarding stimuli increases throughout the teenage years. Adolescents are given more independence and are encouraged to make their own decisions, and this is associated with increased exploration.

Thrill seeking

Teenagers are naturally curious and may be drawn to the excitement and adrenaline rush of jumping into potentially dangerous bodies of water. Many teenagers seek excitement and thrills during the summer when they have more free time. Risky water activities can provide a sense of adventure and excitement that they may not find in other activities.

What drives risk taking?

- The teen brain is attuned to oxytocin, a neural hormone, which (among other things) makes social connections more rewarding.
- After childhood, teenagers are most motivated by the company, influence and opinions of other teenagers. These peers will become the friends, adversaries and bystanders of their adult world, and so how they relate to one another is a powerful component of building their future lives.
- When the risk of peer rejection must be weighed up against other risks, adolescents' sensitivity to social outcomes could result in dangerous behaviours.

Summary of insights

Across all of our research work, these insights had the greatest impact on our strategy development.

Boys take the lead, but girls are right behind

They're making memories together

This is their beach

If a friend says jump, they'll jump

Danger is addictive & fuelled by social media*

Danger doesn't matter when trying to impress

It's a rite of passage for some

*A 2017 international study published in Computers in Human Behaviour found among young adults aged between 18 and 25 years of age, that there is a relationship between exposure to online content depicting risky behavior and users' own offline risky behavior. This relationship was found for six behaviors: drug use, excessive alcohol use, disordered eating, self-harm, violence to others, and dangerous pranks (Branley, 2017)

Developing our strategy

Our strategy for approaching this audience

The research that we carried out pointed us towards the opportunity to harness young people's need to follow their peers.

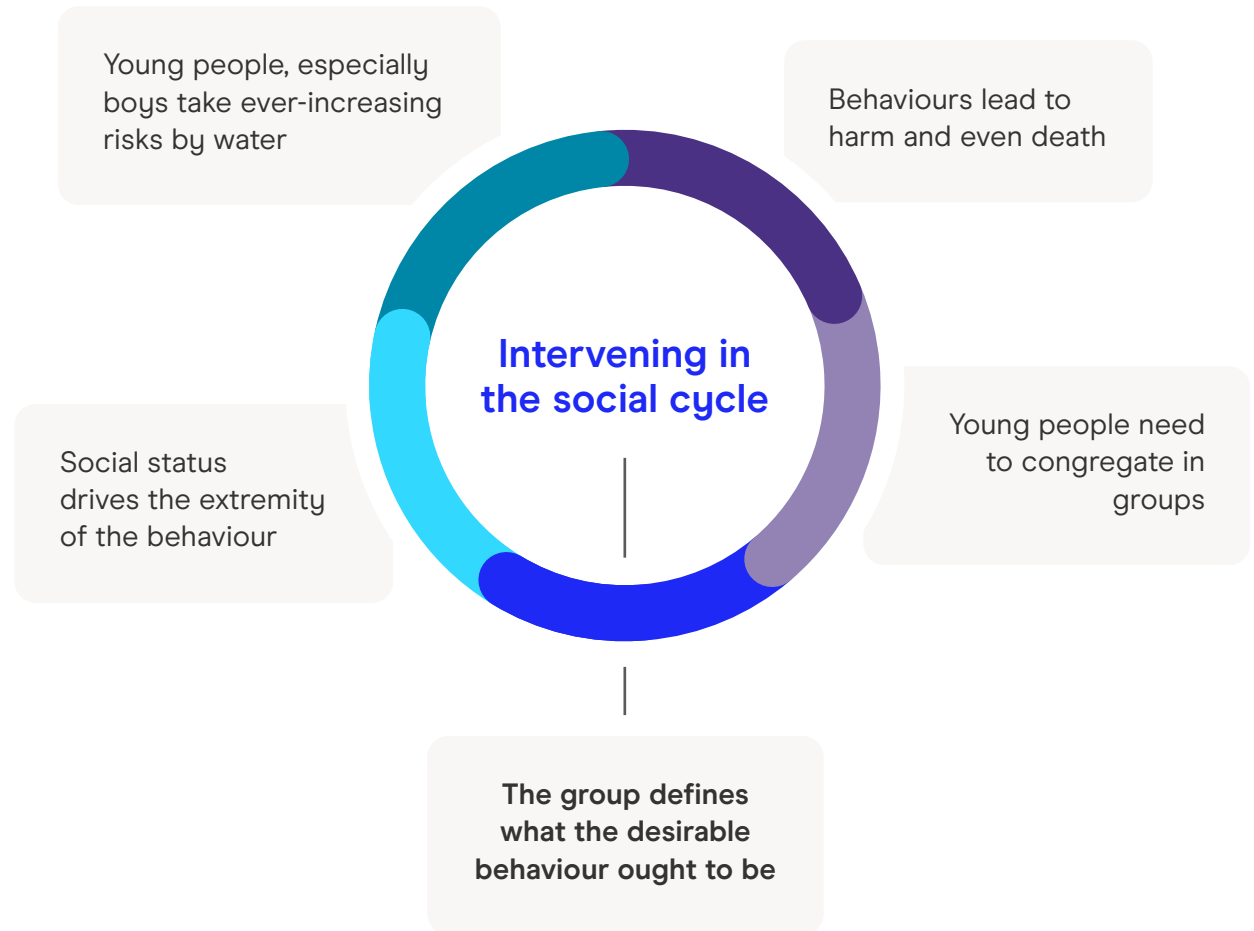
We wanted to explore whether they can positively influence one another to avoid the most dangerous, life-threatening behaviours.



A friend who discourages a young person from engaging in a particular risky behavior can reduce the tendency of the young person engaging in that activity (Maxwell, 2002).

We saw from our insight that the behaviour plays out in groups and therefore the dynamics of these groups could give us an opportunity to intervene in that behaviour.

We were interested to see whether a campaign could be created which encouraged young people to reflect on what behaviour is desirable/ acceptable within the group and to moderate their collective behaviour accordingly.



Co-design session one

Co-design with young people

In January 2024 we went to Wigan to test our hypotheses around audiences and behaviours with young people.

Before meeting with the young people, we visited the location of focus in Wigan – Lock 73 on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal – to gain a better understanding of the environment and activities that young people engage in.

We worked with a group of young people at Wigan Youth Zone across two sessions. The group were a mix of males and females, and included individuals who were likely to have engaged in risky behaviour or know someone who had.

Session one focused on understanding them as an audience and getting an early steer on what the campaign might be like.



Audience insights

We took a lot of insights away from our work with young people in Wigan.

Friends look out for one another

Young people first talked about friendships in the context of support, protection and care

“They have your back, don’t they? Someone to chill with, speak to.”

Individuals are fearless and out to impress

Young people then told us about local risk-taking behaviours by the water

“You know the high-up thing where you can see what’s happening – that’s what they jump in from.”

But it doesn’t always have the desired effect...

Girls in particular told us that they didn’t think the behaviour was very impressive

“They think they’re dead hard, but they’re not.”

Friends don’t let each other get hurt

Young people recognise the limits of risk taking and aren’t afraid to tell their friends when to stop

“If it’s a risk that takes you out your comfort zone that’s one thing but if it’s a risk that’s dangerous and stupid, I’m not ok with that.”

Audience insights

The risks are well known to young people

Young people easily listed the reasons why it might not be safe to enter the water and they knew about young people who'd lost their lives

“The water is really cold and there's things at the bottom.”

The current approach to comms doesn't work

Young people weren't dissuaded by messengers who talked about the risk to life or told them 'no' - in fact it encouraged the behaviour

“If you're being told so many times not to do something, then it makes you want to do it more.”

Young people do assess the situation

Young people are already making judgements about safety despite their risk-taking mentality

“We stuck a massive stick in to see if it was deep.”

In-person conversations were most appealing

Young people said they'd be likely to scroll straight past video content and would prefer a conversation, but the messenger is important and authority figures are problematic

“Teenagers take it more seriously when it's face to face conversations.”

Developing concepts

The three territories

Using our insights from the secondary and primary research with young people and stakeholders, we developed three intervention concepts ready for testing.

1. This makes you look stupid

2. I don't want you to die

**3. Here's the information,
now it's up to you**

1. This makes you look stupid

Insights

- We heard clearly from young males that image among their peers and towards females is paramount in the risk-taking context.
- There is a dissonance between how young males perceive their risk-taking activity and how their “audience” perceives it, which creates an opportunity.
- Bystanders hold important influence over the risk takers, and their perceptions matter to the risk taker.

Hypothesis

Exploring how risk taking might not create the desired image is a potential strategic and creative territory.

2. I don't want to see you die

Insights

- Young people value their friendships and group more than anything else.
- Both the risk-taking males and by-standing females were united in wanting to have fun, but that they would step in if they saw danger ahead.
- A particular opportunity around activating the role of female leadership – we heard about the notion of “mum friends” that preside over the actions of the group.

Hypothesis

Dial in to the caring friendship ties that already exist, both among risk-takers and bystanders, to self-moderate and manage risk.

3. Here's the information – now it's up to you

Insights

- Young people were clear that they wanted to be treated as equals, with the ability to make their own judgements
- They don't want to be scared, as this raises a protective barrier that doesn't enable behavioural change. Evidence suggests fear-based campaigns do not influence action among young people.
- They wanted a clear outline of the risks while still welcoming them to the waterside, and they can exercise their judgement.

Hypothesis

Equip young people with the know-how and the physics of the canals. Show them how to assess the risks themselves and trust them to reach their conclusions.

Co-design session two

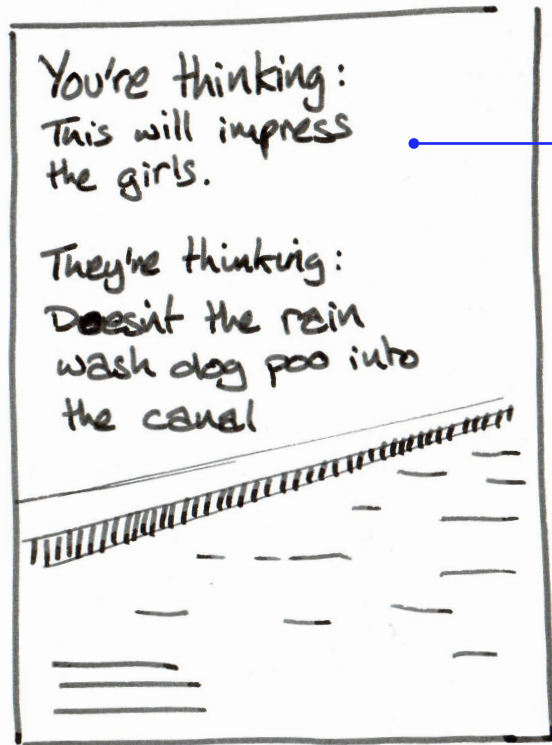


Co-design with young people

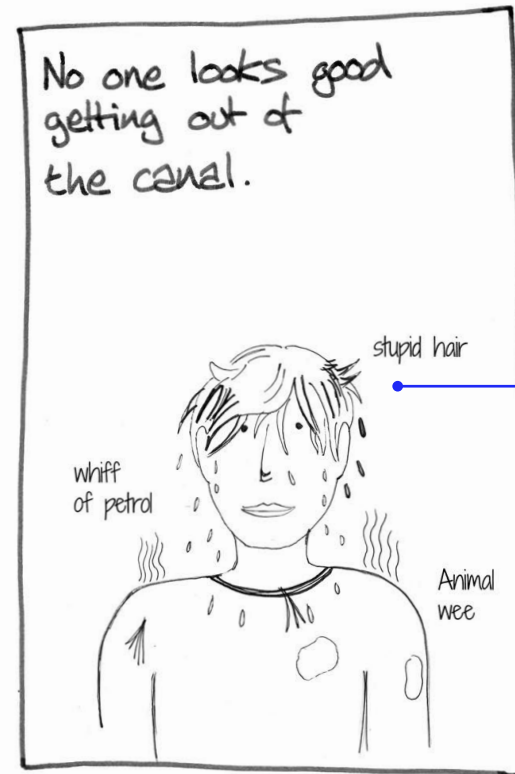
In February 2024, we visited Wigan again to follow up with the same group of young people and get input on the campaign concepts.

We shared the three territories developed between sessions and we showed them our initial creative ideas. We were looking for honest feedback and their own ideas for how to design the campaign.

1. This makes you look stupid



"A show off is a put off."




"What would you call him if he looked like that?"

"A dickhead!"


2. I don't want to see you die

When they're about to backflip into the canal...
Be a mate - before it's too late.



“Actually, I think that's too dangerous.”

Lee's a great lad - always up for a laugh. Yeah, he can be a bit of a show off, but he's got great banter. Whenever we go to the canal he's always the one who wants to jump...
Can you stop your friend's story from ending here?

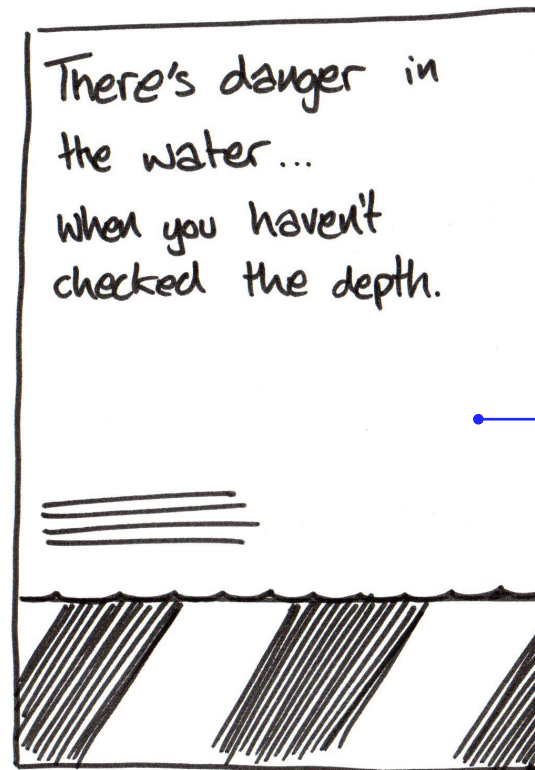


“Too long. Wouldn't read it.”

3. Here's the information – now it's up to you



"Cos your leg could get stuck in the way and then you can't get out?"



"If you're told not to do something, it actually makes you want to do it."

Final pilot campaign platform and creative development



Based on all our research, insight and testing, our pilot campaign platform emerged as:

Have You Got Their Back?

Why does this work?

Have You Got Their Back builds on the foundational insight that young people care and look out for each other. They have an innate sense of when risks are too great, and they would be willing to intervene if they saw someone about to cross a line. This platform will empower them to trust their instincts and enable them to assess risks and to act.

It doesn't pretend they won't take these risks but encourages self-policing through a positive by-stander effect and meets them where they are in their world.

The essence of the approach

These are the key considerations that guide this new approach to communicating with young people.

Ask the question

An approach that leads with questions, rather than orders, respects young people's perspective and empowers them to make the right decision.

Let them risk assess

Young people do assess risks, they're just more willing to take them for the kudos they believe they will get. Our approach empowers people around the risk taker to intervene, crowd sourcing safer judgement.

Remember less is more

Young people are bombarded with messaging every day. We need to get to the point with our campaign in deliver it in as pithy a way as possible.

Keep it catchy

Short pithy phrases and a hooky campaign will work harder with young people. Safety is boring to them, so we need a more engaging way into their lives.

Celebrate their bonds

Friendship bonds in the teenage years are stronger than with anyone else in their lives. Every young person told us they would step in to help a friend.

Utilise Peer messengers

Authority figures don't always play well for young people of this age. But they will listen to each other, so our approach is designed to maximise peer-to-peer communication.

Incorporating the voices of young people

We asked the young people at Wigan Youth Zone, what friendship meant to them and this is where the line 'Have you got their back?' emerged from.

"I'm the mum friend, I look after everyone."

"They have your back, don't they?"

"They've got your back."

"My friends mean everything. Because you wouldn't come here or go out if you didn't have them."

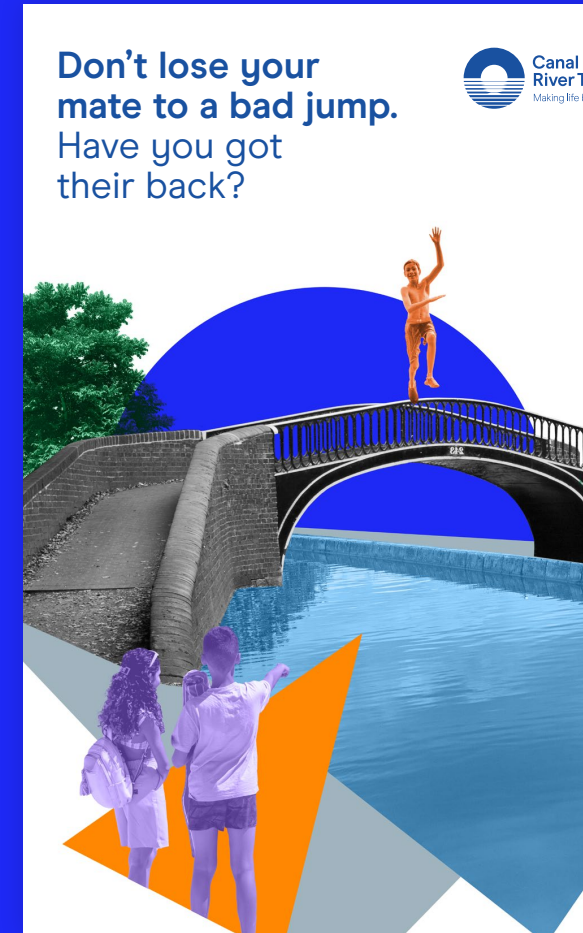
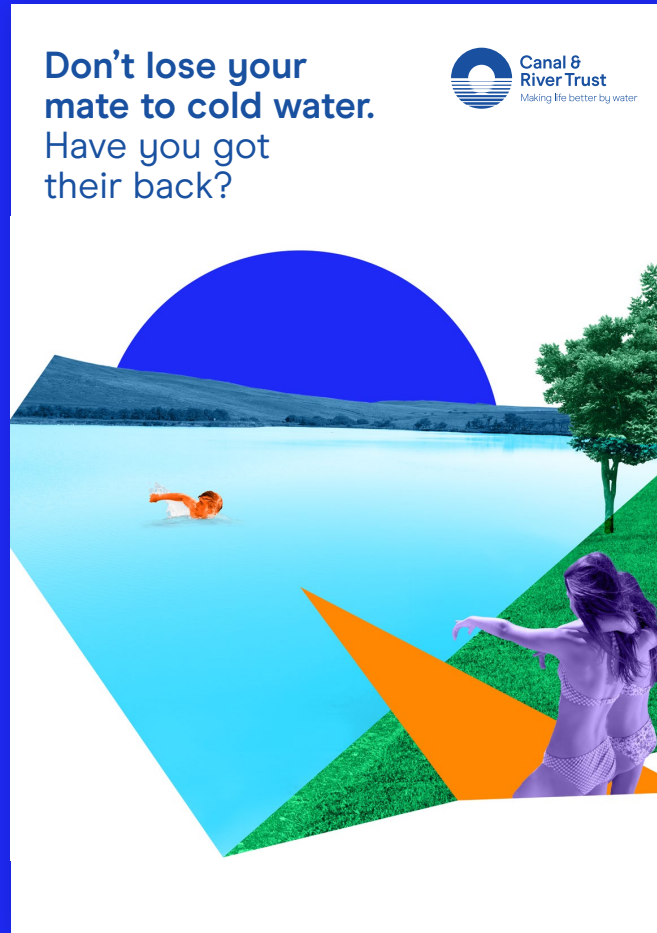
"They look out for you."

"They're there for you and they don't make everything about themselves."

Visual approach

We developed a distinct, graphic approach to the pilot campaign. It tries to break the mould of typical safety campaign advertising.

This style of imagery was designed to be applied to Have You Got Their Back? campaign materials, from social media posts to physical materials such as leaflets, posters etc. Research with young people to develop the campaign pointed towards designs that were eye-catching, relatively simple, and not excessively overlaid with text. Let the audience interpret the scene and use their instincts to assess the risks being illustrated.



Campaign Tone

Have You Got Their Back? represented a new approach to safety campaigning for the Canal & River Trust. We developed guidance to help judge the tone of communicating the campaign.



This campaign should...

- Recognise the importance and bond of their friendships
- Empower young people
- Respect their innate ability to judge dangers
- Enable them to act on instincts to look out for each-other
- Let them have the facts and draw their own conclusions
- Show not tell
- Coach them with questions, not direct them with orders
- Punchy, catchy, pithy

This campaign shouldn't...

- Aim for cessation – stop saying stop!
- Patronise
- Lead with authority figures
- Scaremonger
- Shock
- Dictate
- Be long-winded, worthy, bland

Campaign Language

We developed example social media posts to help bring all the tonal and language elements of Have You Got Their Back? together in a single execution. Our earlier insights from the research helped us develop some pointers on general approaches to language and the need for reiteration for the campaign.



- Young people told us “less is more” so keep your copy short.
- Our primary audience for the campaign is not the person taking the risk, but their friends looking on. We are empowering these bystanders to look out for their mates.
- Avoid giving instructions or orders, and instead offer questions that lead the audience to a safe decision. For example, instead of “Don’t jump from the canal bridge, there are dangers in the water”, try “What’s in that water? Is it even deep enough to jump?”
- Use the “Have You Got Their Back?” line in every piece of content and post to build recognition around the campaign.
- Use regionalisation in your use of the campaign. Are there locks, rivers, open water? Make reference to these specific environments so your audience can relate.

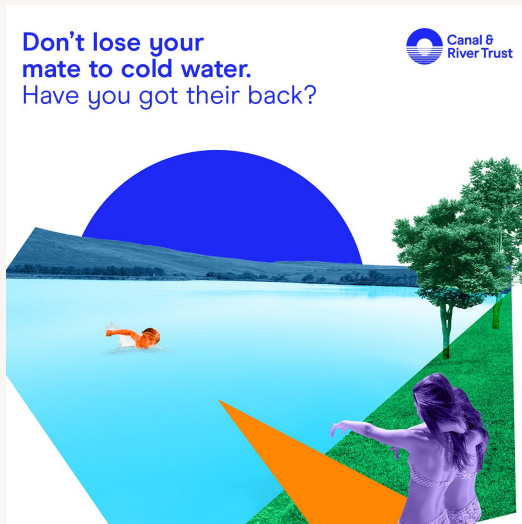
Example adverts

Cold water swimming

What if the cold gets too much? Will they still be able to swim? To even move? Will they get out before they go under?

Call them back before it's too late

Don't lose your mate to cold water.
Have you got their back?



Lock jumping

He's going in, but will he be able to get out? What's in that water? What's under it? What's been thrown in there? Is it even deep enough to jump?

Pull them back before it's too late

Don't lose your mate to a hidden danger.
Have you got their back?

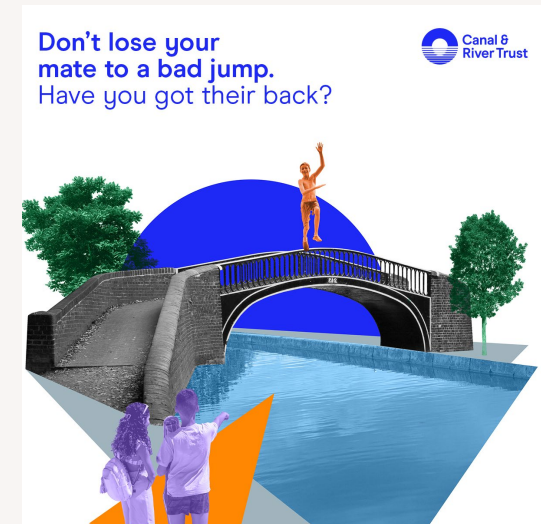


Bridge jumping

He's having a laugh, but is he really up for this? If he goes in wrong, will he ever come out again?

Call them down before it's too late

Don't lose your mates to a bad jump.
Have you got their back?



Feedback from young people

As part of our co-design process we returned to Wigan Youth Zone in October 2024 to capture the views of young people on the concepts and pilot creative output we'd designed following their initial input and ideas.

We interviewed 13 young people aged between 11 and 16, both male and female, across a range of ethnicities.

The young people gave us their gut reactions and honest feedback to the posters we showed them and fed into future considerations for how the campaigning approach to water safety could develop.



Key insights

The core proposition of ‘have you got their back’ was mostly well understood by young people.

“Would you be able to help them out if they got in?”

“It’s saying not to let your mates go swimming in canals.”

“If you have a friend and you know that they’re not safe, and they’re at risk, then you wouldn’t let them do it.”

Young people indicated that they would want to help a friend who was putting themselves at risk, suggesting the approach reflects the way young people think and feel about their friends.

“This water is very dangerous. I would stop my friends, it’s not good, it’s very dangerous and you could maybe die.”

“I’d tell people to stay safe – go and look at it because it’s beautiful but not for swimming.”

“Most people in my friend group would tell them they’ve gone too far and to come back.”

Key insights

There was a view that this type of messaging was relevant to people of their age in their area.

“This is the type of scenario to happen in my community.”

“They want to muck around with their mates and go swimming but it’s dangerous.”

“I’ve seen people always climbing, jumping around waters.”

Young people felt this approach had the potential to be more impactful than other interventions they’d seen and there was some suggestion that a classroom-based approach could have an impact.

“They won’t care in an assembly, we all got bored. Maybe in a classroom... you’d stand more of a chance in a classroom.”

“There’s already one sign there saying beware, not to go in. I think it has no impact. I think it’s better to have the situation shown like you have it. That to me, is showing you how it could happen.”

“On a video you might think it’s just entertainment but on paper like this you’d think it was serious.”

Key insights

We received some constructive feedback on the pilot creative that could be implemented in future development.

“The image is a bit confusing. It looks like she’s just pointing at some poor man swimming.”

“It looks like a swimming pool – the water’s way too clear.”

“There should be more people on the poster. I think more people would be watching if someone was about to do something stupid like jump in.”

Conclusion

Conceptually the proposition of Have You Got Their Back? is understood, and young people told us it reflected the values that play strongly in their friendship groups – it understood their world. The messaging was comprehended and relevant and we heard further support for the value of a classroom-based workshop in schools.

For the campaign to be released on public channels, the creative design for the pilot wasn’t landing as effectively as the messaging. Further development to improve creative look and feel, with some further testing, will finalise the approach for wider roll-out.

Activation and channels

Talks in schools

Young people consistently talked about hearing this information in school through small group interactive sessions delivered in forms e.g. during PSHE. They wanted the opportunity to discuss and ask questions rather than passively receiving safety messages.

We are currently working with PSHE to create a lesson plan to be piloted in Wigan schools in January 2025.



Appendices

Region/department	Contact	Role
Yorkshire & North East	Sharron Bright	Community Roots Engagement Coordinator
	Kerri O'Connor	Community Roots Engagement Coordinator
	Naomi Roberts	Comms & Campaigns Manager
London & South East	Ian Hugo	Harbour Manager - Docklands
	Sonia Blackett	Community & Youth Events Coordinator
Insights	Anna Baatz	Outcomes Measurement & Evaluation Specialist
Social Media	Emma Rowbotham	Social Media Executive
	Francesca Carmine	Social Media Manager
North West	Sarah Potts	Community & Youth Events Coordinator
	James Long	Engagement Manager
	Steve Ballard	Regional Operations Manager
	Gillian Renshaw	Urban Engagement Manager
	Sara Ponting	Community & Youth Events Coordinator
	Andrew Goudie	Harbour Manager – Liverpool Docks
	Steve Maguire	Area Operations Manager
East Midlands	Adrian Royston	Skills & Learning Coordinator (primary)
	Stephen Hardy	Comms & Campaigns Manager
	Jane Stubbs	Volunteering Leader
Wales & South West	Caroline Kendall	Partnerships & Funding Manager
West Midlands	Amat Saeed	Community & Youth Events Coordinator
	Lee Bates	Area Operations Manager
	Julianne Joyce	Community & Youth Events Coordinator
Health & Safety	Claire Gauci	Public Safety Campaigns and Programme Manager

Who did we speak to?

External stakeholders

Organisation	Contact	Role
Daybreak Communications	Paul Pounsford	Water Safety Advisor to the UK Minerals Industry - Public Relations Director
Berkshire Youth	Kelly Leach	Youth and Community Manager
RNLI	Ross MacLeod	Advocacy and Public Affairs Manager
ROSPA	David Walker	Head of Road and Leisure Safety
Essex Fire and Rescue	Andrea MacAlister	Road and Water Safety Manager / Temp Head of Live Safe
Essex Fire and Rescue	Louise Curtis	Development Manager for Education and Specialist Interventions

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