



COMMUNITY BOATS PLAY CENTRAL ROLE IN RIVER RESCUES

Operating on our coasts and major inland waterways, a wide network of community-based rescue boats has resulted in a major reduction in the number of drowning tragedies on Ireland's waters. Peigin Doyle looks at the work of some of these voluntary organisations around the country in providing invaluable assistance to the frontline emergency services.

If you are tossed from your canoe on a stormy inland lake, pulled out to sea on a strong current or trapped by underwater debris while angling, there is a good chance that one of the Community Rescue Boats of Ireland will come to your aid.

Community Rescue Boats Ireland is not a formal organisation but the name given a national network of independent, community-based rescue services that operate on our coasts and major inland waterways.

All rescue boats work closely with the Irish Coast Guard, An Garda Síochána and Water Safety Ireland. While

some boats may operate 24/7 all year round, certain units operate 24/7 for the time it takes for a rescue or recovery of a body, while others provide suicide prevention and safety patrols to help people at risk on the quayside or the waterside.

Among community rescue boats, the highest level of involvement in terms of time coverage are units that are on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The Coast Guard may deem such a station a 'declared resource' (DR) and call it out whenever needed.

The most important criterion for 'declared resource'



Wexford MarineWatch volunteers pictured on night patrol along Wexford Harbour – all volunteers undergo specific training, including the SafeTALK course on suicide awareness.

status is that a rescue station is able to muster its crew and put to sea within 15 minutes. When human lives are at risk, speed is essential.

They must also meet stringent standards of equipment and training, as set down by the Coast Guard and implemented by Water Safety Ireland, which carries out regular inspections of VAT-exempt boats on shore and at sea.

"We use the International Maritime Rescue Federation's standards but all our boats are above that level.. We regularly liaise with the Coast Guard and the RNLI to ensure the correct standards are in operation," according to John Leech, CEO of Water Safety Ireland.

VAT EMEMPTION STATUS

Stations that are a 'declared resource' qualify for a special VAT exemption, which was introduced under the Value-Added Tax (Refund of Tax; Rescue Boats and Related Equipment) Order 2013.

The scheme was launched by the then Taoiseach Enda Kenny in his home town of Castlebar, Co. Mayo in August 2013.

The VAT exemption scheme means that rescue units can deduct tax on the cost of hire, importation, supply, repair, modification or maintenance of a boat of gross tonnage of 15 tons or less, which is designed, built or adapted for the purpose of rescue or assistance at sea

or on inland waterways. Equipment and buildings housing such craft may also qualify in accordance with the exemption order.

They must also satisfy the Revenue Commissioners, by providing documentary evidence from Water Safety Ireland that they both provide water rescue or assistance services and meet the standards required by Water Safety Ireland. About 14 community units have been granted VAT exemption status under this particular piece of legislation.

Units that are not a declared resource may be called out also by the Coast Guard as a 'vessel of opportunity' when many rescue boats may be needed to help with body recovery.

Only units that meet the standards for VAT exemption may take part in sea rescue missions with the Coast Guard, which is in charge of offshore rescue and recovery.

Others concentrate on body recovery, prevention of drowning and raising awareness of water safety. A rescue service that is not on permanent call liaises with An Garda Síochána, which is responsible for co-ordinating rescue or recovery operations on inland waters.

The pattern of rescue work has changed in some cases. For example, although Ballybunion Sea and Cliff Rescue is on 24-hour call, "most calls are for land searches for people who are missing," said PRO Emmet Lynch.

SUICIDE PREVENTION UNITS

Side by side with rescue and recovery work are shore-based volunteers who mount regular harm prevention and suicide watch foot patrols, checking waterside areas where people might

WATER TRAGEDIES

Of approximately 124 drownings that occur in a year:

- 76% are men and 24% are women.
- 62% of all drownings happen in inland rivers or lakes.
- On average 11 people drown per month.
- Almost one-third of drowning victims in the last 10 years had taken alcohol.
- One-third of all drownings within the last 25 years have been recorded as 'suicide'.



be at risk or thinking of self-harming.

Wexford MarineWatch and Galway's Claddagh Watch Patrol are two such suicide prevention units. The volunteers do not enter the water during a rescue, and will call out the RNLI unit; for assistance.

To illustrate this close relationship, George Lawlor from Wexford MarineWatch said: "If somebody is on the wrong side of the railings, the RNLI boat waits under the bridge so as not to frighten them by launching".

In many areas there are two separate units; one unit operates a land-based rescue while the second one responds to water rescues. Drogheda, on the Boyne River, is served by three units - the Coast Guard station, the Boyne Fishermen's Rescue and Recovery Unit (which is on permanent call) and an independent unit.

"We encourage areas to have two units because it is all about safety in the water and saving people. The land-based units do fantastic



Pictured at the launch of the VAT exemption order in Castlebar, Co. Mayo in August 2013 were John Leech, CEO of Water Safety Ireland, the then Taoiseach Enda Kenny, Breda Collins, then Chairperson of Irish Water Safety, and two members of Corrib & Mask Rescue (the first community rescue lifeboat to avail of VAT exemption under the new legislation).

WEXFORD MARINEWATCH

The RNLI, Coast Guard, Civil Defence, the HSE National Ambulance Service, the fire services and local authorities set up Wexford MarineWatch in 2012, and this inter-agency co-operation has since helped to make the initiative a success.

The organisation operates suicide prevention and safety patrols several nights each week to reduce the high number of suicides and deaths in Wexford Harbour. An average of 16 people a year previously lost their lives in the harbour, but now due to the huge efforts of Wexford MarineWatch, the figure has significantly dropped.

"The bridge and harbour area was a hotspot for people attempting to self-harm," noted George Lawlor of Wexford MarineWatch. "Since 2012, we've had 405 incidents, 196 interventions and patrolled for 7,500 hours."



Over 120 volunteers operate regular patrols at Wexford's harbour, quays and bridge on the River Slaney, to watch out for individuals who may be at risk at the waterside, due to alcohol or drugs intake, or who may attempt to self-harm.

All volunteers undergo a specific training programme on water safety, first aid, rescue equipment, radio communication, and the 'SafeTALK' course on suicide awareness, in addition to daytime and night-time training exercises with the local RNLI crew, to prepare them for various scenarios.

Trained to recognise when a person is distressed or suicidal, volunteers engage with the person. However, if a vulnerable person is already in the water, support is then requested from the RNLI.

Having received support and advice from Waterford Marine Search and Rescue, Wexford MarineWatch recently assisted Claddagh Watch Patrol to launch a similar service on Galway city's waterways. For further information visit www.wexfordmarinewatch.com

work in terms of recovery of bodies and they also raise awareness of water safety," said John Leech.

COMMUNITY RESCUE SUPPORT

All community rescue boat units are supported by public fundraising and sponsorship. For this reason, most units register as a charity and are listed on the Public Register of Charities.

Many rescue units are set up by communities in response to local tragedies. Some units start off as part of a sub-aqua club. Many in time become RNLI lifeboats, like Belmullet and Bundoran. Boyne River Rescue Unit grew out of a tradition whereby local fishermen would stop all fishing work and search for missing colleagues until they were found.

Communities who consider setting up a rescue service will contact Water Safety Ireland to discuss the options. A unit may operate on permanent call for a trial period to see if they can maintain the service. Many may decide that they cannot ask their volunteers to make such a heavy time commitment and opt to do regular patrols in co-operation

with the Gardaí. Water Safety Ireland will give them advice, and provide training and safety promotion material.

NATIONAL RECOVERY NETWORK

VAT-exempt units tend to have a very close relationship with Water Safety Ireland especially at the setting-up stage. Water Safety Ireland organises at least one and usually two conferences each year for the VAT-exempt boats, to keep up the contact. The National Search and Rescue Co-ordination Committee, comprising the Coast Guard, the RNLI, the Garda Síochána and Water Safety Ireland, normally meet twice a year.

While working at different levels of capacity, all are highly effective and contribute to a national water rescue and recovery network that has seen drownings drop significantly in the last 20 years. At latest count, 39 communities around Ireland, on coast or on shore, operated recovery or rescue craft.

"Together all these rescue units have brought a huge reduction in the level of drownings over the last 20 years. We are at the lowest level of drownings ever in the history of the State," noted Water Safety Ireland's Chief Executive.

BALLYBUNION SEA AND CLIFF RESCUE

Ballybunion Sea and Cliff Rescue volunteers are on pager-alert 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, serving the coast of North Kerry, West Limerick and the Shannon Estuary to Foynes and inland to Abbeyfeale. They also turn out for inland rescues between Glin and Killarney.

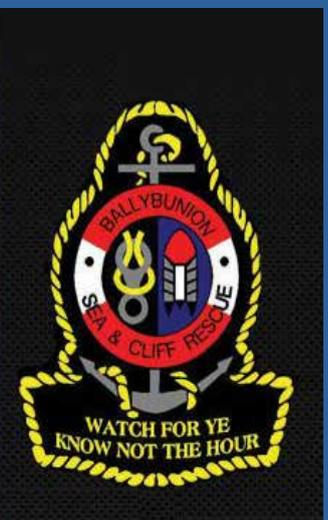
The unit, which has been running for 35 years, currently has two boats in operation – an EA-16D-Class inflatable and an Atlantic 75 (B-class) RIB, both built to RNLI specifications.

Most of their call-outs involve searches for missing people and body recovery. Sea call-outs are less common as boating equipment has improved greatly, and the type of incidents they mainly respond to include leisure boating activities that go wrong, people blown out to sea on rubber floats or fishermen falling off the rocks.

Of the 25-40 average membership, only three are needed on a call-out to launch a boat. Many volunteers do land-based work, such as fundraising, while about 20 members are on pager-alert duty for launches.

"Over 35 years we have never failed to launch a boat. If your pager goes off and you can respond, then you respond," noted Emmet Lynch, Public Relations Officer.

"Most call-outs are for land searches. We do not rescue people drowning at sea. We rescue people who have gone missing during the previous few hours. We get up to 120 calls a year, and there is a significant recovery of bodies of those who go missing. We are glad to be able to bring them home because there can be a funeral and families can properly grieve."



For further information visit www.ballybunionrescue.com