

HI-TECH LIFEBUOYS TO THE RESCUE IN ATHLONE

Ireland's first 'river rescue robots' were launched on the Shannon in early December by the Athlone River Safety Awareness Group, and now these two large, motorised lifebuoys can be remote-controlled from the shore to support individuals in difficulty until the lifeboat arrives, thereby giving them a much better chance of survival. Report by Peigin Doyle.



Athlone River Safety Awareness Group found an agent for the company, Havospark Rescue, in Scotland, and bought two of these unique motorised hi-tech river rescue robots.

The Athlone River Safety Awareness Group was first set up in 2019 in response to a previous number of incidents and accidents on the River Shannon.

"In 2018 we had an incident when someone went into the Shannon at night-time. Some young local bar workers spotted the person; they took up position on both sides of the river, encouraged him to float, to hang on until the RNLI boat arrived and they pinpointed the person in the water for the RNLI.

"Without their quick action, the man would not have survived," Athlone's Councillor Aengus O'Rourke recalled. "In Athlone if somebody ended up in the river, there usually wasn't a good outcome. A few of us asked if we could investigate this and make survival the norm and make rescue possible. We asked ourselves, how do we get to the person in the water quickly? We looked at getting a boat but the more we asked the more obstacles we saw.

"One of the group members spotted the river rescue buoys on YouTube but they could only be found in Asia, Australia and the US. However, we found an agent for the company, Havospark Rescue, in Scotland, and bought two of them," noted Cllr O'Rourke.

FILLING A VITAL GAP

One of these two motorised hi-tech lifebuoys was showcased as part of a multi-agency training exercise on

the Shannon in late November, organised by Athlone River Safety Awareness Group, in association with the Gardaí, the RNLI and the Coast Guard.

"We aim to fill that gap between a person going into the water and the arrival of the lifeboat. The Lough Lee RNLI lifeboat is based at Coosan Point outside the town and it takes 15 minutes to reach the town centre," according to Athlone's Sub-Aqua Club Diving Officer, Jude Kilmartin. He added that this robotic lifebuoy will support a person in difficulty, giving them a much better fighting chance of survival until they are rescued.

Athlone Garda Sgt Paul Kelly, who is also a member of Lough Ree RNLI, has ensured that all Gardaí in Athlone are trained in using this remote-controlled device. "Gardaí are usually the first people to respond but you don't want to have to put someone in the water in a rescue, with the temperature in the water, especially in winter with huge currents."

He explained that since it takes 15 minutes for the Lough Ree RNLI lifeboat, which is equipped with oxygen and first aid, to be deployed from Coosan Point, this robotic device just fills that initial gap. "It's so simple, so brilliant. And it's long overdue," Sgt Kelly noted.

RIVER RESCUE CO-ORDINATION

The midlands town is the first in the country to use these



Athlone's Garda Sgt Paul Kelly is also a member of Lough Ree RNLI.



Cllr Aengus O'Rourke, Athlone River Safety Awareness Group.



Jude Kilmartin, Athlone Sub-Aqua Club.



One of the group's two motorised hi-tech lifebuoys was showcased as part of a multi-agency training exercise on the Shannon. The event, which was screened on RTE News on Sunday 28 November, was organised by Athlone River Safety Awareness Group, in association with the Gardaí, the RNLI and the Coast Guard.

devices, and these hi-tech buoys were thoroughly tested before being launched on the River Shannon recently. "We tested them in six to seven knots of current with people using them. They were tested in the water at the weir, and the battery life was also tested. We tied the two buoys together, which are very easy to control," noted Kilmartin.

All the emergency responders in Athlone River Safety Awareness Group were firstly trained on how to operate them. The group has now brought on board the Athlone Sub-Aqua Club, RNLI, the Gardaí and the Coast Guard and other frontline response agencies to work together on river rescue for the first time, and this is something

they are all enthusiastic about.

The buoys, which are stored in code-operated metal 'survival' boxes located on each side of the River Shannon (The Docks and The Strand) are now ready to assist in all river rescues. The first action taken by the group in 2019 was to instal and equip the boxes with everything needed to help individuals who find themselves difficulty in the water. These include high-powered spot lamps, throw ropes and flotation devices, reach poles, first aid kits, life jackets, defibrillators, and VHF radios to communicate directly with the RNLI.

A recruitment drive is now underway to recruit and train 30 riverside volunteers to operate the

buoys. "Already there has been a good response. Once volunteers are trained in all the equipment they will be connected to a 'call out' app on their phones and will have the code to the survival boxes. We will also train the door staff from bars and restaurants located close to the river, who were very willing to receive this training," said Jude Kilmartin.

Athlone River Safety Awareness Group is a registered charity, and all donations go directly towards equipment and training exercises. Anyone who wishes to volunteer for river rescue should visit <https://athloneriversafety.com> and click the 'Volunteer Now' button.