

**The Success of Foyle Search and Rescue –  
Suicide Prevention and Rescue in the City of Derry, Ireland**  
Patrick Wilson (Foyle Search & Rescue), Craig Smyth (Foyle Search & Rescue)  
and John Connolly (Irish Lifesaving Foundation)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Where recorded, suicide by drowning is the method of choice for between around 1% (USA) to 25% (Ireland) of all suicide deaths.(Connolly 2007a, Salib & Agnew 2005) Little reliable information is available from many developing countries but the likelihood is that their figures match those from developed countries. (Connolly 2010) Ireland has a serious suicide problem with twice as many persons drowning by suicide than drown accidentally (Connolly 2007a). There appears to be a belief that anyone who deliberately enters water, intending to kill themselves, cannot be rescued or prevented from re-attempting should they be stopped the first time. This has been shown to be false in that the majority of persons who fail in a first suicide attempt do not go on to successfully kill themselves later (Connolly 2010).

## **BEGINNING**

Foyle Search and Rescue was founded in the City of Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1993 in response to the high number of suicide by drowning deaths in the River Foyle as it flows through the city. It was triggered by the search for the body of a local man who had entered the river, but this was not a one-off event. In the previous 18 months in Derry City, 25 to 30 individuals had deliberately drowned themselves in the Foyle and in earlier years the number of suicide by drowning deaths had been in the region of 35-40 lives annually, mostly on week-end nights. Derry is an open port city with easy access to the river. A group of concerned citizens came together with the primary aims of stopping suicidal people from entering the river and the rescuing of those in the water. Foyle Search and Rescue came into existence as a community response to a tragic situation and was registered as a charity in July 1993 devoted to the preservation of life in and around the River Foyle.

## **CITY OF DERRY OR LONDONDERRY**

The City of Derry, or Londonderry as it is also known as, is the second largest city in Northern Ireland with a population of about 100,000. The city is divided in two by the River Foyle, with three-quarters of the population living on the west bank or 'Cityside' and one-quarter living on the east bank or 'Waterside'. Up until 1984 Craigavon Bridge was the only bridge over the river inside of the city.

## **RIVER FOYLE**

The River Foyle is found in the northwest of Ireland and is the fastest flowing river in Europe for its size.(Look Around Ireland) The Foyle is tidal, fast flowing and cold. It can move at a speed of 15 knots and has many currents and undercurrents. In the winter of 2009 the river iced-up. The river is up to 800 metres wide in places as it winds through the city.

## **BRIDGES**

Two bridges span the river in Derry, Craigavon Bridge and Foyle Bridge. Craigavon Bridge is a 40 foot high double-decker road bridge and is the older of the two bridges, opened in 1933. Foyle Bridge is a high level road bridge (150 foot high) opened in 1984, and built high enough to allow large ships pass underneath. This proved to be unnecessary in the long run as the Port of Derry relocated from the city centre to a new port north of the city. The high bridge is subject to closure due to high winds during storms.

## **AIMS**

The charity has the following aims;

- The preservation of life
- Training life saving volunteers
- Providing support and help to families bereaved by suicide
- Promoting safety on the River Foyle
- Delivering effective education and training programmes to the local community
- Working cross community (Catholic and Protestant) for common goals
- Working cross border (Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland) for common goals

## **STRUCTURE**

The organisation has a formal legal structure with

- Trustees
- Management Committee

- Administrator
- Co-ordinators
- Team Leaders

## **LIFESAVING ACTIONS**

The aims of the charity are achieved through the following actions;

- Shore patrol to intercept possible suicides before they enter the river
- Boat crew to man the rescue boats and remove casualties from the river
- Search operations looking for missing people believed to be in the river
- Lifebelts are checked regularly and at key sites are alarmed and monitored by CCTV cameras
- Offering help to persons considering suicide
- Providing support to the families of those who have died by suicide
- Visiting schools and youth organisations speaking about water safety and our work in the community inviting pupils from local schools to visit the Prehen base and take part in question-answer sessions

## **BASES**

FSR has two bases on the riverbank, a principal base upriver at Prehen, which is the organisation's headquarters and another storage base downriver at Gillands. Headquarters is a modern three-storey custom built structure with a boathouse and radio room in addition to meeting facilities and an all-tidal floating pontoon. Gillands contains a storage building converted into a boathouse and has a slipway launch site for the second boat.

## **LIFESAVING DUTY**

Club members report for duty on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights between 9.30pm and 3.00am (or until a situation resolves itself) and two Emergency Response Teams of 7 volunteers who are on call-out by pager outside of these times. From a pager going off a team can have a boat on the water in 7 minutes. On duty nights a team of three volunteers patrol Craigavon Bridge (40 foot high) while a second team patrols the 1.5 mile stretch of riverside between Craigavon Bridge (150 foot high) and Foyle Bridge on foot with a supporting back-up 4 X 4 vehicle and a third team crew the principal rescue boat on patrol in the river. All land crew wear warm high visibility jackets for comfort and safety. At the start of each patrol night a radio check takes place and throughout the night regular contact is made between each team to ensure immediate radio contact should an incident develop. Foot patrols begin by checking all lifebelts on the bridges and riverbank. The headquarters radio room has immediate communication with the police and other emergency services should it be needed. The patrol vehicle will usually make a quick sweep around the patrol area taking in Foyle Bridge and then stop at a location with a clear view of Craigavon Bridge and a good portion of the riverbank.

## **TRAINING**

The charity had 55 volunteer members in 2009, all aged 21 years or older. A new cadet scheme is being introduced in 2010 for youths aged between 14 and 18 years. Training and personal development are important parts of the programme of activities for all volunteers.

Basic training for new members includes client approach, first aid, ASIST programme (a 2 day suicide awareness course), child protection, throw line training and radio training. All members participate in regular throw line, lifebuoy and land based rescue training. Boat crew are trained to Royal Yachting Association Rescue Power Boat standards.

Training in how to approach a person alone on the riverside is very important. Many of those dealt with are suffering from mental illness, in the middle of a crisis or are very upset after an argument with a loved one. Team members play a crucial post-rescue / post-removal role. Persons talked away from the river are brought back to their Prehen base where they are given refreshments and an opportunity to have an 'informal chat'.

The organisation also has a strong social aspect to its work, with a fundraising element sometimes but they primarily provide their members with an opportunity to talk about the stressful aspects of their work. Professional counselling is available to members.

## **RESULTS**

That Foyle Search and Rescue have made a difference is beyond question. In the first 17 years of the charity's existence [1993 – (Oct) 2010] the organisation dealt with 1616 incidents and saved over 1000 lives, including 134 persons rescued alive from the water. The service also recovered 84 bodies compared to the expected 500 to 600 bodies had the service not been established. The 2008 figures are 42 Emergency Call-outs, 17 Sierra 1's (a person in the water), 74 Sierra 2's (a person over the railings) and 7 bodies recovered from the river. In 2009 Foyle Search and Rescue volunteers attended over 126 incidents. On duty nights 77 potential suicides were prevented, four of whom were removed alive from the river by boat. One body was recovered from the Foyle.

The remaining 49 incidents occurred outside of duty nights and were dealt with by the 24 hour Emergency Response Teams, who successfully removed 11 persons from the river.

A number of people have succeeded in taking their own lives by jumping from the high-level Foyle Bridge. Hitting water after a 150 foot (45 m) height is like hitting concrete with most casualties dying instantly from multiple injuries. Foyle Search and Rescue are certain that raising the height of the railing has given them and members of the public time to save a number of lives that would have been lost previously. Likewise the alarming of lifebelt boxes notifying police that a box has been opened and the use of CCTV to prevent lifebelts being vandalised making them unavailable for rescue use has resulted in 12 lives being saved with these lifebelts. Prior to this 32 lifebelts had to be replaced in 2007-2008.

Table 1 shows the figures from 1994 to 2001 (not shown on pager call-out records) and Table 2 the figures from 2002 to 2009 (including pager call-out records).

Table 1: 1994 – 2001 (pre-pager)

Table 2: 2002 – 2009 (pager call-out)

YEAR	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL		YEAR	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
1994	22	44	66		2002	31	42	73
1995	33	119	152		2003	25	50	75
1996	42	59	101		2004	18	55	73
1997	24	31	55		2005	45	38	83
1998	23	28	51		2006	26	44	70
1999	22	23	45		2007	23	80	103
2000	11	15	26		2008	32	59	91
2001	12	21	33		2009	32	90	122
Totals	189	340	529		Totals	232	458	690

Totals 1994 – 2009: Female 421 (34.5%) + Male 798 (65.5%) = 1219

The charity is a member of the local Mental Health Forum and works with The Irish Association of Suicidology. They host a “Bereaved by Suicide” support group who hold fortnightly meetings in the headquarters building. They are also part of the City of Derry Emergency Plan and the City Airport Disaster Plan. They also offer a support service to families while searching for the body of a family member providing a contact person and a 24/7 phone contact number.

## CONCLUSION

A founding member of Foyle Search and Rescue writes “Suicide is a very sensitive subject to discuss and the feelings and emotions of the families and friends of casualties must always be taken into account – but we must talk about it. We have been classed as experts in suicide prevention – in stopping people from entering the Foyle and in rescuing those who do so but we are also experts in removing bodies from the river. For some of us the word prevention may not be the right word as we know we cannot prevent all suicides but we also know that we do make a difference. People who attempt suicide often think that they have no other options but they are wrong. We offer them a cup of tea and a trained ear to listen to them. Often that is all that is needed to stop them from taking their life that night. If we can get them through the first night they have a great chance of surviving. Out of over 800 persons we have dealt with we know of only 3 who subsequently killed themselves. Research and education is needed in the areas of mental health and drug/alcohol use and addiction; 98% of the people we deal with have some or a lot of alcohol in their systems. Prevention is a much better option than rescue.” They have formalised and established an effective suicide prevention strategy. The Foyle Search and Rescue website is [www.foylesearchandrescue.org](http://www.foylesearchandrescue.org) .

Look Around Ireland, [www.lookaroundireland.com/ireland-rivers.htm](http://www.lookaroundireland.com/ireland-rivers.htm) , accessed 06/10/2010.

Cox Emily, (2006), *Suicide: Ireland's Story*, Blackwater Press.

Connolly John, (2007a), *Suicide by Drowning in Ireland*, [www.lifesavingfoundation.ie](http://www.lifesavingfoundation.ie)

Connolly John (2010), *Suicide by Drowning is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's Rescue Challenge: A Review*