

Group Safety at Water Margins

Who is this leaflet for?

Teachers, lecturers, youth workers, voluntary leaders and anyone else who might organise and lead the type of educational visit described below.

What does it cover?

Learning activities that might take place near or in water – such as a walk along a river bank or seashore, collecting samples from ponds and streams, or paddling or walking in gentle, shallow water.

What doesn't it cover?

Swimming and other activities that require water safety or rescue qualifications and equipment, or water-going craft.

How will it help me?

Hazards are always present. This leaflet lists a number of things to take into account which will help you to plan and lead a safe and enjoyable visit. Read note¹ to find further guidance!

*I am grateful to the Central Council of Physical Recreation for taking the lead in producing **Group Safety at Water Margins**. They have worked with partners from all sectors to produce a good practice guide which enjoys widespread support. This new guidance complements my Department's own **Handbook for Group Leaders** and will help the training of educational visits co-ordinators. Safety during educational visits is paramount and I will watch the impact of **Group Safety at Water Margins** with particular interest.*

Ivan Lewis

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
for Young People and Adult Skills

1 Things to think about before you go

Why are we going?

There are many reasons for leading a visit near water. Off-site visits can bring the curriculum to life. They can also develop team-working skills and improve self-esteem, which can help to raise achievement. Perhaps more importantly these experiences can help young people begin to learn how to look after themselves in an unfamiliar environment. They can also be fun!



Whatever your reason for going, having a clear purpose and plan will help your group to get the most from the day – and will help to maintain safety.

How well do I know my group?

What is the age range of your group? Is the group used to an outdoor environment? Can the group members' behaviour be trusted? How physically able is the group? Do any group members have special educational or medical needs? Will group members have warm, waterproof clothing and suitable footwear? Each of these factors may impact on your choice of venue and activity.

¹ Further information is available in the DFES publication *Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits: A Good Practice Guide* (HASPEV) and its supplements, which include *A Handbook for Group Leaders*. See Section 5 for contact details.

1 Things to think about before you go (cont)

Who will be in charge?

You need to assess accurately your own competence to lead the proposed visit. If you are a school teacher you should refer your plans to your head teacher and educational visits co-ordinator or outdoor education adviser. If you work in a local authority or are a voluntary leader, find out who is responsible for advising on visits within your own organisation, and ask their advice.

If the proposed activity is beyond your level of competence or resource, then you should make different plans which are within your capacity. Alternatively you could approach an external organisation to lead those aspects of the visit that are beyond your capacity (see note² for ideas).



Whatever you choose to do, be sure that all those present know who is responsible for what should be happening at every point during the visit.



Check out what lies downstream, or around the corner from your work area – is there a fallen tree, a fence, a weir, a waterfall – or any other hazard? If you are not happy with your choice of location, look for another, safer one.

2 Getting ready to go

If you do lead the visit yourself you should take a number of steps to identify the foreseeable hazards, and to minimize the risks these present to your group. This is commonly known as risk assessment. Some of the things you will need to consider are listed below.

Who will help me?

You will need enough competent helpers on the day. Consider what ratio of leaders to group members is appropriate to your group, activity and venue. The person responsible for advising on visits in your organisation can assist with this. Ask the same questions about your helpers as you would about the group. You should also brief them fully on the purpose and plan for the visit, and ensure that they understand their responsibilities throughout.

How can I prepare the group?

Telling group members in advance about the purpose of your visit, the environment you are visiting and any hazards it presents will help them to prepare and to participate appropriately on the day. If appropriate, obtain informed consent from group members' parents.

How well do I know the place?

You should always check out a venue before you go there with a group. A competent person accompanying you on any exploratory visit can help you to identify hazards, and assist you if you get into difficulty. If in the last resort, a pre-visit is not possible then the group leader should obtain information in other ways in order to prepare adequately for the visit.

Here are some of the things you should think about on an exploratory visit:

Look for the hazards

If you will be working near water, how likely is it that someone will fall in?

If they do, could you get them out by reaching with a towel, a stick, a piece of clothing, or any public safety equipment that is available? Could you wade in to get them without putting yourself in danger? **If not then you should move to Plan B.** Remember that sudden and unexpected immersion in cold water has a rapid and dramatic effect on the body's systems and will impair people's ability to reach safety.

² This might include an LEA approved outdoor education centre, a centre in membership of the British Activity Holiday Association or the Institute for Outdoor Learning, or a centre holding the relevant licence from the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority. See Section 5 for contact details.

Do you intend your group to get into the water?

First consider whether entering the water is appropriate to the purpose of the visit, and what you expect your group to be doing in the water.

If you do plan to enter the water, your group must be able to get in and out easily. Find some gradually sloping land and check that the bank is not slippery, and that there is no deep mud or vegetation.

You also need to be sure there are no underwater hazards (such as rocks or roots which can trap feet, rusty cans or wire which can cut, or strong currents). The best way to check for hazards is to wade in using a strong stick for support and ensuring you have a colleague to assist you.



Remember that fast moving water above knee height is likely to knock people off their feet. Consider whether this is likely at your venue. You may need to move to Plan B.

Think about what could change

Your surroundings

Are there cliffs above you (could someone knock loose stones down) or below you (how close to the edge are you)? Is there livestock nearby (could it enter your work area)?

The weather

Get a weather forecast before you go and ensure you understand how it might affect your location and planned activity. Heavy or persistent rainfall can alter situations vastly – even when falling elsewhere. River banks will become slippery, and streams and rivers can rise quickly and flow faster. **You may need to move to Plan B (see opposite column).**



Tidal conditions

If you are working near the sea or an estuary, check tidal conditions with the coastguard, so you know when high tide is, how high it will reach, and whether there are any strong local currents. Could your work area be cut-off or submerged by a sudden wave or quick rise in the tide level? **The tide may advance more quickly than your group can retreat.** Also beware steeply shelving shingle beaches, where one step could take someone out of their depth.

Again you may need to move to Plan B.



Ask somebody with good local knowledge (perhaps the land or water owner) if there have been any changes to the area, or whether the local environment alters regularly.

Think about what to wear

In damp, cold weather wearing a few layers of clothing with waterproof trousers and jacket will help to keep your group warm and dry. Wellingtons or other waterproof boots may be a good idea – however remember that wellingtons can fill with water and make it difficult to reach safety. You should also take some spare clothing and towels with you. In warm weather sunscreen, baseball caps and long sleeves will protect your group from burning. Your group should keep footwear on at all times during the visit.

What's Plan B?

Plan B is an alternative – not an emergency procedure. You may need to change your plan for any number of reasons. Plan B might mean doing the same activity at a different location, or a different activity altogether. Be prepared to move to Plan B before or even during the activity. **You also need to pre-check your Plan B.**

If you visit a place regularly you might be able to identify *cut-off criteria*. These are signs that circumstances have changed such that you need to move to Plan B. Examples might include the river or tide having risen above a certain point. However, remember that visiting one venue once a year for ten years is ten days' experience – not ten years'.

3 Things to think about on the day

Tell people where you are

Make sure that somebody at your usual base knows where you are going, what you will be doing and when you expect to return. Also leave details of any alternative plans.

Brief the group

Although you have prepared your group and helpers in advance of the visit, you should also brief them on the day. Make sure that the group and the helpers know what they will be doing, and what is expected of them. Also let them know about any foreseeable hazards that you identified on the pre-visit. This will help you achieve your objectives and lessen the chance of something unexpected occurring.



Always get a local weather forecast on the day of your visit – and know how this will impact on your plans and location.

Review the situation

On arrival at your venue reconsider the key issues that were raised in your pre-visit. Has anything changed that means you should now switch to Plan B? You should review the situation continuously, as conditions may change at any point, meaning you have to change plans or cut short your visit.

If you need to change plans

Your group may well be disappointed if they cannot complete the activity that was originally planned, particularly if they or another group have enjoyed it before. A well-briefed group and a good Plan B can help to overcome this disappointment. If you move to Plan B be sure to notify your base of this.



*Just because you did it last year – does not mean that you have to do it this year!
Just because it was safe last year – does not mean it is safe this year!*

Group control

Behaviour

Agree the safety rules before the visit and stick to them. If you decided on your pre-visit that it was unsafe to enter the water, then have confidence in your decision and do not be pressured into changing it.

If you do enter water, keeping the group on task will help to ensure safety, as incidents are more likely to occur during unstructured activity. The group need to be aware that pushing, dragging or ducking others into water are unsafe and unacceptable practices.



Set physical boundaries beyond which the group should not venture. You might use fixed landscape features such as a wall, or place your own markers.

Supervision

Having small groups, each with its own leader, is often better than one large group with several leaders. Ideally there would be enough leaders so that the overall leader does not have their own group. Each group should appoint a *head counter* to check regularly that all members are present. If you are walking along a canal towpath, or any other narrow track near water, make sure that everyone present is aware of the dangers of such a restricted environment.



The prudent leader will often choose to get between the group and a potential hazard.

Changing

If your group need to change their clothing, normal sensitivity should ensure that neither you nor they are put in a vulnerable position. This issue should be covered in your child protection procedures.



3 Things to think about on the day (cont)

Health and hygiene

Water quality is important and can be affected by a number of factors such as rainfall or hot weather. Bacteria may derive from chemicals, sewage, dead animals or other causes. Have a look round for any obvious signs such as cloudiness in the water, or froth on the surface.

Make sure your group wash their hands before eating, and if appropriate shower upon return. If any members of your group fall ill following the visit advise them to tell their GP where they've been and what you were doing.

Ensure that the group have sufficient food and drink for the visit. In hot weather it is particularly important to drink water to avoid dehydration.

First aid and incidents

The group leader should have a good working knowledge of first aid and ensure that an adequate first aid box is taken. Any wounds should be cleaned and covered quickly.

Emergency procedures are an essential part of planning a visit. Ensure that you know where the nearest hospital is and that you can gain assistance if needed. Remember that mobile telephones may not work in remote areas.

If you have been trained, and are currently practised in the use of throwlines, you may wish to take one with you. However, remember that taking a throwline is **not** a reason to take a risk. Using Plan B is preferable to using a throwline.



Record any incident which may have given you cause for concern. This will help you to understand how and why it happened and how to avoid it in the future.

4 In the long term

The more often you visit a venue, the more confident you will become – but beware complacency! It is still important to check the venue before each visit, as things could have changed since your last visit. You could also do a number of things to develop your own skills and those of others:

Plans C, D and E

Visit more venues so that you have a range of alternative plans. This will also help you to develop your understanding of the outdoor environment and the weather.

Plan for succession

You could maintain and develop your own skills by asking for training, and assisting on visits led by more experienced people. You could also help others to develop by asking them to assist on your visits.



5 Further information

Purpose and content of visit

There are a number of individuals and organisations that can provide resources to help you plan a productive visit. LEA Outdoor Education Advisers and Educational Visit Co-ordinators have already been mentioned. Other helpful contacts include:

Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres

C/o NAHT, 1 Heath Square,
Boltro Road, Haywards Heath,
West Sussex RH16 1BL.
01444 472476

British Activity Holiday Association

Orchard Cottage, 22 Green Lane,
Hersham, Walton on Thames KY12 5HD.
01932 252994
www.baha.org.uk

Field Studies Council

Montford Bridge, Preston Montford,
Shrewsbury, Shropshire SY4 1HW.
01743 852100
www.field-studies-council.org

Institute for Outdoor Learning

Plumpton Old Hall,
Plumpton, Penrith,
Cumbria CA11 9NP.
01768 885800
www.outdoor-learning.org

National Association of Field Studies Officers

Stibbington Centre, Stibbington,
Peterborough, Cambridgeshire
PE8 6LP.
01780 782386
www.nafso.org.uk

5 Further information (cont)

Relevant qualifications

If you enjoy leading outdoor visits then you should consider further training or gaining a relevant qualification. The organisations below all provide qualifications which will help you develop your skills in this area.

British Canoe Union

Adbolton Lane, West Bridgford,
Nottingham NG2 5AS
0115 982 1100
www.bcu.org.uk

British Sports Trust

Clyde House, 10 Milburn Avenue,
Oldbrook, Milton Keynes MK6 2WA.
01908 689180
www.bst.org.uk

Mountain Leader Training UK

Siabod Cottage,
Capel Curig LL24 0ET.
01690 720272
www.ukmtb.org

Lifesavers The Royal Life Saving Society UK

River House, High Street,
Broom, Warwickshire B50 4HN.
01789 773994
www.lifesavers.org.uk

OCR Examinations Board

Progress House, Westwood Way,
Coventry CV4 8HS.
02476 470033
www.ocr.org.uk
(OCR provide a Level 3 Certificate
in Off-Site Safety Management)

Royal Yachting Association

RYA House, Ensign Way, Hamble,
Southampton SO31 4YA.
0845 345 0400
www.rya.org.uk

Safety information

The DfES good practice guide *Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits* (and its three part supplement) is a key reference point for information on organising and leading visits safely and can be downloaded at www.teachernet.gov.uk/visits

Further safety information is also available from the following sources:

Adventure Activities Licensing Authority

17 Lambourne Crescent, Cardiff Business
Park, Llanishen, Cardiff CF14 5GF.
029 2075 5715
www.aala.org.uk

British Association of Advisers and Lecturers in Physical Education

Sports Development Centre,
Loughborough University,
Loughborough, Leics LE11 3TU.
01509 228378
xxxxxx@xxxxx.xx.xx

The Environment Agency

Rio House, Waterside Drive, Aztec West,
Almondsbury, Bristol BS32 4UD.
01454 624400
www.environment-agency.gov.uk

Health and Safety Executive Information Services

Caerphilly Business Park,
Caerphilly CF83 3GG.
08701 545500
www.hse.gov.uk
(the HSE provides a free document
entitled *5 steps to risk assessment*)

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Spring Place, 105 Commercial Road,
Southampton SO15 1EG.
02380 329100 or 0870 600 6505
(24hr information line)
www.mcga.gov.uk

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

83 Piccadilly, London W1J 8QA.
020 7509 5555
www.nc.uk.net/safeswimming/

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution

West Quay Road, Poole,
Dorset BH15 1HZ.
0800 328 0600
www.lifeboats.org.uk

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents

Edgbaston Park, 353 Bristol Road,
Birmingham B5 7ST.
0121 248 2000
www.rosa.com

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