

Managing Open Water Risk in Education Settings



Understand how open water risk
should be recognised and reviewed



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Open water risks can arise in any event

This guide is not a drowning prevention strategy. It is an education-sector risk management guide that helps organisations operationalise relevant open water strategy themes through governance, planning, supervision, education, communication, collaboration and organisational learning.

Open water includes any outdoor body of water where learners may be exposed to hazards not normally present in a supervised swimming pool environment.

Open water environments offer valuable opportunities for outdoor learning, recreation and personal development. Field trips, coastal visits, pond dipping, ecology work, outdoor learning, residential activities and water sports can help children build confidence, curiosity, resilience and practical life skills. The purpose of this guide is not to discourage these activities but to help organisations plan them well, recognise where water risk can arise and know when to draw on more specialist guidance.

The challenge for schools, youth groups and education authorities is that open water risk does not only exist when swimming activities or water sports are planned. Exposure can arise during a walk beside a canal, a break near a lake, a geography visit to a river, a warm-weather trip to a public park, or a residential activity where young people have access to water outside the formal programme. Incidents may develop quickly and the consequences can be severe, including drowning, hypoxic brain injury, trauma, psychological harm, regulatory scrutiny and civil claims.

A good approach starts with a simple question: where could a child or young person encounter water, either intentionally or unintentionally, and what should the organisation reasonably do about it before, during and after the activity?

The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy 2026-2030, published by the National Water Safety Forum, provides a helpful strategic context for this guidance. Its ambition of “Towards zero drownings” is supported by four broad enablers: data and evidence, education, communication, and policy collaboration. Those themes align closely with the approach in this document: recognising foreseeable risk, educating young people, communicating consistent safety messages, working with relevant partners and learning from incidents and near misses.

The purpose of the guidance

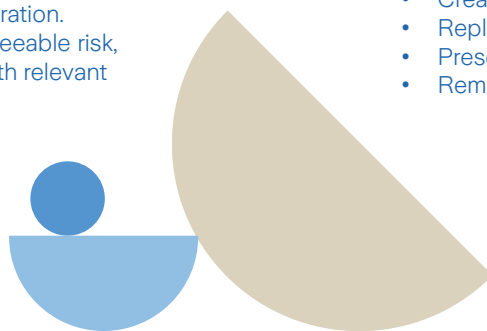
This guide is written primarily for organisations operating in England. Organisations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should apply the relevant legislation, government guidance, national drowning prevention strategy and educational visit arrangements for their jurisdiction. Organisations planning overseas visits should also obtain appropriate local and competent advice. It is not intended to replace the range of authoritative guidance covering educational visits, outdoor learning, health and safety management, swimming, water safety and water-based activities. Instead, the guide should be used to understand how those sources can inform how open water risk can be considered within an organisation's wider governance and visit planning arrangements.

This guide will help readers to

- Recognise where open water exposure may arise, including unplanned or incidental exposure.
- Ask clear governance, planning, supervision, emergency and evidence questions.
- Understand how risk management evidence may support assurance and claims defensibility.
- Signpost to established public and specialist guidance.

This guide does not

- Create a new operational standard or activity code.
- Replace authoritative water safety, educational visit, provider or legal guidance.
- Prescribe rescue techniques, supervision ratios, lifeguarding practice or activity specific procedures.
- Remove the need for competent advice, provider due diligence or legal advice where needed.



Who is this guidance for?

The primary user is someone with overall responsibility for the way an organisation manages educational visits, outdoor learning or supervised activities. This may be a senior school leader, academy trust lead, local authority officer, Educational Visits Coordinator (EVC), safeguarding lead, risk manager or health and safety lead.

Event organisers and trip leaders can also use the guide, particularly the planning prompts in Appendix A, alongside their organisation’s own policy and the relevant source guidance for the activity. In practice, the senior leader sets the governance framework, while the organiser applies that framework to a specific visit or activity.

Organisations may also wish to use this guidance alongside the relevant national drowning prevention strategy for their jurisdiction and any local water safety partnership arrangements. These sources can provide useful context on local water risks, partnership activity, seasonal trends and community-level prevention work.

Reader	How to use this document
Senior leaders and accountable leads	Use Sections 1 to 5 to test whether open water risk is recognised within governance, policy, approval, assurance and learning arrangements. Use the question-based framework in Section 5 to challenge whether responsibilities, escalation routes and review arrangements are clear.
Educational Visits Coordinators, health and safety leads and safeguarding leads	Use Sections 5 to 8 to help staff identify when open water exposure may arise, when source guidance or competent advice is required, and how supervision, briefing, provider assurance and emergency planning should be considered.
Event organisers and trip leaders	Use the practical pathway in Section 6, the hazard themes in Section 7 and the checklist in Appendix A as planning prompts for the specific visit, venue, activity and participant group. These prompts should sit alongside the organisation’s own procedures and relevant authoritative guidance.
Risk and insurance managers	Use Sections 10 and 11 to understand the evidence, learning and liability themes that may support defensible decision-making, while maintaining the primary focus on preventing harm.

Effective risk management requires everyone to contribute



Incidents, near misses, behavioural issues and changes in local conditions should inform future planning. Sharing learnings and being open about near misses can help prevent future incidents.

Core Principles for managing open water risk

An effective approach does not rely on a long generic form. It relies on a clear line of thought that starts with the activity and follows through to delivery and learning. The principles below provide a practical way to structure that thinking without creating a new technical standard.

1

Look beyond the planned activity

Ask whether water entry is planned, possible, incidental or prohibited. A trip that is not "about water" can still create water exposure if pupils pass a canal, stop near a river, visit a public park with a lake or have free time near a beach.

2

Treat behaviour as part of the risk assessment

Children and young people may act impulsively, particularly in warm weather or in peer groups. Supervision, boundaries, briefings and route choices should reflect foreseeable behaviour, not just the written activity plan.

3

Use authoritative guidance for technical controls

Where specialist water safety, swimming, rescue, lifeguarding or activity-specific controls are required, readers should consult relevant bodies and competent providers rather than relying on a general insurance guidance note.

4

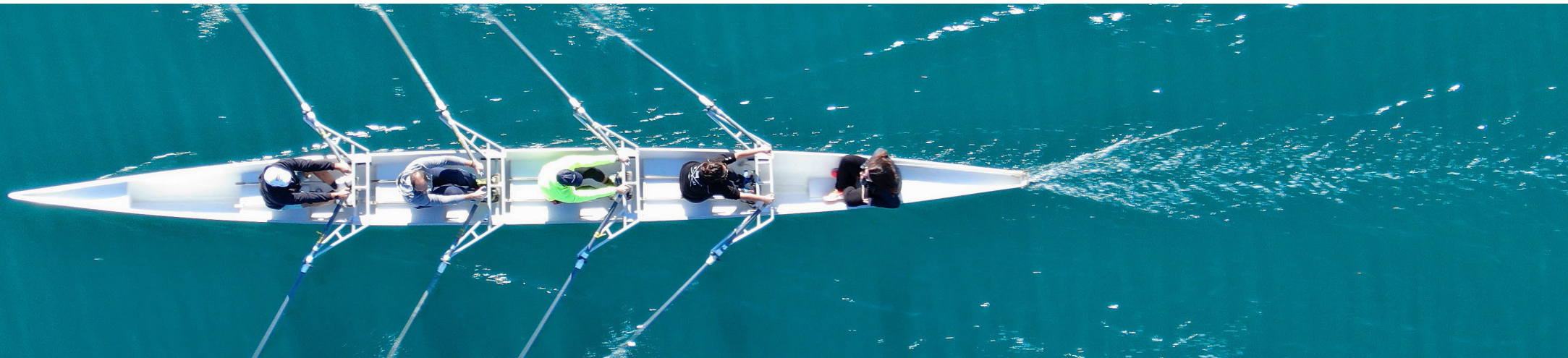
Plan emergency arrangements before they are needed

A good emergency plan should make clear how help will be summoned, how the wider group will be protected, how emergency services will access the location and how first aid and post-incident care will be managed.

5

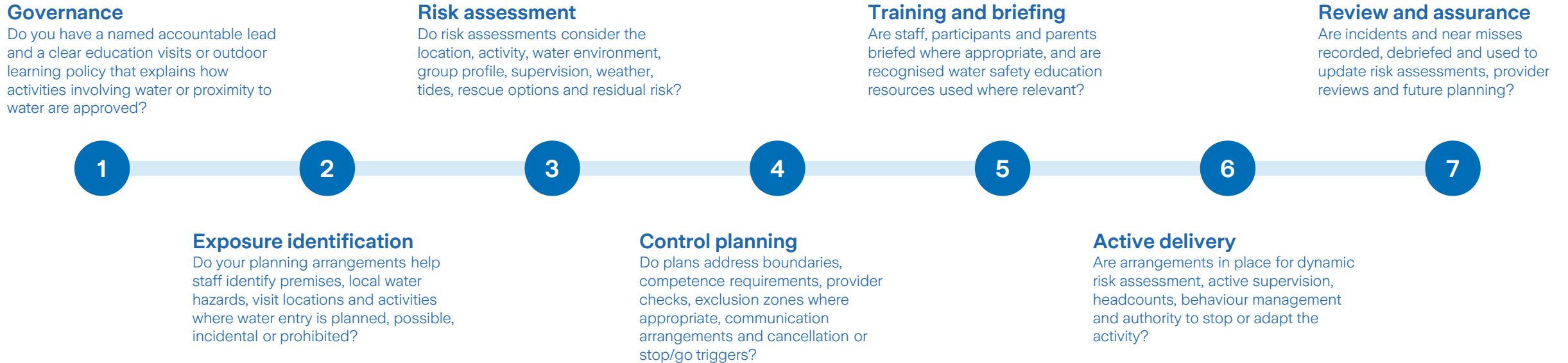
Record and learn proportionately

Documentation should show that the organisation considered the real risk, made reasoned decisions, briefed people appropriately and learned from incidents or near misses.



Governance framework for senior leaders

This section gives senior leaders a simple governance model. It should be used as an illustrative framework, not as a new minimum standard. The good-practice considerations have been framed as questions to help readers test whether their existing arrangements address the relevant governance issues.



Collaboration and local water safety partnerships

Open water risk management is often most effective when organisations work collaboratively with local authorities, emergency services, landowners, water operators, educational visit advisers, governing bodies and local water safety partnerships. Local partnerships can provide insight into site-specific hazards, incident trends, seasonal risks and emerging concerns that may not be evident from national guidance alone.

Practical planning pathway for visits and activities

This pathway can be used as a practical prompt when planning activities where open water is present or could be encountered. It should be adapted to the nature of the organisation, the participants and the activity. Use the prompts and questions to consider the risks rather than as a prescriptive standard.

Quick planning prompts:

- Where is the water and how might children reach it?
- What could change on the day?
- Who is competent to advise, approve and supervise?
- Which authoritative guidance applies?
- What would the organisation do if someone entered the water unexpectedly?
- What needs to be recorded and learned?

1. Define the activity and the exposure

Start by describing the actual position. Is water entry intended, possible, incidental or prohibited? Will participants be undertaking water sports, walking near water, conducting fieldwork, taking a break near water, or staying at a site with access to ponds, lakes, rivers or coastal areas?

2. Understand the environment

Consider the type of water environment, access points, edges, banks, depth, currents, tides, locks, weirs, quarries, reservoirs, water quality, public access, weather and emergency access. Conditions may change between planning and delivery, so the assessment should not be treated as static.

3. Consider the participant group

Age, confidence, swimming ability, behaviour, Special Educational Needs Disabilities (SEND), medical needs, language, prior experience, group dynamics and the likelihood of risk-taking behaviour can all affect the suitability of arrangements.

4. Identify the right source guidance*

Before selecting controls, identify which guidance or competent advice applies. This may include DfE, HSE, OEAP, RLSS UK, RNLI, Swim England, National Governing Bodies, local authority guidance, venue information or provider procedures.

* Please see Appendix B for full source definitions

5. Decide how the activity will be supervised and controlled

Think about boundaries, sightlines, headcounts, transitions, lunch stops, free time, route choices, staff positioning, provider interfaces and how changes in conditions or behaviour will be managed.

6. Plan the emergency response

Confirm how the alarm will be raised, who will contact emergency services, how the wider group will be supervised, where emergency services will access the site, what first aid is available and what information will be handed over.

7. Review after the event

Completing an activity without an incident does not necessarily mean that the arrangements were fully effective. Behavioural concerns, near misses, unexpected access to water, weak supervision points or unclear provider interfaces should feed into future planning.

Inadvertent or unauthorised water entry

Where groups may be near the water's edge and water entry is not intended, organisers should consider how boundaries, supervision arrangements and positioning will prevent inadvertent or unauthorised access to the water, taking account of local conditions such as waves, tides, unstable footing and changing environmental conditions.

Overseas visits and unfamiliar water environments

Overseas visits should consider local environmental conditions, emergency response arrangements, language barriers, local safety information, lifeguard provision and variations in water safety practices. Differences in warning systems, emergency numbers, rescue arrangements, tidal behaviour and coastal conditions should be considered as part of visit planning and provider due diligence.

Common hazard themes and where to go for detailed guidance

Each open water location has its own risk profile. A pond in school grounds is different from a canal towpath, a reservoir, a quarry, a tidal beach or a river crossing. The purpose of this section is to set out common hazard themes that should prompt further consideration and signposting.

Cold water shock is a key example of why open water can be misleading. Warm weather can make water look inviting, while the water itself may still be cold enough to affect breathing and movement. Similarly, rivers, locks, weirs and tides may create forces that are not obvious to children, young people or inexperienced adults. Hidden depth, submerged objects, unstable banks and poor water quality can also turn apparently calm water into a serious hazard.

Hazard theme	Why it matters	Example considerations	Likely source guidance
Cold water shock	Sudden immersion can affect breathing, judgement and ability to self-rescue.	Brief participants on sudden immersion; consider rules on water entry and jumping; plan warming and emergency arrangements appropriate to the activity.	RNLI Float to Live, RLSS UK resources, provider/National Governing Body (NGB) guidance.
Currents, locks, weirs and flow	Moving water and hydraulic features can overpower or trap people.	Assess proximity to high-flow locations; use local/operator advice; consider exclusion zones and route alternatives.	OEAP, local authority/operator guidance, provider/NGB guidance.
Tides, waves and rip currents	Coastal conditions may change quickly and create cut-off or sweep-away risk.	Check tide and beach information; consider lifeguarded locations where swimming is planned; manage access points and transitions.	RNLI, local beach/harbour authority, tide information, OEAP.
Water edge access where entry is not intended	Groups may inadvertently or deliberately approach water even where swimming is not part of the activity.	Consider boundaries, supervision arrangements and positioning to prevent inadvertent or unauthorised water access, taking account of waves, tides, unstable footing and changing environmental conditions.	DfE/OEAP visit planning, site risk information, local authority or venue advice.
Hidden depth and underwater hazards	Depth, silt, weeds, debris and sudden shelves may not be visible.	Consider unauthorised entry, jumping, object retrieval and visibility; seek venue or landowner information.	RLSS UK, venue/landowner advice, provider guidance.
Edges, slips and unstable banks	A fall into water may occur even where water entry is not planned.	Consider route selection, safe standing areas, boundaries, headcounts and staff positioning near water margins.	DfE/OEAP visit planning, site risk information.
Water quality	Open water may contain algae, sewage, leptospirosis or other contamination.	Check warnings and water quality information; consider hygiene arrangements and alternative activities where required.	Local authority/environmental information, venue/provider guidance.
Behaviour and hot weather	Peer influence and heat may increase unauthorised entry or risk-taking.	Set clear expectations; brief on water-related risks; supervise breaks, rest periods and informal activities near water.	RLSS UK/RNLI education resources, school behaviour and safeguarding procedures.
Supervision limitations	Drowning can occur silently and quickly; adult presence alone is insufficient.	Consider sightlines, role allocation, participant accountability, headcounts and stop/go authority.	DfE/OEAP guidance, provider/NGB guidance, organisational policy.
Overseas and unfamiliar environments	Different countries and venues may use different warnings, emergency numbers, lifeguard models and rescue arrangements.	Consider language barriers, unfamiliar tides or coastal conditions, local safety information, lifeguard provision and emergency response arrangements.	Local authorities, providers, tour operators, emergency guidance and competent travel/visit advice.

Delivery, supervision and emergency preparedness

The delivery phase is where a good plan is tested. Conditions may be different on arrival, the group may behave differently from expected, or a provider may alter the activity. Leaders should therefore keep the plan live rather than treating approval as the end of the process.

Supervision should be considered in practical terms.

- Who can see the water?
- Who is managing the group?
- Who is positioned at transition points?
- How will staff maintain headcounts?
- What happens during lunch, toilet breaks, photographs or informal moments?

These are often the points where written plans are most vulnerable.

Emergency arrangements should be realistic and location-specific. This guide should not be used as rescue instruction. Detailed emergency procedures and rescue techniques should come from trained providers, recognised water safety bodies and competent advisers. However, organisations should still be able to explain how they will raise the alarm, protect the wider group, contact emergency services and support first aid and handover.

Emergency preparedness should address:

- How the emergency will be recognised and the alarm raised.
- Who will call 999 or 112, or the relevant local emergency number, and what location information they will provide.
- How the wider group will be moved away from danger and supervised.
- How emergency services will access the location.
- What first aid capability is available.
- How parents, leaders, insurers and relevant authorities will be informed.
- How the event will be recorded, reviewed and learned from.

For overseas or unfamiliar locations, this planning should also consider how local emergency numbers, warning systems, lifeguard provision, language barriers and rescue arrangements differ from those normally expected in the UK.

Education, communication and seasonal risk

Water safety education is an important preventive control. Schools and youth organisations should align messaging with recognised national resources rather than creating isolated local messages. RLSS UK, RNLI and Swim England all provide resources that can help children and young people understand water risk, including what to do if they get into difficulty.

The UK Drowning Prevention Strategy identifies education as one of the principal foundations of drowning prevention. Water safety education should therefore be viewed not simply as a supporting activity, but as a primary preventive control that helps young people understand hazards, make informed decisions and enjoy water safely.

Effective communication is also central to prevention. Consistent messages delivered through schools, youth organisations, parents, local authorities, national campaigns and providers can reinforce safe behaviours before exposure occurs and reduce the risk of conflicting local messages.

Warm weather deserves specific attention. It can change behaviour even when the activity itself has not changed. A school visit to a park, river, beach or residential centre may become higher risk if pupils are hot, tired, excited or tempted to enter water informally. Seasonal communications to pupils, parents and staff can help reinforce expectations before summer trips, school holidays and heatwave periods.

Climate change and more frequent periods of extreme weather may influence exposure patterns, recreational behaviour and water use. Organisations should remain alert to emerging seasonal risks and adapt planning assumptions where conditions differ from historical norms.



Evidence, learning and claims defensibility

The best reason to keep good records is to improve safety. The same records can also help an organisation explain its decisions if an incident later leads to a complaint, claim or regulatory enquiry. The emphasis should remain on protecting children. Claims defensibility follows from clear thinking, proportionate action and evidence that the plan was implemented in practice.

Incident reporting, near-miss reporting and local learning reviews also contribute to a wider evidence base. This can help organisations identify patterns of exposure, understand where controls are under pressure and improve future prevention activity.

Useful records might include the activity plan, risk assessment, provider checks, approval notes, participant and parent communications, staff briefing records, dynamic changes made on the day, headcount arrangements, incident notes, witness details and post-event learning. The level of detail should be proportionate, but for activities involving open water the organisation should be able to show that foreseeable exposure was recognised and considered.

Stage	Examples of helpful evidence
Before	Activity plan, route/location review, source guidance consulted, provider checks, approval and briefing records.
During	Staff deployment, headcounts, changes due to conditions, behavioural issues and stop/go decisions.
Emergency	Timeline, emergency calls, first aid, handover, witness details and communications.
After	Debrief notes, learning review, corrective actions, policy updates and insurer/legal notifications where required.



Legal liability considerations

Open water incidents can give rise to civil claims, regulatory scrutiny and reputational consequences.

The central questions are often whether the risk was foreseeable, whether the organisation had a suitable system, whether competent people were involved, whether the activity was supervised appropriately and whether emergency arrangements were realistic.

Relevant legal and regulatory themes may include duty of care, health and safety duties to non-employees, suitable and sufficient risk assessment, educational visit governance, occupiers' liability where premises or water margins are controlled, safeguarding responsibilities and organisational oversight following serious or fatal incidents. The purpose of including these themes is to support governance awareness, not to provide legal advice.

Organisations should seek appropriate legal advice in relation to specific incidents, claims, regulatory enquiries, contractual arrangements or questions about legal duties in a particular jurisdiction.



Important Notice:

This section explains why open water risk merits senior attention. It is provided for general information only and does not constitute legal advice.



Appendix A:

Practical open water planning checklist

This checklist is an aide-memoire only and should be adapted to the organisation, activity, location, participant group and authoritative guidance.

Question	Response / evidence		
Has the location been checked for open water hazards?	Yes	No	Evidence
Is water entry planned, possible, incidental or prohibited?	Yes	No	Evidence
Have both planned and reasonably foreseeable unplanned interactions with open water been considered?	Yes	No	Evidence
Where water entry is not intended, have boundaries, supervision arrangements and positioning been considered to prevent inadvertent or unauthorised access?	Yes	No	Evidence
Has a site-specific risk assessment been completed and reviewed?	Yes	No	Evidence
Have weather, tides, currents, water levels and local warnings been checked?	Yes	No	Evidence
For overseas visits, have local emergency numbers, warning systems, language barriers, lifeguard provision and local safety information been considered?	Yes	No	Evidence
Are pupil age, behaviour, experience, SEND, medical needs and swimming competency considered?	Yes	No	Evidence
Which authoritative guidance or competent advice applies?	Yes	No	Evidence
Are supervision roles allocated and understood?	Yes	No	Evidence
Are boundaries, exclusion zones and headcount points defined?	Yes	No	Evidence
Has the external provider been checked for competence, safety standards and insurance?	Yes	No	Evidence
Have emergency arrangements been considered for the location and activity?	Yes	No	Evidence
Is there a stop, move, delay or cancel trigger if conditions change?	Yes	No	Evidence

Appendix B:

Source guidance and further reading

Readers should consult current source guidance for their activity, location and jurisdiction. The following sources informed this guide and should be checked to confirm currency and preferred wording before use.

Page 7; Identify the right source guidance:

Department for Education (DfE)
Health and Safety Executive (HSE)
Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel (OEAP)
Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK)
Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI)

No.	Source body	Theme	Weblink
1	National Water Safety Forum	UK Drowning Prevention Strategy 2026-2030	Strategy National Water Safety Forum
2	Department for Education	Health and safety on educational visits	Health and safety on educational visits - GOV.UK
3	Department for Education	Health and safety: responsibilities and duties for schools	Health and safety: responsibilities and duties for schools - GOV.UK
4	Health and Safety Executive	Sensible health and safety management in schools	Sensible health and safety management in schools - HSE
5	Health and Safety Executive	Managing risks and risk assessment at work	Managing risks and risk assessment at work: Overview - HSE
6	Health and Safety Executive	School trips and outdoor learning	School trips - HSE
7	Outdoor Education Advisers Panel	National Guidance for outdoor learning, educational visits and adventurous activities	National Guidance
8	RLSS UK	Water Safety Education Resources for Schools	Water Safety Education Resources for Schools
9	RLSS UK	Water Safety Advice	Water Safety Advice
10	RLSS UK / NWSMP	Water Safety Management in Education	Water Safety Management in Education - NWSMP by Eureka!
11	RNLI	Education resources for young people	RNLI Education Resources For Young People
12	RNLI	Float to Live	Float To Live – What To Do If You Fall In Water
13	Swim England	Primary school swimming and the national curriculum	Primary school swimming and the national curriculum
14	Swim England	Water Safety Code and RSHE guidance	The Water Safety Code will now be part of the DfE RSHE guidance
15	Legislation.gov.uk	Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, section 3	Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974
16	Legislation.gov.uk	Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, regulation 3	The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
17	Legislation.gov.uk	Occupiers' Liability Act 1957, section 2	Occupiers' Liability Act 1957
18	Legislation.gov.uk	Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007	Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007

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Zurich Resilience Solutions UK
Risk Support Services
6th Floor, The Colmore Building
20 Colmore Circus, Queensway
Birmingham
B4 6AT

For further information about any of the topics mentioned in this document please speak to your local Zurich contact, or email Zurich Resilience Solutions at zrs.enquiries@uk.zurich.com or alternatively call this number +44 (0) 121 697 9131

For more information, please visit <https://www.uk.zurichresilience.com>
Zurich Management Services Limited, Registered in England and Wales no. 2741053, Registered Office:
The Zurich Centre, 3000 Parkway, Whiteley, Fareham, Hampshire PO15 7JZ

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