

Organised Open Water Swimming Events

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Good practice guidance and solutions to those planning open water swimming events.



Organised Open Water Swimming Events



Introduction

The number of people taking part in open water swimming is increasing, according to research from the Sport England Active Lives survey. The benefits of open water swimming are vast with participants often describing the experience as exhilarating or liberating. Participation in open water swimming can be excellent for an individual's physical and mental wellbeing, their general fitness, and provides an opportunity for socialisation. What's more, it's often free at the point of entry!

Open water swimming encompasses many differing bodies of water from coastal to inland be that linear waters such as streams or canals, enclosed waters such as lakes, quarries, or reservoirs, and transitional waters such as harbours or marinas.

Open water swimming is vastly different from the typically warm and controlled environment enjoyed within swimming pools, which is why those considering running open water swimming events must take precautions to ensure a well-organised safe event.

Open water swimming events can vary from community-based groups meeting for non-competitive open water swimming, swimming club events and classes, charitable events such as 'New Year's Day dips' through to competitive sporting events. The latter will typically have rules and detailed guidance provided by the governing body. For other organised open water swimming events there are practical steps that can be taken by organisers to reduce the risk of injury or ill-health to participants and others involved.



Management and Planning

Event Organiser

Whilst hugely beneficial, open water swimming is not without risk. All open water swimming events, irrespective of participant numbers must be carefully planned and executed by a competent event organiser who has relevant experience of the watercourse and event.

As an event organiser you are the person with the prime responsibility for ensuring the overall safety of the event is maintained so far as is reasonably practicable. This duty extends to all elements of the event. It requires, including but not limited to for you to have robust health and safety arrangements, ensure co-operation and proper co-ordination of all activities, provide appropriate information, ensure competency, monitor health and safety, and regularly review the health and safety arrangements.

When considering the significant variants associated with open water swimming events, it is essential that the event organiser has the appropriate knowledge, skills, and relevant experience to enable them to successfully prepare, organise and host the event. For more complex open water swimming events, for example those likely to attract higher participant numbers, it may be appropriate and necessary for the event organiser to employ specialist safety professionals to support them.

Insurance

LOSS PREVENTION STANDARDS

Event organisers and owners who provide venues for open water swimming events may require specific insurance arrangements. They may need to seek advice from their insurance broker.

Event Safety Management Plan

An event organiser is responsible for developing an event safety management plan. This document should contain an overview of the event for example where, when, who, what, timescales (1-off event/regular). It will detail specific roles and responsibilities, it will identify the risks and how they're controlled, and document emergency arrangements etc.

For an open water swimming events the event organiser will inevitably involve and seek input from others in the creation of the event safety management plan. Who they need to collaborate with will depend on the location and scale of the event and may involve inhouse staff and colleagues. It may necessitate involving external parties such as the landowner, agencies such as King's Harbour Master and/or His Majesty's Coastguard, and those providing safety cover. It may be necessary to collaborate with others who use the watercourse, and for large scale open water events the local authority may also need to be informed.

The level of detail in the plan should be proportionate to the scale of the event and the degree of risk and to establish the latter, a risk assessment must be completed.

Risk Assessment

A risk assessment must be conducted in advance of the open water swimming event. The risk assessment must be suitable and sufficient with all significant findings documented. The process of completing the risk assessment enables the event organiser to identify risks and introduce control measures to reduce the risks so far as is reasonably practicable. The risk assessment must be completed by person(s) with the appropriate competency.

Aspects to consider within the risk assessment may include:

- Location based hazards e.g., access and egress of swimmers, waterborne vessels, physical structures including weirs, jetties or locks, prevailing weather, other venue users.
- Water based hazards e.g., pollution hazards, currents, tides, vegetation, water temperature
- Participant based hazards e.g., fatigued swimmer, drugs and alcohol, undisclosed medical illness, capability

The risk assessment **must extend to all elements of the event and critically doesn't just happen in advance of the event, it's an evolving document** that needs to be revisited during the planning and preparation phase of the event, and during; the latter often achieved via dynamic risk assessment.

Where third parties are providing support to an open water swimming event the event organiser should obtain and review their risk assessments and method statements. They must also check their insurance provision.

Dynamic Risk Assessment

Open water swimming presents an ever-changing environment meaning risks that weren't foreseeable during the risk assessment may develop during the event itself, examples being a sudden pollution incident or a squall, presence of vessels, other members of the public in public areas, unforeseen emergency situations. The event organiser or the designated event safety coordinator should be trained in how to dynamically risk assess and be empowered and confident to stop the event should a risk emerge during the event itself.

Communication Plan

The event organiser will need to ensure regular and timely communication with relevant stakeholders before, during and after the event. The event organiser should detail a communication plan within the event safety management plan and detail how they intend to communicate details such as:

- Event plan content
- Risks and the control measures
- Safety briefing for participants which must include details of the event/course, the safety arrangements, and action swimmers must take should they get into difficulty.

The event organiser should establish methods for effective communication during the event noting there may be a need to communicate water-to-water, water-to-land, and land-to-water.

The event organiser must consider their audience when establishing their communication plan, ensuring information is purveyed in a clear and understandable manner.

Safety Cover

The event organiser must make appropriate arrangements for competent safety cover to be available throughout the event. The level of safety cover will be influenced by several factors including the watercourse, the prevailing conditions, the number of participants, the ability of the participants, the swimmers clothing e.g., wetsuits, the course. The greater the risk, the greater the safety cover resource that will be required.

The event organiser will need to establish the types of safety cover required for example shore-based and/or water-based cover, including paddle and/or powered craft. The latter, whilst appropriate for certain events may have limitations and by the virtue of their power may introduce additional risks to swimmers.

The event organiser will need to take steps to assure themselves that the safety cover provision is competent and experienced relative to the watercourse. They will need to work in collaboration to establish aspects such as access points for safety cover craft, sighting points for shore-based safety personnel, provision of lifesaving equipment etc. noting there should never be sole reliance on public life-saving equipment.

Accounting for all swimmers is fundamental. In the simplest form this will be counting swimmers in/out of the water. The event organiser should establish methods for identifying swimmers who leave the event early or those who are removed from the water via safety cover. A full register with emergency contacts for the participants should be available for each event.

LOSS PREVENTION STANDARDS

Emergencies

Each open water swimming event should have a formal Emergency Action Plan. This should detail how foreseeable incidents will be managed e.g., tired swimmers, or swimmers who suffer medical events.

Basic first aid must be available at all events with enhanced provisions available at events that present an enhanced risk. The event organiser must establish what provisions are appropriate. Specific to the location the event organiser should identify shore landing points, methods of communication with emergency services, and transfer arrangements etc. **For open water swimming events in more remote locations consider the use of 'what3words' to assist in pinpointing exact locations.**

Medical declarations and next of kin information should be available throughout the event.

Location and watercourse

To help inform the risk assessment it is essential that the event organiser is familiar with the event location and the watercourse. Depending on the location of the open water swimming event, permission from the landowner may be necessary. In addition to inspections on the day of the event, visiting the location and liaising with those with knowledge of the area such as the venue owner, or the local lifeguard club may provide greater insight.

Land-Based

Specific to the location, land-based considerations should extend to:

- Access and egress points for swimmers, safety cover and emergency services
- Sighting points for land-based safety cover
- Sufficient space for safety cover equipment e.g., craft launch trailers
- Sufficient space for participants personal belongings
- Transfer point(s) for landing casualties
- Provision for facilities for enhanced medical support (if provided) and general shelter for swimmers
- Welfare facilities for swimmers, pre - and post-event
- Sufficient briefing area for swimmers, noting critical information will be provided during the brief so it is important that all swimmers can hear the information

Water-Based

The type of watercourse the open water swimming takes place in will influence the risks presented for example, reservoirs and quarries are typically colder and often are of an unknown depth, within rivers and lakes there may be an enhanced pollution risk particularly from agricultural run-off, and coastal swimming presents tidal factors and external influencing factors such other water users including powered craft.

The risk assessment should consider all foreseeable risks including.

- Within the water
 - Top-load hazards – objects on the water surface e.g., logs, watercraft
 - Suspended hazards – algae, seaweed, semi-submerged objects
 - Bottom load hazards – entrapment hazards that may snag or injure a swimmer e.g., discarded shopping trolleys
 - Dissolved hazards – **pollutants that aren't visible be that viral, bacterial, or chemical. Of specific relevance is Blue-Green Algae, faecal pollution, Leptospirosis**
 - Temperature - immersion in cold waters below 16-degrees C can be particularly hazardous. Remembering the water below the surface layer may be significantly colder. See appendix 2 for information about Cold Water Shock
- Manmade hazards e.g., weirs, locks, water whirlpools associated with water drainage
- External influences such as tidal flows, or wake from vessels, vegetation, other water users

Weather-hazards

On the day of the open water swimming event, it's critical to assess weather-related hazards. Not only will these have a direct impact on the event itself e.g., wind, rain, visibility, air temperature but the weather leading up to the event may well have impacted the location since the original assessment. For example, a storm may change a gradually sloped coast into a steeply shelved coast which may impact the planned entry/exit points for swimmer, or heavy rain may disturb riverbanks originally intended as a point for casualty extraction. The event organiser must establish who will monitor the weather-related forecasts.

Swim-route

Open water swimming events can range from a quick dip, through to a structured swim course. The event organiser must establish the route, marking it as necessary and provide a clear brief for all swimmers relating to the route and if there is anything particular of note e.g., stronger currents, navigational markers in the water, or obstructions.

People

Whilst overall responsibility for a safe event remains with the event organiser, swimmers participating in open water swimming have some degree of responsibility for their own safety. To aide participants understand their responsibility, information should be provided to them in the lead-up to the event e.g., the risks, their physical fitness and mental wellbeing, drugs and alcohol, medical conditions. This is in addition to the safety briefing held on the day.

Participants ability to recognise risks may either be over or underestimated and therefore it is important to make all participants aware of the risks associated with open water swimming. Certain groups, for example young persons under the age of 18 may require a greater degree of support and education to help them fully understand the risk associated with participation in open water swimming. Parental consent should be obtained for participants under the age of 18.

LOSS PREVENTION STANDARDS

As an event organiser it's important to recognise that participants will potentially have individual factors that will impact the level of risk open water swimming presents for example their age, fitness, underlying medical conditions, habituated vs inexperienced, natural buoyancy, clothing e.g., use of wetsuits/swim caps, swimmers with additional needs. Event organisers must ensure they are aware of these factors and use the information to help inform their overall management of the event.

Other people-related factors to consider when planning an open water swimming event will extend to the number of participants. Not only will this information support in establishing suitable levels of safety cover, but it can also be used to predict risk factors such as separated swimmers / crowding. Larger groups of participants may necessitate interval swimming where groups of swimmers set off at differing times, typically based on their ability. This process is an effective method at minimising crowding but may have implications on the overall timing of the event.

Checklist

A generic organised swimming event Checklist is presented in Appendix 1 which can be tailored to your own organisation.

Specialist Partner Solutions

Aviva Risk Management Solutions can offer access to a wide range of risk management products and services at preferential rates via our network of Specialist Partners.

For more information please visit:

[Aviva Risk Management Solutions – Specialist Partners](#)

Sources and Useful Links

- <https://www.sta.co.uk/policies/>
- <https://www.rlss.org.uk/pages/category/open-water-swimming-safety>
- <https://www.rospace.com/leisure-water-safety/water>
- <https://www.swimming.org/openwater/>
- <https://www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/advice-and-information/open-water-swimming>
- <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/specialist-forecasts/coast-and-sea/inshore-waters-forecast>
- <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/specialist-forecasts/coast-and-sea/beach-forecast-and-tide-times>
- <https://environment.data.gov.uk/bwq/profiles/>
- <https://www.thepurpleguide.co.uk/>
- <https://rnli.org/safety/choose-your-activity/open-water-swimming>
- <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/safety-on-our-waterways/open-water-swimming>

Additional Information

To find out more, please visit [Aviva Risk Management Solutions](#) or speak to one of our advisors.

Email us at riskadvice@aviva.com or call 0345 366 6666.*

*The cost of calls to 03 prefixed numbers are charged at national call rates (charges may vary dependent on your network provider) and are usually included in inclusive minute plans from landlines and mobiles. For our joint protection telephone calls may be recorded and/or monitored.

Appendix 1 – Organised Outdoor Swimming Events Checklist



Event location	
Event time and date	
Completed by (name and signature)	

	Outdoor swimming event checklist	Y/N	Comments
1	Have you defined and documented the scope of the intended event?		
2	Have you appointed a competent event organiser who has experience of the watercourse?		
3	Have you sought external professional advice (if necessary)		
4	Have you compiled your event safety management plan?		
5	Have you collaborated with relevant stakeholders?		
6	Has the event management plan been shared with relevant stakeholders?		
7	Have you sought permission from the landowner (if necessary)?		
8	Have you visited the event location and sought risk insight from locals?		
9	Have you compiled and documented the initial risk assessment?		
10	Have all risks been reduced so far as is reasonably practicable?		
11	Have you shared the findings of the risk assessment with relevant stakeholders?		
12	Have you obtained method statements and risk assessments from others who will support / assist with the event?		
13	Have you checked all relevant insurance arrangements?		
14	Have you defined who will act as the event safety coordinator on the day of the event?		
15	Is the person fulfilling the role of the event safety coordinator competent in dynamic risk assessment?		

LOSS PREVENTION STANDARDS

	Outdoor swimming event checklist	Y/N	Comments
16	Have you planned/completed an inspection at the location on the day of the event?		
17	Has the inspection on the day identified any significant changes or altered / new risks?		
18	Have controls been put in place (and communicated) to manage the significant changes or altered / new risks?		
19	Have you planned/completed a review of forecasts on the day of the event and taken appropriate action as appropriate?		
20	Has a comprehensive safety brief covering details of the event, the risks, and emergency information been developed?		
21	Is the information in the safety briefing appropriate to the audience?		
22	Have you identified who will deliver the safety brief?		
23	Have you established a suitable briefing area for the swimmers?		
24	Has competent safety cover been arranged?		
25	Have suitable methods of communication been established and tested including water-to-water, water-to-land, and land-to-water?		
26	Have you established methods to monitor and account for all swimmers?		
27	Have you established methods for identifying swimmers who leave the event early or those who are removed from the water via safety cover?		
28	Have you established sufficient space for safety cover equipment e.g., craft launch trailers?		
29	Has an Emergency Action Plan been developed?		
30	Have appropriate resources been arranged to manage an emergency?		
31	Have you established safe access and egress for all relevant parties?		

LOSS PREVENTION STANDARDS

	Outdoor swimming event checklist	Y/N	Comments
32	Are there suitable and sufficient welfare facilities for the participants both pre and post event?		
33	Have medical declarations been obtained from all participants?		
34	Has a competent person reviewed the medical declarations and decided upon safe participation?		
35	Has next-of-kin information been obtained from all participants		
36	Has parental consent been obtained from participants under the age of 18-years of age?		
37	Have measures been provided to support those with additional needs?		

Appendix 2 – Cold Water Shock



Cold Water Shock is often associated with open water swimming and can occur when a person enters cold waters, typically those below 15-degrees C. In and around the UK the coastal waters are often below this temperature, with inland waters such as rivers and reservoirs being colder still.

Cold Water Shock evolves due to the body's natural response to the sudden immersion. The rapid exposure to the cold environment results in a gasp for breath, with is then followed by rapid breathing (hyperventilation). At the same time, **the individual's** blood pressure increases as the **body tries to move blood circulation away from the skin's** surface to the core of the body. People with pre-existing heart conditions may be particularly vulnerable to this sudden increase in blood pressure.

If continued exposure persists there is a risk that **the individual's** muscles and nerves cool resulting in a lack of strength and muscle control. This can continue to the point in which the individual can no longer swim or support themselves.

Both individual's participating in, and event organisers planning, open water swimming events should not underestimate the risk of Cold Water Shock.

Protective clothing such as wetsuits and swim caps, along with gradual acclimatisation, supported by competent safety cover should reduce the overall risks.

Please Note

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