Risk Management – an Overview

Further guidance on the law, and on the concept of duty of care can be found in OEAP National Guidance document 3.2a "Underpinning Legal Framework and Duty of Care".

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provides guidance on risk assessment in "Risk Assessment – A Brief Guide to Controlling Risks in the Workplace".

What is Risk Management?

Most human activity involves balancing benefits and risks. We cannot have all of the benefits but none of the risks. We can eliminate all of the risk only by stopping the activity - but we then lose all of the benefits. Indeed, there are benefits that arise out of taking risks, as many explorers, entrepreneurs and other pioneers have shown. Growing up involves children learning to manage risk.

Risk management is therefore not about eliminating risk – it is about reducing it as low as reasonably practicable and deciding if this is acceptable in order to gain the potential benefits. This is recognised by both HSE and the Department for Education (DfE):

"HSE fully recognises that learning outside the classroom helps to bring the curriculum to life – it provides deeper subject learning and increases self-confidence. It also helps pupils develop their risk awareness and prepares them for their future working lives. Striking the right balance between protecting pupils from risk and allowing them to learn from school trips has been a challenge for many schools, but getting this balance right is essential for realising all these benefits in practice.”

(School trips and outdoor learning activities: Tackling the health and safety myths HSE 2011).

“School employers should always take a common sense and proportionate approach, remembering that in schools risk assessment and risk management are tools to enable children to undertake activities safely, and not prevent activities from taking place. Sensible risk management cannot remove risk altogether but it should avoid needless or unhelpful paperwork.”

(Health and Safety: Advice on legal duties and powers DfE 2014).

Risk management, in the context of outdoor learning and off-site visits, is a two-stage process:

1. Identify the potential benefits to be gained from an activity, and any significant risks to the health and safety of those involved.
2. Plan and implement measures to reduce these risks as low as reasonably practicable without losing the benefits, and use professional judgement to decide whether, in order to gain the benefits, the remaining risks are acceptable.

For example:
- An activity is known to have significant benefits for children. After control measures are implemented, there is still a risk that children will suffer some bumps and scrapes and perhaps very occasionally a sprained ankle or broken arm. However, there is no practicable way of preventing these occasional minor injuries without losing the benefits of the activity. A decision is taken that these risks are acceptable, and the activity goes ahead.
- A different activity has a similar risk of occasional minor injuries, and there is no practicable way of preventing them. However, the activity has limited benefits. A decision is taken that in this case the risks are not acceptable, and an alternative activity is chosen.
- Another activity is known to have significant benefits. However, after control measures are implemented, there is still a significant risk that children will suffer serious injuries, and no practicable way can be found to prevent these without losing the benefits of the activity. A decision is taken that these risks are unacceptable, and a different activity is chosen.

Risk management therefore involves an assessment of both risks and benefits – i.e., a risk/benefit assessment. This is a process. Risk management also requires competent leadership in order to implement the planned control measures.

It is often useful, as well as being a legal requirement, to record the results of a risk assessment. It is important to recognise that a written 'risk assessment' is not the risk assessment itself – it is a record of the results of a process of risk assessment. It achieves nothing unless it is understood by the visit leadership team and competently implemented by them. It is the process of assessing risks and benefits that enables leaders to fully understand the results.

For guidance about what should be recorded, and how, see OEAP National Guidance document 4.3g "Risk Management – What to Record and How”.

Levels of Risk Management

Risk management happens at three levels:
1. **Generic** – Policies and procedures that apply across a range of visits (normally recorded).
   - This is guidance or practice that remains constant regardless of the nature of the visit. It covers the management of risks identified as relevant to all visits involving similar activities.
   - An establishment’s generic policies and procedures will normally describe detailed practical arrangements based on its local circumstances and its employer’s policies, guided by or incorporating wider sources such as OEAP National Guidance, national governing bodies and professional associations. They might address, for example: staff ratios; staff training/competence requirements; notification/approval requirements; emergency procedures; details of participant information and parental consent; measures for dealing
with known local hazards such as busy main roads; local transport arrangements.

2. **Visit-specific** – Carried out before the visit takes place (may need to be recorded).
   This is the identification and management of any significant foreseeable risks not already covered through generic risk management. It is unique to each occasion and should address staffing, activity, group and environment (the ‘SAGE’ variables from OEAP National Guidance document 1b “Foundations”).

3. **Dynamic/on-going** – Carried out continuously throughout the visit (not normally necessary or possible to record).
   This is the on-going monitoring of benefits and risks throughout the visit. If circumstances dictate, such as when unforeseen risks occur or unforeseen learning opportunities arise, plans should be changed and if necessary activities should be amended or curtailed.

For example, during its annual field studies week, a school routinely organises a project which involves crossing a small stream using stepping stones. On one occasion the stream is found to be in spate. The activity leader decides that it is too dangerous to cross, and quickly organises an alternative project, assessing the risks involved in that project by discussing them with the participants. In subsequent years, the alternative project is prepared in advance as a ‘Plan B’.

In addition to dealing with unforeseen hazards, dynamic risk management can be used to maximise the benefits of unforeseen learning opportunities.

For example, a school routinely uses a local woodland area for learning outside the classroom. On one occasion, a child notices a snake under a rock. The teacher decides that the children will gain more from observing the snake than they would have done from their planned activity, and so organises the children to observe the snake from a safe distance, where they will not disturb it.

In practice, it is often these on-going decisions that determine whether the group remains safe, whether learning opportunities are maximised and whether the activity is successful. Hence a competent visit leadership team is essential.

### Categories of Visit

There are two broad categories of visit requiring different levels of planning. You can find further guidance in OEAP National Guidance document 1b “Foundations”.

The categories are:

1. **Standard**
   These are routine visits that are covered by establishment procedures and policy. Such visits should require minimal planning or preparation beyond what is needed to make best use of the learning opportunity. In a school context, they are simply lessons in a different ‘classroom’. They are based on generic risk management, with visit-specific risk management of anything that is out of the normal.
2. **Enhanced**
   These are visits requiring additional planning, and some level of visit-specific risk assessment. A visit moves into this category because one or more aspects cannot be managed adequately by existing procedures and policy. This may be due to distance from the establishment, the nature of the activities, the environment or venue(s), the nature of the particular group, the need for specialist leader competencies, or any combination of these. For some visits this will involve detailed planning over an extended period of time. The additional steps needed to manage these aspects should be identified and recorded.

**Risk Management Implementation**

Employers should ensure that their establishments manage the benefits and risks created by any learning opportunity in such a way that maximises the benefits, while ensuring that any remaining risk is proportionate.

This requires employers to be clear about who does what within the planning and management of outdoor learning and off-site visits, and to provide establishments and employees with sufficient guidance, training and support to do this effectively. See the following OEAP National Guidance documents:

- 3.1a “Requirements and Recommendations for Employers”
- 3.1b “Establishment Roles and their Interdependence”.

The ways to achieve this should not be overly bureaucratic but should be practical and focus on real and significant risks.

Establishment systems should ensure that:
- Visits and outdoor learning are an integral part of the work of the establishment;
- Leaders are given time and support to gain experience in a planned and progressive fashion, not ‘thrown in at the deep end’ (e.g. learning how to manage a group of young people on public transport, or walking through a busy town centre, is not a skill that can be learned by reading a manual);
- Leaders plan and manage visits within their own, and the visit leadership team’s, experience, knowledge and capability;
- Benefits and learning outcomes are clearly identified and maximised;
- Appropriate training and advice is available to relevant staff including senior staff, the Educational Visits Coordinator (EVC) and leaders;
- Straightforward practical procedures exist to cover the generic risk management of ‘Standard’ visits (see OEAP National Guidance document 1b “Foundations”);
- Appropriate information on any visit is shared with colleagues, participants, parents etc.;
- Leaders are aware of the abilities and needs of all staff and participants, including any relevant medical issues;
- All leaders and participants, as far as is possible and appropriate, are involved in the process of planning, risk assessment and risk management;
- Risk assessment is an integral part of the planning process;
- Risk assessment recording is not unduly onerous, but is supportive and helpful for the visit leadership team;
• Visits are approved or authorised as required;
• There is a prepared ‘Plan B’, should things go wrong (for most routine visits this may simply be to return to base - however, in some situations, the temptation to ‘push on’ when things start to go wrong has led to serious accidents and this temptation may be stronger if the only alternative is to ‘give up and go home’);
• Visits are monitored and reviewed, and, where appropriate, any lessons learned are shared and acted upon in future visits;
• Where consent is required, parents are provided with sufficient information to make an informed decision about their child.

See also OEAP National Guidance documents 4.1a “Avoiding Accidents and Emergencies” and 4.3f “Risk Management – Some Practical Advice”.