National
Guidance
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# Natural Water Bathing

For the purpose of this guidance, Natural Water Bathing is defined as swimming or paddling in river, canal, sea or lake.  This document should be read alongside the following documents:

- 7x "Swimming Pools";
- 7i "Group Safety at Water Margins".

Taking young people on a trip to the seaside or other open water in good weather, and then not allowing them to at least paddle or cool off in the water if it is safe to do so, is unreasonable and inappropriately risk-averse.  A balanced approach will ensure that the risks are properly managed so that young people are given these opportunities.

Involving young people in well organised and supervised swimming or paddling in natural waters is an opportunity to develop their awareness of water safety and their swimming ability, as well as being great fun.  These opportunities are important because swimming and paddling in natural waters present real risks: around 400 people drown every year in the UK, with the overwhelming number of incidents being with peer-led unsupervised sessions.  The most effective way to reduce the risk of young people drowning is to teach them to swim and to give them the skills to make sound judgements about playing in and around natural waters.

Natural Water Bathing should always be a robustly structured activity.  This may be by reference to a pre-planned risk assessment and corresponding operating procedure, or it may be by making a more spontaneous plan, either of which should be reinforced by careful observation and judgement at the time.   As with any activity, the leader must be absolutely clear that participants are not exposed to any significant risks.  The pleas of participants to be allowed to bathe (e.g. because it is hot weather) must never be allowed to over-ride the leader's judgement of the situation.

As with other activities, planning should consider the SAGE variables:

- Staff;
- Activity;
- Group;
- Environment.

These variables are each considered in turn below.

The Visit Leader should assess the risks, taking into account all of the SAGE variables, and decide on an appropriate safe supervision level and plan, before the activity takes place. This plan should be communicated to all leaders and participants.

## Staff

There must be sufficient leaders to supervise the planned activity, and they must be appropriately competent to do so.

Appropriate competence means being able to deal with the worst-case scenario in the chosen environment. For example, when paddling or cooling off in contained shallow waters, or at a beach when the sea is calm and there is no risk of anyone getting out of their depth or encountering currents or underwater hazards, this may simply mean being alert and having a suitable first aid qualification. When close to or entering a swiftly flowing stream or river, a leader may require experience and skills in white water safety and rescue. When it is possible for someone to get out of their depth, then 'in-water' lifesaving skills may be required. Therefore:

- A leader supervising participants entering, or at risk of entering, swift water should be approved as competent in white water safety and rescue;
- A leader supervising participants swimming out of their depth and beyond reach from the bank/shore should be approved as a competent life saver, and apply rigorous boundary conditions;
- Such leaders should hold either an appropriate qualification or a statement of competence signed off by a competent technical adviser (see document 3.2d "Approval of Leaders").

British Canoeing provides white water safety and rescue training. See: www.britishcanoeing.org.uk/courses/white-water-safety-and-rescue-training

The Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) has published a National Water Safety Management Programme (NWSMP), which can help leaders to develop the competence they need. Details are available at: www.rlss.org.uk/national-water-safety-management-programme.

## Activity

Natural Water Bathing can encompass a wide variety of activities, from paddling or sitting chatting in shallow water at the edge of a lake or sea, through bodysurfing in the sea in waist/chest-deep water, to swimming well out of one's depth.

Clearly the risks to be managed will differ across this range of activities, but it is important to recognise that the risks involved in any use of natural water should be carefully assessed.

It can be useful to consider four levels of activity:

1. Being by water with no intention of going in, but with the possibility that someone might (either accidentally or intentionally).
2. Going into shallow water - paddling, wading etc.
3. Going into deep water.
4. Water activities such as canoeing or surfing, or diving or jumping into water such as from sea cliffs or in a gorge.

Level 1 is covered by document 7i "Group Safety at Water Margins".

Levels 2 and 3 are within the definition of Natural Water Bathing, covered by this document.

Levels 1, 2 and 3 are covered by different modules of the RLSS NWSMP.

Levels 3 and 4 should be regarded as higher-risk or adventure activities and managed accordingly. Leaders should be assessed as specifically competent to lead these activities. See documents 3.2d "Approval of Leaders" and 7a "Adventure Activities". Parental consent should normally be obtained for these activities.

## Group

The choice of activity, venue and the supervision required should be appropriate for the nature of the group and the individuals within it. Factors include:

- Number of participants;
- Age and physical ability;
- Water confidence;
- Swimming ability;
- Behaviour;
- Ability and willingness to understand and follow instructions.

## Environment

Any proposed venue should be thoroughly assessed for suitability and hazards, including:

- Availability of any lifeguard service;
- Signs or information boards warning of hazards;
- Flagged areas for swimming;
- Local advice from, for example, a lifeguard, coastguard, harbourmaster, police or tourist information office;
- Toilet/changing facilities;
- Access and egress points to and from the water;
- Depth, temperature and clarity of the water;
- The nature of the sea/river/lake bed, e.g. weeds, sharp rocks, quicksand, underwater debris, steeply shelving, uneven or unstable;
- The nature of the bank or beach, e.g. solidity, angle of entry to the water, hidden undercuts, debris;

- The presence of any weirs and associated undertow;
- Water quality/pollution;
- Underwater visibility;
- Prevailing weather conditions;
- Wave/surf conditions, including the possibility of dumping waves or undertows;
- Any currents, particularly the possibility of tidal or rip currents;
- Tides (be aware that depths and related hazards may change quickly as the tide rises or falls);
- Lines of sight - can every participant be clearly seen?  Can leaders see each other? etc.;
- Useful markers for designating the limits of the area to be used;
- Other water users;
- Other hazards (e.g. country-specific marine hazards such as jelly fish and weaver fish in the UK).

Any hazards that might affect the activity, and any arrangements put in place to mitigate the risks that they pose, should be communicated clearly to participants and leaders as necessary.  These might include:

- Boundaries;
- Specific hazards to avoid;
- Clothing to be worn (e.g. footwear; wetsuits);
- Equipment to be used (e.g. lifejackets; rescue equipment).


## Managing the Activity

Wherever reasonably practicable, Visit Leaders should seek out recognised bathing areas that have qualified lifeguard cover, flagged swimming areas, etc. Even then, they should be aware that participants might mingle with members of the public and be lost to view.  During Natural Water Bathing, participants should always be in sight and within reasonable reach of those supervising them.  It is essential that leaders always know how many participants are in the water and where they are.  A number of participants on educational visits have drowned in shallow water because leaders did not keep track of where they were.

Each leader supervising a few pupils will often be more effective than several leaders supervising a larger number.  A one-to-one buddy system amongst participants can be very effective.

Leaders should:

- Ascertain the level of the participants' swimming ability, if necessary by asking for them to demonstrate this under close supervision;
- Ensure the activity is suitable for the group, including any with special needs or disabilities;
- At the venue look out for warning signs or flags: normally a red flag means it is unsafe to swim; yellow flags mean that lifeguards are on patrol in the area between the flags; a black and white flag means it is an area used by surfers and not suitable for swimming; there may also be signs warning of specific hazards;

- Brief the group about the limits of the bathing area;
- Consider marking the bathing area, for example with a rope, buoys or improvised flags or markers on the shore;
- Adopt and explain signals of communication and recall;
- Carry out regular and frequent head counts;
- Have clear roles within the supervision plan – at least one supervisor should always stay out of the water for better surveillance, even where lifeguards are on duty;
- Take up a best position from which to exercise a constant vigilance;
- Divide supervision between leaders who are in the water and looking landward towards the group, and leaders who stay on land and watch the group from that vantage point;
- Give the participants their full, undivided attention;
- Be prepared to act immediately if a participant appears to be in difficulties;
- Be aware that a participant in difficulty may not wave or shout – all of their energies could be focused on trying to keep afloat;
- Follow the advice or directions of an official lifeguard;
- Avoid swimming themselves - unless it is to help a person in distress;
- Avoid joining in with the group's water-based games if it will distract from supervising their particular group of pupils;
- Ensure that participants leave the water if they are getting cold, especially if toes and fingers look blue or feel numb (this could suggest the onset of hypothermia).

Everyone should know:
- That many people who drown are strong swimmers;
- That sudden immersion in cold water can be very dangerous.


## Use of Throw-Lines

Throw-lines in the hands of a trained and competent leader can have a significant impact on reducing the risk of drowning.  However, they can create a false sense of security in the hands of someone who is not well-practised in their use, and can be hazardous if used incorrectly.  Training with this rescue tool should be undertaken.