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Risk Management – some practical advice for leaders

You can find further guidance in the documents 4.3c '*Risk Management – an Overview*' and 4.3g '*Risk Management – what to record and how*'.

Introduction

Supervising a group of young people in any environment involves judgement based on a combination of experience, training, and tacit knowledge. Whether the environment is indoors or out, on-site or off-site, the same risk management principles apply. The difference is in how contained and controllable the environment is. Anyone working with young people in an indoor setting should feel able to use off-site or outdoor environments, and will find that their work becomes more powerful and memorable as a result.

Risk management is not about risk elimination. If young people work in an area of nettles and brambles they may get scratched or stung. This is not necessarily a problem - appropriately planned, it is experiential learning and part of growing up.

There is no question that outdoor learning and off-site visits are enormously beneficial to the education and development of young people. However to achieve these benefits involves acceptance of some element of risk. Indeed there is a benefit in young people experiencing such risks in order to learn to manage them for themselves and improve their ability to look after their own safety.

This document cannot provide a shortcut to developing competence through progressive experience. The key is to start small, work alongside skilled colleagues, and to attempt more as your experience and confidence in different environments develops.

The SAGE variables

Any visit plan should be based on an understanding of the possibilities and limitations presented by the particular combination of the following:

- **S**taffing: who is needed/available? The plan must work within the limits of available numbers, abilities and experience.

- **A**ctivities to be undertaken: what do you want the group to do and what is possible?
- **G**roup characteristics: prior experience, abilities, behaviour and maturity, any specific or medical/dietary needs.
- **E**nvironment: indoors or out; a public space or restricted access; urban, rural or remote; quiet or crowded; within the establishment grounds, close to the establishment or at a distance; and the ease of communications between the group and base. Do not overlook environments to be passed through between venues. For residential visits consider the accommodation and surrounding area. For outdoor environments, consider remoteness, the impact of weather, water levels and ground conditions.

A suggested visit management process for leaders

1. Identify clear aims and benefits: Answer the WHAT, WHO, WHY, WHERE and WHEN questions. In other words be clear about what you want to achieve, with whom and why. A clear understanding of aims makes it easy to identify suitable choices for many other aspects of planning (such as venue, transport, competence of leaders, preparation of the group etc). Identifying the potential benefits is essential in making sound judgements as to whether the level of risk is 'broadly acceptable'.
2. Identify and assess any risks to the health and safety of those involved.
3. Decide if existing establishment practices and procedures adequately manage these risks. If not, create a visit plan that maximises the benefits and learning opportunities while keeping the risk within an acceptable level. This plan and the judgement about balance of benefits and risks needs to be specific to that group, doing those activities at that venue, at whatever time of year and day it is. There may, for example, be a choice of transport to a venue – walking, cycling, public transport or private coach – the skill is to choose the most beneficial option which can still be managed appropriately. Deciding that a balance of benefits and risks is 'acceptable' involves a subjective judgement. It is, therefore, sensible to include colleagues and young people in the process.
4. If not recorded within existing generic documents (e.g. within National Guidance or your Establishment's policies, etc), record the significant findings of your planning process. (you can find further guidance on this in the document 4.3g '*Risk Management – what to record and how*'). **If existing generic documents cover everything then there is no need to repeat anything.** Ensure information on the risks and how they will be controlled is shared with all those involved. Where required, have the visit plan approved by the employer.
5. Carry out the visit or activity using the plan as a guide, but using dynamic/on-going risk management to continue to monitor the plan and adjust where necessary.
6. Review the visit afterwards. Any lessons learned from the visit should inform future visit plans, be shared with colleagues and, if appropriate, incorporated into the establishment's generic policies or procedures.

Practical strategies

The document 4.1h '*Avoiding accidents and emergencies*' provides further guidance on good leadership habits and practical leadership lessons drawn from accidents.

The management of a visit or activity may involve working with young people in and around hazards (e.g. near water, around moving vehicles, in a crowded public place, etc). When creating a visit plan to manage this there are a limited number of options to choose from:

1. Brief the group. A group can be briefed about hazards, or trained to deal with them and therefore manage the risk themselves.
2. Shield the group by skilful positioning. For example: have someone at the front and back of the group; set boundaries that create a buffer zone between the group and the hazard; position the leader between the hazard and the group.
3. Provide protection for the group. For example: gloves for working in rough ground; suitable footwear; waterproofs for bad weather; hats for sunburn.
4. Remove the hazard. For example: checking that a hotel fire escape is free from obstructions; keeping sharp tools in a designated place.
5. Avoid the hazard. If, despite using any combination of these four strategies, the Visit Leader feels that the level of risk is still unacceptable (remember this may vary from group to group and day to day), then the only strategy left is avoidance ('get away'). Stop what is happening, contain the situation, and either move to the pre-prepared Plan B, or reassess for suitable alternatives.

Maximizing benefits and managing risks - some examples

Good visit management is about maximizing benefits while reducing risks to acceptable levels. Better management leads to better learning experiences. The following examples illustrate how choosing appropriate and sensible strategies increases the benefits of learning experiences.

1. A primary school day trip to the seaside

On a day trip to the seaside an obvious major hazard is the sea and the risk of drowning. This is a very real risk, which may tempt some leaders to avoid it altogether and ban the pupils from going into the sea. In terms of maximizing the benefits of the visit though, this could be a poor decision, as experiencing the feel as well as the sight of the sea makes an infinitely richer experience. With suitable supervision, weather, and water conditions, it is perfectly possible to manage a group while allowing them to enter the sea. Guidance on how to do this can be found in the documents 7o '*Natural Water Bathing*' and 7i '*Group Safety at the Water Margins*'.

2. Visiting an art gallery, place of worship, museum or market

Supervision of a group of young people moves along a scale from direct at one end to remote at the other. Choosing the right level of supervision is important for maximizing the benefits of the experience.

- a. Consider a group of young people on a visit to a local venue. The supervision at the venue can be direct; keeping the group together with leaders at the front, middle and back, and going from point to point to look at whatever things the leader has chosen. Alternatively, supervision can be indirect or remote; the group can be briefed about the layout of the venue, the location of some key items to see, a time limit for meeting back together, and a location where they will always find a leader. Any other leaders/helpers can be placed at strategic points and/or roam around between groups of young people, depending on what is deemed most effective. The young people can then be sent to explore the venue alone, in pairs or in small groups depending on their age, maturity, the venue and the leaders' confidence in the young people's abilities and sense.
- b. On a trip to Europe one of your aims is for the young people to have a cultural experience and an opportunity to practise language skills in the local market. You choose an appropriate market with easily defined boundaries and no major traffic hazards. You split the young people into small groups who know to stay together. Each group has a small card in the local language explaining who they are and giving an emergency contact number. The young people are shown the geographical boundaries within which they can roam and the meeting point where there will always be a leader and where they are to meet by a certain time. Some leaders sit at the local café (the meeting point) while the others walk round the market. This is a good example of a sensible balance between risk and benefit – the educational benefits are clear and powerful and the risks are appropriately managed.

3. A Barcelona residential

The following examples are both taken from actual residential trips to Barcelona.

- a. A year 9 secondary school group travelled by coach from the UK to a tourist hotel outside the city centre. Each day they used their own coach to visit the sites. This was a relatively straightforward visit to manage because transport was door to door, there was always a controlled environment (the coach) nearby and the hotel was familiar with foreign tourists. However, by managing the activity in this way the learning opportunities were severely limited. Interaction between the young people and the environment was minimal and so they were not able to practice their language skills, experience another culture, or exercise any of their own judgement.
- b. A year 6 primary school class flew with a budget airline to Barcelona and used public transport to transfer to a local hostel in the city centre. Each day they used the metro to visit the sites and one day they spent with a primary school in the city (the morning in school and then the afternoon on a picnic lunch in the local park). The leader had made a careful reconnaissance of the relevant parts of the city during a preliminary visit and had produced briefing notes for leaders and young people containing

annotated photographs of key places. They had planned first choice transport options between locations together with an alternative, should one be needed. While this visit was more demanding to manage for the leaders, the experience of the young people was considerably richer.

In terms of value for money and benefits, these two visits are not comparable. On the surface both appear to be educational visits to Barcelona, underneath this however, one was really a tourist coach trip whereas the other was a rich, varied and powerful experience of a foreign city and its culture. Imagine how the year 6 children and their parents would feel if, three years later, their secondary school offered them the coach tour option?

