



National  
Guidance

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## Swimming Pools

Being able to swim could be lifesaving, and so learning to swim is an essential part of any young person's development. However, swimming is a potentially hazardous activity requiring appropriate management and supervision.

This document provides guidance for using swimming pools during off-site visits. It does not supersede any policy or guidance about swimming pools that your employer may have.

This document does not cover:

- the provision of swimming lessons, which should follow specialist guidance, such as that provided by the Association for Physical Education (AfPE), the Swimming Teachers' Association (STA), Swim England and Swim Wales;
- diving from high diving boards;
- the use of an employer's or establishment's own swimming pool, which should be covered in the pool's Pool Safe Operating Procedures (PSOP);
- the management of swimming pools.

For general considerations about selecting a facility such as a swimming pool, or an activity provider such as a swimming coach, see OEAP National Guidance document [4.4g "Selecting External Providers and Facilities"](#).

For guidance about swimming in open water, see OEAP National Guidance document [7.1o "Natural Water Bathing"](#).

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) publication [HSG179 "Health and Safety in Swimming Pools"](#) is aimed at pool operators but contains much useful information for group leaders using swimming pools.

## Deciding to Use a Pool

The use of a pool should be clearly identified as part of your visit planning, never a spontaneous decision. You should consider:

- whether the pool is:
  - supervised by competent person/s (see the section on Assessment of Competence below) or unsupervised (e.g., some hotel pools);
  - solely for your use, shared or open to the public: it can be much more difficult to supervise a group when other people are in the pool;
  - well-managed and well-maintained;

- the nature of the pool in terms of:
  - size;
  - depth and where it shelves;
  - shape (for observation purposes);
  - clarity of the water;
  - whether indoors or outdoors (weather considerations);
  - additional features (slides, diving boards, wave machines etc.);
  - ease of egress including hoists and emergency exits;
  - the grip of the pool side when wet;
  - type of pool walling (tiles can be cracked or sharp-edged);
  - type of chemicals in the water (possible allergies);
  - water outlets at least in pairs protected by grilles reducing the possibility of a swimmer being held by suction;
  - temperature of the water (recommended water temperature for recreational swimming in the UK is 27°C - 29°C) – monitor swimmers for getting too cold or too hot);
- the availability of safety equipment and resources:
  - available lifesaving and First Aid equipment;
  - means for summoning help;
  - availability of help or likely time taken for help to arrive;
  - ropes to mark off pool areas;
- the suitability of facilities for the group, for example:
  - privacy and security of changing rooms;
  - facilities for participants with disabilities (access, changing, toileting, hoisting);
  - areas for observing, eating and drinking;
- the size and competence of the visit leadership team;
- the planned activity in the pool;
- the swimming ability, water confidence, and any additional needs of the participants (including medical needs);
- provision of First Aid.

OEAP National Guidance document [8.1r "Swimming Pool Provider Statement"](#) may be useful to help you check that a particular pool meets acceptable standards.

## Awareness of Risk

Preventing incidents is preferable to responding to them. HSE has identified some simple and sensible steps during planning and preparation, which, when coupled with vigilant supervision, go a long way towards preventing accidents.

Your visit plans, based on a risk/benefit assessment, should address the following concerns identified by HSE:

- inadequate or inappropriate supervision;
- unplanned activities such as 'free swimming' entail more risk than programmed activities, and may need a higher level of supervision;

- prior health problems (e.g., heart trouble, impaired hearing or sight, epilepsy);
- alcohol or food before swimming;
- youth and inexperience (half of those who drown are under the age of 15);
- weak or non-swimmers straying out of their depth;
- diving into insufficient depth of water (leading to concussion, or injury to head or spine);
- unruly behaviour and misuse of equipment;
- unclear pool water, preventing casualties from being seen;
- absence of, or inadequate response by, supervisors in an emergency.

## Using a Lifeguarded Pool

All public or commercial UK swimming pools should have a Pool Safe Operating Procedure (PSOP), based on a risk assessment, including a Normal Operating Plan (NOP) and an Emergency Action Plan (EAP). You should refer to the PSOP when carrying out the visit-specific risk assessment, and all members of the visit leadership team should be familiar with any parts relevant to them.

Where the same swimming pool is visited regularly, the establishment's standard operating procedures should take account of the PSOP and the establishment should regularly liaise with the pool management to be updated on any changes. For guidance about standard operating procedures, see OEAP National Guidance document [1b "Foundations"](#).

You should ensure that:

- clear behaviour expectations are set for participants;
- everyone from the establishment involved in supervision has a clear understanding of who is responsible for doing what:
  - this includes arrangements for the session, the rules and precautions as well as their role in an emergency;
  - the pool lifeguard(s) should deal with any emergency occurring in the water.
- relevant information about individual, medical or special needs is shared in accordance with the PSOP – this may include with the pool management and the lifeguards;
- any medication that may be needed in an emergency is accessible;
- the pool management is informed of the intention to visit so that they can be prepared to accommodate the group and ensure sufficient numbers of lifeguards.

You should actively monitor the participants and the activity. This may be from the poolside, or from appropriate viewing positions. When monitoring activity, you should look for good practice among lifeguards including:

- vigilance and concentration – lifeguards must not be distracted from their job of watching the pool users;
- positioning – all areas of the pool and poolside must be observed and supervised by the lifeguards;
- visibility – as a minimum, lifeguards must be able to see the body of a small child if it were located on the floor of the pool in the deepest water: this ability may

be affected by water depth, pool width, water clarity, ambient lighting, glare from sunlight, turbulent water etc.;

- the 10:20 system should be in evidence – lifeguards should be able to scan their zone within 10 seconds and get to an incident within 20 seconds;
- length of time on duty – lifeguards should rotate round other pool duties periodically to ensure they remain fresh.

It is the responsibility of the pool management to manage their lifeguards. However, if you become unhappy about any of the above, you should stop the activity.

In some countries overseas, where standards are not the equivalent of those in the UK, you may need to be extra-vigilant, and it may be wise to regard even a pool which does have lifeguards as being unsupervised.

## Using an Unsupervised Pool

Unsupervised pools, such as in hotels, have varying levels of safety and facilities. Any use of such a facility must comply with any requirements of your employer (including approval if needed).

When planning to use an unknown pool for the first time you should consider the factors in the section above on Awareness of Risk, and also assess any other risks such as:

- slip trip or fall hazards from steps, edges, uneven or wet surfaces;
- entrapment hazards from grilles, ladders etc;
- hazards from sharp or damaged surfaces, edges or railings;
- unexpected sudden changes of water depth;
- cleanliness of the water.

You should discuss pool procedures with the owner or manager, and familiarise yourself and the visit leadership team with the PSOP if this exists. Arrangements for safe use of the pool and equipment, what to do in the event of injury, fire, and other emergencies must be clear.

You should decide whether suitable safety supervision can be provided from the group's own resources, or whether you need to bring in additional support.

It may be preferable for the group to have sole use of the pool, or for the group to stay in one area of the pool.

For a simple shallow pool, such as a 'paddling pool', where the leaders could not be out of their depth, and can easily retrieve an object of an appropriate size and weight from the bottom of the deepest part of the pool, the following minimum may be sufficient to supervise a group:

- water confidence;
- water safety awareness;
- training in First Aid including resuscitation/CPR techniques relevant to drowning.

In such a simple shallow pool, where there is a very small group all engaged in the same activity, it may be possible to supervise from in the water. In all other cases supervision should be led from the poolside.

Where the pool is deep enough to create any possibility of the need to carry out a 'swimming' rescue of a casualty, or to make quick retrieval of someone on the bottom difficult, then it is essential that at least one suitably competent person is designated as lifeguard.

The number of lifeguards required depends upon the size and nature of the group and the pool, and the nature of the activity (including whether it is structured or unstructured), and should be determined by a risk assessment. See OEAP National Guidance document [4.3b "Ratios and Effective Supervision"](#).

Swim England publishes guidance about staff ratios for teaching swimming – see [www.swimming.org/assets/a\\_guide\\_for\\_swimming\\_teachers.pdf](http://www.swimming.org/assets/a_guide_for_swimming_teachers.pdf)

This can be used to inform decisions about suitable ratios for supervising swimming outside the context of teaching swimming, bearing in mind that a group taking part in unstructured activities might need a higher level of supervision than a group undertaking a structured swimming lesson.

Lifeguarding must be a lifeguard's sole activity – they must not be involved in the pool activity, or responsible for the wider supervision of anyone not swimming.

A designated lifeguard could be an appropriately qualified young person, but in this case a member of the visit leadership team must retain overall supervision responsibility at the poolside to guarantee appropriate levels of behaviour.

## Qualifications and Assessment of Competence

For general advice on assessing competence, see OEAP National Guidance document [3.2d "Approval of Leaders"](#).

A lifeguard should be trained and assessed to be competent in pool rescue and First Aid including resuscitation/CPR. The possession of an appropriate qualification provides evidence of such competence.

The Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) offers a range of qualifications including for pool supervisors and lifeguards – see: [www.rlss.org.uk/our-qualifications-and-awards](http://www.rlss.org.uk/our-qualifications-and-awards).

STA also offers a range of lifesaving qualifications – see: [www.safetytrainingawards.co.uk/qualifications/lifesaving](http://www.safetytrainingawards.co.uk/qualifications/lifesaving).

It is important to understand the remit of any particular qualification and not to exceed the scope of a supervisor's or lifeguard's competence. In some circumstances a lifeguard may not need a qualification with the title 'Lifeguard'.

AfPE, in ["Safe Practice in Physical Education, School Sport & Physical Activity"](#), recommends the following minimum qualifications for leaders with responsibility for the water safety of participants in pools:

- for programmed activities:
  - RLSS National Rescue Award for Swimming Teachers and Coaches;
  - STA Level 2 Safety Award for Teachers;
- for unprogrammed activities or in a shared space where programmed and unprogrammed activities are taking place:
  - RLSS National Pool Lifeguard;
  - STA Pool Lifeguard.

Another suitable qualification for programmed activities in pools is a combination of the Level 3 In-Water Rescue and Pool modules of the RLSS National Water Safety Management Programme.

For further advice about appropriate qualifications, or other ways of assessing competence, you should consult your employer's Outdoor Education Adviser – see [oeapng.info/find-an-adviser-home](http://oeapng.info/find-an-adviser-home).

## Jumping and Diving

Jumping and diving into water creates additional safety and management issues and should be allowed only in the context of a well organised and disciplined lifeguarded session.

Advice from HSE is that the requirements for allowing shallow diving are:

- 1.5m minimum depth of water;
- 7.6m minimum forward clearance or 'run out';
- 0.38m maximum freeboard (pool surround above water height).

If jumping and diving is to be allowed:

- you should comply with any PSOP and pool notices, but may choose to strengthen these arrangements depending on their group;
- there must be no swimmers in the area of entry;
- divers should not wear goggles;
- only flat racing dives should be permitted during a recreational swimming session;
- divers' footing must be secure at the edge of the pool (standing dives, toes over the edge - not running dives);
- prolonged underwater swimming after a dive should be discouraged.

The following types of water entry should be prohibited during a recreational swimming session:

- diving from a height, such as from high diving boards;
- running dives/jumps;
- backward dives;
- dives without hands in front of head;
- indiscriminate diving;
- somersault entries;
- 'bombing'.

