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group

Demystifying Risk Assessment

A guide to effective group safety
management on educational visits



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INTRODUCTION

Despite Educational Visits being statistically one of the safest environments for children to be in, this guide was written in response to the large number of group leaders that have expressed concern and were seeking help with the demands being made of them for risk assessments of their visit.

Many of these requests came from leaders preparing to take visits that did not include Outdoor and Adventurous Activities, but were typically curriculum-based tours, such as History and Modern Language Residentials or Concert Tours. Therefore, whilst this guide contains information that will assist in many situations, its main intent is to help leaders taking visits that do not necessarily contain adventurous activities.

Leaders should recognise the importance of always referring to their employer’s guidelines and this document seeks to illustrate, in non-technical terms, common basic principles and how they can be effectively used to benefit their own group management plans.

The information and advice in this guide is suitable for all schools, state-managed or independent, and it seeks to complement the current support and training being offered to all schools via Outdoor Education Advisors at LEA level through Educational Visits Co-ordinator (EVC) and Leader Training.

The guidance sets out to follow the principles established in the DfES document ‘Health & Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits’ (HASPEV) and the 2002 supplement to HASPEV ‘Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits’. In addition, it references the course content of the OCR Certificate in Off-Site Safety Management and has included consultation with the Outdoor Education Advisors’ Panel.

WHAT IS A RISK ASSESSMENT?

Within the context of school travel, a risk assessment is consistent with a group management plan. In other words, the means by which leaders ‘steer’ their group through to the objective of arriving home safe and sound. Whilst there are many types of risk assessment, it is important to recognise that the concept is quite simple:

- Somebody identifying a hazard
- Recognizing somebody is at risk from the hazard
- Putting some judgement on the potential likelihood and severity of the harm that might befall them
- Then critically putting in place the necessary control measures to rectify the problem.

For example:

Teacher A walks into a room and sees Tracy balancing back on the back legs of her chair	
Hazard Identification	Teacher A identifies the hazard - a fall
Person at Risk	Tracy is the person at risk
Likelihood & Severity	Likelihood of fall is quite high and potential for harm also quite high
Control Measures	Tracy told to sit straight on chair and observed to do so.

An important consideration is that the action – the control measure – is usually dependent on the person not the hazard. For example, if the person at risk was unlikely or unable to follow the simple instruction, “sit straight”, the teacher may have felt another control measure was appropriate.

The simple example shows how common the process is; what is uncommon is to write risk assessments down, but even then, the steps remain the same.



WHY SHOULD VISITS BE RISK ASSESSED?

There are two main reasons to do so:

1. The process will inform your group management plan and improve your control of safety. The old adage, 'It is better to plan and not need it, than to need it and not plan' is particularly true – especially when thinking ahead about 'Plan B's'.
2. Good, recorded group management plans not only contribute towards the safety process, they demonstrate that leaders have followed good practice.

WHAT IS EXPECTED?

Essentially, leaders need to be duly diligent in preparing a management plan for their visit, but they do not have to demonstrate superhuman powers of pre-cognition. They simply have to deal with what is reasonably foreseeable and respond within a reasonable range of measures.

Leaders should concentrate on significant risks; there is no expectation for insignificant risks to be included in a formal risk assessment. Professional judgement, particularly when backed by experience, is sufficient to deal with such situations within schools and it is no different when off-site.

Where examples of current good practice exist (as with the DfES guidelines), leaders should ensure they are followed. If alternative practice is to be followed it should be of an equivalent standard or better, not worse.

It is recommended that at least two or more leaders participate in the planning process. Two professionals considering a range of options strengthen the argument that the measures taken have been reasonable.

Finally, the natural discipline of writing down agreed plans and the potential need to evidence the process are good reasons to ensure decisions are recorded formally. Of key importance, it also means that the management plan can be readily shared as an active dynamic document.

REDUCING YOUR OVERALL WORK

Using a Tour Operator – the risk assessment approach

Use of a properly selected tour operator can substantially reduce liabilities and work load. It is the tour operator's responsibility to carry out checks on all the component parts of their visits - such as the accommodation and transport - and so can assist leaders with the local information that they need to develop their management plans.

A good partnership with a suitable supplier offers many benefits. By handing over this part of visit organising, leaders can better allocate their time to developing their own management plan and the delivery of the educational content of the visit.

So, how can good suppliers be found?

HASPEV advises:

"Before using a tour operator, group leaders should ensure it is reputable. Ascertaining this should form part of the risk assessment"

Leaders can easily establish 'reputable' by applying the principle of seeking easily evidenced examples of expert, external verification of standards.



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For example:

Safety Management

The DfES recommends that leaders should confirm that a suitable and comprehensive safety management system covers all the component parts of the visit being provided by the supplier (for example the accommodation and transport, as well as any activities involved). Importantly, they should also seek details of the external verification and recognise the difference in any scheme that has external validation from any that don't.

Copies of the policy should be requested to evidence a leader's selection criteria.

(This principle also has the support of the NASUWT, NUT, ATL, PAT, SHA, NAHT and the Outdoor Education Advisers Panel.)

Financial Security

The DfES also recommends that leaders should ensure they obtain evidence that suitable arrangements are in place to protect the school and parents in case of financial failure.

For example: two widely recognised bodies ensuring suitable financial protection are ABTA (which covers non-air travel) and the CAA (which covers air travel). If a company is a member of ABTA or, if operating air tours, is licensed by the CAA and holds an Air Tour Operator's License (ATOL), any monies paid will be financially secure.

Schools can easily and instantly verify whether a company is a member of ABTA or holds an ATOL by visiting the respective web site, www.abtanet.com or www.atol.org.uk and print off the web page to evidence the process.

From March 1st 2005, companies displaying the 'STF Assured' logo conform to the School Travel Forum's Code of Practice, which ensures the above requirements are met. Membership can be verified by visiting www.schooltravelforum.com.

WHAT GROUP LEADERS MUST DO - THE SAFETY MANAGEMENT PROCESS

It is important to follow any school or LEA guidelines. In addition, the DfES guidance (sections 17–36 in 'Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits') is recommended reading. It describes a simple structure that works from the planning stage right through to the actual event and beyond.





STEP 1 - BEFORE STARTING

A useful mind set - Remember, It's NOT the Eiffel Tower!

Leaders have asked, "Do I have to risk assess the Eiffel Tower? How do I do that?" Put like that – it's very difficult. However, it is useful to think about the task as 'managing the group safely round the series of obstacles the Eiffel Tower presents'.

If we stop thinking of the Eiffel Tower as itself, but see it as a "public monument on an open site, featuring close proximity with other members of the public, potential crowd situations, access restrictions, height and lots of stairs/trip hazards". On consideration, the hazards to a group are common to many similar public monuments and may include:

- Children getting lost / group being split
 - Children acting inappropriately
 - Trips on stairs
 - Strangers
 - Petty theft
- and perhaps, to also consider**
- Trips on stairs
 - Fear of heights

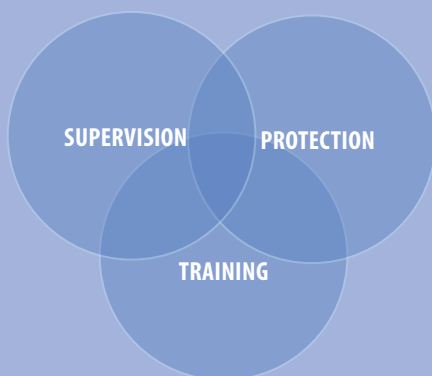
Therefore, control measures relate to group management NOT management of the Eiffel Tower itself.

A visit to a boulangerie might equally be considered "a **small, enclosed light industrial environment without public access**". Again, there is a commonality of hazards affecting groups in similar situations. Many situations on visits can be assessed in this way and this approach is useful to keep in mind, as it starts an effective and relevant assessment procedure. These can be usefully recorded as Generic Risk Assessments.

Appropriate Control Measures

When deciding on how to control a group in any situation, it is useful to consider a range of measures that work together.

For example, some measures that may be considered for a field trip to a local wood:



SUPERVISION

- Pupil / teacher ratios
- Appropriate dispersal of teachers throughout the group

PROTECTION

- Suitable clothing
- Sun protection
- Safe walk routes.

TRAINING

- Agreed code of conduct
- Pre-visit briefing

Note that all categories of controls might not be required on all occasions.

STEP 2 – GENERIC RISK ASSESSMENTS – THE BUILDING BLOCKS

Once established Generic Risk Assessments can be used again and again or shared. Likewise, they may come from elsewhere within the school or the LEA.

In the visit management planning process, even the most complicated visit can be broken down into a series of activities, or building blocks, and the appropriate Generic Risk Assessment slipped into place to support the framework.

However, it is important to recognise that this is not sufficient, even if you return to the same place on a regular basis, the plan needs to be considered further, because the make up of the group (leaders and pupils) will be different every time.



STEP 3 – EVENT SPECIFIC RISK ASSESSMENT – ADDING ESSENTIAL DETAIL

This aspect of planning the visit recognises that each group is unique and responses to the demands of the event will vary from one group to the next. Therefore, where generic risk assessments are supporting the process, essential further detail needs to be added.

It is important for the group leader to talk through the plan with colleagues. This sharing of the planning process has many advantages, it shares knowledge and skills, allows others to be involved and take ownership of the solutions. There is every reason to involve pupils, as a good code of conduct will inevitably feature in any group management plan.

Even if an identical itinerary is followed, every visit should be considered unique, because each group will be different. The final control measures will depend on the individuals (both pupils and leaders) as much, if not more, as the venue.

Example – One venue, same hazards, two correct solutions.

Consider two groups visiting a large amusement park in Europe. Group A is a primary school visit with the children aged 9–10; Group B is from a secondary school with pupils aged 13–15.

From a Generic viewpoint, the hazards will be somewhat consistent with any other large amusement park. The significant hazards might include:

- Getting lost
- Other members of the public
- Sickness
- Trips & minor injuries
- Petty theft

However, the control measures used to protect the children would vary, because of the age and experience of the children.

Group A may decide the appropriate control measure is to divide the group up according to their leader/pupil ratio (which in itself will also be influenced by the age of the children). Thereafter each leader stays in close control of their own group.

Group B may feel that such close control was inappropriate, particularly since one of the objectives of the visit may be to educate the pupils in the management of their own safety. They may decide to allow more remote supervision, by providing more pupil instruction, establishing a base to which pupils could always return, patrolling or stationing leaders as appropriate.

The example clearly indicates that the unique dynamics of the group, and the individuals within it, dictate reasonable and appropriate control measures. **Therefore, it is inappropriate for anybody without intimate knowledge of the group to attempt to complete this phase of the group management plan.**



When talking through the visit, leaders may decide that to be comfortable with the final group management plan some situations may need further investigation.

- Tour companies will normally be very happy to pass on their local knowledge, which can be used to inform (not substitute for) the leaders own plan.
- It is at this stage that a site visit is useful. There is no substitute for first-hand knowledge. Think of a pre-visit as 'walking the course', such pre-visits add the fine detail to the group management plan. Site visits are also useful when developing the educational outcomes for the visit.

Having an Alternative - Plan B's

It is important to think of the obvious 'What ifs?' Again, leaders are not required to consider all the many, minor details that could possibly change, but for example:

- What if a venue is weather dependent and can't be used?
- What if there is a sick child, how will the sick child be looked after and what's the effect on the rest of the group?
- What if one of the members of staff falls sick?

One of the hardest decisions for a leader to make is to stop an activity at short notice with a group of excited, expectant pupils without a pre-prepared alternative.

Emergency Procedures

The ultimate Plan B is an Emergency Procedure for worst-case scenarios. These are usually already established by the school or LEA and must be considered. Remember to ask about a tour operator's emergency procedure and check how it fits into yours.

STEP 4 ON-GOING AND DYNAMIC – MAKING THE PLAN WORK

Armed with the group management plan (including Plan B's), leaders will have a well-considered approach to the visit.

However, the world is a dynamic place and circumstances change. Leaders must monitor the effectiveness of particular control measures and if need be adapt. Well considered 'What ifs' and Plan B's will help here, but inevitably, on the spot decisions will need to be made.

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Management of safety 'on the ground' is key and appropriate skills and experience are called for.

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For many situations, the group management skills exercised within schools are suitable, particularly if the process is backed by a good planning process. If the activity or circumstance is very 'technical' or outside a leader's experience, consideration should be given to recruiting expert help. This might be in the form of a local guide or instructor.

It is important to discuss the coming day's plans and possible variations before setting out. Again, after you return, review the day and look forward to the next. These meetings can be short and informal and jotting down any changes on the management plan forms a useful and easy record of the decisions made.

STEP 5 - REVIEW

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As the majority of educational visits follow similar patterns, it is very good practice when the tour is finished to get together with colleagues, reflect and review the planning process/risk assessments used. These can be used to inform next year's or other visits.

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RECORDING RISK ASSESSMENTS

A written record of your management plan is important. Whilst there is a range of formats, which can help to order the planning process, you should use those adopted by your school or LEA.

FURTHER ADVICE AND TRAINING

Your Authority will have its own policy and guidance for supporting visits which you should request this if you do not have a copy. Many Authorities have an advice and approval process that their schools are required to follow. Key to this is the supporting role of the Educational Visit Coordinator (EVC) in schools. Training for this role is being provided in your authority by the Outdoor Education Adviser, who will also be offering training for group leaders during 2005 and onwards.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

DfES

- The Health & Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits (HASPEV), 1998
- Health & Safety, Responsibilities and Powers, 2001
- The Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits, 2002
- A Handbook for Group Leaders, 2002
- Group Safety at Water Margins, 2003

Oxford Cambridge and RCA Examinations

- OCR Certificate in Off-Site Safety Management

Adventure Activities Licensing Authority

- "...and by comparison." Marcus Bailie, Head of Inspection, November 2003

NASUWT

- Educational Visits, May 2004

HSE

- Five Steps to Risk Assessment, Jan 2001

Mr Chris Lowe

- Chair, Educational Visits Advisory Council

The Outdoor Education Advisors' Panel

- Risk assessment and risk management working group.
- www.oeap.info

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