national water safety forum

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Informal open water dips and festive swims – 10 questions to ask



Photo credit: RNLI

Community dips, festive swims and other informal open water-based gatherings are becoming increasingly popular across the UK. These events can be a great way to connect with others and enjoy the outdoors, but they can also involve significant risks if they are not planned and managed properly.

Before taking part, ask the organiser the 10 questions below. The answers will help you decide whether the event has been planned safely. If the organiser cannot answer the questions clearly, or refuses to answer them, think carefully before taking part.

Important: The presence of branded personnel, lifeguards, rescue equipment, vehicles or fundraising activities does not necessarily mean an organisation is responsible for organising, supervising or providing safety management for an event.

1. **Who is responsible for organising and managing the event?**
   Is there a clearly identified person or organisation leading and coordinating the activity?
2. **Do the organisers have appropriate insurance and event management arrangements in place?**
   Can they explain and share what insurance cover and management processes are in place for participants?
3. **Has a risk assessment been completed for the location?**
   Does it consider the conditions expected on the day of the event, and are plans in place to respond to changing conditions such as weather, water levels, tides, currents or surf?
4. **Do the organisers have permission to use the site?**
   Where required, has permission been obtained from the landowner or relevant authority?
5. **Have participants been given clear information before, during, and after the event?**
   This should include event arrangements, meeting points, safety information, entry and exit procedures and what to expect on the day, with advice provided both before entering the water and after exiting.
6. **Is there an emergency plan in place for incidents both in the water and on land?**
   Have arrangements been made to deal with anyone getting into difficulty, including competent, trained people with suitable equipment, first aid equipment and procedures, and alternative exit strategies?
7. **Are the organisers and volunteers competent to manage the event safely?**
   Do they have the knowledge, skills, equipment and experience needed for event management, supervision and participant safety, including rescue?
8. **Are safeguarding arrangements in place for children and vulnerable people, and are these arrangements clearly signposted?**
   Have suitable measures been taken to protect children and adults at greater risk, whether they are taking part in the event or attending as spectators?
9. **Are there enough staff or volunteers for the number of attendees expected?**
   Is there an appropriate ratio of supervisors to participants to ensure the event can be managed safely, on shore and in the water, including if an emergency occurs?
10. **What happens if the event is cancelled?**
    How will participants be informed and what arrangements are in place?



Questions to ask yourself before taking part

Even if an event appears well organised, it is important to assess the risks for yourself. Conditions can change, and only you can decide whether you feel able to take part safely. If something does not feel right, do not feel pressured to enter the water.

1. **Is this event right for you?**
   Does the location, activity and water environment match your experience, fitness, confidence and ability? Do you have the appropriate clothing and equipment?

2. **Are you medically fit to take part?**
   Have you considered any chronic or acute health conditions, injuries or medications that could affect your ability to participate safely?

3. **Have you checked the conditions?**
   Have you checked the weather forecast and, where relevant, water conditions such as temperature, tides, currents, waves or surf?

4. **Have you familiarised yourself with water safety advice?**
   Have you read relevant guidance from the organisations listed below?

5. **Do you know what to do in an emergency?**
   Do you know how to call for help, who to contact, and what action to take if you or someone else gets into difficulty?

Remember

If you are unsure about any aspect of the event, ask the organiser for more information. However, if you are not confident in your own ability, the conditions or the arrangements in place, be prepared to make the right decision and not take part. There will always be another opportunity to enjoy the water safely.

For further information visit:

- **RoSPA:** rospa.com/water-safety/open-water-swimming
- **Surf Life Saving GB:** slsgb.org.uk
- **RNLI:** rnli.org/water-safety/choose-your-activity/cold-water-dipping
- **Water Safety Scotland:** watersafetyscotland.org.uk/advice-hub/activity-safety/open-water-swimming
- **Swim England:** swimming.org/openwater
- **Outdoor Swimming Society:** outdoorswimmingsociety.com/festive-swims-dos-donts
- **Water Safety Wales:** watersafetywales.org.uk/advice-hub/activity-safety/open-water-swimming