



Water Safety Ireland Recommended Safety Framework for Charity & Organised Open Water Swimming Events

Purpose: This document provides non-statutory advisory guidance and recommended safety practices for organisers of charity, club and commercially operated open water swimming events. This framework is intended to support – not replace – event-specific risk assessment, statutory obligations, or local authority requirements. Final safety provisions remain the responsibility of the event organiser following appropriate risk assessment and consultation with the relevant authorities.

Scope: This guidance applies to open water swimming events organised by clubs, charities or commercial operators.

1. Definitions

- **Safety craft (motorised):** powered boat used for rescue, casualty transfer, communications and as a visual safety platform. Vessel must be appropriate to local conditions and crewed by qualified operator.
 - **Non-motorised safety craft:** kayak, paddleboard, SUP, etc used for close cover and immediate rescues.
 - **Escort boat:** dedicated powered vessel assigned to accompany a single long-distance swimmer or small relay team — used where rules, distance, or navigation hazards require it.
 - **Event Safety Director (ESD):** overall person responsible for the event safety plan and implementation
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2. Event classification & minimum approach

Use **distance**, **ability/competency** and **environmental complexity** to choose the safety tier:

- **Tier A — Short local dips (<300 m, sheltered, eg Christmas Day Dips)**
 - 1–2 fully qualified lifeguards on site; land-based lookout/first aid.
 - Event Safety Director on duty.
 - Coastguard notified at start and finish of event and number of participants when known
- **Tier B — Short races / swims (0–3 km, non-tidal or mild tidal conditions)**
 - Recommended minimum is 1 non-motorised craft per up to 8–20 swimmers depending on conditions & participants ability.
 - Motorised standby: Recommended minimum is 1 suitably equipped motor craft per up to 50 swimmers (for casualty lift/rapid response). Plus roving rescue crew dependent on risk assessment.
 - Land based spotters recommended.
 - First aid presence required.
 - Event Safety Director on duty.
 - Coastguard notified at start and finish of event and number of participants when known
 - Tow floats & high visibility caps recommended.
- **Tier C — Medium distance (3–5 km) or higher-risk coastal courses**
 - Recommended minimum is 1 non-motorised craft per up to 3–6 swimmers depending on conditions, course layout & participants ability.
 - Recommended minimum is 1 motor craft per up to 10–15 swimmers as primary safety (increase if conditions/visibility poor). Rescue crew/lifeguards on board
 - Event Safety Director on duty.

- Medical/ambulance on standby or clearly identified transfer plan.
 - Coastguard notified at start and finish of event and number of participants when known
 - Tow floats & high visibility caps recommended.
- **Tier D — Long distance / marathon swims (>5 km), or complex tidal navigation**
 - Recommended minimum is **1 Escort boat per swimmer** for safety and navigation. Where swimmers are separated across a wide course, each swimmer should have a dedicated escort/pilot boat capable of keeping up, carrying crew, medical supplies and communications equipment.
 - Recommended minimum is 1 roving motor craft per 25 swimmers/wave of swimmers as back up to escort boats with rescue crew/lifeguards.
 - Event Safety Director on duty.
 - Medical/ambulance on standby or clearly identified transfer plan.
 - Coastguard notified at start and finish of event and number of participants when known
 - Tow floats & high visibility caps recommended.

3. Minimum personnel & craft standards (detailed)

3.1. Personnel

- **Event Safety Director (ESD):** open water safety and event management; single point of contact.
- **Rescue crew / lifeguards:** suitably qualified as per the nationally recognised open-water lifeguarding award
- **Coastguard:** Following notification to coastguard in planning stage, coastguard should be notified through the agreed method at start & end of the event for each tier.

3.2. Craft & equipment

- **Motor craft requirements:** suitable seaworthiness for local conditions, prop guards recommended where swimmers near propellers, space for casualties, VHF radio, GPS recommended, throwable rescue equipment, first aid kit recommended. Qualified operators.
 - **Non-motorised craft:** sea-worthy rescue board/kayak/SUP or similar craft with competent paddlers. Recommended that each craft should carry rescue lines, whistle, and be in contact with safety craft.
 - **Tow floats & high-visibility caps:** strongly recommended for all participants in all tiers.
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4. Medical & emergency readiness

- **Onsite first aid:** recommended qualified first aider and AED at transition/finish area for any Tier B and above. For Tier C/D, recommended a medic/paramedic should be on onsite with rapid transfer plan in place.
 - **Hospital/urgent care notification:** include distance and transit times to nearest hospital with emergency department in the safety plan.
 - **Incident reporting:** log all rescues and near-misses.
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6. Communications & control

- **Incident radio net:** VHF with designated channel; handsets for ESD, each motor craft, and designated land-based safety spotters.
- **Course marking & spectator control:** clearly visible buoys, swim lanes, and spectator-free zones at start/finish. Marshals on land to manage crowds.
- **Weather & tidal windows:** ESD must hold authority to postpone/cancel the event. Document weather thresholds in EAP.



7. Emergency Action Plan (EAP) — minimum contents

- Incident command structure & contacts (including coastguard/emergency number).
- Casualty management flow (on-water stabilisation → transfer → ambulance/helicopter).
- Evacuation routes and nearest hospital.
- Roles & checklists for each craft and land team.
- Communications tree and who authorises cancellations.
- Post-incident reporting and review schedule.

8. Participant requirements (recommended minimum)

- Pre-event safety briefing mandatory.
- High-visibility swim cap & personal tow float recommended for all Tiers.
- Minimum age, medical declaration, and cut-off times enforced.
- Declaration of swimming ability.