



A Refreshing New Approach to Open-Water Safety

by Damian Hall and Jacqui Young

Most people would agree that the appreciation of the outdoors and the value of the things we do there can be enhanced by water. Indeed water is an absolutely essential component of the very fabric of the outdoors. Whether we're talking about natural beauty, scientific study, physical exercise or mental health - water adds value.

In terms of outdoor learning, water offers a huge range of potentially stimulating and highly worthwhile activities from pond-dipping to geological analysis, painting to biological sampling – not to mention swimming or just good old fashioned splashing around fun.

However, some outdoor practitioners can begin to feel a little edgy when contemplating the supervision of people around water – and especially young people around water. Many of us have a somewhat conflicted view of

- a) the desire to give our charges an experience of different waterscapes, and
- b) uncertainty about what constitutes 'water-safety' and particularly in terms of personal competency and qualifications.

RLSS UK, National Water Safety Management Programme (NWSMP)

Against this backdrop the Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK), in association with IOL, other outdoor

bodies and the Health and Safety Executive, has developed a new approach to water safety training and management in the form of the National Water Safety Management Programme. The 'NWSMP' is a collection of all things to do with open-water safety, focused around a suite of inter-linked training awards. These awards, in modular form, are designed to meet the civil and statutory safety management obligations of employers of all people who work near, on, in or around open water and especially those with supervisory responsibility.

In simple terms we want employers and leaders to have peace of mind about safety management when taking groups near, in or on water. We believe that with peace of mind comes greater engagement – more people doing more water-based activity and enjoying all the good stuff that goes with it.

It's not Lifesaving and it's not Lifeguarding - it's Water Safety Management

The idea for the RLSS UK's NWSMP began to take shape in 2008 when the organisation was approached by a group of outdoor practitioners in the expedition sector who expressed concerns about the suitability of traditional 'life saving' and 'emergency' focused approaches for outdoor water based activities. A significant point made was that a 'good' swimmer was not necessarily a meaningful indicator

of effective safety management skills. In fact being a strong swimmer with a flawed appreciation of water hazards and risks could even be a liability. Conversely someone with strong 'outdoor' safety management skills combined with a clear understanding of water hazards (albeit not necessarily a strong swimmer) could indeed take good care of people around water.

So RLSS UK started a development process which has produced the NWSMP and which comprises the following key features:

Flexibility

We quickly recognised the most effective way of meeting the training needs of different individuals in a wide range of working situations and with diverse training requirements was through development of a modular programme. So the NWSMP allows employers to construct specific and relevant individual training programmes by selecting and linking together those modules most suited to operational and individual needs.

The NWSMP is definitely not a 'one size fits all' course. Award Candidates may elect to do Level 1, 'Water Safety Awareness' as a stand alone award which can be completed in around four hours (preceded by pre-course self-study of approximately two hours). Candidates may then progress to select from a range of combinations of additional modules up to and including

Level 3, 'In Water Rescue', which might take up to two or three days. The point being that the client chooses what is right for them.

Basic Overview:

RLSS UK does not wish to be prescriptive about the way activities are run in specific circumstances i.e. 'who should do what, when and how', appreciating that this is more sensibly dictated by a range variables, including activity type, site specific information, group composition, leader capability, level of back-up and weather conditions on the day etc. Our concern is more focused on the Leader having sufficient underpinning knowledge and skill of water safety fundamentals in order to make intelligent, informed decisions about what activity is appropriate (or not) given those specific circumstances.



Who Should do What?

Having said that we don't want to be prescriptive, we do offer guideline criteria about the suitability of each level of award for different activities and conditions.

Level 1 - 'Water Safety Awareness' is ideally suited to those working/supervising near water but with a definite intention not to get in e.g. a school teacher taking a group on field trip. This module focuses on understanding, in practical, real life terms - how people drown and how to prevent it. Course content includes awareness of generic water hazards and selection and use of simple effective control measures including, for example, boundary setting, observation skills and emergency response skills.

Level 2 - 'Environment Specific' includes different modules for River, Still-water, or Beach and which recognises a greater likelihood of getting closer to or 'in' water but with a definite intention to stay within standing depth e.g. construction worker or a Ranger working at the water margins. At this level course delegates look more deeply at hazard identification and risk assessment in specific environments and will complete a range of simulated rescues including shout, signal, reach, throw and wade. Delegates get wet in the chosen environment i.e river, beach or still - but not beyond waist depth.

Level 3 - 'In-Water Rescue' is intended for supervision of those swimming out of their depth in a controlled session and in a known environment - for example an Outdoor Instructor leading a Watersports session. This award is essentially a test of swim/rescue capability and candidates are required to perform a simulated rescue of an conscious casualty over 30 metres and an unconscious casualty over 15 metres.

The Programme is progressive so everyone starts with the foundation 'Water Safety Awareness' module and may then move onto the next levels and different modules'. Someone taking Level 3 'In-water Rescue' must have completed Level One and at least one module from Level 2. Level 3 can be viewed as a further layer of response capability provided in the light of higher risk.

Programme Development

The NWSMP needs to be as relevant to a School Teacher as it is to a member of the Emergency Services, Countryside Ranger, Construction worker or Outdoor Instructor so the programme has been developed in close consultation with a number of relevant lead bodies. Further details about consultations are available from RLSS UK.

The Health and Safety Executive was consulted in the development of the NWSMP and **"endorses the sensible, proportionate, reasonable and balanced advice provided by the programme."**

We have been delighted with the level of interest and the uptake of the awards. One of our trainers ran a workshop at the recent IOL National Conference and found that he received very positive feedback from delegates, quoting "people could see the benefits, particularly the entry level programme for Teachers, who do not feel they need a full water rescue capability but do want something which clearly demonstrates basic water safety competency around water margins".

Further environment specific modules are under development with the long-term vision for NWSMP as a comprehensive set of open-water awards suitable for all levels of activity, environment and application.

Engagement momentum with NWSMP has been building steadily since inception with a number of provider organisations already established around the UK (*) We believe the programme has real potential to release practitioners from constraint caused by lack of clarity around water safety and we are keen to hear from Outdoor Practitioners who share that belief and who would like to work with the Society in delivering the awards.

"...endorses the sensible, proportionate, reasonable and balanced advice provided by the programme."





RLSS UK offers an APL (accredited prior learning) route to Instructor status which includes the following criteria:

- Completion of awards and Instructor application from
- Demonstrable experience of open-water safety management
- A Training and Assessing Qualification such as City and Guilds, DTLLS or PTLLS etc.
- Completion of the RLSS UK, Instructor Conversion Day
- Delivery of first course/s as Probationer within mentorship scheme

Instructor Candidates are assessed on an individual basis, however, examples of accepted APL qualifications might include, for example, BCU, PADI, MLT and ASA Training, Assessing & Coaching awards. Individuals or organisations without recognised APL criteria are still very welcome to apply as full qualification and extended Experiential Programmes are available.

Demand is growing and we urgently need more providers - so if you think the NWSMP's for you we'd love to hear from you. ■

This article has been provided by Damian Hall, RLSS UK, Senior Consultant with input from Jacqui Young APIOL freelance outdoor instructor and expedition leader now qualified to deliver the RLSS UK, NWSMP.



(*A Full list of approved trainers is available from the RLSS UK Current providers include, National Open Water Coaches Association, Cardiff International White Water Centre, The Scout Association, Glenmore Lodge and many independent providers and trainers around the UK.

Courses for 2013 are being scheduled now – we are expecting demand to be high and further information can be obtained from www.rlss.org.uk or www.watersafetymanagement.org.uk telephone: 01789 773994 or email watersafetymanagement@rlss.org.uk www.facebook.com/RLSSUK. www.twitter.com/RLSSUK



Author's Notes

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Damian is RLSS UK's Senior Consultant specialising in open-water safety Management, Training and Consultancy - having over 20 years of wide ranging experience in the sector, he's played a key role in the conception and development of the National Water Safety Management Programme.



Jacqui Young has been involved with the RLSS from an early age. Now she works as a freelance outdoor pursuits instructor and expedition leader based in the Lake District. She has a passion for teaching outdoor pursuits and taking young people abroad and is excited about delivering this new WSMP for the RLSS both in the Lakes and nationally. Jacqui is an APIOL. Email: jacyoung@hotmail.com.

Photographs: From the authors and RLSS