

Risk Assessment Process

Procedure

Risk assessment process

Careful and effective assessment of risk enables youth work organisations to deliver successful, impactful and positive experiences for young people and ultimately will help organisations to meet their objectives. Furthermore, Youth work organisations have a legal duty to carry out risk assessments. The Health & Safety at Work etc Act 1974 states as follows:

‘Every employer shall make a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to the health and safety of his employees to which they are exposed whilst they are at work and the risks to the health and safety of persons not in his employment arising out of or in connection with the conduct by him of his undertaking.

Where the employer employs five or more employees, he shall record the significant findings of the assessment...’

Benefit vs risk

Risk assessments may also be referred to as a risk-benefit analysis. In most cases, the benefits of youth work programmes and anticipated outcomes for young people will outweigh the risks involved. Risk assessments should always be considered in the context of the potential benefits of the specific programme, location or activity for the young people participating. Youth work organisations and youth workers should always consider the question - is the benefit worth the potential health and safety risk? - and endeavour as far as is reasonably practicable to minimise the risk whilst maximising the benefit for young people. The answer to this question is normally self-evident but there is added value in listing these benefits or aims within other documents such as risk assessments.

Some principles of risk assessment good practice

- The complexity of risk assessment should be proportionate to the risk and in most youth work service delivery, this should not involve complex or burdensome bureaucracy.
- Risk assessment is part of good organisational planning and should not be done by one specific person solely for compliance or other purposes.
- Risk assessment should involve a logical process that involves prior consideration by individuals with suitable youth work industry knowledge and competency in the proposed activity/settings and working with young people. It is a process and not just a document.
- Risk assessments should be undertaken for all service delivery and include unstructured elements of activity such as freetime, mealtimes or any other periods outside of structured activity, including organised transport to and from venues for example.
- Risk assessments should be in place for all venues (indoor and outdoor).
- The competence and training of workers who conduct and/or approve risk assessments is important to ensure assessments are suitable and sufficient.
- Focus should be given to hazard identification and associated mitigating control measures rather than complex processes.
- Risk assessments should be made available to all relevant workers and procedures should be in place to evidence that these have been communicated to those workers effectively.
- Copies of external venues' own risk assessments should be sought and used to inform a youth work organisation's own assessments.
- Dynamic risk assessments should not be used as a 'catch all' control measure where risks could have been foreseen in the documented process.
- Individual needs assessments should be carried out where necessary for young people and workers, and be used to inform activity and venue risk assessments.
- Copy and pasting from old or existing risk assessments can often lead to errors, hazards being missed, or irrelevant hazards being included, and should be avoided as far as possible.
- Workers should avoid a personal application of risk. When considered in the workplace context, and when working with young people the risk is likely to be significantly different to workers' domestic or recreational contexts.

Risk assessment key definitions

Hazard: something that has the potential to cause harm

Risk: an assessment of the likelihood of occurrence and the potential severity of harm or loss being caused

Control measure: a mitigation to reduce either the likelihood or severity of the hazard causing harm or loss

Reasonably practicable: this means balancing the level of risk against the measures needed to control the real risk in terms of money, time or trouble. Action does not have to be taken if it would be grossly disproportionate to the level of risk. For example, it would not be reasonably practicable to ask the local authority to close roads in order to safely allow a group to walk from one location to another.

Reasonably foreseeable: means only hazards and risks that can reasonably be foreseen need to be included in risk assessments. For example, it would not be reasonable to foresee a plane crashing directly into a youth club (unless perhaps that location is at or very close to a runway or airfield!).

Types of risk assessment

There are various types of risk assessments and a good youth work related safety management system will combine each of them to differing extents.

- Generic: these are written in such a way as to cover general or repeated hazards associated with activities and or locations that have the same risk. Examples could include the use of tea and coffee facilities or minibus travel (not specifying the vehicle or route of travel).
- Specific: these are written specifically for a particular location and/or activity, highlighting the control measures to address specific hazards and risks found at that location or linked to the activity that don't apply elsewhere. An example could identify a particular busy road that it is assessed should be crossed at a specified location and with staff supervision.
- Dynamic: this is the ongoing process of assessing risk whilst conducting an activity and making 'on the ground' decisions based upon and in response to the prevailing conditions. Refer to 'Dynamic risk assessments' section for further information below
- Individual: a needs-based assessment of the unique risk factors associated with a given young person or worker.

Caution

In some cases, and for some organisations generic risk assessments are appropriate and reduce repeating paperwork and workload. For example, where hazards and risks are consistent, repetitive and predictable; locations are specifically designed for particular activities/groups; and/or activities are being managed by professionals who are experienced and familiar with the location and/or area of work. However, in many cases when working with young people, generic RAs can be insufficient to adequately identify, assess and manage the risk on their own. A generic RA may be sufficient to cover a low-risk activity at a low-risk venue such as classroom-based group work in a school where safety of young people is inherent. However, in most cases it will be necessary to pair generic risk assessments with specific RAs/considerations covering the specific activity to be undertaken, the specific venue/setting and/or the specific needs of the group.

Caution should be exercised regarding overuse and reliance on generic risk assessments as they can lead to complacency and hazards being insufficiently identified. Furthermore, simply naming a venue and/or activity in the title of a RA document does not make it specific where consideration should be given to the specific hazards and controls measures required.

How to conduct and write a risk assessment

Risk assessments should be carried out following the five stages outlined by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) below and be undertaken by a 'competent' person. There are not necessarily any specific training or qualifications required to carry out a risk assessment, however there are various courses available and risk assessments should be undertaken by persons with the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to be able to fully and accurately identify all reasonably foreseeable hazards, evaluate the risks and apply proportionate control measures.

It is recommended that risk assessments are not carried out by one single individual since it is unlikely that any one individual will have a high degree of knowledge and competence in relation to all aspects of a particular programme. Therefore, scope for further competent input, support or advice should be allowed for, either in-house or from external sources.

a. Factors influencing competence to conduct a risk assessment:

Experience and knowledge:

- Youth work delivery and leadership experience
- Relevant risk assessment experience
- Understanding of the specific youth programme and needs of the group/individuals
- Knowledge and experience of the proposed activity and setting

Qualifications and training:

- Appropriate to the level of risk
- H&S training and qualifications
 - In-house training
 - External - see [HSE website](#)
 - First Aid (if identified in RA)
- Youth work practice certificates or training
- Transferrable training/quals e.g. teaching or sports coaching
- Other CPD or professional body memberships
- How recent is the experience or training?

Personal attributes:

- Awareness of responsibility
- Time to dedicate to H&S aspects of role
- Judgement and trust
- Acceptance & understanding of own limitations / knows when to seek advice
- Confidence vs complacency
- 'My child test' i.e. ask the question: would I allow my own child to do this activity under this risk assessment?



b. Five stages of risk assessment:

The HSE describes five stages of risk assessment, represented below as a cyclical process due to the fact that this should be ongoing and continuous.

1. Identify hazards: The initial focus of undertaking a risk assessment is to identify the hazards that exist specific to the location and/or planned activity. This should be done with knowledge of the proposed activity and/or location which may require a preliminary visit.

If such a visit to the setting is not reasonably practicable, other desktop research may be undertaken. The knowledge and expertise of colleagues, partners (e.g. venue staff), or external consultants (e.g. adventure activity instructors) should be utilised as appropriate.



The following factors should be considered whilst identifying hazards:

- Focus on hazards that have realistic potential to cause harm to people - insignificant risks do not need to be included
- Understand that hazards are not always visible
- Pay particular attention to weather and how this may change
- Understand that only hazards & risks that can 'reasonably be foreseen' need to be considered
- Risks from everyday life do not need to be included unless programme activities or the needs of young people increase the risk
- Consider whether there could be any environmental hazards

2. Identify who may be harmed: Once hazards have been identified, consideration should be given to who may be at risk of harm. This will include young people, and should also include workers, volunteers, third party providers and members of the public/other user groups as applicable.

Additionally, any further or specific needs that young people, groups or individuals may require should be considered. Medical needs for the clinically vulnerable and accessibility should be addressed.

3. Evaluate the risk and apply control measures: To evaluate the level of risk, the potential severity of consequence and the likelihood of occurrence should be considered.

In line with accepted sector best practice, youth work organisations are advised to use a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to evaluate the level of risk. Whilst numerical values in risk assessments are commonplace, such quantitative systems are most typically applied to more technical processes heralding from industrial processes and often require greater expertise to judge the risk accurately. It may also be tempting to manipulate the risk scores to reach an acceptable level to continue, rather than accepting the actual level of risk and considering further controls. It is now commonplace in youth work and outdoor activity to use a qualitative rather than quantitative approach to assessing levels of risk as they are more 'user friendly' for workers who are responsible for understanding them and implementing mitigations.

Note: analysing risk incorrectly could result in failure to apply important control measures; or the application of unnecessary measures that have a detrimental effect on the activity itself.

Risks should then be reduced by taking preventative or mitigating measures, in order of priority. Reasonably practicable control measures will afford workers and organisations the option to choose the most appropriate based upon the time, financial cost and effort of introducing them. For example, it would not be expected for the Local Authority to be asked to close roads to reduce the risk of activity that involved a simple road crossing!

When applying control measures to reduce the identified risks, it is advisable to consider the hierarchical list below and work through the headings in the order shown. As the diagram below shows, the effectiveness of control measures decreases down the hierarchy with personal protective equipment being the least effective. Any temptation to jump straight for the measures that are easiest to implement and most obvious to see visually should be resisted.

- i. **Elimination**: Is it possible to simply not do the proposed activity or set parameters that remove the risk entirely whilst maintaining the benefit for young people and the project? e.g. prohibiting the use of ladders or working at height
- ii. **Substitution**: Can the activity or location be changed? Can a less hazardous substance be used, i.e. using water-based instead of oil-based paints? Can worker competence be increased by outsourcing to specialists?
- iii. **Isolation**: Can work equipment or other measures be used to reduce exposure to risk? Can numbers of young people engaging in the activity at any one time be reduced and where smaller group sizes allow for much closer supervision? Can the use of tools, equipment or substances be restricted only to trained workers?
- iv. **Process & procedure**: Can measures be applied to working methods that will reduce the risk? I.e. change the planned activity by setting stipulations for supervision, minimum staffing ratios, applying policies and standard operating procedures, training & briefings, hand washing & hygiene, use of signage etc.
- v. **Personal protective clothes and equipment**: The use of specialist PPE such as harnesses, helmets or buoyancy aids will be required for certain activities. Consider also the use of gloves, goggles, face/dust masks and/or hard hats for any use of manual tools (i.e. gardening), if any potentially hazardous substances are present, or for any visits to industrial sites for example. Appropriate clothing and footwear for the weather and conditions should also be considered. External partners should provide PPE if this is necessary.



4. Record significant findings: Risk assessments should be written down i.e. be 'recorded'. An [example template](#) is available and further examples are available on the [HSE website](#). When writing risk assessments, effort should be given to hazard identification and associated controls rather than listing detailed numerical risk evaluations and listing who might be harmed since, for the latter, this will normally be the young people and staff (and occasionally members of the public).

Risk assessment documents should specify:

- The programme, activity or venue to which the assessment pertains
- The hazards/risks that reasonable to foresee
- The associated control measures against each hazard/risk
- Date of the assessment
- Who carried out the assessment

A written document will help to demonstrate that:

- proper checks were made in advance
- all people who might be affected were considered
- all significant risks have been assessed
- the precautions are proportionate
- the remaining risk is acceptable

A written risk assessment should help to effectively share findings and communicate the risks to workers, colleagues, young people and other stakeholders. It is important to ensure that workers are [briefed and trained](#) on the contents of risk assessments and the expected controls. Once the assessment has been completed, controls identified and communicated, it is important that any stated measures and standards are upheld.

5. Review: Risk assessments should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that content remains up to date, that hazard identification is fulsome and that stated controls remain effective and practicable.

Risk assessments should be reviewed:

- At a period to be determined by the organisation. Many organisations do this annually according to a defined safety management system schedule, but the law does not specify this interval
- After any significant changes to operating procedures, policies or locations, and changes of key staff such as management or the H&S Manager
- After any significant incident or near miss

6. Risk assessment sign-off process: Organisations may decide to implement a sign-off process for risk assessments that is proportionate to the organisation's size or complexity, the nature of delivery, the level of risk that remains after it has been reduced in the risk assessment and/or the competence of workers carrying out assessments.

A sign-off process may allow for more experienced or [competent](#) members of staff and/or advisors to check and review risk assessments and associated measures before a programme takes place and provide opportunity for intervention if required. This is often done digitally but can be conducted in paper form: either way, organisations should consider how they could evidence such management oversight in the event of external scrutiny.

7. Dynamic risk assessments: Dynamic risk assessment is the ongoing process of appraising risk whilst conducting an activity and then making decisions based upon and in response to the prevailing conditions which may be continually changing. As such, this is normally done by workers 'on the ground' and in direct supervisory responsibility for young people.

Dynamic risk assessments are not normally written down, but it is good practice for workers to inform their line managers or the authors of written risk assessments being used of any dynamic measures taken. Since conducting dynamic risk assessments relies heavily upon experience and judgement, it is very contextual and therefore difficult to rely upon alone. Where there is a relatively lower level of competence in relation to health & safety or risk management, dynamic assessment will have limitations. Conversely, with a highly experienced and professional workforce there may be a reduced need for detailed written documents and operating procedures as there is greater experience upon which to make decisions. Teachers for example are not required to write detailed RAs for each lesson they teach.

Note: It is bad practice to use and cite dynamic risk assessments as a control measure in a written risk assessment. Dynamic risk assessments should not be used as a catch-all in written risk assessments.

8. Communication of risk assessments to workers: The communication and sharing of risk assessments is arguably a missing stage of the HSE's process. Documented risk assessments themselves do not keep people safe, it is the implementation of well-considered measures and mitigations that keeps people safe by managing risks effectively. Organisations should therefore make risk assessments available to all workers as applicable and support them to understand the contents and their associated responsibilities. Workers should, as a minimum, be briefed on the risk assessment(s) and any key controls in place, particularly those that rely on the action of workers to be properly implemented. It is good practice for workers to have access to risk assessments to refer to during any programme or service delivery, especially those that are offsite or where management is not immediately available to answer questions.

Additionally, youth work organisations should ensure that partners and staff of other providers (i.e. activity, transport or accommodation providers) are aware of any elements of the risk assessment or control measures which may place limitations on their provision of services or require their cooperation to implement or uphold.

Procedures should be in place to evidence that risks and mitigations have been communicated effectively to all relevant workers and partners.

9. Involvement of young people : There can be significant benefits for young people in understanding and being involved in the process of risk assessment and the management of risk. Being risk aware, taking responsibility for their own behaviour and understanding the potential consequences of their actions are all valuable learning opportunities for young people and ones that will support a transition into adulthood and the world of work.

Youth work organisations and workers should involve young people of any age wherever possible and appropriate in conversations, discussions and activities about risk and safety. Promoting a culture of safety and risk awareness and encouraging young people to think about their responsibilities will support their development. Young people should be briefed on key elements of a risk assessment and effort should be made to explain the reasoning behind measures or restrictions during a programme or activity. Understanding of the reasons why measures are in place will help young people to be more risk aware and therefore safer.

