BRITISH ROWING

Honorary Rowing Safety Adviser Monthly Report

November 2025

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TEAMWORK | OPEN TO ALL | COMMITMENT

Royal Humane Society Award for David McNeill

The presentation to David McNeill of a Royal Humane Society Certificate of Commendation was at York City Rowing Club during the during the York Small Boats Head.

David's was a calm, controlled, intelligent rescue.

David noticed some ripples on the water below the embankment and checked and found a woman in the water about five metres off the landing steps. She was fully clothed and struggling to stay afloat. A backpack and coat had been left on the steps. David rushed to the water's edge and shouted, encouraging the woman to swim back to the shore, he extended his arm but could not reach her. He then walked into the water until it was knee deep and was able to reach the woman and pull her in. By this stage the woman was sinking but still conscious.

The woman was emotionally distressed and immediately said she had tried to take her own life. David provided reassurance and some Mental Health First Aid and warming and called the emergency services. Police and Ambulance attended, and the woman was taken for physical assessment at A&E. She was also admitted for further psychiatric help.

It may help to understand that each year in the UK about 200 take their own lives by drowning. It is not unusual for rowers to rescue people from the water and, unfortunately, it is not unknown for rowers to find bodies in the water.

You may find yourself in a position to help by starting a conversation with anyone who appears to be at risk. There is information on how to do this in the Safety-Alert-Small-Talk-Saves-Lives.pdf.

In accepting the Award, David said…

" I am so glad I was in the right place at the right time to help this young lady.

My training and service in the British Army, and my work as a British Rowing Coach, gave me the skills and the confidence to rescue someone from the water safely and to give them both the physical and mental First Aid required.

When I saw this woman in the water, there were plenty of people around – but nobody came to her aid or to help me. I think they were fearful of not knowing what to do – which makes the point about the value of getting First Aid training.

My own training meant I acted almost on instinct. I didn't have to think, I immediately knew I had to bring her to safety without risk to myself, and then to care for her until the emergency services arrived. The Ambulance Service and the North Yorkshire Police were amazing - again showing that it you have the training you can make a big difference.

The training gives the confidence; if more of those on the bank that day had received training, this woman could have had ten people to help her, not just one. I hope some of those people might have been prompted to get training because of what they saw that day.

I also think it demonstrates that there are opportunities every day in our lives where we might be able to help someone in need. A little word of reassurance or just asking this woman a question might have been enough to give her enough to not feel like she wanted to take such a drastic step and try to take her life."

The Royal Humane Society is a charity that grants awards for acts of bravery in the saving of human life. The Society was founded in 1774. The Society recognises people who have contributed to the saving or attempted saving of life, though they may not have put their own life at risk. The Certificate of Commendation is awarded to people who have made a significant contribution to the saving or attempted saving of a life, though their own life was not necessarily at risk.

Rowers help to save the life of a runner

A member of a rowing club noticed that a runner in the local parkrun collapsed after finishing the race and was walking past the car park. The rower quickly identified that the person was unresponsive. They called 999 and requested the AED be brought from the clubhouse which is only a few meters away. A GP, who had also completed the parkrun, commenced CPR.

The AED was used, and it is understood that it delivered one shock.

An Air Ambulance Rapid Response Vehicle arrived, and the crew took control. Resuscitation was successful. The casualty was taken to hospital and was communicating with the ambulance crew in the ambulance. It is understood that the casualty was recovering well in hospital two days later.

This was the perfect response. The key steps are: -

- Early identification of the need for cardiac support
- Call for help (999)
- Start CPR without delay
- Fetch and attach the AED
- Follow the instructions of the AED

There is more information here Safety-Alert-Automated-External-Defibrillators-1.pdf and here Safety-Alert-Staying-Alive-FINAL.pdf.

Incident Reports for November

Stay well away from Weirs and Sluices

A rower in a Coastal Single (C1x) at an upriver club caught their blade on something and capsized and was swept 200m to the weir without being able to get back in the boat and turn round. When they arrived at the weir, the sluice gates were open underwater, the boat went over the top of the sluice gate edge, and the rower was pulled under water and through the sluice gate. The rower remained calm but was confused about their location. The rower did see light after the darkness of the sluice and broke the surface again. At this point they were cold and losing strength. The rower was then able to swim to the bank and walk to a nearby farm and get a lift back to the club. The rower was calm about the incident and has no injuries.

In another incident a rower in a stable 1x was rowing back upstream to the club. They steered too close, and their boat was caught against the post at the downstream end of the weir. They managed to get the boat off the post and continue rowing back to the club.

Incidents near weirs and sluices are extremely serious. Two rowers, in this country, have died in similar incidents recently.

Please encourage all rowers to stay well away from weirs and sluices. Clubs should use their risk assessments to define their own safety rules that specify the distance that rowers should keep clear of weirs. These rules should be clear, objective and definite. There should be no scope for "interpretation" or "discussion".

There are three Safety Alerts that highlight the danger at weirs, these should be shared with rowers. They can be found at Safety-Alert-Keep-clear-of-Weirs-Dec-2019.pdf, Safety-Alert-Flow-over-Weirs.pdf and Safety-Alert-Flow-upstream-of-weirs.pdf. This is particularly important at a time of year when heavy rain can be expected, and river flow will be substantial.

Take care on your bike

A coach on a bike was watching their crew and looked up to see a lamppost about 1m away. The coach braked hard but still collided with the lamppost. The handlebar hit the lamppost and the coach kept going, hitting the lamppost.

Take care to point the boat the right way

The crew of a 4+ boated with the bows facing up-river, when the tide was flooding in strongly (their bow was facing downstream). After pushing off the cox tried to get the crew to paddle the boat clear, but the stroke's blade became caught on a nearby mooring column. The boat became stuck against the mooring column and started to tilt to one side and became partially swamped. The crew managed to prevent a capsize and to extricate the boat. They paddled back to shore to empty the boat.

Please take care to ensure that crews are instructed to always launch their boats with the bows facing into the stream, they can then control their course as they row into the stream. When returning, always row into the stream so that the boat is not swept past the landing point.

Take Care of your cox

A bow loaded 4+ came safely alongside and the rowers moved on to the landing stage leaving the cox in the boat. The rowers did not support he boat, it capsized and the cox entered the water. The water was waist deep, and the cox quickly got out of the water. The rowers were made aware of role in supporting the boat, even after landing.

Take care with cox's lifejackets

Two 4+s in different races were both disqualified at the same competition. In one case the cox was not wearing a lifejacket, in the other case the cox was wearing a buoyancy aid (rather than manually inflatable lifejacket) in a front-loaded 4+.

Take care with Lifejackets

The cox of an 8+ accidentally inflated their lifejacket. The report stated that someone "took the canister out and put the life jacket back". It has since been confirmed that the lifejacket has been taken away, out of the boathouse, to be fixed.

Please ensure that if the CO_2 cylinder in a lifejacket is discharged that the lifejacket is quarantined until the cylinder has been replaced and the lifejacket has been checked.

Take care to teach rowers to never let go of their blades

Both bow side rowers in a 4+ lost control of their blades, leading to a slow capsize.

In another incident the crew of a 4x+ rolled up to the catch, wobbled, let go on blades and capsized.

Please take a positive approach to safety

There were statements in several Incident Report attempting to assign blame to the "other" crew. In one case there was a collision between a 4+ and a 4x from different clubs. The report contained accusations of blame. It was explained that the purpose of the Incident Reporting system is to identify and share opportunities for improvement. This will help everyone involved to identify things that they could have done differently to prevent the incident from occurring. They can then learn from the incident and behave differently in future.

It was suggested that the many clubs in this area should meet to coordinate their activities. In section 9.4 of RowSafe we encourage clubs to work with "other water users" to coordinate their activities. A little bit of good faith, understanding and cooperation can solve a lot of problems.

Please try to avoid concepts of "fault" or "blame". Please remember that everyone should take care of their own safety and that of others.

Take care when planning processional races

Three beginner J14 4x+s came together during a head race. They were overtaken by an Experienced Senior 2x. The 4x+s changed course to allow the 2x to pass but in doing so two of the 4x+s moved closer to the bank and collided with each other and one of them then collided with the bank and firmly wedged its bows into the bank.

When planning processional races please ensure that the faster crews in each division start before the slower crews.

Take care to teach rowers the correct technique for an Emergency Stop

The crew of an 8+ was on the wrong side of the river and noticed a crew approaching towards them (who were on the correct side). They tried to do an emergency stop, but one rower held it up first before others. The handle then hit into the rowers ribs causing significant bruising.

There were other collisions where crews simply stopped rowing rather than stopping their boat.

Please encourage rowers to use the Slap, Bury and Square technique as demonstrated here Emergency Stop Drill

Take Care of your shoes

A rower in a 1x capsized and panicked because they were not able to release their feet from their shoes. They were rescued by the safety launch within about 30 seconds. Upon inspection, one heel restraint had snapped. One metal fixing on the shoe had failed. Also, of the three straps across each shoe, the upper two released on each shoe released upon pulling of the release cord, but lower strap failed to release.

In another incident a rower in a 1x capsized and had difficulty because their shoes were so small that they could not wear socks.

Please take care to ensure that boats are checked before they go afloat.

Take Care with your footwear

A rower sustained a 1to 2 inch laceration to their big toe whilst stepping out of the boat onto land. They were wearing sliders and may have caught their foot on some underwater metal or glass. The rower was treated by a First Aider and was advised to attend A&E to have the wound assessed after a phone call with an NHS 111 doctor.

In another incident, a rower wearing flip flop style shoes was running, slipped on wet mud and fell onto gravel. The rower was reminded to wear solid trailers when running or land training.

Please ensure that rowers always wear appropriate footwear.

Take care around Swans

Rowers in a 2- had an interaction with a swan and the swan became caught on the spoon of the rowers blade. The swan got itself out and left the scene.

Please take care around swans, there is information on how to act around swans at Swans and Rowing

Please do not use the "cox's blind spot" excuse

From time-to-time Incident Reports state that a collision occurred because the other boat was in the cox's blind spot. This excuse can never be valid. If the cox does not know what is ahead then they should ask a member of the crew, usually at bow. If they still do not know what is ahead then they should stop, or at least slow down.

We should not tolerate any boat moving at speed that is not aware of what is ahead.

The following appears in section 5.1 of RowSafe: -

Coxes and Steers

Coxes and steers (including scullers) are expected to:

- *Always keep a good lookout when afloat. Coxes who cannot see directly ahead should enlist the help of members of their crew. Steers should keep a good lookout over both left and right shoulders or consider using a head mounted mirror or similar device.*
- *If the cox or steers does not know that the water ahead is clear then they should stop, or at the very least, slow down.*

Take Care to be seen

There was a comment in a report requesting British Rowing to publish information to encourage rowers to wear hi-vis tops so that they are easier to see.

The Safety-Alert-collision-avoidance.pdf explains the importance of conspicuity and demonstrates the effect of wearing hi-vis kit. However, this is only half of the story, being conspicuous only helps if rowers look where they are going.

In another report a club commented that they were very good at wearing high-vis when afloat and that they would like other clubs to do the same.

Work with Paddle UK

Several Incident Reports contained information about interactions between rowers and canoeists or Stand Up Paddleboarders. These have been shared with my colleague at PaddleUK.

Work with the CPGA

Several Incident Reports contained information about interactions between rowers and Pilot Gigs. These have been shared with my colleagues at the Cornish Pilot Gig Association.

Use of an AED in wet conditions

There was a request for information on whether an Automated External Defibrillator AED could be used safely in wet conditions. There was concern that if an AED was used on a wet metal pontoon, then there would be a high risk of others getting a lethal shock. (This is simply not true.) "Does British rowing give guidance on using AEDs in the setting of a rowing club (i.e. by the water…)"?

The response was that AEDs can be used in wet conditions as described, safely and effectively; there is no risk to the user, and the casualty will benefit from the appropriate treatment. If confirmation is needed then it can be found here The safe use of automated external defibrillators in a wet environment - PubMed. We have to be careful what we mean by wet conditions, AEDs do not work when submerged, but they do work and can be used safely in the circumstances described.

The user will need to ensure that the casualty's chest is exposed and that the skin is dry enough for the pads to stick.

It may help to understand the physics of the process; this is important. The pads are placed so that the shock passes directly from one pad, through the heart, to the other pad. It does not spread through the body or to the surrounding area.

It is important that the pads are correctly placed. Once they are positioned then the AED will analyse the heart rhythm. If the AED detects a shockable rhythm, such as ventricular fibrillation (VF) or pulseless ventricular tachycardia (pVT), then it will warn the user that a shock is to be given and then deliver a shock that will restart the heart, hopefully in sinus rhythm. The heart will then recommence pumping blood to the rest of the body. There is no effective pumping when the heart is in VF or pVT. Further shocks may be needed but the AED will determine this and advise accordingly.

In some cases, the heart will not have a shockable rhythm, and, under these circumstances, the AED will not charge or deliver a shock as doing so would not benefit the casualty. However, the AED will instruct the user to "continue CPR". CPR is important as it keeps pumping the blood around the body especially to the brain and other organs. CPR should be commenced immediately, and help has been summoned, as soon as it has been determined that the casualty is unresponsive and not breathing. This is normally determined by the casualty not breathing regularly, repeatedly, in and out (do not be misled by agonal gasps). There is more information here Adult basic life support Guidelines | Resuscitation Council UK. There is a summary of the key points in Appendix 1.

There is additional information in the Safety Alerts here Safety-Alert-Automated-External-Defibrillators-1.pdf and Safety-Alert-Staying-Alive-FINAL.pdf.

AEDs are becoming more generally available. Well over 90% of rowing clubs have one in the club or have a public access close nearby.

Take Care of your AED

Many rowing clubs now have their own Automated External Defibrillator (AED); however, it is important to ensure that these are maintained in good condition.

Please ensure that the someone checks: -

- The expiry date of the defibrillation pads (most last between 2 - 5 years if not opened)
- The expiry date of the AED battery (most last 4 - 7 years)
- **Make a monthly check that the AED battery condition indicator shows that the battery is in good condition. In some cases, a green light (flashing or steady) will show that the machine is ready to be used, and a red light will indicate a low battery/expired pads/an AED fault.**

It may help to register the AED with The Circuit. The Circuit will support the club by sending emails, for example to let you know that your pad expiry date is approaching so you can order replacement pads. You can also ask The Circuit for support.

Rowers with Long Hair

Concern has been expressed about the safety of rowers with long hair. This follows the incident in Limerick, Ireland, which resulted in the capsize of a junior 4x+. A 12-year-old girl, with very long hair, was trapped and held underwater for some time because her hair had become entangled in a rigger. She survived but suffered serious irreversible brain damage. The Irish Marine Casualty Investigation Board report into this incident can be found here Thomond Weir Report.

It was recommended, in my February 2019 Monthly Report, that "any rower with long hair may find it helpful to wear their hair in a "bun" or "top knot" as shown in the photo opposite. This style has the additional advantage of keeping the hair under control and out of the way so that it does not obstruct the rower's vision."

This advice was subsequently incorporated into RowSafe where it says: -

Understand that everyone is expected to:

- *Ensure that they are dressed appropriately for the conditions and that their hair, if long, is tied up into a bun or "top knot" such that it does not interfere with their rowing and cannot be entangled in the equipment in the boat.*

There are five similar references to long hair in RowSafe.

Qualifications for persons in charge of a boat in tidal waters

There was a request for information from a club that uses and has a St Ayles Skiff. The club has been made aware of some legal issues regarding event leaders. It asked for advice on suitable qualifications for a person in charge of a four oared skiff used in tidal waters.

The response was that I do not know which legal requirements they are referring to but it may be The Adventure Activities Licensing Regulations 1996. In Section 2 of the Act, "adventure activities" are defined as follows: -

"adventure activity" means caving, climbing, trekking or watersports;

Also in Section 2, "watersports" are defined as follows: -

"watersports" means the use on specified waters of: -

(a) canoes, kayaks or similar craft propelled or steered by paddles held in the hand (but excluding rowing-boats propelled or steered by oars);
(b) rafts (including those which are inflatable or which are improvised from various materials but excluding those propelled by means of a motor or towed by a motor-boat); or
(c) sailing boats, windsurfers, sailing dinghies or other craft whose principal means of propulsion is the wind but excluding craft the construction, equipment and use of which is subject to a requirement for a certificate issued pursuant to the Merchant Shipping Act 1995(3) or any regulation or order made thereunder;

"young persons" means persons who have not attained the age of 18.

It is clear in (a) above that there is a specific exclusion for rowing boats.

In rowing a cox is normally the person in charge. As far as cox training for coastal waters is concerned I would recommended that the club ensures that the cox is lead through the Course: Fixed Seat Rowing Coxing Workshop | Home and the Fixed Seat Rowing Coxing Workbook v1.1.pdf on RowHow.

In addition it would be prudent to ensure that the cox understands local considerations such as the tidal flow in the areas where they will be coxing, any hazardous areas (shallows, etc,), how to behave around other boats and ships, the meaning of any buoys or other seamarks that they are likely to encounter, and how to call for help (999 on mobile phone, Ch16 on MMB VHF).

The Ports and Marine Facilities Safety Code

The Ports and Marine Facilities Safety Code is a UK Government document issued by the Department for Transport and the Maritime Coastguard Agency and is dated April 2025. In my view this will mostly impact on Harbour Authorities rather than smaller organisations. There may be a trickledown effect on organisations that operate within harbours, but it should not cause serious problems for well-run rowing clubs.

Harbours will be required to have Marine Safety Management Systems (MSMSs) and these may be audited by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) by doing their Health Checks. Health Checks are effectively audits of MSMSs by the MCA, they have nothing to do with people's health. Harbour Authorities may require organisations that operate within their harbour to have a MSMS and may wish to review them. This should not be a problem for a well-run rowing club.

The MSMS is based on a formal risk assessment and consists of the rules and procedures, etc. that it leads to. In due course, some harbour authorities may look at their own rules and procedures and may require the organisations that operate within the harbour to have rules and procedures that are consistent with those of the Harbour Authority.

Some harbour authorities may require organisations that operate within the harbour to report accidents and incidents. This should not be a problem for a well-run rowing club as such a report can be based on the British Rowing Incident Report.

The code is not law; it is a standard setting guidance document that refers to legal requirements that already exist. It is relevant throughout the UK.

There may be some temporary fuss and noise as Harbour Authorities digest the code, but this should soon settle down. Some Harbour Authorities may "gold plate" the standards in the code and produce something unworkable. If this causes problems for clubs then their NGB may well be able to support them.

There was a further request for information in relation to submitting a compliance statement and having an Environment Policy, this is the response.

There are no mandatory requirements, this is guidance. There are two references to "Mandatory", these both say that " compliance with the Code is not mandatory ".

The code defines the "Duty Holder". I expect that the Duty Holders will be appointed by the Harbour Authority although it is possible that some of these Authorities will require their tenants to make similar appointments and provide them with information.

There is a reference to a compliance submission on the Port of London Authority website here PMSC Compliance - All Ports & Marine Facilities | Port of London Authority, this refers to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) Marine Information Note (MIN) "MIN641(M) Amendment 1 Navigation" here MIN 641 (M) Amendment 1 Navigation: ports and marine facilities safety code compliance submission for 2026-2028 - GOV.UK

The form is not available until 1st January 2026 and the deadline for submissions is 31st March 2026.

MIN641(M) Amendment 1 contains the following: -

5. Proportional Compliance

5.1 Compliance expectations are developed on a risk-based approach and will reflect the scale, complexity and risk of the facility. Smaller, low activity sites (e.g. single jetty operations) are not expected to meet the same resourcing or documentation standards as large commercial ports.

5.2 Every facility, regardless of size, must demonstrate a clear Duty Holder and accountability structure, appropriate Risk Assessment and Marine Safety Management System, arrangements for incident reporting and emergency response and have appointed a Designated Person.

If rowing clubs are treated as "facilities", and I do not expect that they will be, then the Club Chair would be an obvious choice for the "Duty Holder" and the Club Rowing Safety Adviser (CRSA) would be the obvious choice for the "Designated Person". I expect that if evidence of a Safety Audit is required then a copy of the club's British Rowing Annual Safety Audit (required as part of its Annual Affiliation to British Rowing) will be sufficient and if clubs are required to submit information about incidents, then copies of the British Rowing Incident Reports would also be sufficient.

There is a British Rowing Environment Policy here Environment-Policy-2020-v-3.pdf. There is further information about Sustainability here Sustainability - British Rowing. If necessary, we can integrate "Environment" into the specimen Club Safety Policy in section 1.3.1 of RowSafe in the 2026 update. It may help if I explain that I am also an Environmental Management Systems Auditor.

The Code should not cause significant problems for a well-run rowing club.

Appendix 1 - Adult basic life support Guidelines - Summary of Key Points

- Everyone can learn how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).
- Recognition of cardiac arrest can be challenging.
- If a person is found unresponsive, call 999 as soon as possible. Ideally, this should be carried out by a bystander, but if no one else is available you should make the call yourself before assessing whether breathing is normal.
- The ambulance service call handler will be able to assist you if you are uncertain.
- If a person is unresponsive with abnormal breathing, assume they are in cardiac arrest.
- Start chest compressions as soon as possible.
- Compress the chest at a rate of 100-120 compressions per minute.
- Compress to a depth of at least 5 cm, but not more than 6 cm.
- If providing rescue breaths, deliver just enough air to make the chest start to rise; avoid excessive ventilation.
- If you are unable to ventilate the chest, consider a foreign body airway obstruction.
- Anyone can use an Automated External Defibrillator (AED).
- AEDs should be widely available.
- Locations of AEDs should be prominently sign-posted with clear signage.
- AED signage should include a statement that no training is needed to use an AED.
- AEDs should be housed in unlocked cabinets.
- AEDs should be accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- The risk of harm from CPR is low. Rescuers should not be concerned that they will cause serious injury if the person is not in cardiac arrest.

There are the following changes to the 2025 Adult Basic Life Support guidelines:

- Call 999 for any unresponsive person. Rescuers no longer need to confirm abnormal breathing before calling. Initiate the call first, then assess breathing while waiting for the call to be answered. The ambulance service call handler will be able to assist you in identifying abnormal breathing, if needed.
- Exercise is a common precipitant of cardiac arrest. The 2021 guidelines emphasised descriptions of slow or laboured breathing as indicators of abnormal breathing. For 2025, we recognise that early after the onset of cardiac arrest, athletes may display a near-normal or panting breathing pattern.

The following has been added to the 2025 Adult Basic Life Support guidelines:

- There is increasing evidence that finding a person in cardiac arrest and attempting resuscitation is a potentially traumatic experience for many lay rescuers. The 2025 guideline now recognises that lay rescuers and bystanders may benefit from support.

Please see the full guidance here Adult basic life support Guidelines | Resuscitation Council UK.