



Water Trails Criteria for Ireland



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Disclaimer

The criteria set out in this document provide guidelines which outline good practice for the development of water trails at the time of writing. The criteria do not purport to be exhaustive and may not cover every eventuality arising on a Water Trail. Users should use their own judgement when implementing the guidelines. Although water trails may be developed in accordance with these criteria, Sport Ireland does not accept responsibility for liability for any accident or injury arising from the use of such trails.

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1



Introduction

1.1 Background

Sport Ireland plays a leading role in supporting the development of recreational trails throughout Ireland to encourage more people to be active in the great outdoors. Sport Ireland is tasked with the development of trail criteria and best practice along with maintaining the National Trails Register. This role is vital in the continued development of quality trails and is a key goal in Sport Ireland's policy on Sport and Physical activity in the Outdoors (policy goal 3.2).

Sport Ireland also supports the development and promotion of quality experiences and best practice for safe and sustainable outdoor sport and physical activity participation (policy goal 2.3). Sport Ireland believes standardised criteria for Water Trail development will assist in providing managed access to Ireland's inland rivers, lakes and waterways while helping to protect the environment in which these natural amenities are located.

1.2 What is a Water Trail?

For the purposes of this criteria, a Water Trail is defined as:

- A defined stretch of water with designated access/egress points which offers public access
- A loop (A to A) or linear (A to B) journey. In both circumstances the trail can be journeyed in its entirety or in sections
- Including visitor information (pre and during visit) which allows the user to make an informed choice as to a trail's suitability relative to their ability, experience, equipment and weather conditions.
- Accessible - free of charge to any member of the public, provided they do so with respect for other water users and the environment¹
- A branded proposition – i.e. a clear statement of what the trail offers – this will be consistently portrayed through trail name, promotional information, visitor information and signage
- Managed by a defined management structure
- An activity tourism and/or local participation initiative facilitating healthier lifestyles, social interactions and economic development

¹ This does not preclude a reasonable charge for parking or a fee for equipment hire and/or instruction.

This document covers the following Water Trail types²:



Paddling Trail - a Water Trail undertaken by a person in a paddle craft. For the purposes of this criteria this includes Open Canoe, Kayak and Stand Up Paddleboard (SUP).

Snorkelling Trail - a Water Trail typically in a coastal environment which people explore with the aid of a snorkel, mask and fins. The guided or self-guided trail not only provides the opportunity to undertake the physical activity of snorkelling but also provides an opportunity to explore and learn about the eco-system of the underwater world.

Dinghy Cruising Trail - a Water Trail undertaken in a sailing dinghy or dayboat with a centreboard or lifting keel and transportable by car and road trailer.

Open Water Swimming Trail – a Water Trail undertaken by a swimmer in a coastal or inland environment. The guided or self-guided trail not only provides the opportunity to undertake the physical activity of swimming but also provides an opportunity to explore and learn about the environment and heritage.

1.3 Why have a National Trails Register and criteria for trails?

Sport Ireland maintains a [National Trails Register](#) which lists trails which meet agreed criteria. This currently includes walking, cycling, horse riding and water trails (this criteria).

Nationally recognised, standardised criteria fulfil many functions, including:

Quality Standard – providing a consistently high-quality benchmark and best practice for the development and management of trails

Confidence – trail developers, potential funders and the public can gain assurance the trail is of an acceptable quality

² Sport Ireland recognizes that the way the public engage with our outdoors is constantly evolving, therefore this initial list of trail types will be kept under review.

Information – providing accurate information about trails which allows the public to make an informed choice as to a trail’s suitability relative to their ability, experience and equipment

Balance - enabling accessible and enjoyable access to Ireland’s outdoors while simultaneously protecting the environment

Insurance – trail management groups can access the National Trails Insurance Policy³

Promotion – the trail can be listed on the Sport Ireland Outdoors website and included in Ordnance Survey Maps. In addition, an approved trail is more marketable.

Trail Managers interested in registering a trail can apply to Sport Ireland for an independent trail registration inspection which uses an approved, standardised methodology to assess different aspects of a trail against the criteria set out in this document. The assessment process includes identification of where the criteria have not been met, together with other recommendations for improvement. Trails which meet the required criteria will be added to the National Trails Register and included on the Sport Ireland Outdoors website. Periodic reassessment against the criteria, using the same process is required to stay on the register.

1.4 Key components for a successful Water Trail

International benchmarking and engagement with the outdoor recreation sector in Ireland have identified the following key components of a water trail⁴:



³ At the time of writing, the insurance policy can potentially cover Water Trail infrastructure at access or egress points developed on private land – for example a canoe step developed on private land with agreement with landowner. This insurance policy does not include insurance for the waterway used to connect the access/egress points.

⁴ In recognition that many trail developers/managers will be responsible for many types of trails, Sport Ireland has made a conscious effort to provide a level of consistency in approach when developing criteria for trails i.e. walking, cycling, horse riding and water.



FOUNDATION COMPONENTS

Those which apply to all Water Trail types:

Safety – potential safety issues have been identified, assessed and appropriate action taken to reduce, monitor and manage risk

Access Agreement – access is formally agreed with all relevant landowners, waterways / navigation authorities and rights holders

Environmental Sustainability – the impact on the environment has been considered and effective / approved mitigations to protect the environment have been put in place

Trail Management – there are management structures, plans and processes in place to ensure the trail can continue to meet the required standard

Visitor Information, Signage and Trail Experience – the visitor can make an informed choice as to the trail's suitability and find and explore the trail with confidence. If desired, the trail has provided additional elements to provide a 'Water Trail Plus' Experience



ACTIVITY SPECIFIC COMPONENTS

Those with specific considerations for each Water Trail type:

Trail Design & Infrastructure – the trail design is appropriate to the intended user and trail infrastructure follows best practice.

2



Criteria Checklist

This table is provided as a checklist to assist developers to view the criteria in its entirety, however a separate document will provide more detail regarding the National Trails Register registration process.

FOUNDATION COMPONENT			
SAFETY <i>Potential safety issues have been identified, assessed and appropriate action taken to reduce, monitor and manage risk</i>	YES	NO	
A detailed risk assessment has been undertaken by a person with the necessary expertise			
Mitigations are in place to address safety issues			
ACCESS AGREEMENT <i>Access is formally agreed with all relevant landowners, waterways / navigation authorities and rights holders</i>	YES	NO	N/A
Harbour/Navigation Authority permission in place			
Landowner permission in place for access and development			
Riparian Rights Holder – consultation undertaken			
Sporting/Fishing Rights Holder – consultation undertaken			
ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY <i>The impact on the environment has been considered and effective / approved mitigations to protect the environment have been put in place</i>	YES	NO	N/A
Evidence the impact on natural heritage has been assessed and where relevant, consultation with and approval from the appropriate statutory body can be demonstrated			
Evidence the impact on built heritage has been assessed and where relevant, consultation with and approval from the appropriate statutory body can be demonstrated			
Evidence of consultation and approval from Inland Fisheries Ireland			
Proactive measures are in place to stop the spread of invasive species and harmful pathogens			
A Litter Management Plan is in place			
The ‘Leave No Trace’ Principles are incorporated within visitor information			

FOUNDATION COMPONENT			
TRAIL MANAGEMENT <i>There are management structures, plans and processes in place to ensure the trail can continue to meet the required standard</i>	YES	NO	
A Trail Management Organisation should be in place to effectively manage, monitor and maintain the trail.			
A documented Trail Management Plan must be in place which defines the key tasks, procedures and responsibilities for managing, monitoring and maintaining the trail			
A robust process for recording and retaining trail management actions is in place			
VISITOR INFORMATION, SIGNAGE AND TRAIL EXPERIENCE <i>The visitor can make an informed choice as to the trail's suitability, find and explore the trail with confidence. If desired, the trail has provided additional elements to provide a 'Water Trail Plus' Experience</i>	YES	NO	N/A
Pre-Visit Information - The visitor should be able to easily access pre-visit information online			
Directional Signage - The visitor should be able to find the main entry trailheads from the nearest town			
Trailhead Entrance Identifier Sign - The visitor should be able to clearly identify the main trailhead entrance			
Trailhead Information Panel - The visitor should be able to easily access key information regarding the trail			
On-Trail Safety Signage - On-trail signage is positioned as required			
Experience - Toilet and changing facilities (optional) - available within close proximity to water-based trail heads			
Experience - Equipment Storage (optional) - adequate facilities are in place for equipment storage			
Experience - Eateries and Attractions (optional) - Bars, Cafés, restaurants and attractions are easily accessible from trail heads and/or trails			
Experience - Guided Experiences & Equipment Hire (optional) - Guided activity experiences appropriate for 'dabblers' are available and can be booked in advance. Equipment hire is also available for more experienced trails users. A programme is in place for activity providers to demonstrate their safety credentials			

ACTIVITY SPECIFIC COMPONENTS		
PADDLING	YES	NO
Paddling Trail Grading – A Paddling Trail Grading has been accurately assessed and applied		
Route Design – The route design fulfils the minimum criteria and is suitable for the intended user		
Trail Infrastructure – all trail infrastructure fulfils the minimum criteria		
SNORKELLING	YES	NO
Snorkelling Trail Grading – A Snorkelling Trail Grading has been accurately assessed and applied		
Route Design – The route design fulfils the minimum criteria and is suitable for the intended user		
Trail Infrastructure – all trail infrastructure fulfils the minimum criteria		
Interpretation – is available on marine life which will be encountered including guidance on responsible behaviour		
DINGHY CRUISING	YES	NO
Trail Grading - The Dinghy Cruising Trail Grading has been accurately assessed and applied		
Route Design - The route design fulfils the minimum criteria and is suitable for the intended user		
Trail Infrastructure – all trail infrastructure fulfils the minimum criteria		
OPEN WATER SWIMMING	YES	NO
Trail Grading - The Open Water Swimming Trail Grading has been accurately assessed and applied		
Route Design - The route design fulfils the minimum criteria and is suitable for the intended user		
Trail Infrastructure – all trail infrastructure fulfils the minimum criteria		

3



Foundation Components

3.1 Safety

Safety – potential safety issues have been identified, assessed and appropriate action taken to reduce, monitor and manage risk

The safety of those engaging with Water Trails is of paramount importance, therefore a robust approach to identifying and assessing risk is required. It is essential to apply mitigations which are appropriate to the ability and experience of the end user and the environment. In all circumstances there should be ‘no hidden surprises’ that have the potential to cause harm or injury.

This section sets out the approach to risk assessment and is further guided by specific sections for each Water Trail Type. The approach to visitor safety is guided by the principles and practice set out by the [Visitor Safety Group \(VSG\)](#).

3.1.1 Safety/Risk Assessment - Context

3.1.1.1 Balancing Risk & Benefit

The VSG states *‘Visitor safety management is about balancing benefits and risks to provide overall benefit to society and individuals. It is not about creating a totally risk-free society or stopping important recreational and learning activities where the risks are considered and accepted.’*

VSG attests that by following their principles it should be possible to:

- achieve acceptable levels of safety using risk controls that do not harm the environment or reduce the value to society of our coasts and countryside
- promote enjoyable access
- meet our moral and legal obligations
- use risk control solutions that comply with statutory requirements
- achieve cost-effective visitor safety management
- reduce costs, including those from claims.

3.1.1.2 Why managing visitor safety is important

The VSG outlines key reasons⁵ as to why visitor safety is important, and these have been set in context to Water Trails:

Moral - First and foremost we want our visitors to return home safe, happy and satisfied with their experiences. We have a moral obligation to consider their safety and protect them from unnecessary or unreasonable risk. We also need to ensure that they do not feel overprotected. We must consider their right to willingly accept the risks that might come with the benefits they are seeking.

Legal - We have legal duties to ensure the safety of those who are affected by our work – our visitors. See Occupiers' Liability (Appendix A)

Financial - People affected by accidents often look for someone to blame and want to claim compensation. We want to be able to defend unreasonable claims. There is often a clamor for something to be done after an accident. We need to be in a strong position to resist the introduction of inappropriate or excessive safety measures. We can then avoid creating unwelcome precedents and incurring unnecessary costs.

Reputation and Authority - An entirely risk-free environment is not achievable or desirable. However, we must be able to demonstrate to the public, regulators and government that we have done all that is reasonably practicable to manage risks down to acceptable levels. If there is a major accident, we are then in a much better position to retain trust.

⁵ <https://www.visitorsafety.group/principles/>



Retention – We want to attract, satisfy and in turn retain visitors to the outdoors. We may have different priorities for developing a Water Trail (e.g. healthier lifestyles, social interactions and economic development, however, in each circumstance it is important to create an appropriately safe environment to attract visitors.

Visitor Information - We need to be sure that our visitor information (and if relevant promotional material) provides a balanced view of risk.

3.1.1.3 VSG Guiding Principles

The VSG Guiding Principles emphasise the importance of conservation, access and personal enjoyment in the countryside and the need to find a balance between safety and these wider objectives. The principles also underpin the balance between the personal responsibility of the visitor and the responsibility of the landowner or manager.

FUNDAMENTALS	AWARENESS	PARTNERSHIP	RESPONSIBILITY	RISK CONTROL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take account of conservation, heritage, recreation, cultural and landscape objectives. • Do not take away people’s sense of freedom and adventure. • Avoid restrictions on access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that your visitors know the risks they face • Inform and educate your visitors about the nature and extent of hazards, the risk control measures in place, and the precautions that they should take. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise that people taking part in similar activities accept different levels of risk • Recognise that risk control measures for one visitor group may create risks to others • Work with visitor groups to promote understanding and resolve conflict. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important to strike a balance between visitor self-reliance and management intervention • It is reasonable to expect parents, guardians and leaders to supervise people in their care • It is reasonable to expect visitors to exercise responsibility for themselves • It is reasonable to expect visitors not to put others at risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess risks and develop safety plans for individual sites • Risk control measures should be consistent • Risk control measures should take account of wider benefits to society • Monitor the behaviour and experiences of visitors to review visitor safety plans • Make sure that your work activities do not expose visitors to risk



3.1.1.4 VSG Risk Control Spectrum

The VSG Risk Control Spectrum (see Appendix E) also provides a useful guide to assist decision making in striking the balance between visitor self-reliance and management intervention. This is particularly relevant when considering different approaches to risk management as Water Trails are developed in more challenging waters.

The general premise is that as the location becomes more remote and terrain more rugged, the level of visitors' skill and self-reliance should be more advanced. It is reasonable to expect visitors to have greater knowledge and awareness of risks and take more personal responsibility for their own safety. At the same time, the level of management intervention required would decrease and fewer physical safety measures will be provided.

As the location and terrain become more developed, there will generally be higher visitor numbers and the level of management intervention would increase, although the relationship is not always this straightforward.

This approach also states it is reasonable to expect:

- Parent, guardians and leaders to supervise people in their care – albeit they may need to be informed of unexpected or hidden risks
- Visitors to exercise responsibility for themselves
- Visitors not to put others at risk

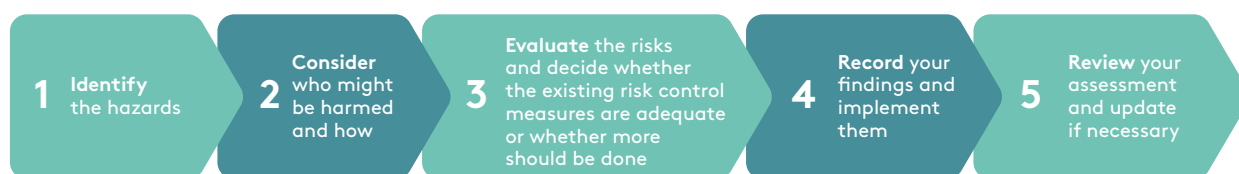
Zoning – the level of management intervention can vary within a Water Trail. This is explored further via the approach to grading each trail type. For example, as the visitor journeys along a Water Trail there may be a gradual transition in intensity from very sheltered waters to challenging waters. Whilst the visitor should be informed of this risk in advance, the management approach may also be to divide the trail into zones to prioritize the focus of management effort.

Limitations - The risk control spectrum is a simplified model to aid thinking. It does not cover all eventualities. For example, adverse weather conditions can make visiting any terrain more hazardous.

3.1.2 Safety/Risk Assessment – Application

» A detailed risk assessment has been undertaken by a person with the necessary expertise.

The development and refinement of any Water Trail must be informed by a risk assessment. If the identified risk is considered unacceptable for the intended user of the trail, it may be necessary to look for an alternative route. It is critically important that the risk assessment is undertaken by someone with the necessary expertise i.e. demonstrable experience of having undertaken the task previously and a strong understanding of the activity type e.g. paddling.



Hazard - is there anything with the potential to cause harm. This will include:

- Inherent Hazard i.e. a hazard caused by a permanent feature e.g. weir or rip tide
- Potential Hazard i.e. a hazard which may be temporarily caused e.g. heavy rainfall, engineering works
- Infrastructure Hazard i.e. a hazard which may be caused by an item of infrastructure which is either defective or impacted by the conditions (e.g. a slippery jetty or pontoon)

Risk - is the likelihood, high or low, that somebody will be harmed by the hazard, the severity of the harm and the number of people who might be hurt

Risk Control Measures - are precautions to make an incident less likely to occur and/or the results less severe.

A sample risk assessment template has been provided in Appendix A.

» Mitigations are in place to address safety issues

A Water Trail wishing to be listed on the National Trails Register must have addressed all safety issues. In addition, a stated timeline for a review of risk assessment must be provided.

3.2 Access Agreement

Access Agreement – access is formally agreed with all relevant landowners, waterways/navigation authorities and rights holders

To be sustainable, it is critical a recreational trail is developed through consultation, agreement and formal permission from all relevant landowners, waterways/navigation authorities and rights holders.

3.2.1 Agreement/Permission

» A formal documented agreement should be in place with all relevant landowners (public and private) and those with authority and/or rights to the waterway.

These can be divided into four categories:

Harbour/Navigation Authorities – They are responsible for navigation along the waterway and landing rights (to property they own), therefore permission will be required to use the waterway for your intended purpose. They may also own land/property or rights along the waterway so the relevant points below should also be considered.

Landowners (Public and Private) – They own land on the shores/bank of the waterway. Permission will be required to:

- use existing access and egress points on land which they own/manage
- undertake development of new access and egress infrastructure on land which they own/manage
- install additional signage/visitor information

Riparian Rights – Riparian rights may come into effect when a body of water flows through or abuts land. A riparian owner has a right of access to a waterway on their land and this may be exercised for the purpose of navigation. The ownership does not relate to the water rather the bed of that section of the waterway and the airspace through which the water flows. Therefore, a riparian rights holder can prevent access to that section of waterway and permission should be secured.

The following points are worthy of note:

- In the case of a river, it is assumed the riparian ownership extends to the middle of the river, therefore in the scenario of a different person owning each side of the river they will have rights to their respective side of the river. However, they have the right to navigate both sides.
- In the case of a larger waterway such as a small lake, it is assumed the rights are separated in wedges linking the owned shoreline to the middle of the lake. The rights owners have rights to navigate the entire lake.
- The riparian rights can be separated from land owning rights, therefore one landowner could purchase/transfer rights to the other half of the river or other wedges on a lake
- The riparian rights are often separate from sporting/fishing rights – see below



Sporting/Fishing Rights – These can be owned by private individuals, state agencies or groups such as angling clubs. It is often the case that rights holders should not be hindered or prevented from exercising their rights, therefore permission should be sought.

It is recognised that it can be difficult to establish the Riparian Rights and Sporting/Fishing Rights of waterways as often these are not accurately documented. Therefore, in this circumstance the trail developer must provide adequate opportunity for those holding rights to engage regarding proposals. This may be in the form of a public consultation workshop(s), drop-in meetings, providing the information in a public place (e.g. town hall or leisure centre) or website. Each engagement opportunity should be well advertised through relevant channels in advance. It is ultimately the responsibility of the trail developer to ensure they are content with their actions in this area.

3.2.2 Advisory Note - Consultation

Consultation should be undertaken from the outset of the project. It is advisable to do so prior to communication to the wider public otherwise there is the potential to damage future relationships. It is essential to consult and gain agreement with landowners and rights holders on which physical development or navigation will take place (see above re approach regarding riparian/sporting/fishing rights)

This agreement must be documented and signed by the relevant parties. Public bodies will often have their own processes which will have to be followed. Agreements should be clear and unambiguous – they may relate to:

- permissive access – use of navigation, access to existing infrastructure, access to new infrastructure
- development – construction of new infrastructure

Agreement should include:

- duration of agreement and any review schedule
- legal status e.g. MOU, permissive agreement, licence, lease etc
- purpose of use e.g. Water Trail access point for non-motorised craft
- who will be allowed to use the trail
- exclusions – e.g. periods the trail cannot be used e.g. spawning season
- accurate description/drawing of capital works (if required)



3.3 Environmental Sustainability

Environmental Sustainability – the impact on the environment has been considered and effective / approved mitigations to protect the environment have been put in place

Water Trails provide an excellent way to engage with natural and built heritage assets. It is therefore essential that as a minimum Water Trail development and management avoids any negative impact on the environment. Fundamentally, the maintenance of a high level of water quality is vital to the success of a Water Trail. In addition, the Water Trail can add to or improve the environment e.g. through education and appropriate access.

3.3.1 Natural Heritage

» **Evidence the impact on natural heritage has been assessed and where relevant consultation with and approval from the appropriate statutory body can be demonstrated**

The impact on the following should be considered:

EU Natura 2000 Designations – Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protected Areas (SPAs), RAMSAR

National Designations – Natural Heritage Area (NHAs), Nature Reserves and National Parks

Other Protections – In addition to the aforementioned designations there are a range of other habitats / species of high conservation value which must be considered

Further guidance on the process and level of environmental assessment required is provided by [National Parks and Wildlife Service](#)

3.3.2 Built Heritage

» Evidence the impact on built heritage has been assessed and where relevant consultation with and approval from the appropriate statutory body can be demonstrated

The impact on the following designation should be considered:

● **Monuments protected in the following ways:**

- Recorded in the Record of Monuments and Places
- Registered in the Register of Historic Monuments
- National monument subject to a preservation order (or temporary preservation order).
- National monument in the ownership or guardianship of the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht or a Local Authority.
- Guidance is provided by [National Monuments Service](#)

● **Archaeological sites** listed under [Archaeological Survey of Ireland's Site and Monuments Database](#)

● **Protected Structures** – these are listed in each Local authority area within the [Register of Protected Structures](#)

3.3.3 Inland Fisheries Ireland

» Evidence of consultation and approval from Inland Fisheries Ireland

Where any trail development works are proposed alongside, or close to, a river, lake or watercourse, consultation should take place with Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI). A new slipway, quay or canoe step at a watercourse should also be discussed with IFI, who can advise on precautions to be taken to prevent any discharges of silt or soil.

Inland Fisheries Ireland has developed a [Guidance Document to the IFI Environmental Assessment Process](#) describing the process and procedures in place within IFI to facilitate development and conservation works within Ireland's inland and coastal waters.

3.3.4 Biosecurity and Invasive Alien Species

» Proactive measures are in place to stop the spread of invasive species and harmful pathogens

Invasive Species Ireland highlights that invasive non-native plant and animal species are the second greatest threat to biodiversity worldwide, after habitat destruction. They can negatively impact on

native species, can transform habitats and threaten whole ecosystems causing serious problems to the environment and the economy. Fundamentally, they can be highly detrimental to the key asset on which the Water Trail is dependent i.e. water quality.

It is essential Water Trails undertake proactive measures to stop the spread of invasive species and harmful pathogens. A biosecurity plan is therefore essential and should be incorporated within a Trail Management Plan (see Section 3.4.2).

It should be recognised that the typical Water Trail visitor is mobile i.e. small kayaks, canoes, stand up paddle boards etc are more likely to cross between catchments and various water bodies on a much more regular basis than general waterway users. It is also recognised that kayakers, canoeists, stand up paddle boarders have direct contact with the water and this can result in them inadvertently becoming a carrier of aquatic invasive alien species.

The overriding principle regarding biosecurity is that prevention is better than cure therefore awareness, education and training are key to successful biosecurity action planning within water catchments. This is an area that requires relevant expertise, an initial contact point for advice and guidance should be Waters and Communities Office – Community Water Officers

3.3.5 Litter/Waste

» A litter management plan is in place

Litter and waste (including dog foul) left at access/egress points and along a trail will detract from the users' experience and has a significant detrimental impact on the environment. The route should be kept free from litter, broken glass and fly-tipped waste.

A litter monitoring and pick up plan must be included in the Trail Management Plan. The schedule for this may need to be more frequent if there is a littering problem or at times of high usage.

3.3.6 Environmental Education/Awareness

» The 'Leave No Trace' Principles are incorporated within visitor information

As a minimum Water Trail developers should incorporate the Leave No Trace Principles within information boards. However, it is recommended Leave No Trace Awareness Sessions should be offered to key stakeholders. These can be tailored according to the waterway, for example Leave No Trace Ireland has recently developed a 'Watersports Skills and Ethics' and 'Waterways Skills and Ethics' to complement the original mainstay edition.

3.4 Trail Management

Trail Management – there are management structures, plans and processes in place to ensure the trail can continue to meet the required standard

To ensure a Water Trail continues to maintain the high standard set out at launch, it is essential an effective trail management organisation/structure is in place to deliver a defined management plan for the monitoring and maintenance of the trail.

3.4.1 Trail Management Organisation

» **A Trail Management Organisation should be in place to effectively manage, monitor and maintain the trail.**

The scale of the trail management organisation should be appropriate to the requirements of the Water Trail. In most circumstances, the trail management organisation will be formed during the development stage – it is therefore important it is able to draw upon appropriate watersports expertise to inform both stages.

The management organisation may be subsumed within a pre-existing organisation or due to the geographic nature of Water Trails, trail management may involve a range of organisations. In this circumstance a partnership should be formalised via a mechanism such as a partnership agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). In all circumstances there must be a defined lead contact for each Water Trail.

3.4.2 Trail Management Plan

» **A documented Trail Management Plan must be in place which defines the key tasks, procedures and responsibilities for managing, monitoring and maintaining the trail.**

A Trail Management Plan should include (but limited not to):

- Roles and Responsibilities within trail management organisation
- Map of Trail and Inventory of infrastructure, signage, waymarking, counters etc.
- Risk Assessment – see Safety – section 3.1
- Inspections
 - Schedule of Inspections – routine, operational and additional (e.g. following adverse weather, reported incident or accident)
 - Inspection templates – including hazard identification, risk rating and priority for action
 - Process for Random Fault Reporting (by stakeholder or member of public)
- Maintenance – template for recording maintenance undertaken
- Incident & Accident Reporting by stakeholders or members of the public
- Communication – process for communicating diversions, closures, exceptional events etc.

- Emergency Services Plan
- Biosecurity plan – outlining proactive measure to stop the spread of invasive species and harmful pathogens
- Review Process and regularity

Additional Items – may include:

- Marketing Plan
- Event Management Plan

3.4.3 Record Keeping

» **A robust process for recording and retaining trail management actions is in place**

The retention of all records related to the trail is best practice and will potentially be critical as a form of defence in the event of a claim for an injury on a trail. It is the condition of the National Trails Insurance Policy that for cover to be eligible a trail has in place:

'...a system for ongoing maintenance and monitoring of the trail managed locally by the Trail Management Organisation. Any safety issues found or reported must be prioritised and addressed accordingly. Documented records of all monitoring or work carried out on the trail must be retained by the management organisation.'

Documented and dated records related to the management of a trail should include:

- Risk Assessment – including any reviews and rationale for same
- Inspections & Findings
- Maintenance and/or repair work
- Accident/Incident Reports – including record of any resulting investigation/action
- Specific decisions made by Trail Management Organisation

3.5 Visitor Information, Signage & Trail Experience

Visitor Information, Signage & Trail Experience – the visitor can make an informed choice as to the trail’s suitability, find and explore the trail with confidence. If desired, the trail has provided additional elements to provide a ‘Water Trail Plus’ Experience

3.5.1 Visitor Information and Signage

The approach to visitor Information and signage should follow the model below with the information consistent within each level:



3.5.1.1 Pre-visit Information

» The visitor should be able to easily access pre-visit information online

The trail developer will inevitably wish to provide online information to attract visitors to their trail and this should be encouraged. However, the focus of this criteria is to ensure the online information is adequate to allow the visitor to make an informed choice as to the trail's suitability and also allow them to plan their trip with confidence.

As a minimum, the online pre-visit information should reflect:

- **Directions** - A link showing the trail start point (trailhead) on an interactive internet map which can provide directions (e.g. Google Maps) to allow potential users to find the trail
- **Map** – An up-to-date map or chart⁶ clearing showing
 - A clear legend of symbols
 - A scale plus kilometre marker
 - A north pointer
 - The complete trail section⁷
 - Start and Finish Locations
 - All defined access & egress points
 - Location of obstructions, hazards or increase in difficulty
- **Trail Grading** – the appropriate trail grading table – in the case of trails with multiple grades these should be portrayed on the map
- **Trail Description detailing:**
 - Named Access & Egress Point
 - Distance Km
 - Duration
 - Concise Description of what to expect, appropriate information on potential hazards and variable conditions
- **Length of Trail** – from start to finish and between each access/egress point (in km)
- **Biosecurity information** – Check - Clean - Dry
- **Leave No Trace Principles** – or other appropriate robust guidance
- **Method for visitor feedback** – online form/email/phone number
- **Contact Details for Enquiries** - email/phone number
- **Further Info** – excellent information is available from:
 - RNI
 - Water Safety Ireland
 - Canoeing Ireland – Main Website
 - Canoeing Ireland – Get Ireland Paddling
 - Irish Sailing
 - Diving Ireland
 - Swim Ireland – Open Water Swimming

⁶ It should be made clear the map/chart provided is for visitor information and is intended to be used in conjunction with the relevant official map or chart

⁷ For paddling and dinghy cruising trails this should be a line however sites incorporating snorkelling may indicate areas

- [Swim spots app](#)
- [Swim Ireland Me and the water website](#)⁸
- [Tide Times](#) (where relevant)
- [Weather Forecast](#)
- [Water Temperatures](#)

3.5.1.2 Directional Signs to the Water Trail

» The visitor should be able to find the main entry trailheads from the nearest town(s)

- Directions to the main entry trailheads along the Water Trail should be signed. Signing should commence at the nearest town, village or junction with the nearest national road. Thereafter all junctions from the first sign en-route to the trailhead must be signed.
- Minor trailheads may be signed similarly to the main trailheads if required. The main trailheads should be easy to find however it may not be appropriate to provide directional signs from centres of local population and national roads to all of the trailheads due to sign costs as well as the risk of confusion where there are signs to multiple Water Trail entry points in the same area.
- Signs which are used on Public Roads in the Republic of Ireland should follow the guidelines within [DTAS Traffic Signs Manual](#)

3.5.1.3 Trailhead Entrance / Identifier Sign

» The visitor should be able to clearly identify the main trailhead entrance

In many cases, a trailhead entrance or identifier sign may be required to identify the trailhead/access points. The requirement for a trailhead information panel to be in close proximity to the water often means they can be hidden within busy car parks.

This trailhead entrance or identifier sign will therefore provide reassurance the visitor is in the right place. It should:

- be clearly visible to passing traffic
- not block visibility to those entering or exiting the site/car park
- never be used in place of a white on brown road sign/directional sign

⁸ If space allows all Swim Ireland websites should be included – if not they are provided here in priority order

3.5.1.4 Trailhead Information Panels

» The visitor should be able to easily access key information regarding the trail

Trailhead information panels should be:

- clearly visible from the car park
- positioned so as not to impact visitor flow i.e. visitors reading the panel should not disturb the flow of vehicles or people throughout the site

If a trailhead combines more than one type of trail it is good practice to separate the information relating to the individual activities e.g. one panel for a paddling trail and one panel for a dinghy cruising trail. An overview panel may be useful to provide insight into the spatial relationship of the component trails.

The trailhead information panels should be placed close to the water. If the access point is not obvious from the location of the trailhead information panel then additional directional signage may be required. Trailhead signage for water-based trails should include:

- **Map** – An up-to-date map or chart⁹ clearly showing
 - A clear legend of symbols
 - A scale plus kilometre marker
 - A north pointer
 - The complete trail section¹⁰
 - ‘You are Here’ pointer
 - Start and Finish Locations
 - All defined access & egress points
 - Location of obstructions, hazards or increase in difficulty
- **Trail Grading** – the appropriate trail grading table – in the case of trails with multiple grades these should be portrayed on the map
- **Trail Description detailing:**
 - Named Access & Egress Point
 - Distance Km
 - Duration
 - Short Description
- **Length of Trail** – from start to finish and between each access/egress point (in km)
- **Leave No Trace Principles*** – or other appropriate robust guidance
- **Biosecurity information*** – Check - Clean - Dry
- **Method for visitor feedback** – online form/email/phone number
- **Emergency services** – contact number (999 or 112)
- **Web URL or QR code** – linking to pre-visit information

Both Open Water Swimming and Snorkelling should include information on the importance of ascertaining water temperature.

⁹ It should be made clear the map/chart provided is for visitor information and is intended to be used in conjunction with the relevant official map or chart

¹⁰ For paddling, open water swimming and dinghy cruising trails this should be a line however sites incorporating snorkelling may indicate areas

It is recommended that trailhead panels have a secure updatable section to update visitors on frequently changing aspects for example events, trail closures, temporary hazards etc.

3.5.1.5 Water Based Trails – On-trail signage

» On-trail signage positioned as required

Signage along water-based trails should be kept to a minimum to prevent damaging the aesthetic environment. However, the following signs may be required:

- Colour coded indicator markers – indicating the safe or navigable heights of water levels at access points on river based Water Trails. These indicators may make use of existing structures such as bridges or slipway walls
- Flags or Windsocks – are useful to indicate wind strength/direction and also identify access/egress points from the water
- Confirmatory signs -are only to be used where essential, for example where there are multiple indistinct choices some of which have the potential to significantly undermine the Water Trail experience – for example routes around river islands



3.5.2 Trail Experience

If a trail delivers on the other components outlined in this document, it will provide a positive outdoor recreation experience for the end user. However, if Trail Developers wish to use the Water Trail within a tourism destination portfolio – it may wish to aspire the 'Water Trail Plus' Criteria. These are optional are do not form part of the National Trail Registration process.

3.5.2.1 Toilets and Changing Facilities

» Toilet and changing facilities are available within close proximity to water-based trail heads

The beginner or novice will have higher expectations for toilet and changing facilities than an enthusiast. Toilets and changing facilities should therefore be provided within close proximity to water-based trailheads.

Composting toilets offer an environmentally friendly solution and have lower construction costs with respect to power and effluent treatment, however care is required regarding positioning and they require occasional management especially in high use areas of the trail.

Given their likely proximity to a watercourse, non-composting type toilets will require either an advanced wastewater treatment system or a holding tank. The latter will require the on-going management of this wastewater. Chemical toilets should be a last resort option.



3.5.2.2 Equipment Storage

» Adequate facilities are in place for equipment storage

At least one trailhead or access point should provide a secure storage for equipment. This will typically be in partnership with a club or relevant organisation requiring a permanent base from which to operate their activities.

3.5.2.3 Eateries & Attractions

» Bars, Cafés, restaurants and attractions are easily accessible from trail heads and/or trails

Visitors should be able to access eateries and attractions preferably at trail heads and along the Water Trail. As a minimum they should be available within short walking distance. These should be clearly identified within visitor information.

It may be appropriate for trail heads located in a more rural setting to offer mobile catering options, although these should be sensitive to their setting.

3.5.2.4 Guided Experiences & Equipment Hire

» Guided activity experiences appropriate for 'dabblers' are available and can be booked in advance. Equipment hire should also be available for more experienced trail users. A programme is in place for activity providers to demonstrate their safety credentials.

Activity experiences which are appropriate to 'Dabblers' should be available and can be booked in advance.

Watersports/aquatic providers promoted by the trail management organisation should be externally accredited via the relevant National Governing Body and a programme should be in place to verify this.

- [Canoeing Ireland Registered Provider](#)
- [Irish Sailing Training Centre](#)
- Swim Ireland Registered Provider¹¹

Whilst the participants will be required to learn the basics to enjoy the experience in a responsible manner, it is important activity providers offer more than a 'splash and dash' watersports session. Guides should not only be technically competent but also able to confidently provide insights into the culture and heritage of the area. It is important all activities are bookable in advance and not restricted to bookings by large groups.

Equipment hire should also be available for more experienced trail users.

¹¹ This programme is under development

4

Activity Specific Components

The remainder of this document is focused on four specific trail types i.e.



The requirements for Route Design, Grading and Trail Infrastructure are different for each.



5



Paddling Trails



5.1 What is a Paddling Trail?

Building on the definition of Water Trails from Section 1.2, a Paddling Trail is a Water Trail undertaken by a person in a paddle craft. For the purposes of this criteria this includes Open Canoe, kayak and Stand Up Paddleboard (SUP).

It is recognised that Paddling Trails form a component part of many Blueways. This criteria does not aim to replace the current Blueway Accreditation Criteria rather it will further inform trail developers' approach to planning and delivery.

Paddling Trails can be used by a range of participants from 'Novice' i.e. those with little or no experience to 'Expert' i.e. those with extensive experience in challenging conditions.

5.2 Paddling Trail Grading

» A Paddling Trail Grading has been accurately assessed and applied

A Paddling Trail Grading has been developed to:

- Support Water Trail Developers in designing and developing trails to suit the most appropriate level of user
- Guide the approach to risk assessment and mitigation to suit the most appropriate level of user. For example, a strong tidal section or area of moving water may be appropriate for a trail used by an 'Intermediate' or 'Expert' but not a 'Novice'.
- Provide a pragmatic and meaningful method by which trail developers can convey the suitability of a trail to the participant
- Provide decision aids to the participant

The grading is based on information within Canoeing Ireland's Paddle Skill Awards and River Grading/Area Definitions.

A Water Trail may transition through a number of grades for example a canal (Simple Waters) may enter into a river with slow moving water (Moderate Water). This is an acceptable approach; however, the risk assessment would be required to identify mitigations such as pre-visit information, signage which informs the user in advance i.e. no hidden surprises.

Is this Paddling Trail for you? – Inland

General Description	Simple Waters – Beginner	Moderate Waters – Intermediate	Challenging Waters – Advanced
Suitable For	<p>Ability to Swim Essential</p> <p>Beginner/Novice – prior training with a club or operator is encouraged</p> <p>Never paddle alone – less than 3 (craft) there should never be</p>	<p>Ability to Swim Essential</p> <p>Beginner/Novice must be guided by an approved operator</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Those with an ability to undertake the following in the conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Paddle in straight line · Turn, Reverse, Stop · Undertake an on-the-water rescue of another paddling craft <p>Confident navigating with the use of a map</p> <p>Never paddle alone – less than 3 (Craft) there should never be</p>	<p>Ability to Swim Essential</p> <p>Beginner/Novice must be guided by an approved operator</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Those with an ability to undertake the following in the conditions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Paddle in straight line · Turn, Reverse, Stop · Undertake advanced strokes – sweep, draw, pry, brace, stern rudder, pivot turn · Undertake advanced techniques – ferry gliding, breaking in · Undertake an on-the-water rescue of another paddling craft <p>Rivers - An understanding of moving water – eddies, standing waves, v waves, stoppers and route selection</p> <p>Confident navigating with the use of a map</p> <p>Never paddle alone – less than 3 (Craft) there should never be</p>
Conditions	<p>Very Sheltered Inland Water</p> <p>Canals with bank side access and egress which have a minimum of commercial traffic</p> <p>Small Lakes which do not have difficult landing areas and which are not large enough for problems to occur if there is a sudden change in conditions</p> <p>Rivers – specific sites on slow moving rivers</p> <p>It is recommended paddlers stay within 50 metres of the shoreline and do not set out when the wind is blowing away from the shore/launch point</p>	<p>Sheltered Inland Water</p> <p>Rivers – Stationary or extremely slow-moving water without obstruction (Grade 1)</p> <p>Lakes (or sections of lakes) – with a distance of no more than 250m from shore to shore. These are classified as challenging waters when the wind is blowing away from the shore/launch point</p> <p>It is recommended paddlers stay within 50 metres of the shoreline and do not set out when the wind is blowing away from the shore/launch point</p>	<p>Moderate Inland Waters</p> <p>Rivers - The way down a river is clear but simple obstructions do exist. Small stoppers and small drops can be present. There are places where the flow accelerates. There is a choice of routes. (Grade 2)</p> <p>Lakes – Lakes of up to 3kms in diameter. Caution should be exercised while paddling on lakes of this size. The definition excludes conditions where there are offshore winds of above Force 4. (20-28 km/h)</p>

Contd.

General Description	Simple Waters – Beginner	Moderate Waters – Intermediate	Challenging Waters – Advanced
Equipment Required	<p>Craft Type:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Open Canoe · Kayak · Sit on Top · Stand Up Paddle Board <p>Buoyancy Aid or Lifejacket (CE /ISO Approved)</p> <p>A method of calling for help</p>	<p>Craft Type:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Open Canoe* · Kayak* · Sit on Top* · Stand Up Paddle Board · Rafts <p>Buoyancy Aid or Lifejacket (CE /ISO Approved)</p> <p>A method of calling for help</p> <p>*Inflatable versions of these craft are not recommended as they are more susceptible to cross winds and waves making them difficult to control in these conditions</p>	<p>Craft Type:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Open Canoe* · Kayak* · Sit on Top* · Stand Up Paddle Board · Rafts <p>Buoyancy Aid or Lifejacket (CE /ISO Approved)</p> <p>Helmet (for Grade 2 Rivers where obstructions exist)</p> <p>A method of calling for help</p> <p>*Inflatable versions of these craft are not recommended as they are more susceptible to cross winds and waves making them difficult to control in these conditions</p>

Watersports are potentially a hazardous activity carrying a significant risk. They should only be undertaken with a full understanding of all the inherent risk. These guidelines should be used in conjunction with the exercise of your own experience, intuition and careful judgement.

- Always check the weather forecast and water conditions first. Trail can change grading as the weather deteriorates. Care is advised when water temperatures and air temperatures are low.
- Never paddle alone – less than 3 (craft) there should never be
- Let someone know where you are going and what time you plan to return
- Prior training via relevant [Canoeing Ireland Skills Awards](#) is recommended

Is this Paddling Trail for you? – Sea

General Description	Moderate Waters – Intermediate	Challenging Waters – Advanced
<p>Suitable For</p>	<p>Ability to Swim Essential</p> <p>Beginner / Novice guided by an approved operator</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Those with an ability to undertake the following in the conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Paddle in straight line · Turn, Reverse, Stop · Undertake an on-the-water rescue of another paddling craft <p>Confident navigating with the use of a map</p> <p>Never paddle alone – less than 3 (craft) there should never be</p>	<p>Ability to Swim Essential</p> <p>Beginner / Novice guided by an approved operator</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Those with ability to undertake the following in the conditions and winds of up to Force 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Paddle in straight line · Turn, Reverse, Stop · Undertake advanced strokes – sweep, draw, pry, brace, stern rudder, pivot turn · Undertake advanced techniques – ferry gliding, breaking in · Undertake an on-the-water rescue of another paddling craft <p>Confident navigating with the use of a map</p> <p>Never paddle alone – less than 3 (craft) there should never be</p>
<p>Conditions</p>	<p>Sheltered Tidal Areas</p> <p>Enclosed harbours with a minimum of commercial traffic, enclosed on three sides.</p> <p>Small enclosed bays – enclosed on three sides</p> <p>Defined beaches - a short section of beach with easy landing throughout, no tidal races, or overfalls</p> <p>Estuaries - upper reaches of some suitable, slow moving, estuaries.</p> <p>It is recommended paddlers stay within 50 metres of the shoreline and do not set out when the wind is blowing away from the shore / launch point</p>	<p>Moderate Tidal Areas</p> <p>A stretch of coastline or estuary in close proximity to the shoreline with easy landing and not involving tidal streams, tidal races, or overfalls</p> <p>Upper reaches of some estuaries</p> <p>Winds above Force 3 (12-19 km/h) . Force 2 (6-11 km/h) if offshore, when the greatest of caution should be exercised.</p> <p>Open crossings of more than three kilometres are specifically excluded in this definition.</p>

Contd.

General Description	Moderate Waters – Intermediate	Challenging Waters – Advanced
Equipment Required	Craft Type: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Open Canoe* · Kayak* · Sit on Top* · Stand Up Paddle Board Buoyancy Aid or Lifejacket (CE/ISO Approved) A method of calling for help *Inflatable versions of these craft are not recommended as they are more susceptible to cross winds and waves making them difficult to control in these conditions	Craft Type: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Open Canoe* · Kayak* · Sit on Top* Buoyancy Aid or Lifejacket (CE/ISO Approved) A method of calling for help *Inflatable versions of these craft are not recommended as they are more susceptible to cross winds and waves making them difficult to control in these conditions

Watersports are potentially hazardous activities carrying significant risk and should only be undertaken with a full understanding of all the inherent risks. These guidelines should be used in conjunction with taking cognisance of personal experience, intuition and careful judgement.

- Always check the weather forecast and water conditions first. Trail can change grading as the weather deteriorates. Care is advised when water temperatures and air temperatures are low.
- Never paddle alone – less than 3 there should never be
- Let someone know where you are going and what time you plan to return

5.2.1 Paddling Trail Grading Caveats

As with all trail grading systems, a perfect system is not possible especially when trying to provide a compromise between detailed and succinct information. This system is designed with the following caveats.

- The grading is assessed by an appropriately skilled and experienced person
- As per section 3.1.1.5, it is reasonable to expect visitors to exercise responsibility for themselves and those under their supervision
- The grading should be used to inform a risk assessment but does not replace it. Users should continue to be advised of any 'hidden surprises'
- The classification is designed for the 'typical day' but it is acknowledged the grading of a particular body of water can change due to changes in the weather. Care is advised when water temperatures and air temperatures are low
- The trail developer and end user may need to be supported in their decision making by further information such as the [Beaufort Scale](#) or [Canoeing Ireland Paddle Skill Awards](#)
- The grading is deliberately written with a cautious approach and is aimed at those with less experience (i.e. those deemed more likely to engage with a Water Trail). Experienced paddlers will continue to undertake journeys on waterbodies which are beyond this grading.

5.3 Paddling Trail Guidelines

There are several components to consider when planning the trail and infrastructure – this section provides guidance on each.

5.3.1 Route/Trail:

» **The route design fulfils the minimum criteria and is suitable for the intended user**

- The trail should conform to the conditions within the relevant section of Paddling Trails Grading. A trail may have multiple grades provided the visitor is informed of this in advance
- A paddling trail must have a series of defined access/egress points – minimum of two
- The distance between access and egress points should be no more than 3km.
- All sections of the waterway must be unobstructed and passable. Small obstructions may exist on Challenging Waters Inland (Rivers), however a line choice should always be present
- Any significant hazards or obstructions must have a clear portage option with associated access and egress points

5.3.2 Trail Infrastructure

» All trail infrastructure fulfils the minimum criteria

Trailheads

These will typically be the formal entry point and the main location at which visitors are encouraged to access/egress the waterway

- On a linear river trail this will often be at the most logical upstream and downstream location – bookending the other access points.
- On coastal and inland lake trails – most Water Trail excursions will be looped. However, there may be several trailheads from which to begin and end a journey.

These trailheads will therefore have the highest volume of use and should adhere to the following minimum criteria:

- Parking
 - Off-road parking (off the public highway) for a recommended minimum of 10 spaces (including space for trailers)¹²
 - A Parking/Loading Bay near the water
- Information Panel – see Visitor Information and Signage 3.5
- Formal staging area i.e. a hard surface staging area (min 3m x 3m) outwith the car park to allow gathering of equipment and preparation
- Unrestricted and easy access from parking to water access
- Water access infrastructure should be fit for purpose, robust and safe at all points of water level
- Consideration of the requirements of activity operators

Access and Egress Points

Secondary access and egress points should adhere to the following minimum criteria

- Parking
 - Off-road parking for a recommended minimum of 5 spaces (including space for trailers)¹³
- Information Panel – see Visitor Information and Signage
- Formal staging area i.e. a hard surface staging area (min 3m x 3m) out-with the car park to allow gathering of equipment and preparation
- Unrestricted and easy access from parking to water access
- Water access infrastructure should be fit for purpose, robust and safe at all points of water level

Portages

Portages should be provided on inland trails where either the route on the Paddling Trail is impassable e.g., the presence of a dam or if the route is beyond the ability outlined in Paddling Trail Grading, e.g., the presence of a weir or rapid on a Simple Water Trail.

- The portage egress should be clearly identifiable from the waterway, either due to the visibility of infrastructure or if necessary appropriate signage. Where the egress for the portage is reasonably visible from the water, a small courtesy egress sign might be located at this site to provide reassurance to the Water Trail user.
- The portage route should be safe, as short as possible, clearly identifiable, have a suitable surface and an appropriate egress and access point to the water. Portage is not preferable on Simple or Moderate Waters.

Appendix B provides further recommendation

¹² The Water Trail Developer is tasked with determining the scale of the trailhead required

¹³ The Water Trail Developer is tasked with determining the scale of the trailhead required

6

Snorkelling



6.1 What is a snorkelling trail?

Building on the definition of Water Trails from Section 1.2, a Snorkelling Trail, as the name suggests, is a trail typically in a coastal environment which people explore with the aid of a snorkel, mask and fins. The guided or self-guided trail not only provides the opportunity to undertake the physical activity of snorkelling but also provides an opportunity to explore and learn about the ecosystem of the underwater world.

It is recognised that Snorkelling Trails form a component part of many Blueways. This criteria does not aim to replace the current Blueway Accreditation Criteria, rather it will further inform trail developers' approach to planning and delivery.

Snorkelling Trails can be used by a range of participants from 'Novice' i.e. those with little or no experience to 'Expert' i.e. those with extensive experience in more challenging conditions.

6.2 Snorkelling Trail Grading

» **A Snorkelling Trail Grading has been accurately assessed and applied**

A Snorkelling Trail Grading has been developed to:

- Support Water Trail Developers to design and develop trails to suit the most appropriate level of user
- Guide the approach to risk assessment and mitigation to suit the most appropriate level of user. For example, a strong tidal section or area of moving water may be appropriate for a trail used by an 'Intermediate' or 'Expert' but not a 'Novice'.
- Provide a pragmatic and meaningful method by which trail developers can convey the suitability of a trail to the participant
- Provide decision aids to the participant

The grading has been developed in conjunction with Diving Ireland. Reference is also drawn from the Diving Ireland Training and Standards Manual 2021.

A Snorkel Trail may transition through several grades e.g., an enclosed bay (Simple Waters) may continue onwards to an extended coastline (Moderate Water). This is an acceptable approach; however, the risk assessment would be required to identify mitigations such as pre-visit information, signage which informs the user in advance i.e. no hidden surprises.

Is this Snorkelling Trail for you?

General Description	Simple Waters – Beginner	Moderate Waters – Intermediate	Challenging Waters – Advanced
Suitable For	<p>Competent Swimmers with sufficient stamina to comfortably swim length of trail in the prevailing conditions</p> <p>Beginner / Novice – prior training with a club or operator is encouraged</p>	<p>Competent Swimmers with sufficient stamina to comfortably swim length of trail in the prevailing conditions</p> <p>AND</p> <p>Those with an ability to undertake the following in the conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To clear mask & snorkel whilst on the surface · To identify and understand the effects of currents, weather and water temperature on snorkeling activities · To be able if they or their companions are getting too cold know what steps to take · To understand key snorkeling hand signals · To walk, dive, swim and resurface using fins 	<p>Competent Swimmers with sufficient stamina to comfortably swim length of trail in the prevailing conditions</p> <p>AND</p> <p>Those with an ability to undertake the following in the conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To clear mask & snorkel whilst on the surface or underwater · To identify and understand the effects of currents, weather and water temperature on snorkeling activities · To use charts and maps to plan a snorkel trip · To be able if they or their companions are getting too cold know what steps to take · To understand key snorkeling hand signals · To walk, dive, swim and resurface using fins · To swim effectively below water using fins
Length/ Depth	<p>Length – Less than 1 km</p> <p>Depth – Less than 2 metres</p>	<p>Length – Less than 3 km</p> <p>Depth – Between 2 – 5 metres</p>	<p>Length – More than 3 km</p> <p>Depth – Greater than 5 metres</p>

Contd.

General Description	Simple Waters – Beginner	Moderate Waters – Intermediate	Challenging Waters – Advanced
Conditions	<p>Enclosed harbours with a minimum of commercial traffic, enclosed on three sides.</p> <p>Small enclosed bays – enclosed on three sides</p> <p>Defined beaches - a short section of beach with easy landing throughout, no tidal races, or overfalls</p>	<p>A stretch of coastline or estuary near the shoreline with easy landing and involving some tidal streams but not tidal races, or overfalls</p>	<p>A stretch of coastline or estuary near the shoreline with easy landing and involving tidal streams, but not tidal races, or overfalls</p>
Length/Depth	<p>Length – Less than 1 km</p> <p>Depth – Less than 2 metres</p>	<p>Length – Less than 3 km</p> <p>Depth – Between 2–5 metres</p>	<p>Length – More than 3 km</p> <p>Depth – Greater than 5 metres</p>

Watersports are potentially hazardous activities carrying significant risk and should only be undertaken with a full understanding of all the inherent risks. These guidelines should be used in conjunction with taking cognisance of personal experience, intuition and careful judgement.

- Always check the weather forecast and water conditions first. Trails can change grading as the weather deteriorates. Care is advised when water temperatures and air temperatures are low.
- Never snorkel alone – always use a buddy system
- Let someone know where you are going and what time you plan to return
- Prior Training via relevant [Diving Ireland Snorkelling Course](#) is recommended

6.2.1 Snorkelling Trail Grading Caveats

As with all trail grading systems, a perfect system is not possible especially when trying to provide a compromise between detailed and succinct information. This system is designed with the following caveats.

- The grading is assessed by an appropriately skilled and experienced person
- As per section 3.1.1.5, it is reasonable to expect visitors to exercise responsibility for themselves and those under their supervision
- The grading should be used to inform a risk assessment but does not replace it. Users should continue to be advised of any 'hidden surprises'
- The classification is designed for the 'typical day' however it is acknowledged the grading of a particular body of water can change due to changes in the weather. Care is advised when water temperatures and air temperatures are low
- The trail developer and end user may need to be supported in their decision making by further information such as the [Beaufort Scale](#) and [Water temperatures](#)
- The grading is deliberately written with a cautious approach and is aimed at those with less experience (i.e. those deemed more likely to engage with a Water Trail). Experienced snorkellers will continue to undertake journeys on waterbodies which are beyond this grading.

6.3 Snorkelling Trail Guidelines

There are several components to consider when planning the trail and infrastructure – this section provides guidance on each.

6.3.1 Route/Trail

» The route design fulfils the minimum criteria and is suitable for the intended user

- The trail should conform to the conditions within the relevant section of Snorkelling Trails Grading. A trail may have multiple grades provided the visitor is informed of this in advance
- A snorkelling trail must have at least one defined trailhead point from which the snorkeller will depart and return during a dive.
- An area may provide several trailheads from which snorkellers can undertake A to A journeys
- Areas with multiple forms of recreation activity and/or commercial boating activity should engage with key stakeholders to consider an approach to zoning activity. The principle of this is to define zones in which each activity can be undertaken without being detrimental to the other. This can be achieved through a combination of visitor information, signage and potentially buoys. In this instance the zone for snorkelling must be clearly defined on a map
- Whilst Snorkelling Trail Grading provides a criteria for length, it is more important to consider time in the water, especially for those who are less experienced. As snorkelling involves complete immersion, the time spent snorkelling will be very much dependent on air and water temperature conditions. It is advisable to plan for snorkels for novices/beginners that last no longer than 45 minutes.

- As a minimum, the Bathing Water Status must be classified as 'sufficient' in line with [Bathing Water Directive](#)¹⁴
- A key element of the snorkelling experience is to be able to sensitively view and explore underwater life in its natural environment – the trail should therefore provide the opportunity to do so.
- Where the trail is being developed for a festival or a similar event, consider buoying-off the trail to mark the way. This is not required for perennial snorkelling trails.

6.3.2 Trail Infrastructure

These guidelines assume the best use will be made of existing infrastructure, rather than incurring significant expense in new-build or costly investment.

» **All trail infrastructure fulfils the minimum criteria**

Trailheads

This will be the formal entry point and the main location at which visitors are required to access/egress the snorkel trail. These trailheads will therefore have the highest volume of use and should adhere to the following minimum criteria:

- Off-road parking (off the public highway) for a recommended minimum of 10 spaces
- Information Panel – see Visitor Information and Signage 3.5
- Formal staging area i.e. a staging area (min 3m x 3m) out-with the car park to allow gathering of equipment and preparation
- Unrestricted and easy access from parking to water access
- Entry and exit to and from the water should be possible at all stages of the tide, either via steps, a slipway or across a beach.
- Water access infrastructure should be fit for purpose, robust and safe at all points of water level
- Entry and exit to and from the water should also be possible at all stages of water flow conditions for river or lake snorkels.
- Avoid using entry and exit points that pass over seaweed covered rocks.
- If a working pier is being used, entry and exit should be well away from the working area of the pier or harbour.
- Consideration of the requirements of activity operators

¹⁴ It is recognised that the venue for the Snorkelling Trail may not be included with the Local Authority's testing regime. The trail developer should demonstrate they have undertaken an assessment of bathing water quality and have engaged with the local authority to include within future testing regimes.

6.3.3 Interpretation

» Interpretation is available on marine life which will be encountered including guidance regarding responsible behaviour

A key element of the snorkelling experience is to be able to sensitively view and explore underwater life in its natural environment.

It is therefore required that in addition to Visitor Information and signage outlined in Section 3.5, the snorkel trail should provide information (online, printed or information panel) to inform snorkellers of the underwater life they may encounter.

This information should also include guidance relating to responsible behaviour when snorkelling close to underwater life, as a minimum:

- Do not remove seaweed or animals from the rock or from their homes.
- Take care not to kick sea life with fins or stand on delicate animals.
- Observe animals where they live and don't take anything away with you.

6.4 Snorkelling Best Practice

The Snorkel Trails developed by the [Scottish Wildlife Trust](#) provide an example of good practice

7



Dinghy Cruising Trails



7.1 What is a dinghy cruising trail?

Building on the definition of Water Trails from Section 1.2, a Dinghy Cruising Trail is a Water Trail undertaken in a sailing dinghy or dayboat with a centreboard or lifting keel and transportable by car and road trailer.

Unlike the other Water Trails within this criteria, dinghy cruising trails are designed for those with a high level of experience and in the majority of cases, own their own dinghy or dayboat¹⁵. The aim of the Dinghy Cruising Trails is to provide a consistent platform to share local knowledge and encourage visitors to explore a new waterway with confidence. In, addition it may be used by sailing schools for passage elements of their training programmes.

7.2 Dinghy Cruising Trail Grading

» The Dinghy Cruising Trail Grading has been accurately assessed and applied

The Dinghy Cruising Trail Grading has been developed to:

- Support Water Trail Developers in designing and developing trails to suit the most appropriate level of user
- Guide the approach to risk assessment and mitigation to suit the most appropriate level of user
- Provide a pragmatic and meaningful method by which trail developers can convey the suitability of a trail to the participant
- Provide decision aids to the participant

In this scenario, as the grading is aimed at one level of user i.e. highly experienced, there is only one grade. It is still important to document this to assist in the definition of the criteria and to inform risk assessments. Even experienced sailors should not encounter hidden surprises.

¹⁵ To a lesser degree, Dinghy Cruising Trails will also be used by Irish Sailing Training Centres as part of their instructor led activities.

Is this dinghy cruising trail for you?

Suitable For	<p>Experienced dinghy/day boat sailors with ability and knowledge of how to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prepare and handle your craft in moderate winds (Force 4–11-16 knots) • undertake advanced techniques such as heave to, man overboard, towing another sailing boat • use an anchor • plan and undertake a passage in waters with which you are not familiar • source, understand and apply weather forecasts to your passage • identify principal day marks used in IALA A buoyage system and describe their significance • navigate with a chart and compass <p>For further detailed information consult Irish Sailing Small Boat Sailing Scheme – Adventure Skills</p>
Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inland - estuaries and large, deep lakes and loughs where the significant wave height could not be expected to exceed 1.2 metres at any time • Sea – estuaries, natural harbours, sounds and bays enclosed on three sides where you are not required to be more than 0.5 nautical miles from shore • In both circumstances there should be minimal commercial traffic
Equipment Required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seaworthy and suitable dinghy/dayboat • Anchor • A correctly sized lifejacket/buoyancy aid for everyone on board (CE/ISO Approved) • Appropriate personal clothing • First Aid Kit • A means of calling for help • Map/Chart and route description & compass

Watersports are potentially hazardous activities carrying significant risk and should only be undertaken with a full understanding of all the inherent risks. These guidelines should be used in conjunction with taking cognisance of personal experience, intuition and careful judgement. Please know and sail within your limits

- Always check the weather forecast and tide times first
- Let someone know where you are going and what time you plan to return

7.2.1 Dinghy Cruising Trail Caveats

As with all trail grading systems, a perfect system is not possible especially when trying to provide a compromise between detailed and succinct information. This system is designed with the following caveats.

- The grading is assessed by an appropriately skilled and experienced person
- As per section 3.1.1.5, it is reasonable to expect visitors to exercise responsibility for themselves and those under their supervision
- The grading should be used to inform a risk assessment but does not replace it. Users should continue to be advised of any 'hidden surprises'
- The classification is designed for the 'typical day' however it is acknowledged the grading of a particular body of water can change due to changes in the weather. Care is advised when water temperatures and air temperatures are low
- The trail developer and end user may need to be supported in their decision making by further information such as the Beaufort Scale and Water temperatures
- The grading is deliberately written with a cautious approach and is aimed at those with less experience (i.e. those deemed more likely to engage with a Water Trail). Experienced sailors will continue to undertake journeys on waterbodies which are beyond this grading.

7.3 Dinghy Cruising Trail Guidelines

7.3.1 Route/Trail

» **The route design fulfils the minimum criteria and is suitable for the intended user**

- The trail should conform to the Dinghy Cruising Trail Grading
- A Dinghy Cruising Trail should have at least one defined trailhead from which sailors will start and return
- The Dinghy Cruising Trail must provide a meaningful journey including points of interest easily viewable from the water, recommended anchoring points and/or recommended stop off points (jetties, quays, harbours, pontoons)
- The overall journey time should range between a half day (3 hours) to full day (6 hours)
- All sections of the waterway must be unobstructed and passable. Exclusion zones (potentially due to wildlife or commercial traffic) should be clearly identified on visitor information
- The Dinghy Cruising Trail should provide a pleasant cruising experience and therefore avoid:
 - commercial traffic (crossing of shipping lanes)
 - areas of significant tidal flow
 - areas which dry out and/or include shallows/rocks

7.3.2 Trail Infrastructure

» All trail infrastructure fulfils the minimum criteria

Trailheads

This will be the formal entry point and the main location at which visitors are required to access/egress the Dinghy Cruising Trail. These trailheads will therefore have the highest volume of use and should adhere to the following minimum criteria:

- Parking
 - Off-road parking (off the public highway) for a recommended minimum of 10 spaces (including space for trailers)¹⁶
 - A Parking/Loading Bay near the staging area to allow un-hitching/unloading
- Information Panel – see Visitor Information and Signage 3.5
- Formal staging/rigging area i.e. a hard surface staging area (min 10m x 10m) out-with the car park and in proximity to the water to allow gathering of equipment and preparation
- Unrestricted and easy access from parking to water access
- Slipway which is fit for purpose, robust, safe and accessible at all points of water level (or if tidal – times are provided indicating when the slipway is accessible) – further recommendations are included in Appendix C
- Preferably (not essential) a jetty, quay or pontoon (accessible at all points of tide) in close proximity to slipway which allows dinghies to moor alongside to facilitate loading and unloading
- Consideration of the requirements of activity operators

Egress Points

Secondary access and egress points are not an essential requirement but can add value to the Dinghy Cruising Trail by providing additional stop off points for lunch breaks etc. If included they should adhere to the following minimum criteria:

- Information Panel – see Visitor Information and Signage 3.5
- Jetty, pontoon or quay accessible at all points of water level (or if tidal – times are provided indicating when the slipway is accessible) which allows dinghies to moor alongside

Anchor/Mooring Locations

Anchor and Mooring Locations are not an essential but can add value to the Dinghy Cruising Trail by providing additional stop off points for lunch breaks etc. If included:

- Locations for anchoring/or where anchoring may not be permitted (e.g. environmental, shipping, privacy reasons) should be clearly identified on the visitor information map
- Visitor moorings should be clearly identified on visitor information map. It would add value to the trail if visitor moorings are located in sheltered locations to provide further stop off points along the trail.

7.3 Dinghy Cruising Trail Guidance

The [Dinghy Cruising Trails](#) developed by the Royal Yachting Association provide an example of good practice.

¹⁶ The Water Trail Developer is tasked with determining the scale of the trailhead required

8



Open Water Swimming Trails



8.1 What is an Open Water Swimming Trail?

Open water swimming is defined as any swimming not in a pool. Building on the definition of Water Trails from Section 1.2, an Open Water Swimming Trail, as the name suggests, is undertaken by a swimmer in a coastal or inland waterway environment. The guided or self-guided trail which not only provides the opportunity to undertake the physical activity of swimming but also provides an opportunity to explore and learn about the environment and heritage.

Open Water Swimming Trails can be used by a range of participants from 'Novice' i.e. those with little or no experience to 'Expert' i.e. those with extensive experience in more challenging conditions.

8.2 Open Water Swimming Trail Grading

» The Open Water Swimming Trail Grading has been accurately assessed and applied

An Open Water Swimming Trail Grading has been developed to:

- Support Water Trail Developers to design and develop trails to suit the most appropriate level of user
- Guide the approach to risk assessment and mitigation to suit the most appropriate level of user. For example, a coastal section may be appropriate for a trail used by an 'Intermediate' or 'Advanced' but not a 'Beginner'.
- Provide a pragmatic and meaningful method by which trail developers can convey the suitability of a trail to the participant
- Provide decision aids to the participant

The grading has been developed in conjunction with Swim Ireland and with cognisance of VSG Open Water Swimming Topic Guidance.¹⁷

¹⁷ <https://www.visitorsafety.group/topic-guidance/open-water-swimming/introduction/>

An Open Water Swimming Trail may transition through several grades e.g., an enclosed bay (Simple Waters) may continue onwards to an extended coastline (Moderate Water). This is an acceptable approach; however, the risk assessment would be required to identify mitigations such as pre-visit information, signage which informs the user in advance i.e. no hidden surprises.

Is this Open Water Swimming Trail for you?

General Description	Simple Waters – Beginner	Moderate Waters – Intermediate	Challenging Waters – Advanced
Suitable For	<p>Competent Swimmers with sufficient stamina to comfortably swim length of the trail in the prevailing conditions</p> <p>Those with the knowledge to apply cold water entry and acclimatization techniques to reduce the reaction to cold water shock</p> <p>Those with an understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Effect of weather and tides · Effects of cold-water immersion i.e. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cold shock - Hypothermia <p>Previous attendance at a Swim Ireland Open Water Safety Awareness Course is recommended</p>	<p>Competent Swimmers with previous open water experience (in the past six months) and sufficient stamina to comfortably swim the length of the trail in the prevailing conditions</p> <p>Those with the knowledge to apply cold water entry and acclimatization techniques to reduce the reaction to cold water shock</p> <p>Those with an ability and knowledge to apply the following in the conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To identify and understand the effects of currents, weather and cold water immersion on swimming activities · To be able if they or their companions are getting too cold know what steps to take <p>Previous attendance at a Swim Ireland Open Water Safety Awareness Course is recommended</p>	<p>Competent Swimmers with previous open water experience (in the past six months) and sufficient stamina to comfortably swim the length of the trail in the prevailing conditions</p> <p>Those with the knowledge to apply cold water entry and acclimatization techniques to reduce the reaction to cold water shock</p> <p>Those with an ability and knowledge to undertake the following in the conditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · To identify and understand the effects of currents, weather and cold water immersion on swimming activities · To be able if they or their companions are getting too cold know what steps to take <p>Previous attendance at a Swim Ireland Open Water Safety Awareness Course is recommended</p>
Length	Length – 700m < 1km	Length – 1km < 1.6km	Length – 1.6km < 3km
Conditions	<p>Within a designated bathing area with lifeguard provision in place at access point</p> <p>A designated zone or course will be indicated by buoys</p> <p>Sheltered Tidal Areas Enclosed harbours with a minimum of commercial traffic, enclosed on three sides.</p>	<p>Sheltered Tidal Areas</p> <p>A stretch of coastline or estuary near the shoreline with easy get out and involving some tidal streams but not tidal races, or overfalls Sheltered Inland Water</p> <p>Rivers – Stationary or extremely slow-moving water without obstruction</p>	<p>Sheltered Tidal Areas</p> <p>A stretch of coastline or estuary near the shoreline with easy get out and involving some tidal streams but not tidal races, or overfalls Sheltered Inland Water</p>

Contd.

General Description	Simple Waters – Beginner	Moderate Waters – Intermediate	Challenging Waters – Advanced
Conditions contd.	<p>Small enclosed bays – enclosed on three sides</p> <p>Defined beaches – a short section of beach with easy get out throughout, no tidal races, or overfalls</p> <p>Estuaries – upper reaches of some suitable, slow moving, estuaries.</p> <p>Very Sheltered Inland Water Canals with bank side access and egress which have a minimum of commercial traffic</p> <p>Small Lakes which do not have difficult get out areas and which are not large enough for problems to occur if there is a sudden change in conditions</p> <p>Rivers – specific sites on slow moving rivers</p>	<p>Lakes (or sections of lakes) – with a distance of no more than 250m from shore to shore. These are classified as challenging waters when the wind is blowing away from the shore/launch point</p>	<p>Rivers – Stationary or extremely slow-moving water without obstruction (Grade 1) Moderate Inland Waters</p> <p>Lakes – Lakes of up to 3kms in diameter. Caution should be exercised while swimming on lakes of this size. The definition excludes conditions where there are offshore winds of above Force 4. (20-28 km/h)</p>
Equipment Needed	<p>Essential</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A brightly-coloured silicone swim hat · Tow Float · Goggles · Ear plugs <p>Optional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Wetsuit · Neoprene Swim hat, gloves and/or boots · Swimming shoes · Change of clothes · Changing mat 	<p>Essential</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A brightly-coloured silicone swim hat · Tow Float · Goggles · Ear plugs <p>Optional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Wetsuit · Neoprene Swim hat, gloves and/or boots · Swimming shoes · Change of clothes · Changing mat 	<p>Essential</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A brightly-coloured silicone swim hat · Tow Float · Goggles · Ear plugs <p>Optional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Wetsuit · Neoprene Swim hat, gloves and/or boots · Swimming shoes · Change of clothes · Changing mat

Watersports are potentially hazardous activities carrying significant risk and should only be undertaken with a full understanding of all the inherent risks. These guidelines should be used in conjunction with taking cognisance of personal experience, intuition and careful judgement.

- Always check the weather forecast and water conditions first. Trails can change grading as the weather deteriorates. Care is advised when water temperatures and air temperatures are low.
- Never swim alone – always use a buddy system
- Let someone know where you are going and what time you plan to return

8.2.1 Open Water Swimming Trail Caveats

As with all trail grading systems, a perfect system is not possible especially when trying to provide a compromise between detailed and succinct information. This system is designed with the following caveats.

- The grading is assessed by an appropriately skilled and experienced person
- As per section 3.1.1.5, it is reasonable to expect visitors to exercise responsibility for themselves and those under their supervision
- The grading should be used to inform a risk assessment but does not replace it. Users should continue to be advised of any 'hidden surprises'
- The classification is designed for the 'typical day' however it is acknowledged the grading of a particular body of water can change due to changes in the weather. Care is advised when water temperatures and air temperatures are low
- The trail developer and end user may need to be supported in their decision making by further information such as the Beaufort Scale and Water temperatures
- The grading is deliberately written with a cautious approach and is aimed at those with less experience (i.e. those deemed more likely to engage with a Water Trail). Experienced swimmers will continue to undertake journeys on waterbodies which are beyond this grading.

8.3 Open Water Swimming Trail Guidance

There are several components to consider when planning the trail and trail infrastructure – this section provides guidance on each.

8.3.1 Route/Trail

» **The route design fulfils the minimum criteria and is suitable for the intended user**

- The trail should conform to the conditions within the relevant section of Open Water Swimming Trails Grading. A trail may have multiple grades provided the visitor is informed of this in advance
- An Open Water Swimming Trail trail must have at least one defined trailhead point from which the swimmer can depart and return during a swim i.e. an A to A journey
- Where land access permits (e.g.an existing walking route) Open Water Swimming Trails may provide an A to B experience by water with swimmers returning to A via land.
- Route design for longer trails should consider egress points to facilitate emergency or unplanned exits
- Areas with multiple forms of recreation activity and/or commercial boating activity should engage with key stakeholders to consider an approach to zoning activity. The principle of this is to define zones in which each activity can be undertaken without being detrimental to the other. This can be achieved through a combination of visitor information, signage and potentially buoys. In this instance the zone for swimming must be clearly defined on a map
- Simple Water – Beginner Trails should be located within designated bathing areas with lifeguard provision in place. The trail (zone or course) should be clearly identified using buoys.

- As a minimum, the Bathing Water Status must be classified as 'sufficient' in line with [Bathing Water Directive](#)¹⁹
- A key element of the open water swimming experience is to be able to sensitively view, explore and learn about the environment and heritage of the waterway – the trail should therefore provide the opportunity to do so.

8.3.2 Trail Infrastructure

These guidelines assume the best use will be made of existing infrastructure, rather than incurring significant expense in new-build or costly investment.

» **All trail infrastructure fulfils the minimum criteria**

Trailheads

This will be the formal entry point and the main location at which visitors are required to access/egress the Open Water Swimming Trail. These trailheads will therefore have the highest volume of use and should adhere to the following minimum criteria:

- Off-road parking (off the public highway) for a recommended minimum of 10 spaces
- Information Panel – see Visitor Information and Signage 3.5
- Formal staging area i.e. a staging area (min 3m x 3m) out-with the car park to allow gathering of equipment and preparation
- Unrestricted and easy access with a smooth surface underfoot from staging area to water access
- Entry and exit to and from the water should be possible at all stages of the tide, either via steps, a slipway or across a beach. Avoid using entry and exit points that pass over seaweed covered rocks.
- Water access infrastructure should be fit for purpose, robust and safe at all points of water level
- If a working pier is being used, entry and exit should be well away from the working area of the pier or harbour.
- Consideration of the requirements of activity operators
- Simple Water – Beginner Trails should have recognised lifeguard provision

The following items are also desirable:

- Digital water temperature gauge
- Changing Shelter/Area to sit on whilst getting changed
- Outside solar shower/tap to wash and rinse kit
- Hooks for hanging towel/robe on
- Fresh water tap
- Defibrillator

¹⁹ It is recognised that the venue for the Open Water Swimming Trail may not be included with the Local Authority's testing regime. The trail developer should demonstrate they have undertaken an assessment of bathing water quality and have engaged with the local authority to include within future testing regimes.

Appendices



Appendix A: Occupiers' Liability

Overview

The Occupiers' Liability Act 1995 (the "1995 Act") addresses the legal exposure of landowners and occupiers to claims arising from injuries to different types of users of a premises and the duty of care owed to those users.

Section 1 of the 1995 Act expressly confirms that a premises includes land, water and any fixed or moveable structures, and defines an occupier as "*a person exercising such control over the state of the premises that it is reasonable to impose upon that person a duty towards an entrant in respect of a particular danger*".

The extent of the duty of care of each occupier towards users is dependent on the degree of control the occupier has over the premises, the particular dangers on the premises, and whether the user is classified as a (i) visitor, (ii) recreational user or (iii) trespasser.

In the case of the water trails, local authorities will be the occupier/landowner in many cases along the water banks and entry points along Water Trails. In addition, users of the Water Trails will almost certainly be classified as "*recreational users*".

Where property of other landowners/occupiers is included within a Water Trail the Developer will need to make appropriate arrangements with such landowner/occupier including indemnification under the Developer's insurance.

What duty is owed to recreational users

A recreational user for the purposes of the 1995 Act is someone who is on the premises (which includes on water), with or without the occupier's permission or at the occupier's implied invitation, without a charge being imposed for the purpose of engaging in a recreational activity, such as sailing, sightseeing, kayaking etc.

The duty of care owed to a recreational user is lower than that owed to a visitor, but greater than that owed to a trespasser. In particular, section 4 of the 1995 Acts requires an occupier not to "*intentionally injure*" or act with "*reckless disregard*" for the recreational user. Although "*reckless disregard*" is not formally defined, the 1995 Act sets out a number of factors to be considered in determining whether an occupier would be considered as acting with reckless disregard in the particular circumstances.

Relevant factors are largely based on the state of knowledge of the occupier in relation to the dangers associated with the premises, and the protections the occupier should reasonably be expected to provide having regard to the difficulty, expense and impracticability of implementing those protections.

Other very relevant factors in the Water Trail context include the character of the premises with regard to the recreational activity, and the desirability of maintaining a tradition of open access, as well as the warnings issued by the occupier and the care reasonably expected to be taken by the recreational user.

The duty owed by occupiers to recreational users is an area that has been litigated frequently, and it is clear that the courts do not impose onerous burdens on occupiers where recreational users are involved, in particular where the social utility of the recreational use is high and the risks to the users is clear.

Conclusion

As both the social utility and the dangers inherent in recreational water-based activities are generally clear and obvious, recreational users will be reasonably expected to take particular care in that context. The duty of care imposed on occupiers in respect of recreational users in the context of the Water Trail projects may therefore be perceived as not being overly onerous.

In addition, the extent of protections that an occupier can be reasonably be expected to put in place on the Water Trails are limited, given the scope and extent of the waterways involved.

However, of course, this will be subject to each managed facility/Water Trail undertaking its own risk assessment and risk control exercise to ascertain individual preventative and protective measures.

All Water Trails developers should obtain independent legal/insurance advice from an appropriately qualified person in relation to their own developments. Furthermore, it is essential that appropriate warnings and water safety advice should be included and prominently featured in promotional materials, both printed and those available online and at each trailhead/entry way to the Water Trail to minimize the risk of a legal challenge.

Appendix B: Sample Risk Assessment Template

LOCATION

Activities taking place at this location

Visitor Safety Group - Risk Control Spectrum Classification

	Level of Visitor Use, Location and Terrain	Level of Visitor's Skill, Self-reliance and Personal Responsibility	Level and type of hazard management required
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Hazards	Who might be harmed?	How might they be harmed and factors affecting the likelihood?	Initial Risk Level Before control measures	Control Measures	Residual Risk Level After control measure introduced	Additional Control measures identified from implementation, monitoring and review
			Severity		Severity	
			Likelihood		Likelihood	
			Risk Level		Risk Level	
			Severity		Severity	
			Likelihood		Likelihood	
			Risk Level		Risk Level	

Appendix C: Paddling Trail Infrastructure - Further Recommendations

Car Parking

Car parking at trailheads should be within designated parking i.e. off the public highway.

It is the task of the Water Trail Developer to determine the scale of the trailhead. If an existing car park/amenity is being used it is important to consider the current volume of use, for example if the car park is already full on most weekends then additional provision will be required.

When developing new car parks, consideration should be given to the surface most appropriate to the setting. Products such as TRUCKPAVE provide useful alternatives to tarmac or gravel.

When designing a car park consider the following:

- the space required for the parking and navigation of vehicles and canoe trailers as well as their loading and offloading 'flow' requirements
- the nature of paddling activities (canoes, kayaks, stand up paddleboards) require the need for generous parking bays
- car park height restriction barriers can prevent inappropriate use, however these barriers should take into account the requirement for cars carrying canoes on roof racks or mini buses with trailers. A minimum height of 2m is required for cars, however a management process should be considered for when barriers are likely to prevent access.

Formal Staging Area

Formal staging areas are congregation spaces which facilitate the gathering of equipment in the trailhead close to the parking and en-route to the water access area.

Informal staging areas in the car park leads to the casual positioning of water-sports craft and equipment, the blocking of user flow as well as an increased potential for theft and slip, trips and falls. A three meter by three meter concrete or compacted gravel staging area should be sufficient.

Unrestricted and easy access from parking to water access

Passage between the water and the trailhead will typically require a short section of walking trail.

These trails should not act as drainage slopes as this can lead to erosion and the transfer of soil and other contaminants into the Water Trail. The following principles and criteria are suggested for such trails:

- The trail from the parking area to the launch should be a maximum of a 10% gradient
- Maximum trail cross slope 2%
- Resting intervals (max 3% slope), are required for trails in excess of 100 metres with a slope in excess of 5%. Especially at water egress trailheads
- No dips on trails or other features that increase the risk of ponding
- Minimum trail width of 2 metres
- Minimum overhead clearance of 2.5 metres
- Swing clearance on bends of 2 metres either side of the trail.

To prevent inadvertent entering into the water, fencing or margin vegetation planting between the trail/ car park and the water may be required.

Launch points should be fit for purpose, robust and safe at all typical points of water level

Launch points or water access points will often require bespoke solutions to the exact location. The following guidelines provide some recommended approaches:

- Existing in-situ facilities (when possible) should be used to facilitate the trail. This is preferential to constructing additional new infrastructure. However:
 - It should not be assumed that current infrastructure such as a pier, slipway, pontoon or jetty implies access for all water users. It may have been developed for a specific use e.g. anglers, ferries, fishing craft. Consultation and permission is therefore required
 - Existing infrastructure may require adaptations – for example standard floating pontoons can be difficult to use to exit from a kayak as the height of the pontoon from the water can be excessive. Dropped pontoons positioned lower to water level can be attached to alleviate this.
- The design and positioning of water access points must take into account prevailing conditions such as wind, tide, flow direction, varying water levels. The launch site should offer a calm environment to begin a Paddling Trail journey.

Infrastructure	Dimensions	Comment
<p>Access and Egress – landing stage heights</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Ideal Height of the landing stage above water - 300 mm or less · Maximum Height of the landing stage above water - 700 mm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Kayak steps are the most appropriate and cost effective where water levels fluctuate on rivers · A floating pontoon should be used where water levels fluctuate significantly · Heights above 600 mm may need to be supplemented by hand-holds at a lower height · Where there is significant water flow at the landing stage, heights should be closer to the ideal than the maximum · Beaches and slipways also provide suitable access and egress points, where they are uncovered at all stages of the tide, or are at typical lake water levels

Infrastructure	Dimensions	Comment
Access and Egress – landing stage platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Ideal Height of the landing stage above water - 300 mm or less · Maximum Height of the landing stage above water - 700 mm · Minimum landing stage platform Length - 800 mm, width - 300 mm · Ideal landing stage platform Length - 3 metres, width - 1.5 metres · Slope to and from the landing stage - ideally no more than 1:3 · Risers - typically 250 mm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Landing stage platforms should allow for the placing of the participants paddle on the shore, and facilitate the relatively ungainly body movement required in accessing and egressing the canoe/kayak
Access and Egress – landing stage obstructions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · 3 metres of unobstructed riverbank is recommended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Canoes/kayaks range in length from 1.6 to 2 metres
Access and Egress – landing stage surfaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The edge of the landing stage nearest the water should ideally be curved to a 50 degree radius 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Reduces fall injuries, and rubbing damage to canoe/kayaks
Canoe slides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The tie-off point on lowering stanchions should be higher than the highest point on the slide · Canoe slides should ideally be set at 45 degrees, however the bank's slope will dictate this · Access to either side of the canoe at the end of the slide is preferred · Wood or durable plastic should be used as the sliding surface · Sharp corners are to be avoided on all sliding areas · Slide designs should not facilitate sliding by individuals · Appropriate description and safety signage is required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Stanchions heights will typically be determined by the slide height · Canoes are primarily made of plastic and abrade readily on sharp surfaces · An overly shallow slope will require the pulling of the canoe downwards, due to the friction of the canoe on the slide surface · Open canoeists should be encouraged to carry painters (bow and stern ropes), each of which is at least the length of their boat, as painters facilitate the lowering of the canoe on slides
Portage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A portage of less than 100 metres is preferred 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Unladen open canoes weigh circa 20 kilos · You may wish to consider providing trolley wheels
Portage dimensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Open canoes are up to 6 metres long and 1 metre wide. All turning points on a portage must accommodate this, or facilitate the lifting of the craft 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · On land canoes can be raised at one end, in order to minimise their length when turning in tight spaces. However, their weight makes this manoeuvre difficult

Appendix D: Dinghy Cruising Trail Slipway - Further Recommendations

In the majority of circumstances, dinghy cruising trails will avail of existing slipway infrastructure rather than developing new facilities.

New slipway development should be lead by a suitably qualified and experienced engineer . However the following consideration are provided when designing new slipways or considering the use of existing slipways:

- **Sheltered location** - The slipway should be located in an area which does not allow waves to break on the face of the slipway or across the face
- **Avoid cross** – currents – water flowing sideways across a slipway can inadvertently cause people launching or recovering boats to be pulled of the side off the slipway
- **Suitable Slope** – Slopes between 7–12 degrees are preferable. Slopes less than 7 degrees can provide a challenge to sufficiently submerging a trailer to launch or recover larger sailing dinghies. Slopes more than 12 degrees can be unnecessary pressure on the towing vehicles
- **Avoid vertical drops** – slipways should avoid vertical drops into deep water at the end of slipway. The risk is people can inadvertently wade off the end of the slipway or trailer can become stuck on the ledge.
- **Grip** – Rough concrete provides a high friction surface for wheels and feet. A robust cleaning regime should be in place to avoid challenges with weed and algae
- **Signage** – The RNLI provide guidance for [signage at public slipways](#)

Appendix E: VSG Risk Control Spectrum





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