

Durham University Canoe Club

SAFETY POLICY

ISSUE 6

Issue Record

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Safety Policy

Canoeing is a sport that has an inherent element of risk. However, as long as you paddle within your ability, take certain precautions, and use your common sense, the risk involved may be minimized. The following document is intended to provide some guidance as to what is and is not acceptable when paddling with Durham University Canoe Club (referred to as The Club hereinafter). It is not designed as a get out clause, to protect you from legal action if something goes wrong because you are negligent.

1. SHOULD AN INCIDENT OCCUR, WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?
 - a. We are all consenting adults, and therefore responsible for our own actions. This includes your own safety, as well the safety of those around you.
 - b. Next comes the most experienced paddler in the river group. This is not usually the most qualified person, and need not be the trip organiser
 - c. Finally, the Club as a whole, and Team Durham, and eventually Durham University itself.

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2. WHAT ARE WE RESPONSIBLE FOR?

Legally, we can be held responsible in two ways.

- a. Being sued for damages in the civil courts. In practice Team Durham and then the University would end up bearing the cost
- b. Criminal Liability. Such as manslaughter for the death of another paddler. Any individual who could have reasonably done more to prevent the accident can be held criminally liable.

As long as the following is adhered to, nothing should go wrong. If something does go wrong, you will be able to use this to demonstrate that everything was in order, and you were not negligent, that is providing that you were following the policy.

It is then clearly to your benefit to follow this policy, and to ensure that those around you do so as well. BUT, nothing can provide for every situation you may find yourself in, and so there is no substitute for common sense.

If you find this policy outdated, inadequate, or wrong, then report it to the Executive Committee, so that something can be done. The same applies if the rules are breached, please tell someone.

Part A – Individual Members

All members should be familiar with the equipment they are carrying, and how to use it correctly. This covers your boat (you should be able to exit unaided, releasing a spray deck if necessary), your paddles, buoyancy aid (fastened correctly, in good condition), helmet (correctly fitting, secure). This will all be covered during the first session but if at any point you are unsure, please ask. Additionally, coaches and river leaders should ensure that they are competent using any safety equipment they carry.

Always wear a helmet when on the water. The only exception is fitness training on flat water. Remember that most injuries on flat water are caused by flailing paddles. In any session the leader or coach may stipulate that certain safety kit must be worn or carried, in which case you must comply. Be adequately prepared for the prevailing conditions. Wrap up warm if it is cold.

The decision to paddle rests with you alone. If you are not confident, unsure, or concerned about the trip, you can always stay off the water. This eliminates any danger caused by canoeing.

Part B – Other People

Always act with consideration for other water users (canoeists or not). Your safety may depend on them if something goes wrong. If you consider another paddler to be unsafe, or inexperienced, tell them diplomatically. If necessary do not paddle, as you could be held responsible for them. If anyone requires help, give them all the assistance possible, without unduly endangering yourself.

Part C - White Water Rivers (natural rivers of grade 2 or above)

All paddlers will wear a buoyancy aid and helmet.

On White Water trips, there should be a minimum supervision ratio of 1 leader to 4 participants should be adhered to. On more advanced and narrow river it is advised that the group separates into groups of 3-8, each managed by an allocated leader, usually the strongest, most experienced paddler in the group, or the person with the greatest knowledge of the river. If nobody is willing to be the leader, do not get on the water. The leader may also nominate a

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'second', who should be able to assist in rescue, should any incident occur, and who is of a sufficient standard to make it unlikely for them to be involved in any incident themselves. However, on wider rivers or flat water sections it may be acceptable for existing groups to join together, providing the supervision ratio is maintained.

In most situations groups should be of at least 3 people, however, with sufficient safety and competent paddlers, smaller groups may be possible. For example, when racing or training, paddlers will often paddle individually or with one competent paddler looking after a single weaker paddler. Each group will know the location of vehicles and keys, and which access and egress points are to be used. Each group will carry sufficient safety equipment appropriate to the hazards reasonably expected. See 'Group Leader Guidelines' for details of equipment. The instructions of the leader must be followed, particularly when it comes to decisions about whether to portage a rapid. All paddlers should understand international river signals. When paddling with new people these are to be confirmed by the leader before a trip commences. The one exception is for novice groups on grade 2(3) or below; in this situation the leader may decide it is more appropriate not to overload the novice paddlers with information at the start of the trip and could instead elect to teach the group river signals either during the trip or at a later date. In this situation experienced paddlers familiar with the international river signals should be utilized to control the group.

For rivers new to all members of a group, if possible, a guidebook should be consulted beforehand. If necessary, sections should be walked first to inspect. Care should be taken when inspecting rivers; wet suit boots are not walking boots! Always stay in groups. Consult a map if necessary.

Part D - Bank Safety and Rescue

Rescuing participants:

Paddlers have a responsibility to aid any paddler who is in danger, whether they are in their group or not, provided that this does not place themselves or other members of their group in danger.

Buoyancy aids and helmets must be worn when inspecting or giving safety cover. Care should be taken when throwing a line to someone who isn't swimming as capsized boats may have someone about to roll in them, and may be fouled by a throwline. Do not tie off a throwline used for swimmer rescue; it may have to be released quickly if the swimmer becomes entangled. It is preferable to tie yourself off, and hold the line. Do not use a throwline unless you have a suitable knife to hand. All towlines and cow's tails carried must have a quick release mechanism.

Rescuing equipment:

Always rescue swimmers first, and equipment later. Do not put yourself, or anyone else in danger to rescue equipment. In contrast to rescuing a person, time is no longer a priority. Rescuers should therefore wait until they are able to perform the rescue in the safest manner. This may involve waiting for experienced paddlers or safety cover for the rescuer. If someone enters the water unaided to recover equipment, at least one person with a throwline should be positioned downstream, in case they swim free (note that these principles do not apply to rescuing people). If equipment has to be chased by boat, the group chasing it should be confident enough to chase safely. If necessary, weak paddlers should get off the water in order that a strong group can chase. If there is any doubt about the safety of the chase boaters, or anyone else, leave the equipment.

Part E - Forms

On any trips other than the regular sessions, a Trip Form must be filled in and emailed to the members of Team Durham staff specified by Team Durham. This must be done before 3pm on the last working day before the trip. These forms can be generated from the Canoe Club website, for more guidance see the "**Trip Form Guidelines**" document.

In addition, during any session, including Pool Sessions, and Wednesday afternoons, the Health Forms for every member present must be accessible. In general these will be available by signing onto the Canoe Club website as a member of the exec, however, if you are somewhere where there is likely to be poor signal you should download the relevant forms beforehand or consider printing them off. After the session the forms should be deleted and any print outs should be destroyed.

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When paddling on a river, these forms should be available during the course of the day. The leader should consider whether it is sufficient for the forms to remain in the car, or whether print outs or a phone with the downloaded forms should be taken on the trip.

If a member has not filled in a health form online, a limited number of paper forms should be kept in the boathouse and one of these must be filled in before they partake in the session. (Alternatively, members with a phone may fill in the online form.)

Part F – Artificial White Water Courses

When paddling on an artificial course, such as the Tees Barrage or Holme Pierrepont, paddlers should follow the center rules and safety policy at all times, including competency to paddle, safety equipment guidelines and any training required. Often this will include signing additional health declarations and/or consent forms. Helmets and buoyancy aids should of course always be worn, even if not mentioned in the centres policy. All paddlers should be aware that whilst White Water courses are often safer than natural rivers, they are still potentially dangerous. Paddlers who are new to a course should consider walking down it first, and safety cover should still be set up on large features where necessary.

When paddling on an artificial course, there will be other members of the public there and sometimes there will be safety provided. As such it is possible for groups as small as one or two people to paddle there safely, however, paddlers should be prepared to get off as soon as there are not enough other people on the course to paddle safely. Any group which goes to a white water course to paddle should be fully self sufficient in terms of providing safety cover (the exception being at events such as NSR or BUCS where safety cover is provided).

There will be paddlers of many disciplines at the course, to which you should be polite and courteous to all. Priority must always be given to the upstream boat. However, paddlers should also observe paddling etiquette when possible (which contradict this slightly); try to avoid waiting under slalom gates and if someone is “playing” a feature, eddy out and wait until they are finished before paddling down. Paddlers in plastic boats should also take all reasonable action to avoid contact with composite boats. This may cause significant damage and could damage the reputation of the university’s paddlers. If in doubt, ask other people on the course.

Part G – Surfing Trips

All paddlers will wear buoyancy aids and helmets.

Rip currents and obstacles should be pointed out to the group prior to launching. At least one in four paddlers on the water should be confident in the prevailing conditions i.e. of rolling if capsized during the biggest sets and rescuing other paddlers. The number of paddlers on the water shall be reduced until this condition is reached.

There should be limits set as to where paddlers can go. The stronger paddlers should keep track of the other members in the party. If there are lifeguards present, they should always be consulted before the party embarks.

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Part H – Sea Paddling

No Club trip shall take place on the sea, other than in the surf, without a qualified Sea Kayak Instructor or a paddler of equivalent experience in sea kayaking.

Part I – Flat Water

When paddling on flat water, there should always be enough competent paddlers to manage the groups. As a minimum requirement the ratio of coaches to participants should be kept under 1:8 and each coach should be happy with the number of paddlers they are to be allocated. The coach should identify safe access and egress areas for the group and boundaries should be set for the group in order to keep everyone together. The current weather consideration should be taken into account, with coaches making sure that participants are wearing suitable clothing for the temperature and wind. In addition, even flat rivers may become unsafe after a significant amount of rain. If the river is too high then, the session should be adapted appropriately or cancelled.

In addition, paddlers should be aware of other river users, the prime example being rowers, fishermen or the Prince Bishop cruise boat. As with white water courses, the leaders should be aware of how other people use the river in order to avoid any potential conflict.

When paddling in a pool many of the same considerations must be taken into account. In addition to this, any poolside rules must be followed. Activities such as running on the poolside or anything which would be considered unsafe whilst swimming, is still unsafe whilst on a canoeing trip.

Part J – Paddling at night or with limited visibility

When paddling at night or with limited visibility, considerable extra care should be taken and in most situations, it is not recommended. All paddlers should be entirely self-sufficient for the conditions, or under very close one-to-one supervision from an experienced member.

The use of lights, where possible, is strongly recommended when paddling in a group in order to avoid becoming separated.

Part K – Lone Paddling

Paddling on your own increases the risks when compared to paddling in a group. The collective capability of the group acts to provide a safety net if things go wrong. Durham University Canoe Club therefore recommends that all members paddle in a group whenever this is possible.

That being said, solo paddling is permitted providing that the following conditions are met.

The approval process:

Solo paddling is not openly endorsed by the club. Any member that wishes to paddle alone must therefore be signed off of sufficiently competent by Team Durham. The four parts to the approval process are outlined below.

Part 1: Assessment of paddling skills

All paddlers wishing to access the water alone must demonstrate that suitably proficient in their discipline.

The paddler must demonstrate an ability to perform the following skills consistently:

- An ability to assess their environment and the risks (on and off the water)
Including site specific risks and those that may emerge in different conditions; wind, cold, strainers/ debris around the road bridges, the weir. The paddlers must also consider how they would egress from the water and get back to the boathouse should there be an incident.

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- Enter and exit from the water safely.
- Competently manoeuvre the boat (flat water strokes)

(Forward paddling, backward paddling, sweep strokes, reverse sweep stroke, plus bow and stern rudders, and draw strokes if discipline appropriate. It is emphasised however that these are foundational skills so the individual should display a mastery of them and achieve the desired outputs consistently).

- Ability to manoeuvre the boat (moving water skills)

If the individual is intending to paddle on the river whilst there is flow the coach/committee should be confident that they can handle their craft in this environment. The precise skills this will require will vary by discipline but in the case of white water boats should include breaking in and out, ferry gliding and eddie-hopping up a current. Paddlers who are not comfortable in fast flowing water should be told to restrict their paddling to conditions they are familiar with. All paddlers however should paddle well within their ability. Members are also advised that there is a river gauge that can be accessed via (<https://flood-warning-information.service.gov.uk/station/8201>). Paddlers should perform their own assessment of the conditions but as a rough guide the river is placid until around 0.6m, 0.67m is the limit for rowing and there is grade 2 current by the boathouse at about 0.8m. Paddling at higher levels is acceptable if paddlers are suitably experienced but there is a need to be aware of additional level of risk, debris around bridge and the weirs in town.)

- Maintaining balance;

The paddlers should be able to maintain their stability whilst static and on the move, as well as demonstrating the capacity to re-stabilise their boat using support strokes. As with the flat-water strokes mastery of these skills is required for lone paddling.

- Rolling of the boat

Whilst it is not possible to right all types of boat from the water anyone paddling a craft that can be rolled must be able to perform this skill. In the unlikely event of a capsize this should help to prevent the situation deteriorating further than necessary. Sprint, marathon, SUP and Open Boat paddlers must be competent in self-rescuing as per requirements below. Rolling must be performed consistently and with ease.

- Capsize drill

All paddlers must demonstrate that they have the ability to safely exit their craft following a capsize. In recognition of the fact that the first University term starts in November however this test may take place in swimming pool and can be demonstrated alongside the rescue skills in the section below.

Part 2: Safety training

All paddlers will be required to demonstrate that they have the knowledge and skills to paddle alone safely.

To help ensure this the club provides informal (and sometimes formal) training that covers the material set out in the British Canoeing FRST training syllabus (see <https://www.britishcanoeingawarding.org.uk/download/168/>). To paddle alone any members will be required to demonstrate their mastery of the skills and knowledge that are applicable to their discipline. This includes demonstrating not only the relevant rescue skills (particularly self-rescue / deep-water rescue) but also an awareness of hazards, the rules of the river (in keeping to the left whilst paddling up or down the racing stretch and the need to wear lights in the dark), and the receipt of assistance from other river users. Examples of hazards include: those specific to high water conditions; particularly the risk of debris around bridge arches in town, the weirs, the fact that the process of dealing with a capsize would be more time consuming and problematic when paddling alone and the need to perform a dynamic risk assessment before getting on the water.

Assessment of both proficiency elements (paddling skills and safety) must be performed or overseen by the canoe club coach. Should an official representative of Durham University not be employed at the time, this responsibility falls to Captain; though club exec or any other individuals may be consulted in this helps to reach a safe decision.

Assessments do not have to take place on the River Wear or in the boat the individual intends to use but they should be sufficient to demonstrate that they have their knowledge and skills are sufficient from their planned activities. Prior knowledge of the participant (such as having paddled with them previously) may be taken into account.

Part 3: Club approval:

Anyone wishing to paddle alone must be signed off by the club coach (or the captain – see above). Once again in cases where there is a more experienced / suitable individual within the club these members may be asked to contribute. This criterion is intended to re-enforce the assessment of the applicant's ability and to act as a safeguard to help recognise any unforeseen factors that would make unsupervised paddling unduly risky. It is also useful for the club to have a good impression of how many members are paddling outside of the club's official sessions. The process is not however intended to imply that the coach/captain has accepted a legal duty of care for said individual.

After approving an application it is the responsibility of the coach (/captain) to forward the application to Team Durham for final approval.

Part 4: Final approval by Team Durham

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A list of paddlers with permission to paddle in isolation will be approved and retained by Team Durham. In the unlikely event that a member wishes to challenge the club's decision, this complaint can be pursued through the same channel.

Accredited Prior Learning:

In acknowledgement that the vast majority of individuals that wish to paddle alone are experienced athletes wishing to train within a specific discipline, any paddler that has competed for GB, completed an Advanced Personal Performance Awards (see for example; <https://www.britishcanoeingawarding.org.uk/download/367/>) / old 5 star qualification in their discipline or a Level 2 coaching award is exempt from having to formally demonstrate the above proficiencies. The two former criteria are clear indicators that the individual is a highly experienced paddler that is well beyond the minimum competency level required to paddle alone. The latter is, according to British Canoeing's supervision requirements, the point at which coaches can operate without supervision. Since an individual with this award is trusted to evaluate the risks of running a session in a particular environment and can coach up to 8 novices alone, their experience is deemed suitable to weight the risk paddling alone. All individuals must still however have a discussion with the club coach (or captain in their absence) to provide details of the craft they will be using and the environment they will be using it in. The club coach or captain will also take this opportunity to highlight the hazards that are particularly potent on this section of river and the rules of the river.

Good practice:

Anyone paddling alone is still required to abide by the rules set out in the other sections of this document. A few additional practices should however be observed:

Anyone paddling alone must inform someone that they are going training and what time they expect to be back. A housemate or college friend may be most appropriate for this as are more likely to notice if your take longer than agreed.

Whilst these procedures are designed to limit the risk associated with lone paddling they cannot eliminate them. The ultimate decision to paddle or not to paddle therefore rests with the individual. All members are advised to only paddle in craft that they are comfortable in and to paddle comfortably within their comfort-zone when unsupervised and to refrain from training alone if they have a serious health condition such as epilepsy, heart problems, diabetes that cannot be addressed by ensuring that the required medication is immediately accessible (Speak to the coach/captain about how the best ways of storing this during a session). Sessions can also be adapted to reduce specific risks and paddlers should consider this before setting out.

Part L – Internal Leader Sign-Off Process

During the exec meeting held 26th October 2025, it was agreed that an internal leader sign-off process should be implemented for those club members acting as leaders or assistants on moderate and advanced water. This is a simple formal process to assess the competency of a leader/assistant, replacing the informal system the club has used in the past. This decision has been taken following three members of the 2025/26 executive committee attending a student white water leader course in Llangollen, organised by leading Paddle UK white water providers with extensive experience of university canoe clubs.

The club is not currently affiliated with Paddle UK, and it is the opinion of the current executive committee that affiliation is not a desirable option due to the excessive costs and limitations this would incur, resulting in a reduced club programme. It is not feasible for potential student leaders to reach an adequate level of competency and complete various Paddle UK whitewater safety and leadership courses during their short degree programme. The club also does not have the resources to sponsor potential leaders through these courses. Leaders may choose to complete these courses, however they are self-funded (though they may seek funding elsewhere, e.g. college opportunities funds).

An internal sign-off process is deemed more suitable. A framework endorsed by leading Paddle UK whitewater course providers has been provided and has been adopted by the club verbatim (see Annex A). The framework provides a skills checklist against which potential leaders/assistants will be assessed. The process will be as follows:

- The club captain and the most experienced moderate/advanced water paddler (MEP) will oversee the process.
- Current leaders will endeavour to promote and encourage the development of future leaders.
- When a willing club member is deemed ready to lead/assist on whitewater, they will lead a group in this environment under the supervision of the Captain/MEP and be assessed against the skills checklist.
- If the club member is deemed to be competent, they will be signed off by the Captain and MEP.
- Sign-off documents will be stored digitally on the club shared drive and reviewed at the start of each academic year.
- A sign-off may be revoked at the discretion of the Captain/MEP if competency is called into question.

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