

Glenridding Beck – Conclusions

Drowning of Max Palmer in Glenridding Beck 26 May 2002

1. The main lessons

The investigation identified two main issues:

- The wholly inappropriate actions of the party leader before and during the incident
- The shortcomings of the management systems which allowed an unsuitable leader to be in charge of a party of schoolchildren in a high-hazard environment

The main lessons are:

- leaders need to be competent, diligent and always put the safety and best interests of the young people at the top of their agenda. They should always follow the published guidance.
- schools and providers of outdoor education/adventure activities need to have effective management systems to prevent unsuitable leaders taking young people into hazardous environments. Effective arrangements for assessing and ensuring competence and for monitoring are particularly important.

2. The tragedy in the context of other educational visits

Recent tragedies and widely-reported rescues of inadequately equipped and led school parties have led to understandable confusion and concern among teachers. Some are being advised not to lead visits because of the possible civil and criminal consequences if anything goes wrong. On the other hand, there are fears of a “nanny state” where initiative and adventure are stifled by bureaucracy.

The overwhelming majority of educational visits are carried out safely and responsibly by teachers who take the time and effort to get things right. The benefits of these trips to children is immense. They are particularly valuable where the opportunity is taken to make children “risk aware” rather than “risk averse”.

In contrast to all these well-run visits, the Glenridding tragedy occurred when the promised activity went ahead, despite the appalling conditions and the warnings of others. Lack of planning was a major contributory factor. The trial Judge described the leader’s actions as “reckless in the extreme”.

HSE, DfES and the other bodies involved in developing this site have the clear view that leaders who act conscientiously will have little to fear.

3. Department for Education and Skills (DfES) perspective

A number of tragedies in recent years, caused by a neglect of good practice, led the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to publish three supplements in July 2002 to support the [Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits](#) (HASPEV) guidance.

[“Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits”](#) (SLOEV)

[“Standards for Adventure”](#) (SFA)

[“A Handbook for Group Leaders”](#) (HGL)

DfES also published in December 2001:

[“Health and Safety: Responsibilities and Powers”](#) (HSRP)

DfES comment that

These publications aimed to help:

- LEAs by clarifying their H&S responsibilities and powers and defining the standards for overseeing educational visits
- teachers become more competent and confident in outdoor education
- The head teachers' and teachers' unions (bar one) support Education Ministers in encouraging educational visits that have clear educational objectives and are carefully prepared and safely managed.
- OFSTED has reported that some teachers fear the risks of outdoor education and the possibility of legal action if something goes wrong.
- The Better Regulation Task Force has reported a decline in private litigation overall. The DfES is considering what might be done to help LEAs and their schools manage any unjust accusations.
- The DfES and others have received a number of complaints about bureaucracy stifling adventure and initiative.

4. Qualities of leaders and helpers

Good quality leadership is probably the biggest single factor in ensuring safe visits.

Technical competence can be demonstrated by:

- holding a relevant nationally-accredited award in a relevant activity, or
- personal accreditation by one or more suitably experienced and qualified people who can provide verification by a “Statement of Competence”. It may be necessary to determine 'suitable' from first principles. Personal accreditation is the only option where there are no formal qualifications for a particular activity.

Many LEAs operate their own in-house training and assessment schemes for teachers and youth workers based on the above principles.

The [“Collective Interpretations”](#) on the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA) website contain valuable information on competencies.

The DfES publications [“Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits”](#) and [“Standards for Adventure”](#) contain very useful guidance on means of verifying competence, including arrangements for accreditation by a suitably experienced and qualified person. They also contain information on EVC Competence.

Technical competence, in itself, is not enough. Diligence, coupled with responsible attitudes and behaviours are also important for the safe delivery of activities. People involved in managing leaders or helping them should follow up any concerns about:

- lack of diligence, including any revealed in other areas of work
- a relaxed approach to discipline or to truth
- inappropriate behaviours of whatever kind

Poor performance in these areas should always be challenged and reported.

5. The importance of pupil involvement

Children should be actively involved in discussion of the activities and how they can be done safely. Through this they will absorb the principles of being “risk aware” rather than “risk averse”. This is an educational issue as well as a safety issue because risk awareness is an essential life skill.

One of the characteristics of the Glenridding visits was the lack of involvement of the children in discussion of activities or the risks. Their preparation for the visit was largely a description of the plunge pool that built up an expectation. The tragedy occurred when conditions were too severe for that expectation to be met safely.

In contrast there are many other school adventure visits where the children have been involved throughout the planning stage. In some instances the pupils themselves have given the presentation on the proposed activities and safety precautions at the parents meeting. Such a level of involvement has proved highly enriching.

Another key aspect of involvement is the “transparency of risk”. Parents and their children need to have some appreciation of the risks involved in both the main and alternative activities if they are to give informed consent. A parent who has knowingly accepted a risk (for instance that a child might trip on a mountain path and break a limb) when giving consent will have few grounds for complaint against a diligent leader if such an incident occurs.

6. Planning

At his trial, the leader said in mitigation that it had never occurred to him that anything could go wrong. These very chilling words are often heard following serious incidents. They explain much about the underlying causes of this tragedy.

Good planning is essential for safe and successful visits. The leader should have very clear objectives. Every visit should have an educational objective, which should be clearly stated to the supervisors and pupils in the group.

A minority of teachers may have a mindset that lower standards are acceptable for visits not directly linked to the National Curriculum. Governors should challenge the nature of the venture when the educational objectives are not clear or where the means to meet them do not appear to be realistic. (see [“Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits”](#), paragraph 10).

Whatever the purpose of the visit, the highest professional standards must always be maintained because the most important objective must be the safe return of the group.

Risk assessment should inform the whole planning process. The leader should ask at the planning stage “what might go wrong?” and this question should also be posed by EVCs, head teachers, governors and others involved in planning and approving educational visits/adventure activities. [Click for further information on risk assessments](#)

The administration for an outdoor visit can seem onerous, for instance:

- initial approval to plan a visit
- initial letter to parents
- parental consent/medical information form
- swimming consent form (if appropriate)
- parents meeting
- formal, written risk assessment

However, conscientious teachers have been doing these things as a matter of good practice for many years because they know that good preparation is at the heart of a safe and successful visit.

Such procedures have grown out of previous tragedies and are an essential part of the planning process. In particular, the consent forms and the parents meeting may identify additional concerns that need to be considered in the risk assessment. It is important that a structured written risk assessment is done because:

- without a structured approach, it is easy to make false assumptions
- it is an important reference document for those who may wish to monitor the visit or others to learn from it

For outdoor visits, it is essential to consider the three levels of risk assessment: generic (activity), site specific and ongoing (dynamic), together with the importance of establishing cut-off points. The three levels of risk assessment are explained in more detail in [“Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits”](#). A number of the recent tragedies have occurred

during repeat visits where circumstances have changed, particularly weather conditions. This includes the Stainforth Beck tragedy as well as Glenridding.

Another factor, besides the weather, that changed at Stainforth Beck was that the normal, experienced leader became unavailable and less experienced staff were called on to lead the activity. Therefore, a very important cut-off point relates to the availability of competent staff. If a person essential to the skill mix needed for the safe delivery of an activity becomes unavailable, then that activity will need to be cancelled. Such an eventuality should be considered in contingency planning.

7. Contingency planning

One of the features common to a number of the recent tragedies on school visits has been the need to meet the expectation that a particular activity will be delivered. In particular, there was no structured alternative programme for the Glenridding visit. The "[Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits](#)" guidance states (paragraph 45) "training for group leaders should include all aspects of supervision, ongoing risk assessment (including being prepared to stop an activity that has become too hazardous) and how to deal with an emergency".

An important part of planning is therefore to identify reasonable alternative activities ("Plan B") and to be equipped to carry them out if need be. It is also important to make the parents aware of the alternatives because of the need for consent and to inform the children so that they know in advance that while the planned programme may not be deliverable if circumstances are unfavourable, there will be other activities on offer.

The other aspect of contingency planning is emergency planning. Those who plan for emergencies are less likely to have them. The leader had no emergency plans. He was not equipped to recover anybody from the pool, prevent or deal with hypothermia or to deal with the foreseeable risk of his being incapacitated as a leader. Such a lack of preparedness turned his gross error of judgement in allowing Max to jump into the pool into a tragedy when he was unable to get him out.

There is always the possibility in a mountain environment of a genuine accident, for example a child tripping and breaking a limb. HSE consider that the leader of a party who is able to take effective control of such a situation through good planning and training will have little to fear from the criminal law. They are also likely to have a robust position in the event of parents questioning their conduct.

8. Control by the school

Head teachers need to ensure that visits are being properly run. This includes having a clear policy on visits and robust systems for:

- Ensuring that leaders and helpers have the appropriate experience and competence
- Checking the objectives of the visit
- Co-operating with governors to ensure that approval has been obtained from the LEA for visits abroad, residential visits or adventure activities
- Balancing the educational benefits of the visit against the foreseeable risks
- Ensuring that suitable and sufficient risk assessments have been done
- Encouraging pupils to take an active part in the risk assessment
- Ensuring that the risk assessment is sent to parents with other information about the visit
- Checking that essential paperwork, such as consent forms, has been completed
- Ensuring that there are contingency plans and emergency plans
- Ensuring that any concerns about school visits are brought to the head teacher and properly investigated
- Ensuring that leaders and helpers are suitable for the activity and are appropriately trained. Risk assessment should be part of that training
- Ensuring that teachers report on completed visits and that there is a specific requirement to list any potential improvements that they may have identified
- Carrying out/making arrangements for periodic "field" monitoring of visits

Many of these functions may be carried out by an Educational Visit Co-ordinator (EVC) acting on behalf of the head teacher. Note: All LEAs in England have signed up to the principle of having in-school EVCs. Some LEAs, including Lancashire, already have an EVC in each school. The situation may be different in Scotland and Wales.

Governing bodies, as part of their responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of pupils, should set appropriate criteria for visits and standards for their management. To ensure that these are being met, their monitoring role should confirm that:

- visits have clear educational objectives
- visits are undertaken in accordance with the school's policy
- risk assessments have been carried out
- there are arrangements for reviewing and evaluating visits.

9. Local Education Authorities

LEAs need a policy on outdoor visits **and in particular on those not covered by NGB guidelines and qualifications.**

For many, the use of a provider licensed by the AALA may be the best option because the LEA and school have some assurance that the activity is likely to be delivered safely by highly skilled and experienced instructors.

A number of LEAs have advised their schools not to provide high hazard activities other than through AALA-licensed centres. Many have their own AALA-licensed centres.

Where schools wish to provide such activities in-house and the LEA agrees, there should be a rigorous approval process. Such an approval might be for specific activities at a specific site by specific people who have been trained and assessed as technically competent in that activity by a suitable expert. An important part of such assessment would be of the leaders' ability to do relevant dynamic (ongoing) risk assessments and make appropriate decisions in the light of changing levels of risk.

The recent incidents have identified a number of issues arising out of the relationship between schools and LEAs under Fair Funding, for instance:

- The extent to which an LEA can prohibit a school from carrying out an activity that it deems to be unsafe and the availability to an LEA of sanctions for schools that choose to ignore it
- The need for clarity in the delegation of functions such as assessing teacher qualifications and competencies. If that function is delegated to schools, what guidance and support does the LEA give them?
- Training in risk assessment. All teachers have to be able to assess risk. How does an LEA ensure that all are competent in this?
- Monitoring. Does the LEA have a monitoring strategy and provide guidance to schools on the extent, limits and process for the monitoring required? What "field" and procedural monitoring of school visits is done? What monitoring does the LEA do of the school's monitoring processes?

Outdoor activities are but part of the total range of educational visits. There is a significant challenge for LEAs in devising systems proportionate to the risks, so that there is effective control of high hazard activities without imposing unnecessary burdens on those organising low hazard activities. A consensus on good practice may emerge in time.

10. The importance of monitoring

Despite the high quality of the leadership on the majority of educational visits, there will be a small minority of poor leaders. These are the people who create the serious risks. There will also be areas of poor procedure within schools and LEAs. Such weaknesses are unlikely to be found unless there is effective monitoring, hence the strong emphasis placed on both procedural and "field" monitoring throughout this report. "We didn't know" is unlikely to be a very convincing justification to a bereaved parent or a court of law.

"Field" monitoring may also help to identify areas where there appears to be common misunderstanding. Furthermore, it can provide a continuing check on the validity of guidance.

11. The future for educational visits

Sadly, every serious incident that arises from the poor management or leadership of an educational visit leads to adverse publicity which may reduce the opportunities for other children to go on visits. It also undermines the many leaders who work so hard to deliver safe and successful visits.

HSE, DfES and LCC have the very clear view that:

- adventure activities are an essential option within the PE and sports part of the curriculum, not least because of the opportunity to learn about the management of risk
- such activities must be properly planned and managed
- most teachers are careful and professional. If the small numbers of less careful teachers learn the lessons from this report and undertake proportionate risk assessments then that will be a purpose served.
- people who follow the available guidance should have nothing to fear; those who ignore it may be asking for trouble

We applaud those teachers and helpers who give their time and energy to follow good practice and do the job properly. Long may well-planned educational visits continue.