



**Guidelines for
Port Phillip Heads Events**
that meet the definition of a Boating Activity Event

SAFE TRANSPORT VICTORIA



Guidelines for Boating Activity Events at Port Philip Heads

Purpose of this Guidance

This guidance is intended to assist in the assessment and approval of Boating Activity Event (BAE) applications. It aims to strengthen the safety management system and emergency management plan for such events, ensuring the safety of all participants and other waterway users who may be affected.

This guidance aligns with the objectives and requirements outlined in the *Marine Safety Regulations 2023* and the *Marine Safety Act 2010* (Marine Safety Act). Specifically, *Section 25A* of the Marine Safety Act requires that:

“a duty holder who manages a boating activity event must, so far as is reasonably practicable, ensure the safety of participants in the boating activity event or persons affected by the boating activity event.”

A duty holder will have contravened section 25A if it fails to:

- provide participants with information enabling them to participate in the BAE safely;
- comply with accepted safety standards or manuals applicable to that BAE event; or
- ensure that rescue and first aid capabilities or services are available to participants.

Failure to comply with section 25A carries civil and criminal penalties. Meeting the requirements of section 25A must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

This guidance is provided for general information only and does not constitute legal advice. Duty holders must ensure compliance with all relevant legislation and seek independent legal advice where necessary.

Who should use this Guidance

This guidance should be used by duty holders intending to run a BAE at Port Phillip Heads. The obligations under the Marine Safety Act and Marine Safety Regulations apply to a ‘duty holder’ but this guidance should be used by any person or

organisation that intends to run, or is assisting in the organisation of, a BAE at Port Phillip Heads.

Duty holder:

Duty holder is defined widely and includes an employer or self-employed person within the meaning of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* but does not include an employee of a duty holder who manages a BAE or a volunteer. A duty holder manages a BAE if it organises, facilitates, or controls a BAE.

If you are an employee of a duty holder you should use this guidance to inform the development of any BAE event plan.

Boating Activity Event:

A BAE is defined in Part 2.2B of the Marine Safety Act as:

“(a) means an event on State waters that directly or indirectly involves vessel operations; and

(b) does not include –

(i) a pyrotechnic display or show on State waters; or

(ii) groups of people cruising together in vessels on State waters in an informal manner.

A BAE includes, but is not limited to, boat races, open water swimming races, water sports competitions or exhibitions, filming or promotional events and school kayak excursions.

Port Phillip Heads:

Port Phillip Heads (the Heads) is a Designated Hazardous Area as defined in the *Marine Safety Regulations 2023 (MSR)*. The Heads means all the waters between an imaginary line drawn between Shortland Bluff and Point Nepean, and the seaward limits of an imaginary line consisting of the arc of a circle with a radius of three nautical miles centred on Point Lonsdale. The area at the entrance to Port Phillip Bay where conditions pose additional known risks to vessels is now included in the definition of Port Phillip Heads.

Please note these guidelines apply irrespective of whether a duty holder has applied for or obtained an exemption from, or the establishment of, an exclusion zone under Part 5.3 of the Marine Safety Act.

(a) Provide, so far as is reasonably practicable, participants with information to enable those participants to participate in the boating activity event safely, including:

Provide information to participants prior to the event

The duty holder who manages the event should conduct and document relevant and appropriate risk assessments and provide information prior to the event to allow participants to make an informed decision if the event is appropriate for them given the risks, their fitness level, and conditions on the day.

A duty holder who manages a BAE may consider implementing the following:

- **Pre-event capability assessments** to evaluate each participant's fitness, ability, and experience in open-water conditions and providing the participant with information about this assessment in a format that allows the participant to ensure that the event conditions and distance are suitable and safe for their demonstrated capabilities.
- **Request participants to provide recent evidence of swimming** and on-water proficiency or participation in similar events at the start of the registration process and provide the participant with information about the event to allow the participant to ensure that the event is suitable for their experience and capabilities.
- **Provide a clear plan of the event route** to the participants prior to the event to inform and prepare for safe participation. This may include details on start and finish areas, exclusion zones and designated hazardous areas, predicted weather conditions, risks, expected tidal streams, and water temperatures.
- **Provide details of the event's cancellation policy**, outlining specific criteria and thresholds for cancellation. This information should be clearly communicated and published to participants during the registration process to provide participants with transparent guidelines regarding event cancellation policy.
- **Provide a detailed emergency management plan** that outlines response procedures for potential incidents.
- **Monitor conditions before the event**, including weather, tides, weather warnings, and water quality to allow timely responses to any emerging risks. Information about the conditions should be provided to participants as relevant.
- **Ensure the emergency management plan is communicated** to all participants and event officials involved in the event ensuring clarity of roles, procedures and the communication strategy and VHF radio channels are provided in writing.

Provide information to participants on the day of the event

It is recommended the duty holder provides information to participants on the day of the event such as localised conditions, participant instructions, emergency protocols, and any risks identified from a pre-event risk assessment. The duty holder who manages the event should:

- **Conduct and document a pre-event assessment** against cancellation policy thresholds ensuring conditions remain within defined limits as stated in the weather cancellation plan.
- **Monitor conditions before and during the event** to respond promptly to any changes or emerging risks and document these observations to inform officials and participants.
- **Conduct pre-event safety briefings:**
 - Provide in person safety briefings that emphasise conditions, hazards, and withdrawal procedures for participants who may become fatigued or distressed.
 - Informing swimmers about identification systems, safety procedures, and how to signal for assistance if required.
- **Monitor shipping traffic and inform participants** of expected vessel traffic and changes in ports and shipping channels.
- **Inform participants of the risk** associated to the designated hazardous area.
- **Notify swimmers of a dangerous situation** if conditions deteriorate.
- **Provide a separate briefing for officials** and ensure their roles are clear in the event of an emergency. Inform officials of the designated VHF radio channel for effective marine radio communication and coordination of the rescue capabilities.

(b) Comply, so far as is reasonably practicable, with accepted safety standards or manuals that were specific to the type of boating activity event being undertaken, in that:

To ensure the safety of participants and other waterway users, the duty holder responsible for managing the event must implement a robust safety management and emergency response system. This system should align with the Australian Standard Risk Management Guidelines (AS/NZS ISO 31000:2018) to ensure best-practice risk management.

The duty holder who manages the event should consider the heightened risks associated with operating near or within the Heads and ensure that all activities comply with applicable safety regulations and operational restrictions.

Safety Management Plan

It is recommended the Safety Management Plan (SMP) includes the identification of a Designated Person Ashore (DPA) whose role is to keep a lookout and lead any emergency and rescue procedures. Details to include the:

- 1) DPA name, qualifications, and location
- 2) DPA location and plan to remain onshore and onsite for the entire event duration.
- 3) DPA have first aid qualifications.
- 4) DPA hold marine radio (VHF) qualifications to communicate with kayakers, rescue boats, IRBs, and the support team on land at the finish line.

The duty holder is required to ensure safety protocols are in place for increased monitoring and oversight of swimmers to reduce the risk of harm and injury. It is recommended the DPA is qualified and responsible to manage the:

- manifest of swimmers
- emergency response procedures
- Coordinate communication with emergency services and all land based and on water officials.

Risk Register

A risk assessment is essential for all events. Each risk assessment must:

- Identify hazards
- Assess the associated risks
- Specify, as far as is practicable, the measures required to control these hazards and risks

Boating activities conducted in high-risk zones, such as designated hazardous areas, should be subject to additional requirements. These may include a risk-based, independently validated SMP to ensure that risks are effectively controlled, and appropriate safety measures are in place.

Emergency Management Plan

The duty holder is responsible to prepare a comprehensive emergency management plan that outlines response procedures for incidents. A record of each document must be included:

- emergency response procedures
- contacts for emergency contacts, duty holder, officials, and DPA
- communication procedures
- weather cancellation policy
- medical emergency plan
- site survey
- risk assessments/ Register
- emergency service contacts identified near Queenscliff, Point Lonsdale, and Ocean Grove
- an evacuation plan with egress points marked with clear bug out points if a swimmer is fatigued or in distress.

Weather cancellation limits

A duty holder should establish a risk-based framework for monitoring weather conditions and determining when an event must be modified, suspended, or cancelled to ensure the safety of participants, staff, and spectators. A risk assessment is required prior to the event and during the event to ensure safety for all participants.

Environmental factors to consider:

- When weather forecast published by BOM are above the trigger points.
- If weather forecast changes or includes severe or extreme weather warning or if tidal streams are high.

All weather-related decisions must be informed by a documented dynamic risk assessment considering all environmental and marine hazards to determine suitability and safety, to include the following environmental factors:

- Strength of tidal flows, time & direction of tide
- Currents
- Breaking Waves and Swells
- Hazards such as Rocks, Reefs, & Sharks
- Water Quality, including risks from water contamination
- Water Temperature

- Wind Speed and Direction
- Heavy Rainfall & Flooding
- Extreme Heat or Extreme Cold
- Reduced Visibility (fog, smoke, heavy rain, sea spray)
- Sea State (combined effect of wind, waves, and swell)
- Forecast of an Imminent Electrical Storm
- Other hazards: hidden, overhanging, or underwater

Consultation with authorities and subject matter experts

It is recommended the duty holder who manages the event consult with the relevant authorities or community groups prior to applying for an event, to obtain appropriate guidance on prevailing and forecast weather conditions, as well as to evaluate the adequacy of rescue and emergency response capabilities. This consultation includes organisations and agencies such as:

- Parks Victoria
- Volunteer Marine Rescue assets, i.e. Coast Guard
- Ambulance Victoria
- Life Saving Victoria
- Ports Victoria
- Victoria Water Police

Increased Swimmer oversight

It is recommended that the duty holder who manages the events implement a comprehensive system for monitoring and tracking swimmers to enhance safety and facilitate rapid response in the event of an incident. This also includes the implementation of DPA onshore to keep a lookout and coordinate all monitoring and oversight of participants. The following safety measures are required for events operating in high-risk areas such as the Heads:

- **Standardised identification tools:** Using coloured swim caps, numbered caps, or high-visibility flotation devices to support visual identification of swimmers.
- **Electronic tracking systems:** Employing GPS to provide real-time monitoring of swimmer locations and assist in quickly identifying missing or distressed participants.

- **Check-in and check-out procedures:** Recording all swimmers entering and exiting the water to ensure every participant is always accounted for.
- **On-water supervision:** Deploying Inflatable Rescue Boats (IRBs), rescue skis, kayaks, or surf lifesaving craft positioned strategically along the course to provide immediate response capability.
- **Spotters and observation teams:** Positioning trained spotters in vessels, onshore, pontoons, or elevated platforms to maintain constant visual surveillance of swimmers for position and, hazards and communication equipment to raise an alarm.
- **Designated safety zones:** Establishing safe zones or rest platforms where swimmers can stop without obstructing others or posing additional risks.
- **Communication systems:** Equipping safety vessels and staff with reliable two-way radios or marine communication devices to ensure quick coordination in case of emergency.

(c) Ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that rescue and first aid capabilities or services were available to participants in boating activity event, including:

Duty holders must ensure that all vessels associated with a BAE carry appropriate safety and emergency equipment. Carrying safety equipment relevant to the waterway and being able to raise the alarm should issues occur will dramatically reduce the chance of a small incident having a catastrophic result.

Safety of the Operator and Vessel – Ensuring the vessel is equipped with appropriate safety gear such as lifejackets, fire extinguishers, first aid kits, navigation lights, and communication devices to protect all onboard during normal operations.

Emergency and Rescue Preparedness – Carrying suitable rescue and recovery equipment, such as lifebuoys, throw lines, ladders, and distress signalling devices, to effectively respond to emergencies and assist others in distress.

Safety Vessels Deployed for Rescue and Tracking

It is recommended the operator of the safety support vessel hold adequate qualifications and competencies to operate as safety support vessel during boating activity events. This is recommended for events where participants have a level of dependence upon a guide and leader. Professional training and relevant marine qualifications help reduce the risk of incidents and injuries, and include:

- Capsize prevention training

- Open water rescue training
- First aid qualification
- Marine radio (VHF) training appropriate for class of the vessel deployed
- Surf awareness training if operating within breaking waves

Anyone operating a powered recreational vessel on Victorian waters must have a marine licence.

Planning for the adequate number of safety vessels

The duty holder who manages the event has a duty to plan for the appropriate ratios of safety vessels to participants to include:

- appropriate guide-to-participant ratios to support effective tracking, monitoring, and supervision of all participants, ensuring that guides can maintain visual contact and provide immediate assistance where necessary.
- appropriate ratio of support and rescue vessels to participants, determined through a risk-based assessment. Factors to consider include location of event, waterway type, water temperature, event duration and distance, and prevailing environmental conditions such as wind, wave height, and tidal flow.
- Heightened risk conditions require increased safety coverage, with a greater number of support and rescue vessels deployed relative to the number of swimmers. For increased safety, a 1:1 ratio for participants and appropriate vessels is recommended for events held within a Designated Hazardous Area with no easy access to a landing place away from the start and finish areas.

The duty holder is required to deploy a separate vessel for emergency rescue, distinct from those involved in participant monitoring.

First Aid Capabilities

The provision of first aid capabilities or services are mandated under the Marine Safety Act and is the responsibility of the duty holder who manages the boating activity event. The level and type of first aid provision should be appropriate to the number of participants, the nature of the event, the type of waterway, and the risks associated with the activity and waterway conditions.

First aid personnel must be positioned onshore and available to respond to emergency situations during the event. All first aid stations should have direct communication with emergency services as well as the event duty holder and officials.

It is recommended all safety vessels be equipped with a first aid kit and suitably first aid qualified personnel be deployed with the crew during the event. First aid kits and trained first aid personnel should be included as part of the event's emergency management plan. This ensures that participants have timely access to medical assistance in the event of injury, illness, or other emergencies during the activity.

Consultation with emergency services

It is recommended the duty holder who manages the event proactively consult with appropriate organisations such as the Parks Victoria, Victoria Police, Coastguard, Fire Service, Ambulance Victoria, and Life Saving Victoria to seek advice on emergency capabilities, resources available in the area in the case of an emergency and suitable access for emergency service vehicles and airwing.

The duty holder is responsible for informing emergency services, of the date of the proposed event, time, a summary of the event, and its location, to ensure a high-level of safety preparedness and rescue capability.

It is recommended that this advice be in writing and be included in the emergency and safety management plan submitted to the waterway manager to assess the level of emergency capability and safety protocols in place. This is to ensure high-level of safety if the event is operating in an area and time of heightened risk.

Insurance Requirements

It is required that a duty holder of a BAE obtain and maintain appropriate insurance coverage for the duration of the event. Evidence of insurance may be required as part of an event application process.

Safety Case

A record of all planning and event documentation must be kept onsite and onshore for the duration of the event. These documents should include:

- Manifest of swimmers and key emergency contacts
- Risk Assessment/ Register
- Event map or course route

- Weather cancellation limits
- Emergency response plan excerpts or quick-reference procedures
- Organisational contact numbers and roles, including the DPA or duty holder, and any technical officials
- Reporting procedures for incidents
- Location plans (e.g. muster points, first aid stations, evacuation routes)
- First aid protocols and equipment list
- Communication channel for the event
- Site Survey
- Briefing notes for officials
- Emergency Services Contacts

Post Event & Incident Debriefing

To support continuous improvement in safety management, best practice and ensure compliance with the Marine Safety Act, the duty holder who manages the events have a duty to maintain participant safety by implementing the following measures:

- Conduct a debriefing or critical incident debrief if an incident occurs.
- Document any incidents, near misses, injuries, or unsafe conditions regardless of severity. Include time, location, participants involved, actions taken and outcomes.
- Maintain records for future event planning and safety improvements.

Incident Reporting Requirements

The duty holder is responsible to report all incidents to the appropriate authorities as soon as practicable, to include the Victoria Police, Safe Transport Victoria and waterway manager which is in accordance with the reporting requirements of the Marine Safety Act, reporting reportable incidents.

Useful Opensource Links

[Safe Transport Victoria Boating-Safety-Handbook-2024-DIGITAL.pdf](#)

[Safe Transport Victoria Waterway Map- Zone & Rules](#)

[Marine Safety Act 2010](#)

[Marine Safety Regulations 2023](#)

[World Aquatics Open Water Swimming Manual 2024](#)

[Master Swimming Australia Open Water Swimming Event Guide](#)

[Australian Standard Risk Management Guidelines](#)

