

Boat operations, Charter boats

These notes are intended to provide a framework for a return to diving following easing of government restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This guidance is based on current knowledge and understanding of the risks associated with the outbreak and the current scientific evidence informing decisions by government and other relevant authorities. It is acknowledged that the evidence base and knowledge surrounding the outbreak is rapidly and continually evolving and so the guidance will be reviewed regularly and be subject to update and amendment as appropriate.

STATUS

Currently in the UK different criteria applies within each of the devolved administrations. Please refer to the [STATUS document](#).

Protecting others and reducing the demands on the NHS

Current advice on avoiding transmission of the virus can be found on the Government Website. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-list-of-guidance>

The advice for anyone in any setting is to follow these main guidelines:

- The most common symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) are recent onset of a new continuous cough and/or high temperature. If you have these symptoms, however mild, stay at home and do not leave your house for 7 days from when your symptoms started (if you live alone), or 14 days (if you live with someone who has symptoms). You do not need to call NHS 111 to go into self-isolation. If your symptoms worsen during home isolation or are no better after 7 days, contact [NHS 111 online](#). If you have no internet access, you should call NHS 111. For a medical emergency dial 999.
- Wash your hands more often than usual, for 20 seconds using soap and hot water, particularly after coughing, sneezing and blowing your nose, or after being in public areas where other people are doing so. Use hand sanitiser if that's all you have access to.
- To reduce the spread of germs when you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue, or your sleeve (not your hands) if you don't have a tissue, and throw the tissue in a bin immediately. Then wash your hands or use a hand sanitising gel.
- Clean and disinfect regularly touched objects and surfaces using your regular cleaning products to reduce the risk of passing the infection on to other people.

Anyone displaying any symptoms should NOT engage in any activity outside the home.

At the height of the pandemic significant social distancing rules were in place as a legal requirement. Thanks to significant measures applied to control the spread, including the vaccination programme, most restrictions on group size and social distancing have been removed. The following guidance provides advice on appropriate safety precautions that can still be taken to help ensure the safety of all persons aboard a dive boat.

The best initial precaution is for all divers to check their own medical condition and consider the use of lateral flow testing prior to departure and not travel if testing positive or showing symptoms.

Charter boats

Most Charter boats are greater than 7m in length, although a small number of smaller boats do exist. The relatively limited space available on these craft with a normal compliment of divers (~

12) clearly represents some challenges to maintaining sensible social distancing, particularly during certain phases of the operation. Consideration needs to be given achieving effective protection. Additionally when underway, although not as great as on a RHIB or less sheltered vessel, anyone positioned behind someone else will be directly in the flow of exhaled air from the person in front, thereby increasing the potential risk of infection.

Skippers role

The management of their vessel and the safety of their passengers is of primary concern to the operator and they should have in place their own risk assessment and procedures to ensure the safety of passengers and crew. Planning and preparation is vital. Thought should be given to every stage of the operation, from preparation for loading and departure all the way through to diver deployment and recovery, disembarking passengers and their equipment, and cleaning operations at the end of the day.

From a safe diving perspective, under current government guidance, a Charter boat should be able to provide safe environment for a group of divers aboard.

Where people come into closer contact with each other, particularly in enclosed areas such as the wheelhouse, the risk of infection increases significantly. As the wheelhouse is a place of work it is likely that most skippers will place the wheelhouse out of bounds for customers. In order to protect staff who are not from the same household as the skipper but need to access the wheelhouse additional precautions, including the use of face-coverings or PPE masks, may well be necessary. The owner/skipper should follow UK Government and HSE guidance. Divers must respect any restrictions on access imposed by the skipper and crew.

In times where greater restrictions apply, planning in advance where people will sit and how many can safely be carried to ensure that physical distancing is respected when on board. Tape can be used on the benches, gunwhales or deck to mark out sitting positions.

Divers

Those taking part should be reminded to bring their own refreshments, contained in a bag to reduce contact by others. They should avoid the need for sharing cups and utensils with others who are not members of the same household. Hands should be cleaned with alcohol based gel or washed in soap and water (>20 seconds) before any food/drink is taken.

Avoid taking any unnecessary items on board that are not needed for safety reasons or underwater operations. Where short trips are planned food and additional drinks should be left ashore to reduce the risk of contamination. Make sure you have alcohol based hand sanitisers and equipment wipes available on board.

Boat skippers and Dive Managers should provide a brief prior to boat loading. All those taking part should ensure that they have either washed their hands in soap and water (20 seconds) or used an alcohol based santiser gel before loading equipment. Hand cleaning should be repeated again after loading the boat and before getting under way.

Scuba equipment should be assembled by the user before being loaded on board. Mask, fins, snorkels and ancillary equipment should be carried in an enclosed bag. Where assistance is required in loading it may be necessary for individuals to wear face-coverings or PPE masks. When assisting or loading other divers' kit, handlers must not touch cylinder valves or regulator and BC mouthpieces. Avoid touching or handling another person's equipment or bags unnecessarily. The practice of 'forming a chain' to load kit should be avoided to reduce contact with other divers kit. Those involved in loading equipment should be encouraged to clean their hands afterwards using alcohol gel or soap and water.

When kitting up, if help is needed (e.g. to close drysuit zips) you should consider if measures to reduce risk are necessary. The following are some suggested considerations;
Both people could stand near side by side, so that neither is downwind of the other.
If closing a rear dry suit zip then the diver should stand and face at right angles (90°) to wind, back to the person closing the zip who should face towards the wind.
If closing a cross chest / self donning zip then these sometimes require help at the shoulder and the diver should stand directly into the wind with their head turned away from the helper as near to a right angle to the wind as possible. The helper should stand to the side of the diver not down or up wind. The helper should face directly down wind. Both should wear face-coverings.
(see BSAC PPE Guidance).

Where safe to do so, divers should board the boat on their own unaided. Where this is not possible, for whatever reason, then face-coverings, PPE masks and gloves may be needed. If help is required then both parties (person boarding and the helper) should gel hands immediately after.

Bear in mind that, even when distancing rules are respected, while the boat is moving and due to the effect of the wind, droplets may travel a longer distance. It is therefore advisable that all passengers wear a PPE mask or face-covering (scarf, snood etc), especially during transit.

Do not spit into masks to defog them, as this will generate droplets into the environment. Use a proprietary defogging product, biodegradable baby shampoo or a slice of raw potato (which can be kept in a waterproof container). If necessary masks should be rinsed in the open water and not in a bucket or container of water on board.

When assisting a diver kitting up prior to entry it will probably not be possible to maintain distancing rules. Again careful positioning and face covering can help in reducing likelihood of transmission. A thorough and clear buddy check should be carried out while maintaining distancing and avoiding contact with mouthpieces.

Once the divers are breathing scuba gas they will be protected from inhaling airborne droplets but these may still contaminate equipment surfaces.

On conclusion of the dive and having made themselves positively buoyant on the surface, in line with good practice, divers should keep masks and mouthpieces in place. In this configuration and using a SMB / DSMB or line they can avoid separation until picked up by the boat.

The usual procedure should be used for re-entry into the boat after the dive. Diving masks remain in place until back on the boat. When scuba equipment is removed in the water before being handed back into the boat there is a point where distancing will be impossible and it is recommended that those in the boat who are assisting the diver should be wearing face-coverings as a minimum. Alternatively, the diver may clip their BCD to a secure point on the side of the boat, exit the water and recover their own BCD to minimise the intervention of another person. The diver should release their regulator from their mouth at the last possible moment, particularly if their buddy is alongside them. It may be appropriate to have the buddy re-enter on the other side of the boat.

When using a lift to exit the water, the diver should keep their mask and regulator in place, breathing gas from their scuba until they are clear of all other persons and have returned to the designated area which has been allocated to them. Although this will reduce the likelihood of the diver being infected by others, it will not prevent the divers exhaled breath from infecting others.

Boat crew, who are at work may have to wear an appropriate PPE mask.

If spare cylinders are carried, pillar valves should be taped or covered with a protector. Ideally a diver's spare cylinder should be secured next to their main scuba set.

Toilets on board:

Ideally these should only be used for urinating.

They should only be used for stools if absolutely needed. Anyone using the toilet (if portable) should then be asked to empty the toilet if they have needed to pass a stool, wipe down the seat and refill with toilet solution – ideally environmentally friendly toilet blue– seat wipes should be bagged and binned once back on shore.

Toilets located in the bow of a dive boat are difficult to ventilate well and these should be avoided for use by the public/divers.

Toilets in some boats can be well ventilated and the door left open – in this case it would be wise for people to wait at least 20mins between use if a stool is passed and the diver should either flush with the toilet lid (if present) down or remain sat on the toilet when then flush. Where the toilet does not have a lid, the operator might consider providing a temporary lid for use. Again if a stool is passed the diver should wipe the toilet seat with a cleaning wipe and place in a bin for disposal back at harbour.

Some operators may wish to locate a portaloos on the deck and use a portable tent to provide privacy if the weather / wind allows

Dive planning safety measures during initial dives:

- Build up depth progressively
- Do not plan for mandatory decompression stops
- Do not dive in strong currents where risk of separation is increased
- A maximum depth of 30m is suggested
- No night dives or overhead environments
- Divers are encouraged to carry an independent gas source (pony cylinder/bail out)
- Special care should be focused on ascents. Ideally use of a point of reference such as shot line, SMB/DSMB line, or natural topography.
- Special care should be taken to ensure the boat cover is able to monitor the position of divers at all times to minimise the risk of separation and the consequent need to call for assistance

To be used in conjunction with other guidance including:

- Medical guidance
- Status
- Equipment guidance

- Shore diving
- CPR and rescue procedures
- Diver Training
- Travel Guidance
- Charter boat diving
- RIB diving
- Swimming pool usage
- Etc.