

Risk Assessment – Canoeing / Kayaking in Christchurch Harbour (Supervised)

Activity: Canoeing / Kayaking Supervised Trip

Location: Christchurch Harbour, Mudeford Quay / Harbour entrance ('The Run'), River Avon & Stour channels

Activity Type: Supervised paddling

Assessor: James Wardle

Last Reviewed: 24 January 2026

Reviewed By:

Review Due: January 2027

Scope and Context

This risk assessment covers supervised canoeing or kayaking activities within Christchurch Harbour and (where applicable) short sections of the River Avon / Stour channels used for the Christchurch Loop. Leaders are responsible for planning, dynamic risk assessment, decision-making, Participants must follow leader instructions and operate within the limits of their ability.

Christchurch Harbour is shallow and strongly tide-influenced. The harbour entrance at Mudeford ('The Run') can experience very strong tidal streams on the ebb and should be treated as a high-consequence area.

Additional Controls (Activity Specific)

- Tide-led planning: choose launch/route/timings to avoid large areas drying and to avoid the harbour mouth on strong ebb where possible.
- Wind-led planning: strong winds across open water can make progress difficult; set conservative wind limits and keep to sheltered margins if wind increases.
- Group control: lead + sweep; buddy system; compact group; headcounts at key decision points (launch, before/after channels, before return).
- Traffic management: keep out of the main navigable channel where safe; when transiting narrow channels stay between bank and moorings where possible; regroup before pinch points.
- Known fixed hazards briefing: chain/obstruction near the town bridge/fishing raft area; do not drift into it; portage/avoidance plan agreed.

- Upper river controls: after heavy rain expect stronger flow and more tree hazards/strainers; avoid narrow tree-lined channels if flow is strong; turn back early.
- Carry and use suitable kit: BA mandatory, whistle, towline(s), spare paddle, first aid kit, repair tape, and communications (phones in dry cases).
- Emergency plan: identify safe egress points (slipways/banks), emergency access, and shore contact/float plan.

Risk Assessment Table

Hazard	Who Might Be Harmed	Risk	Existing Controls / Mitigations	Risk Level	Further Actions
Strong winds across open harbour	All participants	Slow progress, fatigue, loss of group control, capsize	Conservative wind limits; keep to sheltered margins; shorten route; frequent regrouping; stop early.	Medium	Define 'turn back' triggers in briefing
Harbour shallow / dries in places	All participants	Grounding, stuck in mud, delayed return, injury while walking boats	Plan tides carefully; avoid drying areas at low water; carry/drag only if safe; use known channels.	Medium	Agree 'no-go' areas for the day
Strong ebb through harbour entrance ('The Run')	All participants	Loss of control, swept out to sea, collision risk	Avoid transiting entrance on strong ebb; stay well inside harbour when ebbing; maintain group discipline.	High	Route plan avoids entrance unless slack/favourable
Narrow channel to Christchurch with traffic	Participants and other users	Collision / capsize	Stay between bank and moorings where possible; regroup before channel; cross only when safe; high-visibility clothing.	Medium	Brief local traffic patterns
Subsurface chain/obstruction below town bridge / fishing raft	All participants	Entrapment, capsize, injury, equipment damage	Brief hazard location; keep clear; do not drift under/near structure; portage/avoidance if uncertain.	Medium-High	Mark on route card/map for leaders
Strong flow on upper Avon after heavy rain	All participants	Loss of control in narrow channels, increased capsize risk	Check recent rainfall/river levels; avoid upper sections if flow strong; turn back early; keep close group control.	Medium-High	Add 'after rain' alternate route
Tree hazards / strainers on upper Avon	All participants	Entrapment, capsize, injury	Avoid fast narrow tree-lined channels in higher flow; keep away from outside of bends; leader sets safe line.	High	Avoid rather than attempt clearance
Capsize / immersion	Individual / group	Cold shock, hypothermia, separation	BA mandatory; rescue capability within group; towlines; dress for immersion; stop early in cold conditions.	Medium	Refresh rescue plan before launch
Separation from group / loss of visibility around bends	All participants	Delayed assistance, wrong turn	Lead/sweep; buddy system; regroup points; wait at junctions/bridges; clear whistle signals.	Low-Medium	Use simple route with minimal junctions

Manual handling (launch/recovery, carrying boats)	Participants	Strains, slips, trips	Two-person carries; clear launch/recovery brief; suitable footwear; controlled movement on slipways.	Low	Assign 'launch marshal' if large group
Equipment failure (paddle, BA, boat damage)	All participants	Reduced control, delay	Pre-trip checks; spare paddle(s); repair tape; defective kit quarantined.	Low-Medium	Improve defect reporting
Biohazards (Weil's disease, blue-green algae, pollution)	All participants	Illness/infection	Cover cuts; hand hygiene; avoid contact with scums; rinse kit; monitor symptoms after activity.	Low-Medium	Seasonal reminders
Medical issue / delayed access	Individual participant	Worsening condition	First aid kit; medical disclosures; know access points; call emergency services if required.	Medium	Confirm emergency access points in leader plan

General Notes

- This is a supervised paddling activity: leaders hold responsibility for planning, supervision, and safety management.
- Safety takes precedence over completing the route.
- This risk assessment should be reviewed annually or after any incident/near miss.