

## Risk Assessment – Studland to Old Harry Rocks (Sea Kayak / Coastal Paddle)

**Activity:** Coastal paddle: Studland (Knoll/Middle Beach area) to Old Harry Rocks and return (or land at Swanage/Sophie’s Cairn where planned)

**Location:** Studland Bay / Ballard Down / Old Harry Rocks / Ballard Point (Dorset)

**Activity Type:** Supervised Coastal Paddle (tidal streams / swell / high seasonal activity)

**Date last reviewed:** 23 January 2026

**Assessor:** James Wardle

**Reviewed by:** Caroline Smedley

**Review due:** January 2027

### Scope and Context

This risk assessment covers a supervised sea kayak trip from Studland Bay to Old Harry Rocks (Ballard Down) and return or onward landing, in conditions suitable for the group. The route is exposed to tidal streams at Ballard Point/Old Harry, increased water-user density in summer, and local features (sea caves, rocky landings, and headland tide races) that can significantly increase risk if swell or tidal timing is misjudged.

Studland Bay is popular with swimmers and other leisure craft in summer. Water-sports activity (including towed sports) and high-speed craft can be present. Local water-safety measures and seasonal speed controls may apply, but participants must not rely on other users complying.

### Additional Controls (Studland / Old Harry Specific)

- Participant capability: suitable experience for coastal paddling, immersion risk, and basic self-rescue; novices only with explicit leader agreement.
- Minimum leader team: nominated Lead + Sweep; leaders carry towline(s), first aid kit, group repair kit, spare paddle, and spare warm layer/foil blanket.
- Comms: waterproof phones as minimum; VHF where carried. Pre-brief simple hand/whistle signals and a clear ‘stop/regroup’ protocol.
- Go/No-Go checklist: wind direction/strength, swell height/period, visibility, temperature, forecast confidence, and daylight timing (including return).
- Tidal planning: confirm timing/strength of ebb/flood around Ballard Point and the effect of Poole Harbour outflow; plan to avoid peak tide race if the group is not intending to play in it.

- Traffic management in bay: keep group compact; cross ski/waterski lines well clear; stop and regroup if the area becomes congested.
- Swimmers close inshore: maintain a safe separation distance; approach landings slowly; no fast manoeuvres near bathing zones.
- Sea caves at Old Harry: do not enter caves in swell; no ‘through’ of caves on a falling tide when shallow; leader to set a firm ‘no-caves’ rule unless conditions and competence clearly allow.
- Trap risk beyond Old Harry: treat Ballard Point/Old Harry as a hard decision point. If tide/swell is building, turn back early—do not commit beyond the headland without sufficient time/conditions to return.
- Condor fast-ferry wash: expect larger wake events, particularly outbound; keep bows into wake where practical; maintain spacing and avoid being side-on near rocks.
- Sophie’s Cairn landing: small swell + rocky landing. Prefer the more sheltered sandier area opposite the ‘landship’ feature. Leader to manage landings one-by-one and provide hands-on support if needed.
- Current set near Ballard Point: expect a consistent set around the headland (often anti-clockwise in the bay); strong tide can make progress difficult—allow extra time and plan conservative turn-back time.

## Risk Assessment Table

Hazard	Who Might Be Harmed	Risk	Control Measures (Studland / Old Harry)	Risk Level	Further Actions
High density of water users (summer)	Group; swimmers; other craft	Collision / near miss / injury	Avoid peak times where possible. Keep group compact with Lead/Sweep. Slow, predictable paddling near swimmers and moorings. Regroup if congested.	Medium	Adjust timing/route on day
Jet skis / towed sports activity in Studland Bay	Group; PWC users; swimmers	High-speed collision risk	Maintain wide separation from activity zones. Cross behind tow lines only when clearly safe. Stop/regroup and let traffic pass. Brief that PWC may behave unpredictably.	Medium	Brief participants before launch
Large number of moored yachts (summer)	Group; yacht crews	Collision / entanglement / restricted manoeuvre	Keep clear of mooring lines. Pass outside mooring fields where practical. Avoid weaving between yachts in swell/wake. Maintain lookout.	Low-Medium	Choose clearer line if busy
Swimmers close to shore	Swimmers; group	Collision; complaint; rescue distraction	Maintain separation and paddle further off unless landing. Low speed near shore. Do not shine torches/lights at people (if late).	Low-Medium	Leader to control approach
Old Harry caves / narrow features on falling tide	Group (esp. less experienced)	Capsize; injury; entrapment; gear damage	No cave entry in swell. No ‘through’ caves on falling tide. Maintain clearance from cliff base and rocky outcrops. Leader sets hard rules.	Medium	Monitor tide/swell continuously

Tide race at Ballard Point / Old Harry on outgoing tide	Group	Loss of control; capsize; separation	Avoid peak stream for transit. Keep well offshore of race if not playing. If playing: only competent paddlers, strict supervision, escape line and regroup point.	Medium-High	Have conservative 'abort' trigger
Risk of being trapped beyond Old Harry (tide/swell misjudged)	Group	Inability to return; fatigue; exposure	Hard decision point before committing. Set fixed turn-back time. Identify bail-out landing options. Do not commit beyond if conditions are building or time margin is insufficient.	Medium-High	Leaders to monitor time strictly
Wake / wash from high-speed ferry (e.g., Condor)	Group	Capsize; collision with rocks	Expect significant wake events. Keep bows into wake, maintain spacing, and stay off rocks. If near cliff/rocks, move to safer water early.	Medium	Brief 'wake handling'
Current set in the bay / around Ballard affecting progress	Group	Fatigue; separation; late return	Plan for adverse stream and allow extra time. Keep group together and take breaks in sheltered water. Conservative route and turn-back.	Medium	Carry spare warm layer/food
Swell at Sophie's Cairn / rocky landing	Group	Injury during landing; boat damage	Choose sandier landing opposite 'landship' where possible. Land one-by-one under leader control. Leaders support landings and timing between sets.	Medium	Abort landing if unsafe; move elsewhere
Entering sea caves in swell	Group	Capsize; impact injury	Explicit 'no caves in swell' rule; leader assessment only. Maintain clearance from cliff faces and surge channels.	Medium	Reinforce in briefing

## General Notes

- This is a supervised coastal session: leaders remain responsible for group management and dynamic risk assessment.
- Participants must stay within the group boundaries (no passing the Lead, no falling behind the Sweep).
- The session may be modified, shortened, or stopped if conditions become unsuitable.
- This risk assessment should be reviewed annually or following any incident or near miss.