

Dynamic Risk Assessment (On-the-Water)

St Denys Boat Club – Quick Guide

Why this matters






Pre-assessing risk for events is valuable, but no two days on the water are the same. Weather, tide, visibility, traffic and group capability can change quickly. Skippers, leaders and individual participants must continuously assess risk and adapt the plan.

Simple definition

Dynamic risk assessment is: Observe → Think → Decide → Act early.

Key principle: adjust early, while you still have options.

The 5 things to keep re-checking

-  1) Weather (actual, not just forecast)
Watch for gust patterns, whitecaps and sudden changes. If it feels harder than it should... it probably is.
-  2) Tide / flow / current
Do the hardest bit first (into wind/tide). Set a fixed turn-back time (not just a turning point).
-  3) Traffic / other water users
Rowers, swimmers, anglers, motorboats and commercial traffic increase risk. Tighten up and go wide around congestion.
-  4) The group (fatigue, fear, confidence)
Cold, tired or anxious paddlers/sailors need support early. Reduce challenge before confidence collapses.
-  5) Equipment condition
Small kit issues become big issues fast. Fix problems early or stop and reassess.

What leaders can change (without drama)

- Reduce exposure: shorten route, stay sheltered, avoid headlands/bridges/tide races
- Reduce complexity: stop training manoeuvres, switch to safe-transit mode
- Increase control: lead + sweep, tighter spacing, headcounts, buddy system enforced
- Increase support: raft up, tow, move to bank and reassess
- Stop the activity: ending early is often good leadership

Red flags (act early)

- Group spreading out or repeated separation
- Wind/wash increasing (whitecaps appear)
- Swimmers / traffic increasing sharply
- Landing/exit points worse than expected
- One person becoming cold, quiet, stressed or making repeated mistakes
- "It's probably OK..." becomes the main justification

On-water decision rule

If the worst realistic outcome is unacceptable — change the plan now.

Ask: “If someone capsizes here, can we safely help them?” “If something breaks, can we still get home?”
“If visibility drops, do we have a safe escape route?”

Club culture

At St Denys Boat Club, anyone can raise a safety concern or ask to stop/turn back. Doing so is treated as good judgement.