

RYA Summary and Response to the serious incident at the Youth National Championships 2025

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Introduction

The 2025 Youth National Championships was hosted at Plas Heli, the national sailing events centre for Wales, in April. The RYA was the Organising Authority, and the event was led by RYA staff and an experienced volunteer team.

The classes were single handed or two person dinghies, windsurfers and multihulls. The sailors were mainly in the 13-19 age group. There was a wide range of experience within the fleets, including those just moving into youth sailing classes.

A serious incident took place on Wednesday 16th April 2025.

Strong winds and a rough sea state led to many capsizes on the 29er race course during the 2nd race of the day. Recovering 29er sailors and boats proved to be challenging.

Independent report

Following the incident the RYA commissioned an independent investigation into the incident.

Phase	Purpose	Led by	Reviewed by
Information gathering	Collect complete picture of what occurred on the 16 th April 2025	Alan Williams	Alastair Fox
Incident report and recommendations	Establish the contributing factors and identify independent recommendations to learn for the future	Alastair Fox	RYA's Safety Management Group and RYA Board
Learning action and planning	Create a clear action plan to apply the lessons learned to future event delivery	Working group	Safety Management Group and CEO

A huge amount of evidence was gathered from event documentation and direct experience of the incident provided by sailors, parents, volunteers and officials. Inevitably there are many perspectives on what happened, the causes and learnings.

The report provides a valuable account of the incident as it unfolded, observations of the factors that led to the serious incident, and some clear recommendations.

The RYA accepts the report and is grateful to Alan Williams (evidence gathering) and Alastair Fox (observations and recommendations) for their work. Alan has many years of experience leading sailing organisations, coaching and investigating incidents. Alastair has over 20 years' experience delivering major events as the former Event Director at World Sailing.

The working group that considered the report included RYA staff, class association representation, a race official and an event director with experience of large-scale events. This summary and response lays out the key lessons learned and what action the RYA is putting in place to address those learnings.

Neither the investigation report nor this summary seek to apportion blame to any party. The intention of both documents is to learn from the incident and to ensure appropriate measures are implemented to mitigate against the risk of such an incident occurring the future.

RYA Response

The RYA acknowledges the events of 16 April constituted a serious incident. The challenging conditions placed considerable demands on sailors, parents, volunteers, and staff. Thanks to the skill of all involved and with the support of the emergency services sailors were safely recovered to shore. We are deeply grateful to everyone who supported the response on the water and on shore.

Sailors are at the heart of the RYA. We value their experiences, voices and wellbeing in everything we do. We are mindful of the impact this incident has had and recognise it was distressing for many sailors, parents and volunteers. Some sailors endured long waits and difficult recoveries, which tests their physical and emotional resilience. For families and supporters on shore, there was a period of significant concern as the situation unfolded, and they waited for news of their loved ones. Equally, those volunteering found themselves in a very challenging situation.

The incident is a reminder of the importance of our objective to provide environments where everyone feels safe on the water. Importantly, it also underscores our commitment to providing the highest standards of safety.

The RYA accepts collective responsibility. Our planning, resources, and procedures exist to prevent such incidents, and we must do all we can to avoid a recurrence. Following the findings of our independent report we have already reviewed what happened and identified opportunities where different decisions and approaches

could have improved both prevention and response, which we have outlined below.

We are committed to learning from this incident and have begun implementing changes to strengthen safety procedures and decision-making processes at events. This work is being shaped in collaboration with classes, clubs, race officials, volunteers, and industry partners, and will continue as part of an ongoing action plan that reflects the wealth of knowledge that exists within our community.

The sport of sailing has a strong record of safety, built on robust structures, teamwork, and communication. By listening, learning, and working together, we will continue to improve and ensure the wellbeing of all who take part.

The Incident

- Plas Heli is one of a small number of venues in the UK capable of accommodating the Youth Nationals in its current format
- A professional meteorologist provided a forecasting service for the event
- The forecast was that strong wind would arrive suddenly, and while the timing was uncertain, it clearly pointed to a considerable increase in wind strength at around 13.00hrs
- The 29ers were allocated a course some 2.5miles from the beach in an area that often has a rough sea state in onshore winds due to an uneven seabed, shallow patches and the tidal stream
- There were 40 boats and 80 sailors in the 29er class
- The incident occurred during the 29ers' second race of the day
- Conditions deteriorated rapidly, with strong winds and a rough sea state
- A high number of capsizes occurred within the 29er fleet
- Recovery operations were prolonged and complex
- The Coastguard were informed and search and rescue attended
- Sailors from the IICA and 420 courses experienced difficulties returning to the beach
- Sailors were prioritised over equipment
- Sailors were eventually successfully recovered to the shore
- One volunteer safety boat crew member sustained a serious head injury requiring hospital treatment.
- A number of other minor injuries were managed by the medical team supporting the event and did not require the assistance of the NHS
- Several boats sustained significant damage

The learning and actions

Our priority is the safety and wellbeing of all those involved alongside a transparent review of the circumstances and outcome of the incident. Sailors and volunteers are at the centre of our approach and ways of working. We are committed to continuously improving safety, skills and resilience.

There were opportunities for improved structures, clearer plans and different decisions that may have prevented the incident and could have improved the incident response on the water and on the shore.

The learnings focus on both prevention and incident response. The common thread is risk-based decision making which is enabled by both structures and culture.

There are many decision makers at an event, and we need to reflect on the structures and culture that enable them all to access the right information so they can each decide what is best for them in any given circumstance.

Structures, planning and concise documentation provide a framework allowing each event, day, fleet and situation to be assessed.

A culture of teamwork, open communication, discipline in following plans and healthy check and challenge results in clear plans, based on a common understanding of the risks by everyone involved, with opportunities to raise concerns and change course.

This section discusses key themes, the issues that arose, the learning, the action we are going to take and where we need to engage with the community further.

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Impact on people

Issues

Prevention	<p>Does the length and format of the event enable race management teams and volunteers to be at their best, deliver great racing to the schedule, and have enough down time?</p> <p>A variety of people have responsibility for liaising and communicating with sailors and parents on a daily basis throughout an event.</p>
	<p>Sailors endured long waits before being rescued, testing their physical and emotional resilience. It was a distressing and frightening experience for some. Parents did not get a full picture of what was happening, weren't clear where to go for information, and found it difficult to get accurate updates. There was considerable and understandable worry and anxiety among parents and sailors. Safety teams and race officials experienced a long day afloat in challenging, stressful conditions.</p> <p>Opportunities for support to help people cope after the incident were put in place during the event and subsequently (group and informal 1:1 chats). Sources of professional support were signposted, however feedback received suggested this provision did not meet the needs of those affected.</p>

Learning

Prevention	<p>Event length and format need to respect the purpose of the event and enable sailors and volunteers to be at their best.</p> <p>Sailors and parents need to be aware of plans, what is happening afloat and be able to raise concerns in order to play their part in an open, risk-based decision making and teamwork culture (see theme on culture)</p>
Incident response	<p>It should be clear who is responsible for communicating with participants and parents as a serious incident unfolds, and the person in this role shouldn't be distracted from other key roles (e.g. Beachmaster).</p>

Recommendations and action

General – the Director of Racing will:

- Put in place a process to follow up with all sailors and volunteers to learn about their recovery since the incident and any further practical, emotional and social support needed
- Research good practice post incident support and confirm options the RYA will put in place in the future

- Include communicating with participants and parents during an incident into the review of roles and responsibilities (see theme: structure and planning)
- Ensure training on post incident support is available to those involved in event delivery
- Review the event format to ensure a good fit with the purpose and enable sailors and volunteers to be at their best.

Safety Guidelines, Procedures and plans. The RYA's Safety Management Group and the RYA Event Management team will:

- Ensure there is a clear route for sailors, parents and volunteers to get up to date information about the daily plan, raise any questions or concerns, and get a prompt response.
- Ensure major incident plans include:
 - a designated point of contact for parent liaison
 - direction on where sailors, parents and volunteers can seek practical, emotional and social support
 - information about coping with stress following a major incident including how to access further professional help.

Future Engagement

Professionals with knowledge of post incident support

- Identify good practice and future options

Classes and affiliates

- Sailors, parents and volunteers impacted by the incident

Structure and planning

Issues

Prevention	Clarity about the wider oversight and assurance role of the RYA senior management team.
	Missed opportunities for different decision making. Clarity around the structure (chain of command) and daily plan with agreed timings.
Incident response	Communication with the RNLI and Coastguard in the early stages of the response. Clarity of who had overall responsibility for the response to the serious incident on the 29er course. Clarity about adverse condition decision making and action plans, including strong winds.

Learning

Prevention	A clear structure and chain of command aids decision making. Safety is enhanced when key roles are filled by experienced, competent people with proven skills, ability and knowledge whose suitability has been given due consideration, who are then given the training, resources and support needed. The daily meeting structure, decision-making process and subsequent briefings are key to reviewing the factors that impact on the safety plan, racing schedule and course allocation. The operating guidelines and event specific safety plans provide a framework, so everyone knows what to do in given situations. They need to be clear, concise and communicated to all.
	An established relationship with the emergency services may improve communications in the early stage of a response. Clarity over structure and chain of command will make it clear who has overall responsibility for the incident response on the water, support decision-making and improve communication with the emergency services. Structure and chain of command needs to be communicated to all stakeholders through a clear, easy to follow Emergency Action Plan. Procedures and safety plans (for example action plans around strong winds) need to provide clarity about decision making and steps for safety teams to follow and include situations where people are prioritised over equipment.
Incident response	Recommendations and action

Roles and responsibilities. The Director of Racing will:

- review and sign off pre-event risk assessments, delivery and safety plans for major events, monitor implementation and ensure support structures are in place,
- confirm the event management structure and chain of command so the RYA appointed Event Director assumes overall responsibility for the event, with clear relationships between the Principal Race Officer and Event Safety Officer, and subsequently the Course Race Officers and Course Safety Leads,
- review and update the responsibilities, competence required and the appointment process for key roles within the event management team,
- ensure operational guidelines and safety plans are updated with approved structure, roles.

Meetings / decision making. The Director of Racing will:

- update the meeting structure and decision-making process,
- ensure the daily plan and decisions concerning racing are confirmed at an event management meeting, chaired by the Event Director with the PRO and ESO present. A checklist of what needs to be covered would help,
- consider the involvement of a venue representative within the meeting structure and decision-making process

Safety Guidelines, Procedures and Plans. The RYA's Safety Management Group and the RYA Event Management team will:

- review and update the operating guidelines for RYA events and event specific safety plans in line with the incident report, this action plan, the working group discussions and subsequent engagement with the community, and in particular:
 - update structure, roles and responsibilities and operational aspects
 - ensure they provide clarity of decision-making responsibilities, and easy steps to follow for safety teams and when to escalate decisions during serious incidents
 - include in procedures the need to establish a relationship, outline plans and agree communication with the RNLI, Coastguard and other local authorities
 - outline when the emergency services should be called

Safety briefings. The event director will:

- ensure race management, safety teams and sailors have access to information about the risk factors assessed, decision making processes, operational guidelines and action plans in a concise format, using checklists where possible

Future Engagement**Emergency Services**

- Structure and chains of command to inform RYA event structure and emergency action plans

- When and how to notify local authorities and emergency services in advance

Classes and affiliates

- Safety guidelines, procedures and action plans
- Good practice on structure and chain of command for multi-course events

Race officials and safety teams

- Good practice on structure and chain of command for multi-course events
- Safety guidelines and procedures
- Responsibilities, competence required and appointment process for key roles

Risk assessment

The issues

Prevention	<p>Local knowledge indicated the race area experiences rough seas in an onshore wind due to an uneven seabed</p> <p>There was a broad range of ages and experience in the 29er fleet</p> <p>There were different approaches within the daily risk assessments for each course, with different assessments of the conditions and capabilities of the sailors</p> <p>The forecast was clear that strong winds would arrive suddenly</p> <p>Clarity around the daily plan, and no agreed timings for getting ashore considering the forecast</p>
	<p>The 29er is a high-performance dinghy and challenging to recover in bad weather / rough seas. It would have been challenging to recover any of the fleets in the conditions experienced.</p>

Learning

Prevention	<p>The pre-event risk assessment needs to be event specific and include the boats being sailed and their recovery in bad weather; the age, experience and competence of the participants; and the venue and each course area. Local knowledge and officials with previous experience can help inform the risk assessment.</p> <p>For multi – course events, daily risk assessments for each course should be consistent in their approach.</p> <p>There are many decision-makers, and many 'pause' moments during a large event. Decision makers include the event management team, course race officials, safety leads, sailors and their parents. Pause moments include the meeting to devise the daily plan, the decision to launch, the decision to start a race and the decision to return to shore.</p> <p>Decision making will be different if the conditions are expected to build progressively or change suddenly – in building conditions a safety fleet is likely to have the time and resources to make a judgement on when to return to shore, in suddenly changing conditions a safety fleet can get quickly overwhelmed so the decision to return to shore needs to be taken before the change.</p> <p>The outcome of the risk assessments, and the information assessed within them, is a 'golden thread' for all decision makers and could be communicated to all (including sailors and parents)– e.g. the daily plan, the forecast, a venue guide...</p>
Incident response	The risk assessment of the boats being sailed should inform what safety teams are guided to do during an incident

Recommendations and action

Pre-event risk assessments. The Director of Racing will:

- ensure each pre-event risk assessment includes boat, venue and event specific factors (including participants, race management and safety teams).
- be assured that local, class and race official knowledge has fed into the risk assessment

Daily risk assessment. The Event Director will:

- provide an overall approach to daily risk assessments and manage the process centrally
- consider how the outcomes of the risk assessments, the information assessed, and the plans formed can be communicated to all decision makers, including the sailors – e.g. forecast, venue guides

Future Engagement

Venue and classes involved in the next Youth Nationals

- Factors to be considered in the risk assessments

Sailors and parents

- The decisions they make and the information they use to make those decisions

Culture – open communication, risk-based decision making and teamwork

The issues

Prevention	Missed opportunities for different decision making.
	Clarity around the daily plan, with agreed timings, considering the forecast conditions.
	Weather forecast (and updates) can give a false sense of security around timings
	Ensuring all staff and volunteers are aware of guidelines, procedures and plans

Learning

Prevention	Individual perspectives, experiences and skills contribute to the decision making and a common plan.
	The value of members of the team knowing each other well enough and feeling able to challenge the plan (or its absence).
	Open communication through a briefing structure gives all decision makers (including sailors and parents) the information they need to consider the significant factors and anything forecast to change.
	All decision makers need to recognise the 'pause' moments – the chance to check whether the resources are still sufficient, the plan still holds, and it is safe to proceed or not. There will be many pause moments during an event.
	Back forecasts up with regular observations of conditions.

Recommendations and action

Safety briefings. The Event Director will:

- be assured that everyone involved in the event is fully briefed on the overall procedures, the daily plans and emergency action plans,

General. The Event Director will establish a culture so that all involved:

- know each other,
- know the plan and their part in it,
- feel able to challenge the plan if they have concerns.

And decision makers:

- recognise the 'pause' moments to check whether the plan still holds,
- prioritise checking whether the plan still holds equally with completing the schedule.

Future Engagement

Race officials and safety teams

- creating and regularly reinforcing the culture

Resources (people, time skills and knowledge, equipment)

The issues

Prevention	<p>Safety is enhanced when key roles are filled by experienced, competent people with proven skills, ability and knowledge whose suitability has been given due consideration, who are then given the training, resources and support needed.</p>
Incident response	<p>Communication was challenging between the safety teams, between the safety teams and the shore, and between the event and the emergency services, in part due to wet microphones and wind noise.</p> <p>Volunteers will often have class specific experience, so if called to help with another fleet may lack experience and familiarity with that class of boat.</p> <p>Some abandoned boats were temporarily secured to buoys, alongside each other. They suffered damage and were difficult to release later.</p> <p>Conditions were very challenging – safety boats were filling with water; manoeuvring in strong winds and high seas at close quarters led to damage; it was difficult to lower sails; recovering inverted boats (most of which had sails hoisted) was extremely difficult. Significant seamanship skills were required.</p> <p>In very difficult conditions, it was reported that safety boats with 3 crew on board were more efficient, particularly when recovering boats with no sailors on board.</p> <p>Sailors returned to shore in several ways – some were assisted to right their boats and sail back to the beach (some under jib alone); others were taken ashore on ribs and their boats left for later recovery.</p> <p>Masts of some inverted boats became stuck in the seabed and wire cutters were needed to free them from the seabed</p> <p>Red and white tape was not routinely attached to boats when sailors were removed because it was unsafe to attempt it. In addition, not all crews had red and white tape. It was not easy for the SAR helicopter to identify which boats were unoccupied.</p> <p>Safety teams were confident they had 'eyes' on all sailors but this information was not clearly communicated to Bridge. Returning boats used any trolley to get from the beach to the compound so it wasn't clear which boats were still at sea.</p> <p>It took a long time for the tally system (physical tallies, tallying sailors to Bridge) to account for all sailors.</p>

Learning

Prevention	<p>There needs to be a clear pathway for key roles at major events that includes mentoring and support if events like the Youth Nationals are to be sustainable</p>
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	<p>Equipment to keep water off microphones and reduce wind noise can help the communication challenges.</p> <p>Boats temporarily secured to buoys are less likely to be damaged if left 'in line', ideally on a herring bone towline</p> <p>Very challenging conditions call for very good seamanship skills and familiarity with the equipment and the techniques to use. Practice and experience are key but you never practice in the conditions when they are needed most.</p> <p>At the point additional resources are deployed to a serious incident consider additional crewing for safety boats.</p> <p>Wire cutters, GPS location equipment, lines for herring bone tows and spare radios should be available on each course.</p> <p>Red and white tape is currently seen as good practice for marking unoccupied boats – but it is not perfect</p> <p>Physical tallies, and tallying sailors / safety crew with Bridge are currently seen as good practice to account for all those on the water. In challenging situations, the systems are stretched and take time, but robust, consistent use of them is vital.</p>
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Recommendations and action

Safety Guidelines, Procedures and plans. The RYA's Safety Management Group and the RYA Event Management team will:

- review equipment requirements to address wind noise and wet microphones on VHF, and consider headsets / throat mikes for key roles
- review practice to identify the best means of marking up turned, unoccupied boats,
- build in consideration of additional crew as and when a serious incident requires additional resources,
- review current procedures for implementing tally systems to ensure they are robust and timely, including a method of marking/identifying in the tally system any sailors who have been removed to a RIB but not yet tallied ashore

General. The Event Director and Director of Racing will:

- ensure people in key roles have the time and support they need to deliver the event
- ensure there is a pathway so that in the future there are people to fill the key roles at major events
- produce daily checklists for safety boats and safety fleets (equipment, fuel, fit for purpose),
- ensure opportunities to develop and practice seamanship skills are included across racing programmes, activity and the community,
- consider how to educate everyone involved in the event (and pathway generally) so they are familiar with the equipment being sailed, communication on the water, recovery techniques to be used, managing the sailing area, and managing incidents

- keep technology-based options for tally systems under review and consider testing the RFID tags in use at 29er Euros and Worlds events

Future Engagement

RNLI / Coastguard

- Practice to identify the best means of marking up turned, unoccupied boats

Classes, coaches, race officials, safety teams

- Develop and practice seamanship skills
- Good practice in implementing tally systems
- Technology options for tally systems

General

The issues

Prevention	There are a limited number of venues who can host an event at this scale, most are coastal, and not all have sheltered water options
Incident response	As the review of the incident started a conflict of interest existed given the person asked to lead the collection of information and evidence had a link to the event delivery team. This was managed by engaging an independent author for the observations and recommendations. The review, and the RYA response to it has been long and complex.

Learning

Prevention	The choice of venue and the information assessed is part of the 'golden thread' for all decision makers and could be communicated to all as part of a venue guide.
Incident response	Sail racing is a small community where conflicts of interest may arise. Managing them is key to ensuring confidence and in the review recommendations and the RYA response to these. Starting the process of collecting information and evidence as soon as possible was important. Ensuring that potential conflict of interest is considered throughout an incident review is key to ensuring confidence and trust in the review recommendations. The importance of balancing engaging with the sail racing community to consider the RYA response and ensuring reflection and learning is seen to happen as quickly as possible.

Recommendations and action

General – the Director of Racing will:

- Check current venue assessment process incorporates the lessons from this incident

Incident Review Process – the Safety Management Group will:

- Ensure conflict of interest is considered through its incident review process
- Review its incident review process relating to RYA events and activity

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