

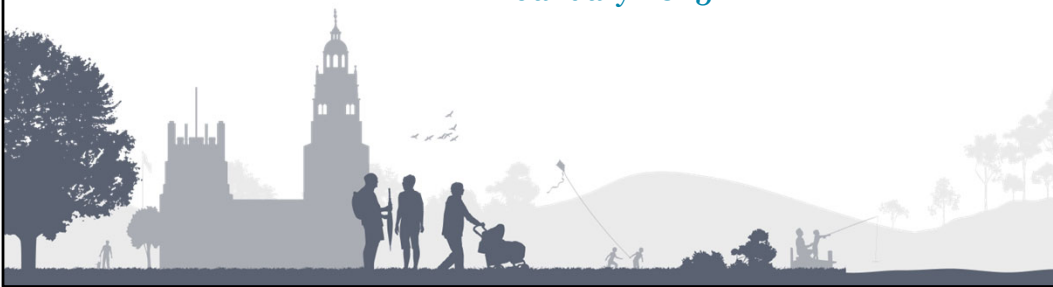


# Back to Basics Risk Assessment Templates

Numbers vs. Narratives

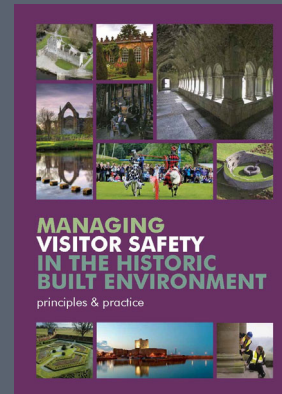
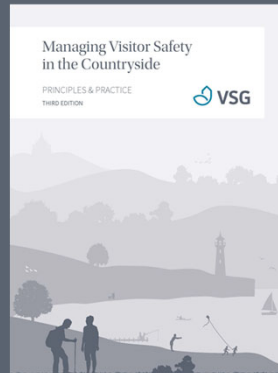
Ken Dodd

22 January 2025





‘The guiding principles, the risk control matrix and the case studies all give good guidance to inspectors and dutyholders, on when management intervention may be appropriate to control risk and what that management intervention could look like.’



Basics of VSG approach to risk assessment can be found in our publications.

You can get free electronic copy from your organisation (or ask Outscape). Hard copies now available for £12. (Link to purchase is on VSG website).

Now achieved one of our original aims: For government and enforcement agencies to recognise VSG represents best practice in the sector.

These words are from HSE website advising their own staff that prosecution after an accident would be unlikely if the land owner has followed VSG principles.





## Five-step risk assessment

- Step 1 **Identify the hazards**
- Step 2 **Consider who might be harmed and how**
- Step 3 Evaluate the risks and decide whether the existing risk control measures are adequate or whether more should be done
- Step 4 Record your findings and implement them
- Step 5 Review your assessment and update if necessary



The law does not specify how to do risk assessment.

Under criminal law (Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974) they need to be 'suitable and sufficient' - but how to achieve this is not defined.

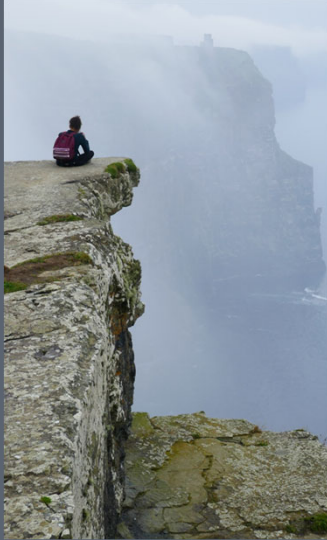
Under civil law (defined in several Occupiers' Liability Acts) you have a duty of care to ensure that visitors will be reasonably safe.

We have chosen to follow the method recommended by HSE. (This gives the advantage of reassurance and familiarity if you are being investigated by the enforcing authorities or in front of a judge.)



## Step 1: Identify the hazards

### natural hazards



- unprotected drops such as cliff edges and rock outcrops
- water - deep, fast-flowing, tidal, cold or with currents
- falling rocks, trees or branches
- weather - including extreme cold, high winds, electrical storms, fog, blizzards
- animals and insects - including Weil's Disease from rat's urine and Lyme Disease from tick bites
- poisonous plants



A hazard is anything that has potential to cause harm.

You need to consider the whole range of hazards that are on your site.

It is essential that someone carrying out risk assessments has good knowledge of the site and its visitors.

Risk assessments carried out by small teams almost always produce more comprehensive and higher quality results.

Sometimes it is helpful for one of the team to bring a fresh pair of eyes to the site.



## Step 1: Identify the hazards

### man-made hazards

- unprotected drops such as in castles
- machinery, vehicles and boats
- confined spaces (such as tunnels)
- low light levels
- worn or steep steps and stairs, uneven paths
- events and pressure from crowds of people
- work activity - especially farming and forestry with heavy machinery
- buildings, bridges, structures, canals, lakes, ponds, mine shafts, fences, barbed wire
- activities such as walking, cycling, swimming, horse riding, hang gliding, canoeing, fishing and mountain biking



5



It is helpful to consider the hazards through the eyes of your users.

Some will result from activities of visitors.

Recreation user groups and governing bodies will have good information about the hazards typically encountered in their particular sports and activities.



## Step 2: Consider who might be harmed and how

- know your visitors – age, abilities, experience
- know your visitors – activities and behaviour
- accident records – on site, elsewhere, emergency services
- accident reporting



Need to gather information from surveys?

Can learn a lot by taking time to watch behaviour of visitors.

Learn from others.

Have easy ways for staff and public to report accidents and near misses.





## Five-step risk assessment

- Step 1 Identify the hazards
- Step 2 Consider who might be harmed and how
- Step 3 **Evaluate the risks and decide whether the existing risk control measures are adequate or whether more should be done**
- Step 4 Record your findings and implement them
- Step 5 Review your assessment and update if necessary



How do you calculate the level of risk?

And judge whether the risk is acceptable?





Illustration from VSG publication.

Top right: multiple fatalities almost certain to happen are not acceptable!

Bottom left: No need to consider remote possibilities causing no real harm.

Middle area: Judgement here is trickier. But does scoring help?



## Acceptability of risk

Risk Rating (RR)		Hazard Severity (S)		
RR = S x L (see below)		1	2	3
Likelihood of Occurrence (L)	3	3	6	9
	2	2	4	6
	1	1	2	3
Low	1-3	No immediate action required proceed with care.		
Med	4-6	Hazard to be investigated in conjunction with line manager/supervisor with a view to reducing the risk		
High	9	Immediate action must be taken to eliminate risk or substantially reduce the risk.		

SLIGHT HARM                      HARMFUL                      EXTREMELY HARMFUL

\*\*\*\*\* SEVERITY OF CONSEQUENCE \*\*\*\*\*▶

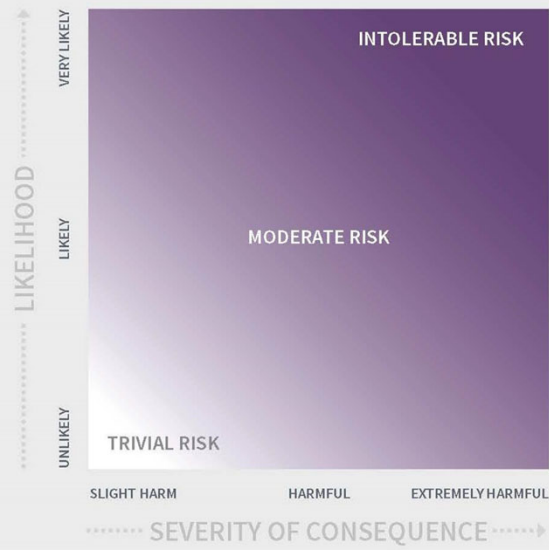
Application of numerical values to previous diagram.

Simplest three by three matrix.

Red 9 is the intolerable risk. Green 1 equates to the trivial.



## Acceptability of risk







**Historic Environment Scotland (HES)  
Visitor Safety Risk Assessment (VSRA)**

**Risk Matrix**

Risk Assessment Title	
HES VSRA Template	
Who is at risk?	HES staff, Members of the Public, Third Party Users/Occupiers
Description:	Visitor Safety Risk Assessment
Conclusion:	If the control measures outlined are adhered to then the residual risk is acceptable

Risk Rating (RR) RR = S x L (see below)		Likelihood of Occurrence (L)		
		1	2	3
Hazard Severity (S)	3	3	6	9
	2	2	4	6
	1	1	2	3
Low	1-3	No immediate action required proceed with care.		
Med	4-6	Hazard to be investigated in conjunction with line manager/supervisor with a view to reducing the risk		
High	9	Task must not be undertaken, immediate action must be taken to eliminate risk or substantially reduce the risk.		
Likelihood				
1	The likelihood is almost negligible.			
2	There is a medium likelihood – it is reasonably likely that the outcome will be realised.			
3	The outcome is almost certain to be realised.			
Severity				
1	The outcome will lead to a minor injury requiring only minor first aid.			
2	The outcome will lead to a significant or RIDDOR reportable injury.			
3	The outcome will lead to life changing or life limiting injuries or death.			

This matrix is the one proposed by the consultants for HES.

Note the guidance provided on how to score.



## Historic Environment Scotland

Risk Rating (RR)		Likelihood of Occurrence (L)		
RR = S x L (see below)		1	2	3
Hazard Severity (S)	3	3	6	9
	2	2	4	6
	1	1	2	3
Low	1-3	No immediate action required proceed with care.		
Med	4-6	Hazard to be investigated in conjunction with line manager/supervisor with a view to reducing the risk		
High	9	Task must not be undertaken. Immediate action must be taken to eliminate risk or substantially reduce the risk.		



The template also tells the HES assessor whether the risk is acceptable, based on the score.

(Note the language. 'Task must not be undertaken.' Reveals the approach and template come from consultants who usually deal with occupational risk.)

I do not believe that the score should be used to provide a definitive decision. It implies a spurious degree of accuracy. When in fact the numbers entered most often derive from subjective judgements.



Happy if numerical models provide guidance to aid consideration. Unhappy to see them used unthinkingly.



	S	L	RR		S	L	RR
Rock falls – death or serious personal injury through rock falls	3	3	9	1. Areas liable to rock falls to be regularly inspected and the level of risk identified. Areas to be re-inspected after adverse weather. 2. Areas of imminent or immediate risk to be temporarily closed off to members of the public until made safe or the risk subsides. 3. Appropriate actions to be taken to clear loose rocks or rocks liable to dislodge – specialist contractor to be used. Areas to be re-opened once hazards have been addressed and risk is considered tolerable again. 4. Provide information on the HES website about rock fall risks. 5. Residual risk from rock falls to be assessed by HES senior management. Decisions on accepting residual risk are reserved to HES senior management.	3	2	6

Likelihood	
1	The likelihood is almost negligible.
2	There is a medium likelihood – it is reasonably likely that the outcome will be realised.
3	The outcome is almost certain to be realised.
Severity	
1	The outcome will lead to a minor injury requiring only minor first aid.
2	The outcome will lead to a significant or RIDDOR reportable injury.
3	The outcome will lead to life changing or life limiting injuries or death.

3X3 scoring has benefits and drawbacks.

Above is extracted from HES template sent to staff responsible for site risk assessment.

Shows reduction in residual risk after new risk controls introduced. This is useful.

However, I would question initial premise that the hazard of rock falls should score 9. This implies that a falling rock is almost certain to strike someone underneath.

Seems unlikely, unless at sites where rocks are prone to fall where people are gathered. Might happen at, for example, seaside if cliffs are prone to fall in summer.

However, generally rock falls occur in winter. Fewer visitors likely, and mostly on the move whilst passing under hazard.



# Cadw

Severity	Likelihood	Risk Rating is calculated by multiplying the likelihood of harm against severity of harm				
1. No injury 2. Minor injury 3. Injury requiring Doctor/Hospital 4. Major injury 5. Fatality	1. Unlikely 2. Possible 3. Likely 4. Probable 5. Almost certain					
		5	10	15	20	25
		4	8	12	16	20
		3	6	9	12	15
		2	4	6	8	10
		1	2	3	4	5
		Severity				
		Likelihood				
<b>High Risk: 15 to 25</b>		Activities should cease immediately until further control measures to mitigate the risk are introduced				
<b>Medium Risk: 8 to 12</b>		Activities should only be tolerated for the short-term and then only whilst further control measures to mitigate the risk are being planned and introduced, within a defined time.				
<b>Low Risk: 1 to 6</b>		Largely acceptable, subject to reviews periodically, or after significant change				

14



Other VSG members use 5X5 scoring matrices.



# Scottish Canals

Five-point scale to estimate likelihood and consequences.

## Likelihood: (L)

- |   |               |   |
|---|---------------|---|
| 1 | Very unlikely | 1 in a million chance of the hazardous event happening. |
| 2 | Unlikely      | 1 in 100,000 chance of the hazardous event happening.   |
| 3 | Fairly likely | 1 in 10,000 chance of the hazardous event happening.    |
| 4 | Likely        | 1 in 1,000 chance of the hazardous event happening.     |
| 5 | Very likely   | 1 in 100 chance of the hazardous event happening.       |

## Consequences: (C)

- |   |               |                                   |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Insignificant | No injury.                        |
| 2 | Minor         | Minor injuries needing first aid. |
| 3 | Moderate      | A&E visit.                        |
| 4 | Major         | Hospitalisation.                  |
| 5 | Significant   | Fatality.                         |

Likelihood (L) X Consequence (C) = Risk level. E.g. 4 (Likely) X 2 (Minor) = 8 (Adequate)

5	10	15	20	25
4	8	12	16	20
3	6	9	12	15
2	4	6	8	10
1	2	3	4	5

17 - 25	Unacceptable	Action required
10 - 16	Tolerable	Monitor and review
5 - 9	Adequate	Maintain controls
1 - 4	Acceptable	No further action

15



Let's compare the results from similar scoring systems.

(We will see why I question their use to provide scored answers.)



Five-point scale to estimate likelihood and consequences.

**Likelihood: (L)**

- |   |               |   |
|---|---------------|---|
| 1 | Very unlikely | 1 in a million chance of the hazardous event happening. |
| 2 | Unlikely      | 1 in 100,000 chance of the hazardous event happening.   |
| 3 | Fairly likely | 1 in 10,000 chance of the hazardous event happening.    |
| 4 | Likely        | 1 in 1,000 chance of the hazardous event happening.     |
| 5 | Very likely   | 1 in 100 chance of the hazardous event happening.       |

**Consequences: (C)**

- |   |               |                                   |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Insignificant | No injury.                        |
| 2 | Minor         | Minor injuries needing first aid. |
| 3 | Moderate      | A&E visit.                        |
| 4 | Major         | Hospitalisation.                  |
| 5 | Significant   | Fatality.                         |

Likelihood (L) X Consequence (C) = Risk level. E.g. 4 (Likely) X 2 (Minor) = 8 (Adequate)

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Five-point scale to estimate likelihood and consequences.							
Likelihood: (L)							
1	Very unlikely	1 in a million chance of the hazardous event happening.	5	10	15	20	25
2	Unlikely	1 in 100,000 chance of the hazardous event happening.	4	8	12	16	20
3	Fairly likely	1 in 10,000 chance of the hazardous event happening.	3	6	9	12	15
4	Likely	1 in 1,000 chance of the hazardous event happening.	2	4	6	8	10
5	Very likely	1 in 100 chance of the hazardous event happening.	1	2	3	4	5
Consequences: (C)							
1	Insignificant	No injury.					
2	Minor	Minor injuries needing first aid.					
3	Moderate	A&E visit.					
4	Major	Hospitalisation.					
5	Significant	Fatality.					
Likelihood (L) X Consequence (C) = Risk level.			E.g. 4 (Likely) X 2 (Minor) = 8 (Adequate)				
Severity			Likelihood				
Likelihood			Severity				
1. No injury	1. Unlikely	5	10	15	20	25	
2. Minor injury	2. Possible	4	8	12	16	20	
3. Injury requiring Doctor/Hospital	3. Likely	3	6	9	12	15	
4. Major injury	4. Probable	2	4	6	8	10	
5. Fatality	5. Almost certain	1	2	3	4	5	
Risk Rating is calculated by multiplying the likelihood of harm against severity of harm							
High Risk: 15 to 25			Activities should cease immediately until further control measures to mitigate the risk are introduced				
Medium Risk: 8 to 12			Activities should only be tolerated for the short-term and then only whilst further control measures to mitigate the risk are being planned and introduced, within a defined time.				
Low Risk: 1 to 6			Largely acceptable, subject to reviews periodically, or after significant change				



The 1 to 5 likelihood scores show variations in definition.

I have rarely encountered risk assessors who have the data to accurately score likelihood for all hazards. However, if you have a managed site with comprehensive accident reports, and reliable data for visitor numbers, you may be able to do so.

The severity of outcome scores are comparable.







## Natural Resources Wales

Hazards: (location of hazard if needed)	Who might be harmed?	How might they be harmed and factors affecting the likelihood? (e.g. environmental conditions)	Initial risk level: (before implementing controls)			Control measures: (Eliminate, Reduce, Isolate, Control, PPE)	Residual risk level: (after controls implemented)		
			Severity	Likelihood	Risk level		Severity	Likelihood	Risk level
Forest operations	Public, staff, contractors	Hit by felled trees or harvesting machinery while walking into active harvesting sites resulting in severe injury	High	Med	High (6)	Contribute to Planning dept coupe plans database and liaison with WHaM team when coupes to be worked, outlining relevant recreation constraints on the site and implementing measures which are the teams responsibility such as path closures and diversions. Advertise these at trail head, App/website.	High	Low	Med (3)
Unprotected drops	Public, staff, contractors	Bruising, sprains or broken limbs etc from falling down slope	High	Med	High (6)	Trail width maintained to 1.5m to the river and passing bays provided as per Fieldfare Trust Urban fringe spec to allow safe passing of wide buggies/chairs/groups. The trail has a 50mm wide grass strip to the side to delineate the edge to maintain the visual amenity of the view which a fence would obscure. There are 35 culverts along this trail and the drops are protected with a barrier on accessible trail and raised stones on yellow trail, clearly marking the culverts.	High	Low	Med (3)

19



NRW also employ scoring that results in colour-coded categories for risk.

However, they feel that the key part of the risk-assessment is to be found in the narrative, capturing the consideration of the need for possible additional risk controls.



David Ball - Professor of Risk Management and Director of the Centre for Decision Analysis & Risk Management at Middlesex University and  
Dr John Watt - Associate Professor

'Along with a growing number of authors we find these matrices to be misleading and verging on or worse than useless.'



20

VSG

“Risk matrices are commonly-encountered devices for rating hazards in numerous areas of risk management. Part of their popularity is predicated on their apparent simplicity and transparency.

Recent research, however, has identified serious mathematical defects and inconsistencies. This article further examines the reliability and utility of risk matrices for ranking hazards, specifically in the context of public leisure activities.

We find that

- (a) different risk assessors may assign vastly different ratings to the same hazard,
- (b) that even following lengthy reflection and learning scatter remains high,
- (c) the underlying drivers of disparate ratings relate to fundamentally different worldviews, beliefs and a panoply of psycho-social factors which are seldom explicitly acknowledged.

It appears that risk matrices when used in this context may be creating no more than an artificial and even untrustworthy picture of the relative importance of hazards which may be of little or no benefit to those trying to manage risk effectively and rationally.”

Journal of Risk Analysis



You don't need a score to decide which cage is safe to enter!



John Adams – Late Emeritus Professor of Geography,  
University College London, author of RISK

Risk assessment.

‘It’s not rocket science. It’s  
much harder.’

Any threat of nature or any  
human activity, physical or  
intellectual, leading to an  
uncertain outcome can  
serve as a descriptor of a  
type of risk.



21

VSG

Original Board of Directors of Friends of the Earth.  
Honorary Member of the Institute of Risk Management

‘The risk manager must, however, deal not only with risk perceived through science , but also with virtual risk - risks where the science is inconclusive and people are thus "liberated to argue from, and act upon, pre-established beliefs, convictions, prejudices and superstitions.’

I would add

Do we have the data?

When we do, beware, "Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics“

Waterfall Country example (in Bannau Brycheiniog National Park).

5 deaths in three years. FAR (number of deaths per million hours exposure to risk) is over 200. This is quite high – between air sports (like hang-gliding) and being an agricultural worker.

However, the number of non-fatal accidents is normal in comparison to other national parks.

But the above data is misleading as it is derived from all the time spent by all the visitors, so includes walking, picnicking etc. Four of the deaths were to people choosing to go into the water. We don’t have accurate figures for the number of people doing this, but reasonable estimates of hours of exposure to risk would give a FAR, well over 400, and more than the FAR for riding a motor bike.



## Who decides what risk level is acceptable?

- Society
- Or the media
- Or Judges in court
- Individual choice

22



Rail accident Clapham Junction 1988 - 35 fatalities  
Similar accident at Ladbroke Grove 1999  
Both from SPADs (Signal passed at danger)

Automatic Train Protection (ATP) would have prevented crashes.

Media outcry after each crash. Paradoxically, probably because rail travel is very safe so the occasional accident is very newsworthy.

Following second crash, John Prescott, deputy PM, announced it would never happen again and money would be spent to retrofit ATP.

However, this was quietly dropped later. Certainly, the same money spent in better ways would have saved more lives.



## VSG Guiding Principles - awareness

- Ensure that your visitors know the risks they face
- Inform and educate visitors about the nature and extent of hazards, the risk control measures in place, and the precautions which visitors themselves should take
- No 'nasty surprises'



23



VSG guidance recognizes that individuals vary in their appetite for risk.

Our aim should be for them to have all the knowledge needed to make informed judgement.



## VSG Guiding Principles

- Recognise that people taking part in similar activities accept different levels of risk.



24



Dun Aonghasa, Aran Isles  
Hill Fort  
OPW site



## VSG Guiding Principles

- Recognise that people taking part in similar activities accept different levels of risk.





## VSG Guiding Principles

- Recognise that people taking part in similar activities accept different levels of risk.





## Lyme Bay, Dorset Tragedy

- R v OLL Ltd and Mr Peter Kite, Winchester Crown Court, December 1994
- Adventure Activities Licensing Regulations, 1996



27

VSG

The event that led to the formation of VSG and start of visitor risk management.

Four young girls died canoeing whilst on an activities holiday.

HSE used HASWA to prosecute the company running the activity and the owner went to prison for manslaughter.

The deaths resulted in the need to licence operators of adventure activities.

VSG came about to develop principles for safe management of visitors.



## Canoeing risk assessment

- Canoeists' experience
- Instructor competence
- Equipment
- Emergency planning
- Weather forecast



28

VSG

Would risk scoring matrices have helped to prevent these deaths?

Maybe. But the application of common sense, certainly. I call them GOBOs – Glimpses Of the Blindingly Obvious.

Consider who might be harmed and how – group of inexperienced canoeists

Hazard – capsizing into water

Likelihood – high

Consequence – depends on site conditions and competence of trainers. In a swimming pool with warm water and a life-guard, probably excitement, exercise and fun. Out at sea with cold water, strong wind, high waves and inexperienced instructors –very sadly, multiple fatalities.



## Touch of Grey and kda

Area and location	Hazard	People at risk	Typical outcome	Current precautions
Where on the property	The hazard under consideration	Which groups are at risk	'Typical' outcome is probably more useful than 'worst' outcome	What precautions are in place, whether physical or organisational

Discussion and relevant factors	Decision and rationale	Action required	Time scale	Completed
<p>The main points of any discussion should be recorded. For many hazards, the decision will be straightforward and little discussion will be required – but for 'grey areas' where there may be some apparent conflict between safety, conservation and other objectives, the discussion may become more complex. Relevant factors in the discussion can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numbers and types of visitors</li> <li>• Severity of the consequences</li> <li>• Foreseeable visitor behaviour</li> <li>• Presence of 'vulnerable' visitors</li> <li>• Adverse effect of precautions on the visitor experience</li> <li>• Damage to any structures from installing physical safety measures</li> <li>• Inappropriate impact of safety measures and signs on historic structures or landscape</li> <li>• Impact of safety measures on aesthetics</li> <li>• Consistency within the site and with other historic structures and landscapes elsewhere</li> <li>• Physical difficulty and cost of installing safety measures</li> <li>• Risks to staff or contractors from installing safety measures</li> <li>• Avoiding the 'illusion' of a safe environment</li> </ul>	Record what decision has been reached and the reasons for reaching that conclusion	Specify what further actions are needed to manage the risk		

Touch of Grey is Mark Daniels. kda is Ken Dodd

We do not use scoring matrix.

I will only train and guide client to carry out their own final assessments and selection of additional risk controls, if judged necessary. (Hence the three blank columns in the following example.)



## Extracted from Cliffs of Moher Visitor Risk Assessment June 2018

### FROM STOCKEEN CLIFF TO HAG'S HEAD TOWER

This section has been classed as 'lightly developed'. Most of the day visitors joining the path from the Visitor Centre do not go beyond Stockeen Cliff. Those using this section are usually prepared for the longer walk, either north from the paid parking at Kilconnell or in reverse, from the Visitor Centre southwards. There are still some parts where the official path has been created inland of the unofficial worn routes near the cliff edge, but often the path simply follows the edge, mostly at a reasonable distance back. There may be more visitors near Hag's Head Tower, exploring the southern section of the path. The Tower itself is owned by others and managed by OPW, and is surrounded by robust fencing to prevent access.



Quarry with 'artistic' stacks of stones



Official path running between flags and bank



Unofficial desire lines near Hags Head

Area and location	Hazard	People at risk	Typical outcome	Current precautions
Section heading S from Stockeen Cliff to Hag's Head Tower	Unprotected cliff edge; potential for single or multiple falls from height due to cliff collapse or landslip, loss of balance in high winds, or through risk taking behaviour	All visitors	Fatality	Provision of an official path set back from the edge along some parts of this section. Information boards, trail markers and warning signs in position along path. Expectation of some skills, knowledge, experience and personal responsibility on the part of visitors.

The introduction to the risk assessment (not reproduced here) explained the use of VSG principles, including zoning and its impact on how much management intervention might be appropriate.

We use multiple photographs to show the nature of hazards on the site.



### Extracted from Cliffs of Moher Visitor Risk Assessment June 2018



Flat section of path close to the edge



Headland with visitors on unofficial path



Flooded section of official path

Discussion	Decision and rationale	Action required	Time scale	Action completed
<p>The consequences of any fall from height are likely to be fatal. The likelihood of an incident is considered to be 'remote' given the lower number of visitors, and the little known history of falls.</p> <p>The risk of cliff collapse, rock fall or landslip is unknown without more detailed geological survey work, although the need for a geological survey along this section is less critical given the lower level of use.</p> <p>Some visitors leave the official path and use worn, unofficial paths, often very close to the unprotected edge. There are many incentives for visitors to do this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the narrowness of the official path</li> <li>the unsuitable and often muddy surface</li> <li>the obstruction of stiles</li> <li>occasional gaps in the vertical stone flags</li> <li>the proximity of barbed wire and electric fencing</li> </ul>	<p>The key measures to improve safety are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>where practical, provide and maintain an improved official path set back from the exposed edge, with locations for visitors to see and photograph the cliffs</li> <li>better information and more effective signage</li> </ul> <p><b>Detailed short-term recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve drainage at flooded sections</li> <li>Provide better direction to encourage visitors to follow the official path where it is available</li> <li>Improve or remove stiles</li> <li>Discourage unofficial creation of 'artistic' piles of stones in positions close to the cliff edge</li> </ul>			

Key recommendation is to document discussions. This is especially important when you conclude that no further risk controls are appropriate.



