



Position Statement

Rescues of submerged casualties

25th March 2021

Introduction

Evidence collated by National Operational Learning (NOL) that highlights the risks fire and rescue services encounter when they attended a water rescue incident where a casualty has been identified as submerged. Submissions have involved fire and rescue service personnel taking actions to rescue the casualty and put themselves in a position that is not supported by legislation, national guidance and subsequently policy and procedure.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), as a standing member of the National Operational Learning User Group (NOLUG) have expressed their concern regarding the apparent upward trend of submitted NOL cases.

The HSE have indicated that not preparing for a foreseeable risk, including rescues of submerged casualties, is unacceptable. Fire and rescue services may face action if they are found to be exposing their staff to a situation that involves an intervention to save a submerged casualty. Operational discretion is not seen as applicable in circumstances that require actions not supported by legislation, policy and procedure, when there is evidence to support this is foreseeable.

NFCC position:

Unless services are able to address the identified gap in the required resources, equipment, training, and the actions that are required to remain compliant with legislation, when attending an incident involving a casualty that is submerged – All rescues of a submerged casualty should be taken from the land, the surface of the water or by personnel in the water maintaining the correct levels of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Rescuers should be competent to risk assess and carry out rescues and should maintain the correct levels of PPE. Operational discretion should not be used to remove PPE, enter confined spaces underwater or act outside of service policy to go underwater.

There may be specific sub-surface situations that can be controlled to allow a rescue attempt. These situations will usually be when the casualty is visible and submerged in shallow water.

The NFCC will consider future National Operational Learning cases but are unlikely to re-evaluate existing guidance unless they include new evidence, alternative safe systems of work or equipment, or other technical solutions that are deemed as a potential improvement in this matter.

Further Reading/Evidence and Research:

Saving life will always be the priority of fire and rescue service personnel. However, many life-threatening hazards are faced when attending incidents involving underwater rescue or recovery. Underwater rescue or recovery should be undertaken by specialist dive teams using approved equipment. Standard fire and rescue service breathing apparatus is not designed for underwater use. Whilst superficially like scuba gear, fire service breathing apparatus lacks a critical drain port in the first stage demand valve which is vital to underwater use of scuba. Although a fire service breathing apparatus set may work underwater for a short time, any seepage of water into the first stage can trigger an immediate hydraulic lock with no prior warning, leading to catastrophic failure of the air supply.

Responders are not prohibited from taking reasonable action to save life before specialist resources arrive. Suitable control measures should be implemented prior to acting and appropriate PPE maintained.

[NOL Action note - Submerged casualties](#)

Committee
Operations

Date for Review
December 2023