

The nature and use of British Standards

The following information is prepared with particular reference to **BS 8848 *Specification for the provision of adventurous activities, expeditions, visits and fieldwork outside the United Kingdom*** but is considered to be of relevance to a majority of British Standards currently in use.

The objective of BS 8848 is to set out in clear, unambiguous language, the actions and associated responsibilities essential to the provision of a risk-based safety management system for adventurous activities. In so doing, it gives those intending to provide such ventures a means of organising their activities in accordance with currently accepted good practice in a manner that makes it possible to objectively verify compliance.

Understandably, many people will not be familiar with standards, let alone standards in services. They may well be asking themselves: 'what is a standard? What does it do? How does it work? How can using a standard benefit me and what I do?'

1. What is a 'standard and what does it do?'

- 1.1 Standards exist in relation to products; procedures; systems and services
- 1.2 The application of standards is voluntary, unless required by legislation or as part of a contract.
- 1.3 For Services (e.g. provision of adventurous activities), a standard is a document, that:
 - sets out currently accepted 'good practice' in carrying out particular activities in connection with the delivery of a service in the subject area of the standard, and
 - has been prepared by acknowledged experts in that field to the satisfaction of major stakeholders, preferably (but not necessarily) with the participation of representatives of potential service beneficiaries (consumers/ customers)
 - is framed in terms that clearly and unambiguously set out the actions necessary for the satisfactory delivery of the service, in a manner that is:
 - reliably repeatable
 - objectively verifiable
 - capable of being assessed to a demonstrably uniform level

Such a document could be prepared by or on behalf of:

- an individual service provider (e.g. Adventure holiday provider)
- a professional or trade body
- a consortium of interested parties
- the National Standards Body (BSI)

NB: As has already been referred to above, it may be beneficial to seek the opinion/ input of potential beneficiaries (customers) as to the outcomes that are likely to be viewed positively.

For a standard prepared by the National Standards Body it is certain that it will have been prepared, using a procedure that involved:

- contribution by a broadly based group of experts/ interested parties, nominated by representative bodies having legitimate interest in the subject of the standard
- submission to a period of public comment
- approval by consensus* between all participating parties

2. How do standards work?

There are two types of standard - 'Specifications' and 'Codes of Practice' they appear to be very similar but they are fundamentally different in the way they work.

2.1 Specification - A specification will consist of a coherent set of absolute requirements for achieving specific outcomes through actions deemed to be in line with currently accepted good practice. These outcomes will be objectively verifiable from the point of view of 'a third party called upon to verify conformity'. It is necessary that verification of conformity is possible equally by a first party (e.g. supplier), a second party (e.g. purchaser) or an independent third party. The criteria for claiming compliance will be set out in such a way as to ensure that, whichever way the claim is made and supported exactly the same requirements will be satisfied.

In preparation of a specification, great care will be taken to including requirements that are inherently not verifiable or are open ended. (e.g. "all risks shall be considered"). For a requirement to be objectively verifiable, it has to be physically possible to determine whether or not it has been met by a particular item or system. Requirements that can only be verified by observing the absence of breakdown or catastrophe do not constitute verifiable requirements.

As a general principle, performance requirements are preferred to design requirements as they are less likely to inhibit innovation.

In all formal standards, published by the National Standards Bodies, the convention is that requirements are identified by use of the word 'shall' and recommendations and advice are identified by use of the word 'should'

2.2 Code of practice

A code of practice will be drafted to reflect current good practice as employed by competent and conscientious practitioners, taking into account the current state of technological development, and giving due regard to the appropriate balance between fitness for purpose and cost of implementation. It will be presented in the form of recommendations and guidance; it will not contain requirements and as such is less rigorous than a specification. To make this fact clear, the following statement will be found in the foreword of every BSI code of practice to distinguish it from a specification. This distinction between 'specification' and 'code of practice' is not always so clearly made, in documents prepared by other bodies

"As a code of practice, this British Standard takes the form of guidance and recommendations. It should not be quoted as if it were a specification and particular care should be taken to ensure that claims of compliance are not misleading. Any user claiming compliance with this British Standard is expected to be able to justify any course of action that deviates from its recommendations."

3. BS 8848 is a 'specification'

It presents a clear set of absolute requirements; therefore you will see the word 'shall' frequently, throughout the text. In addition, as with all standards the "Scope" (Clause 1) together with the title, identifies the subject and defines the extent of the area to which the standard applies. It will also identify any areas that have specifically been excluded from the scope that the potential user might otherwise expect to be included..

A specification may contain supplementary, informative material that will either be identified as commentary, located to the side of the related text, as clearly identified notes or, if it is a single and significant piece of information, as an Annex at the end of the standard. Whatever the method used, great care is exercised to ensure that the information cannot be mistaken for requirements. The word shall will, therefore not be found in commentary or in notes, which may not contain requirements. Annexes on the other hand, may be 'normative' (containing requirements denoted by 'shall') or 'informative' (containing only supplementary information and guidance 'should'). The status of every annex, in this respect is shown by the inclusion of either 'normative' or 'informative' at the end of the annex title. All annexes will also be tied to the main text by being called up or referenced from one or more clauses of the standard.

4. Why do we need standards?

In the past, Standards have applied mainly to components such as nuts and bolts or to complete products. More recently standards have functioned in 'quality management' i.e 'ISO 9001' or as management system standards. Standards in services are a relatively new area - not only in the UK, but also in Europe and in the wider international arena. As the more advanced industrialised nations, particularly the UK specialise more and more in 'service' industries, the need for a consistent understanding of what is expected from those involved is driving a demand for increased 'Service Standardization'. This in turn will lead to more consumer focussed systems and procedures, increased efficiency, and greater satisfaction and peace of mind service users.

Using BS 8488 as an example, once the standard has been ratified and published, schools, colleges, charities or commercial organizations seeking to provide 'adventurous experience' (either individually or on a group basis) will be able to do so, through the application of BS 8848, confident that their planning and activities will be:

- pertinent to the levels of risk envisaged
- relevant to the participants involved
- organised and implemented in accordance with currently accepted good practice
- undertaken in a wholly open and appropriately cooperative manner so as to engender confidence and satisfaction in all participants and interested parties.

5. How are standards produced?

Having either identified or been informed of a particular standardization need, and having been convinced that the perceived need is valid, BSI facilitates and supports committees of experts in the given area to prepare the draft standard. BSI does not, itself, draft standards. The drafting group, usually a working group from that committee, will carry out research and prepare the text involved. After the draft has had the opportunity to be reviewed and tested amongst the experts involved, a more mature draft is then circulated to the public for their comments - this is called the 'Draft for Public Comment', which is the stage that BS 8848 has currently reached.

Comments received, are collated, reviewed and approved for incorporation into the draft by the working group. The full committee then reviews the final draft and once approved, the standard will be published.

6. Why would a venture provider use BS 8848 and how would it help me?

To function correctly, it is necessary that the standard be prepared in a manner that requires and enables a single entity (company, charity, individual) to take responsibility for the various actions specified. This is a fundamental platform of BS 8848 which identifies that entity as 'the venture provider' and requires it to take responsibility for all elements of the venture. This is not to say that others may not be involved in the provision of the various aspects of the venture but the venture provider will always remain ultimately responsible for the quality, delivery and overall safety, across the entire extent of the venture. Those contributing to the delivery of an adventurous activity, as defined in the standard, will therefore have a clear basis for establishing the extent of their responsibilities and the holder of overall responsibility will be clearly known to contributors and participants, alike. The other side of the same coin, of course is that claim of compliance with the standard allows providers to demonstrate that they are operating in accordance with accepted good practice, in a manner already agreed by a peer group of experts in the field and that can be clearly supported by evidential review. The pressure to apply the standard therefore comes from a need on the part of the provider to be recognised as being amongst the best and from the expressed expectations of their clients, customers and other scheme participants.

Given that the application of standards is voluntary, unless taken up in legislation (see 1. above), you may wonder how potential participants can be sure that their selected 'venture provider' conforms to the standard. In the first instance this can be done by observation. By preferring venture providers that claim to conform to the standard (in itself a requirement of the standard) and then taking the time to compare the processes and procedures used by the venture provider with those required by the standard. Since the Standard requires the provision of particular information at key stages, this should not be too arduous a task. Ultimately, of course, confirmation that a particular scheme complies may be provided by an independent third party. Usually an appropriately competent body employed to assess the venture provider's scheme and confirm that it does indeed meet the requirements of the relevant standard (BS 8848).

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the committee Secretary, Sarah Horsfield (email:sarah.horsfield@bsi-global.com).