PRESS RELEASE

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DRAMATIC RIVER RESCUE EXERCISE TO LAUNCH WATER SAFETY WEEK

Firefighters from Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) will mark the beginning of the first national Drowning Prevention and Water Safety Week (13-19 April) by staging a dramatic live exercise by Reading Bridge.

Drowning Prevention and Water Safety Week is an initiative led by the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA), which aims to raise awareness of water safety issues and reduce deaths. In 2013, there were 669 water-related fatalities – that’s two and a half times the number of people who died in dwelling fires in 2012/13.

The exercise starts at 11am on Monday 13 April and will see RBFRS’ Water Rescue Unit, along with crews from Dee Road, Langley and Slough, carrying out rescues from the River Thames. It will also feature the National Police Air Service helicopter (subject to availability), which will be used to work in partnership with the crews to locate people in the water.

The scenario is that a group of demonstrators, who were intending to hold a protest by suspending themselves from the bridge, have got into difficulty: their boat has lost power, leaving one ‘protestor’ (a dummy casualty) suspended precariously under the bridge. To make matters worse, the protestors’ support boat has also got caught up above the weir, with one person still on board, three people in the water and a further unconfirmed number of missing people in the vicinity.

The crews will therefore need to rescue one ‘casualty’ from height, three from the river and one from the stranded boat, as well as searching for other possible casualties in the area. To make the exercise even more realistic, the ‘casualties’ in the river will be played by RBFRS staff - putting their acting skills to the ultimate test!

RBFRS crews will also be holding a series of events throughout the rest of the week:

Tuesday 14 April  Alexandra Gardens, Windsor
Wednesday 15 April  High Street, Maidenhead
Thursday 16 April  Northbrook Street, Newbury
Friday 17 April  Broad Street, Reading

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Visitors will be able to chat to the crews about water safety issues, as well as exploring RBFRS’164-horsepower jet boat, which is believed to be the largest in-shore capacity boat in the country.

Jess James, Station Commander at Caversham Road fire station (where RBFRS' Water Rescue Unit is based), said: “People often think that if they are a strong swimmer, it is safe for them to swim in open water such as rivers, lakes, canals and quarries. But in reality, it doesn’t matter how good a swimmer you are – there are just too many other factors. You have no way of knowing what is beneath the surface of the water: there could be rubbish such as abandoned shopping trolleys or broken glass, which could cause you serious injuries. There could also be unseen currents and reeds, which could pull you under the water.

“One of the biggest risks is cold-water shock. Even on a warm day, although the surface of the water may feel warm, the underwater temperatures will remain very cold. If you jump into the water, this can make you involuntarily gasp for air, meaning that you could breathe in water. Your muscles will also weaken, so you may not be able to pull yourself out of the water or keep afloat, and your body will shiver, which will affect your co-ordination and swimming ability. At worst, your heart can go into abnormal rhythms, which can cause sudden death.

“Every year, we attend numerous water-related incidents, many of which, despite our best efforts, have devastating outcomes – and what makes it even more tragic is that so many of them could have been avoided. Our advice is simple: don’t take the risk. It’s far safer to swim in a pool where there are none of the potential hazards involved with open water and there is also likely to be a lifeguard who can help you if you do get into difficulties.

“Similarly, we also called to several incidents involving boats each year. Before you take a boat out on the river, please ensure you consider the water and weather conditions. It is also very important to pay attention to any warning signs you may come across when you are on the water – they are there for your safety.”

ENDS.

i National Water Safety Forum Water Incident Database (WAID) date, 2013

ii Fire Statistics Great Britain, 2012-13