Schools' Team Championships – Technical Rules of Swimming (Effective from September 2026)

The Rules of Swimming for ESSA Team Championships

Scope

These rules apply ONLY to swimming competitions held in England and promoted by ESSA which are not licensed under Swim England regulations. They 'call in' relevant Swim England regulations and rules and identify specific variations to suit the nature of schools swimming competition.

Competitions held in England and promoted by ESSA which are licensed under Swim England regulations shall be held under Swim England Regulations and Technical Rules

Background

It is ESSA policy to promote and organise events and competitions, and to make awards, in furtherance of its objective of the advancement of the physical education of school children through the medium of swimming. ESSA is committed to treating everyone equally within the context of its activity and with due respect to the differences of individuals.

For Primary Schools' Teams Championships there has been much disappointment for this young and relatively inexperienced age group swimmers of travelling some distance and not being able to swim due to a technical infraction. **ESSA wishes to maximise the participation and enjoyment of swimmers, while respecting the competitive ethos of the sport of swimming.**

In this context ESSA the rules of swimming as set out by World Aquatics and adopted by Swim England are to be applied during all stages of the ESSA Primary and Secondary Schools' team championships with the adaptions stated in this document.

Rules

ESSA technical rules of swimming apply the Swim England technical rules of swimming as stated in the Swim England Handbook[1] 2026 which in turn 'calls in' (SE 501.1) "… the relevant parts of the World Aquatics Rules (including by laws) and World Aquatics Swimming Rules". This is interpreted as the World Aquatics Competition regulations[2].

A summary of the changes made to adapt the Swim England and World Aquatics rules to ESSA team Championships is provided for ease of understanding the intent and full details of the changes are included in the attachment.

Note: Swim England rule numbers are prefixed with SE and the World Aquatics rule numbers are prefixed with SW to identify that these are within the Swimming Rules part of the World Aquatics Competition Regulations

[1] Based on the Swim England Handbook Version: 2026-v2 Published: 3 July 2026 https://www.swimming.org/swimengland/swim-england-handbook/

[2] Based on the World Aquatics Competition Regulations Version February 2026 (updated 18.02.2026) - https://www.worldaquatics.com/rules/competition-regulations.

Summary of changes

Swim England Rule SE 503.6 is adapted to allow a single timekeeper per lane.

This is to enable use of manual timing at qualification rounds without placing an undue burden on the number of officials required, where automatic officiating equipment is not available.

World Aquatics Rule SW 4.1.1, 4.1.3 is adapted to allow starting in the water:

This has the effect of permitting starting from on the starting blocks, the pool deck next to the block, or in the water. This is common practice for younger swimmers that have yet to achieve the ability or confidence to dive safely into the pool.

Further guidance and interpretation is provided to address common misunderstandings in the application of this rule when starting in the water (at the beginning of a race).

World Aquatics Rule SW 4.4.2 shall be applied as modified to allow a disqualified team to swim regardless of when the disqualification is determined (Primary Schools' events only – discretion remains with the referee for all other events).

This has the effect that a disqualified swimmer/team is still allowed to swim, but will not be placed or achieve a time. The adaptation of the rule allows participation of all swimmers in the events without disadvantaging any team that has competed with due starting procedure.

World Aquatics Rule SW 10.4.4, 10.4.5 shall be applied as modified to allow relay takeovers by a swimmer in the water.

Further guidance and interpretation is provided based on common misunderstandings in the application of this rule when starting in the water (for a takeover in a relay race).

World Aquatics Rule SW 10.4.2, 10.4.6 shall be applied as modified to remove the need to specify the order of swimmers in a team event.

Due to the operational constrains and nature of the championships, it is not practical to consistently collate and distribute a full list of swimmers participation order such that the designated swimmer can be determined by officials. Furthermore, it is common for the swimmer taking over from the swimmer completing their length to enter the water to start, rather than use a dive.

World Aquatics Rule SW 10.2.8, 10.4.7 shall be applied as modified to permit a swimmer that has completed the race to remain in their lane until requested to leave the pool by the referee or starter.

It is conventional for Referees to ask swimmers who have completed the race (the 4th swimmer in a relay) to remain in their lane until requested to leave the pool by the referee or starter. Failure to observe this convention is not a contravention on the rules and, for the avoidance of doubt, no swimmer or team shall be disqualified if the last swimmer in a team leaves their lane prior to such instruction.

Swimmers of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd leg in a relay are expected to leave the pool to the side, without obstructing any other swimmer, as soon as possible. Due to the varied experience of swimmers in the Primary Schools' age group championships swimmers are not always able to make such judgment and may remain in their lane longer than ordinarily permissible.

Rules SW 10.2.6 (obstructing another swimmer) and SW 10.6 (referee discretion for fouled swimmer) remain in force.

Relay start and takeover further information.

In order to aid the Team Managers to prepare their teams for this event and to attempt to make the interpretation as simple as possible for schools thereby minimising the numbers of disqualifications in Relay take-overs, the following information is provided.

Where multiple galas are used within a division's qualifying stage and one or more of the pools used for those galas has a pool depth that does not permit safe diving for inexperienced swimmers, the division may impose additional conditions to ensure consistency and fairness in the qualification process.

This is the approach taken in the South East Division, where diving is not permitted at the shallow end of the pool in any qualifying stage gala within their Division. Where races are started at the deep end of the pool and the pool depth is sufficient for it to be safe to do so, swimmers 1 and 3 are permitted to dive as long as they have satisfied the conditions of the Swim England Preliminary Start Award criteria.

Interpretation of rules for in the water starts or takeovers:

1: In the following text, the ***extended starting platform*** is any of the starting block, the pool wall at the end of the lane, or a pad attached to the pool wall at the end of the lane; Where two hands are in contact, they can be with any combination of the block, wall or pad

2: For swimmers starting the race in the water (i.e. 1st leg) at least one hand of the swimmer starting in the water must remain in contact with the ***extended starting platform*** until the start signal is issued.

3: For relay races for swimmers starting their leg (other than 1st leg) in the water, at least one hand of the swimmer starting in the water must remain in contact with the ***extended starting platform*** until the incoming swimmer has completed their length and touched the end of the lane.

4: No physical restraint of the outgoing swimmers intended to prevent that swimmer leaving their starting position before the incoming swimmer has touched the wall is permitted. Any such occurrence may result in the team being disqualified for pace-making (SW 10.2.9). This includes, but is not limited to, holding any part of the body.

i.e. *The team of the swimmer who is starting their relay leg in the water and has neither hand in contact with the **extended starting platform** before the preceding swimmer touches the end of the lane (before the start signal is given for 1st swimmer if starting in the water) may be disqualified.*

Examples:

When the incoming swimmer touches, if the outgoing swimmer is:

- Holding with one hand = good takeover – No DQ
- Holding with two hands = good takeover – No DQ
- Not holding with either hand = illegal takeover – DQ

Note: The position of the feet is immaterial to the decision for a swimmer starting their leg in the water.

Attachment A:

Adaptions of The Rules of Swimming for these Championships

Italic text is used to show the original rule wording that remains unchanged.

~~***Italic red text that is struck through***~~ is used to show rule text that has been deleted or replaced

Italic blue text is used to show new/replacement text

*For the purposes of these adaptions, the **extended starting platform** is any of the starting block, the pool wall at the end of the lane, or a pad attached to the pool wall at the end of the lane. Any WORLD AQUATICS rule that refers to a starting platform shall be considered to have the wording replaced with 'extended starting platform' even if not explicitly indicated below.*

Swim England Rule SE 503.6 is adapted to allow a single timekeeper per lane.

SE 503.6.1 The time shall be taken by automatic officiating equipment or, if this has malfunctioned, by semi-automatic officiating equipment or by ~~three~~ timekeepers using hand-held watches.

SE 503.6.2 When human timekeepers are used, the chief timekeeper or referee shall inspect the timers used and record the times. The accepted time shall be publicly announced in the results of the competition as soon as practical after the completion of the competition.

World Aquatics Rule SW 4.1.1 is adapted to allow starting in the water:

Once all Athletes have removed their clothing, except for Swimwear, the Referee will signal the commencement of a race by a short series of whistles, which invites the Athletes to get ready at the starting end, followed by a long whistle, which indicates that the Athletes must take their positions with at least one foot at the front of the extended starting platform or, if starting in the water, with at least one hand having contact with the extended starting platform and remain there.

World Aquatics Rule SW 4.1.3 is adapted to allow starting in the water:

On the Starter's command "take your marks", the Athletes will immediately take up a starting position ~~with at least one foot in contact with the front of the starting platforms. The position of the Athlete's hands is not relevant~~.

This has the effect of permitting starting from on the starting blocks, the pool deck next to the block, or in the water. This is common practice for younger swimmers that have yet to achieve the ability or confidence to dive safely into the pool.

World Aquatics Rule SW 4.4.2 shall be applied as modified below:

If the disqualification is declared before the starting signal is given, the starting signal will not be given, the ~~remaining~~ Athletes will be stood down using the command "stand down please", and the Referee will repeat the starting procedure from the long whistle in accordance with Article 4.1.1 or 4.2.2 of this Part Two (as applicable). The swimmer or swimmers shall be disqualified upon completion of the race.

This has the effect that a disqualified swimmer/team is still allowed to swim, but will not be placed or achieve a time. The adaptation of the rule allows participation of all swimmers in the events without disadvantaging any team that has competed with due starting procedure.

World Aquatics Rule SW 10.4.4 shall be applied as modified below**:**

Athletes must commence relay exchanges from the extended starting platform, and must not perform a running start from the pool deck.

World Aquatics Rule SW 10.4.5 shall be applied as modified below**:**

Until an Athlete touches the wall to complete their quarter of the total race distance, the ~~feet of the~~ Athlete in the same relay team who is next in order to compete must remain in contact with the extended starting platform.

In the case of a swimmer starting on the out of the water, losing 'touch with the extended starting platform' shall be judged based on the position of the swimmer's feet. In the case of a swimmer starting in the water, losing 'touch with the extended starting platform' shall be judged based on the position of the hands.

This has the effect of permitting taking over from on the starting blocks, the pool deck next to the block, or in the water. This is common practice for younger swimmers that have yet to achieve the ability or confidence to dive safely into the pool.

World Aquatics Rule SW 10.4.6 shall be applied as modified below**:**

Prior to the race and in accordance with the deadline specified by the Promoter, the team ~~leader~~ must specify the ~~order in which the~~ relay team members who will compete. This may include any reserves who may be substituted in without resubmitting the team nomination.

World Aquatics Rule SW 10.4.6 shall be applied as modified below**:**

Unless they are ~~specified as~~ next in order to compete in the relay, an Athlete who is a relay team member must not enter (or re-enter) the water during that race or before all Athletes in the race have completed the course distance..

Due to the operational constrains and nature of the championships, it is not practical to consistently collate and distribute a full list of swimmers participation order such that the designated swimmer can be determined by officials. Furthermore, it is common for the swimmer taking over from the swimmer completing their length to enter the water to start, rather than use a dive.

World Aquatics Rule SW 10.2.8 shall be applied as modified below:

An Athlete who has completed the course distance must leave the pool ~~as soon as possible~~ without obstructing or otherwise interfering with any Athlete who has not yet completed the course distance

World Aquatics Rule SW 10.4.7 shall be applied as modified below:

An Athlete who has completed their distance must leave the pool as soon as ~~possible~~ practical without obstructing or otherwise interfering with any Athlete who has not yet completed their distance.

It is conventional for Referees to ask swimmers who have completed the race (the 4th swimmer in a relay) to remain in their lane until requested to leave the pool by the referee or starter. Failure to observe this convention is not a contravention on the rules and, for the avoidance of doubt, no swimmer or team shall be disqualified if the last swimmer in a team leaves their lane prior to such instruction.

Swimmers of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd leg in a relay are expected to leave the pool to the side, without obstructing any other swimmer, as soon as possible. Due to the varied experience of swimmers in the Primary Schools' age group championships swimmers are not always able to make such judgment and may remain in their lane longer than ordinarily permissible.

Rules SW 10.2.6 (obstructing another swimmer) and SW 10.6 (referee discretion for fouled swimmer) remain in force.