



**British Sauna Society guidance document.**

## **Where to start:**

# **Setting up as a sauna operator in the UK.**

This guide is designed for people who are seriously considering setting up as a sauna operator in the UK, or who have just begun operating and want to sense-check their decisions.

It is published by the British Sauna Society as a professional association resource. Its purpose is to support informed decision-making, not to prescribe a single model of operation or a fixed pathway into the sector. It reflects shared experience and common practice across the UK sauna landscape, rather than guarantees, instructions, or regulatory advice.

You do not need to have everything figured out before you begin. Very few operators do. What matters is understanding the order of decisions, the points of genuine risk, and where flexibility still exists.

This guide:

- outlines common approaches used by UK sauna operators
- highlights recurring risks and pressure points
- identifies issues that commonly cause delays, costs, or complications
- supports practical, staged decision-making

This guide does not prescribe a single way of operating and is not an exhaustive source of information. Decisions taken on the basis of its content remain the responsibility of the reader.



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## 1. First question: Is this the right path for me?

Most early mistakes happen because people try to solve everything at once. Sauna businesses tend to fail or stall not because the idea is bad, but because people commit too early to:

- the wrong site
- the wrong level of regulation
- an overbuilt or overcapitalised sauna
- fixed costs they can't reverse

Before locking into planning permission, long leases, or major capital investment, most operators need to learn:

- whether people will attend
- whether the site works in practice
- whether the operating reality suits their life and capacity
- whether they are prepared for the uncertainty, responsibility, and decision-making pressure of operating independently

Early-stage learning is often more valuable than early-stage certainty. Prioritise gathering information and testing assumptions before committing to large fixed costs.

Understanding the lifestyle you are signing up for is just as important. For most operators, the financial return is lower and the workload higher than initially expected, particularly in the early stages. Many still choose to continue because the work itself is meaningful and deeply valued.



## 2. Licensing, planning permission and permission to operate in the UK.

This is one of the most variable areas for UK sauna operators and one of the most common sources of uncertainty. It's one of the most common questions we are asked at the British Sauna Society.

There is no single national answer that applies everywhere. Different councils interpret the same rules differently, and many local authorities have limited experience with sauna operations.

Most operators begin in one of these ways:

- Mobile sauna on private land (often the simplest)
- Pop-up sauna under temporary permissions
- Operating as part of an existing site or event

Being mobile often reduces planning requirements, but it does not remove all regulation or barriers.

Depending on location, you may encounter:

- planning permission requests
- public complaints or objections
- a site licence
- a street trading licence
- temporary event notices
- health and safety documentation
- environmental health or public health involvement
- fire safety oversight or inspection

Some operators are asked for none of these initially. Others are asked for all of them.

### **Practical considerations.**

- Do not assume you need full planning permission before you've tested demand
- Start conversations with councils later rather than earlier unless required
- Document everything you are already doing safely
- Expect rules to change as councils catch up with the industry
- Recognise that local community relationships can influence how sites and applications are received by councils and regulators
- Plan for instability in early-stage sites, including the possibility of having to move, pause, or relocate operations at short notice



### 3. Securing land: private, public and pop-up sites.

Once you have a sauna, access to land becomes your most significant operational constraint.

#### **Common land types.**

- private land (farms, lakes, private estates, existing businesses, beaches)
- council land
- seasonal or event-based pop-up locations

#### **Typical financial arrangements.**

Most operators use one of the following:

- a flat daily or monthly rent
- a percentage of takings (often around 10–15%)
- hybrid models combining minimum rent and revenue share

Early-stage operators often favour percentage-based arrangements as they share risk.

#### **Agreements.**

In early stages, agreements are often:

- short-term
- informal
- deliberately flexible

This is normal. It is also why operators are advised to avoid dependence on a single site and to maintain alternative options in case relocation becomes necessary.

#### **Common risks.**

- long leases before understanding operating costs
- profit-share models where labour and risk are not balanced



## 4. Practical site requirements to assess

When assessing land or sites, operators may need to consider some or all of the following. This list is not exhaustive.

### **Physical access and layout**

- flat, stable ground for sauna placement
- vehicle access for delivery, towing, and setup
- emergency access routes

### **Water and drainage**

- access to running water (or a clear water supply solution)
- wastewater management
- drainage and ground conditions

### **Facilities and infrastructure**

- toilet access (on-site or nearby)
- changing areas or shelter
- staff space and welfare facilities
- storage for fuel, equipment, and supplies
- parking available for the demand and staff

### **Utilities**

- electricity access
- lighting for evening operation
- phone signal on site

### **Safety and compliance**

- fire safety positioning and clearances
- safe distances from structures, vegetation, and public pathways

### **Operational suitability**

- noise impact
- visibility and privacy
- accessibility for users
- seasonal usability (i.e. flooding)



## 5. Choosing your first sauna.

This decision shapes:

- capital costs
- insurance options
- transport and logistics
- regulatory complexity
- maintenance burdens
- operating model flexibility and capacity
- user experience and safety

### Common options.

- ready-made saunas
- trailer or vehicle conversions
- self-build structures
- sauna tents (often used as low-cost entry points for testing sites and demand)

### Core considerations.

- **Safety and build quality** – structural integrity and materials, bench strength and load capacity, fire safety design and stove positioning
- **Ventilation and heat management** – airflow and ventilation, heat distribution and temperature control, moisture management
- **Internal design and capacity** – internal layout, seating configuration, customer flow, maximum safe capacity, operational supervision needs, drainage
- **Stove selection and specification** – stove type, output capacity, reliability, safety clearances, ongoing maintenance requirements, compatibility with insurance and fire safety expectations
- **Insurance and regulation** – insurability of design and materials, insurer acceptance of build method, alignment with fire safety expectations
- **Transport and logistics** – weight and towing requirements, setup and breakdown time, site access constraints
- **Operational reality** – cleaning and maintenance demands, durability and repairability, resilience to weather and seasonal use
- **User experience** – internal design, comfort and layout, accessibility, customer safety and supervision
- **Scalability** – ability to relocate, adaptability to new sites, long-term suitability as demand grows



For many operators, working with experienced professional sauna builders can reduce risk in these areas, particularly around safety, insurability, ventilation, stove specification, and regulatory acceptance. This does not remove the need for due diligence, but it can provide technical expertise and sector-specific experience that is difficult to replicate independently.

### **Common early regrets**

- overbuilding before demand is proven
- choosing designs that are hard to insure
- underestimating weight, towing or setup complexity
- prioritising aesthetics over durability or usability

Many successful operators start simple and upgrade later.



## 6. Insurance and risk: what you actually need.

Insurance is unavoidable and often one of the more complex early processes.

### Typical requirements.

Most operators require:

- public liability insurance
- equipment and asset cover
- employer's liability insurance for staff or volunteers
- additional practitioner or activity cover for facilitated sessions or sauna rituals (this is commonly held by the practitioner rather than the business)

Annual costs commonly range from several hundred pounds to over £1,000 depending on setup.

### What insurers may care about.

Insurers have been known to ask about any or all of the following:

- stove safety and maintenance
- fire risk assessment and fire management procedures
- ash handling and disposal procedures
- supervision and operational oversight
- documented risk assessments for all activities and services offered
- clear safety policies and procedures
- appropriate customer waivers and consent processes, particularly for under 16s
- qualifications, training, and appropriate insurance cover for any additional therapies or facilitated practices offered beyond hosting
- data handling and booking systems where customer information and payments are involved
- compliance with landowner or site insurance requirements

They care less about perfection and more about evidence of competence.

### Practical advice.

- expect premiums to rise over time
- prepare documentation before seeking quotes or ask insurers what documentation they expect
- speak to other operators about current providers



## 7. Staffing and operating lean.

Many saunas start as one-person operations.

### **Solo operation.**

Possible at the start, but you must consider:

- fire management i.e. fire marshall training
- customer safety- health and safety training
- emergency procedures

### **When to add support.**

Operators often bring in help when:

- sessions are consistent
- the site is busy or complex
- safety or supervision capacity feels stretched
- workload and sustainability become limiting factors

Models vary, including hourly staff, freelance support, and trusted volunteers in early stages.



## 8. What you need before opening day.

You do not need everything.

### Typically required.

- insurance in place
- a basic risk assessment
- fire safety equipment
- clear operating rules
- customer waivers and consent processes (where appropriate)
- first aid provision and emergency procedures
- access to drinking water and hydration
- clear customer information about what to expect
- a way to take bookings and payments

### Often added later.

- elaborate showers or cold plunging facilities
- permanent structures
- complex booking systems
- additional facilities and infrastructure

Start with what keeps people safe and allows you to learn.



## 9. Final perspective and limits of responsibility.

Every sauna operator in the UK started with uncertainty.

What matters most is:

- starting small
- staying flexible
- learning from others
- not mistaking caution for delay
- responding constructively to feedback and setbacks

This guide is a beginning, not a blueprint. It cannot account for every local authority, site condition, insurance requirement or personal circumstance.

Operating a sauna also carries responsibility to customers, communities, landowners, and the wider sector.

The British Sauna Society exists to support good practice, knowledge-sharing, and professional standards across the sector. Use of this guide is entirely at the reader's discretion, and the Society accepts no liability for decisions, actions, or outcomes arising from its use.

The UK sauna sector is evolving rapidly, and new regulatory, operational, and practical challenges will continue to emerge. The British Sauna Society will review and update this guidance periodically to reflect sector learning and changing conditions, with the intention of revisiting it on a six-monthly basis.

The British Sauna Society welcomes feedback, shared learning, and sector insight. If you have experience, guidance, or practical considerations that could strengthen this document, please contact us at [content@britishsaunasociety.org.uk](mailto:content@britishsaunasociety.org.uk) so they can be considered in future updates.