



British Sauna Society guidance document.

Operating a sauna in the UK: Planning your site & sauna

This guide forms part of the British Sauna Society's operator guidance series. It is written for people planning, setting up or refining a sauna site in the UK, particularly mobile, pop-up and small site-based operations.

It reflects common practice and shared experience across the UK sauna sector. It does not constitute technical, legal or safety advice. The British Sauna Society accepts no liability for decisions or outcomes arising from its use. Responsibility for design, safety and compliance remains with the operator.



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1. Why site planning matters more than perfection.

Many early problems attributed to “the sauna” are actually site planning issues.

Good site planning affects:

- safety and supervision
- permissions and insurance
- customer flow and experience
- operating effort and fatigue
- long-term adaptability

At early stages, the goal is not to build an ideal or finished environment. It is to create a streamlined, safe and hard working setup that can evolve.



2. Understanding the site before placing a sauna.

Before positioning a sauna, operators should understand the site itself.

Key factors include:

- access routes for vehicles and trailers
- ground conditions, drainage and stability
- exposure to wind, weather and tides
- proximity to neighbours, paths or public routes
- space for queues, circulation and rest

Many issues only appear during busy sessions or poor weather. Conservative assumptions usually save time and stress later.



3. Positioning the sauna.

Where the sauna sits on a site affects safety, comfort and operations.

Planning considerations include:

- safe distance from public walkways and boundaries
- clearance for flues and safe smoke dispersion
- orientation relative to prevailing wind
- access for loading wood, water and supplies
- clear sightlines for supervision

Small changes in position can significantly reduce smoke complaints, congestion and operational pressure.



4. Benches, layout and capacity.

Interior layout decisions have outsized consequences.

Operators should consider:

Bench height and spacing.

This is critical for heat distribution and good löyly. Benches set too low commonly result in cold feet, weak steam circulation and a flat sauna experience

A realistic capacity.

Capacity planning requires balance. If you go too big too soon, fuel and heating costs increase before bookings justify them, placing unnecessary financial pressure on an early operation.

If you go too small and demand is strong, you may sell out quickly, cap revenue and create frustration for customers struggling to find availability.

Many operators choose a starting capacity that is efficient to heat and supervise, while remaining realistic about how easily the setup could be expanded once demand is proven.

Movement into and around the sauna.

You'll want staff checking on bathers and the stove regularly so consider their access needs. Consider the needs for those with larger bodies or those who have mobility problems.



5. Stove type, placement and heat management

Stove choice and placement are both safety-critical and operational decisions. Considerations differ depending on whether your sauna is wood-fired or electric.

Wood-fired stoves.

Wood-fired stoves introduce additional variables that must be designed into the site and sauna layout.

Key considerations include:

- clear access for firing, refuelling and ash removal
- physical guards or barriers around the stove to reduce the risk of burns in the event of slips, trips or falls
- consideration for internally or externally feeding the stove
- safe distances from benches, doors and circulation routes
- the ability to observe fire behaviour easily
- sensible flue routing and roof penetration
- managing smoke dispersion in relation to wind and nearby neighbours
- awareness of relevant national and local guidance or legal requirements relating to wood-burning stoves, including emissions, smoke control areas and fire safety

Wood-fired operation requires active attention. Calm, unhurried fire management becomes especially important during busy sessions, when distraction and time pressure increase risk.

Electric stoves.

Electric stoves remove the need for fuel handling and flues, but introduce different planning requirements.

Key considerations include:

- sufficient and reliable electrical supply
- capacity of the local power source to support heat-up and peak loads
- positioning to allow safe access for maintenance
- protection of cabling and control units from water and impact

Electric stoves are often easier to supervise during sessions, but failures or power interruptions can halt operation entirely. Operators should understand the limits of their electrical infrastructure before committing to an electric setup.



6. Changing facilities, showers and hygiene.

Changing and washing facilities have a disproportionate impact on how welcoming and well-run a sauna feels.

Operators should plan for:

- where people change before and after sessions
- privacy, shelter and weather protection
- separation between dry changing areas and wet circulation
- how queues form during session changeovers

Well-designed changing space reduces awkwardness, delays and staff intervention.

Showers, rinsing and cleaning.

High standards of hygiene and cleanliness are fundamental to a good sauna experience.

Sites should be set up with fresh running water so that cleaning and rinsing can take place regularly.

When planning showers or rinse points, consider:

- locating showers close to cold plunge barrels or tanks so customers can rinse before entering them
- avoiding bottlenecks between sauna, showers and cooling areas
- drainage, slip risk and ease of supervision
- how many people may need to rinse at once

Simple, reliable systems are often more effective than complex ones.

Where cold plunge tanks or barrels are used, it is very difficult to keep water clean and cold without filtration systems. Filters should be treated as standard infrastructure rather than an upgrade. Operators should have robust processes and high standards of cleaning and water refreshing if filters are not possible.



7. Water, cooling, rest and recovery.

A well-run sauna site is not only about hot and cold contrast. Rest is a core part of safe and enjoyable bathing.

Operators should plan for dedicated rest areas where customers can sit, recover and regulate their temperature between rounds.

Rest areas can be simple:

- chairs and small tables
- benches
- sheltered seating away from wet or high-traffic areas
- indoor warm space for people to relax

Rest space is particularly important if any bathers feel light-headed or faint following a session. Customers should be encouraged to sit, hydrate and recover fully before continuing.

Cooling facilities also shape movement and safety across the site.

Planning considerations include:

- distance between sauna and cold plunge or natural water
- slip risks and surface conditions
- bottlenecks during transitions
- visibility and supervision during cooling

Well-placed, simple cooling setups are often easier to manage than elaborate installations.



8. Power, lighting and visibility.

Even minimal power introduces complexity.

Operators should consider:

- whether lighting is essential or optional
- the impact of low light on supervision and safety
- battery, generator or mains power options
- weatherproofing and cable management

Many operators start with minimal lighting and add complexity only once real usage patterns are understood.



9. Customer flow, check-in and belongings.

Good site planning reduces the need for constant staff intervention.

Key questions include:

- where people wait before sessions
- where customers check in with a staff member
- how they enter and exit the sauna
- where staff attention is most needed
- how emergencies would be managed

Check-in points

Every site benefits from a clear check-in point where customers can arrive, orient themselves and speak to staff.

This area should:

- be visible and calm
- sit away from heat and wet surfaces
- allow questions without blocking flow
- mark a clear transition into the sauna space

Belongings and storage

Customers need somewhere to store belongings safely and neatly.

Operators should plan for:

- bags, towels and shoes being kept off the ground
- storage that does not obstruct walkways or exits
- reducing trip hazards and visual clutter

Simple benches, shelves or crates placed intentionally often make a significant difference.

Clear physical cues usually work better than rules alone.



10. Toilets and hydration

Providing free drinking water is essential.

Sauna bathing and cold water immersion both cause rapid fluid loss. Dehydration significantly increases the risk of dizziness, fainting and accidents.

Operators should ensure:

- free drinking water is always available
- customers are actively encouraged to hydrate before, during and after sessions
- water provision is visible and accessible without asking

Hydration is a safety measure, not an optional amenity.

Cold water immersion is also a diuretic. Toilet breaks are inevitable.

When planning a site, operators should be clear about:

- where the nearest toilets are located
- how far customers need to walk to access them
- whether access is step-free and available throughout operating hours

Where toilets are not on site, clear communication and signage before booking is essential.



11. Rituals, programming and specialist use.

Many operators plan to introduce rituals or specialist programming over time. These decisions have physical implications for site and sauna design and are best considered early, even if delivery comes later.

Aufguss rituals.

If you intend to run Aufguss or towel-based rituals, consider:

- ceiling height, as low ceilings restrict safe towel movement and heat distribution
- clear space above and around benches to avoid striking bathers
- sightlines so Sauna Masters can see and respond to participants
- placement and size of stove to facilitate performance, placing of ice balls and heat distribution

Retrofitting for Aufguss later can be difficult if ceiling height or internal volume is limiting.

Whisking and body-based rituals.

If you plan to offer whisking:

- consider benches that allow people to lie horizontally
- circulation space for practitioners to move safely
- cleaning requirements and restrictions that prevent easy removal of stray leaves after sessions
- good drainage and ventilation for treatments
- whisk storage and preparation

Scrubs, masks and infusions.

For scrubs, masks or herbal preparations, consider:

- access to a preparation space such as an office, store room or kitchen
- hygienic surfaces for mixing
- shelving or boxes for storage
- access to heat sources such as hobs for preparing infusions or providing teas

Ice and storage.

Aufguss requires crushed ice. Planning considerations include:

- where ice will be prepared



- how it will be kept frozen between sessions
- access routes between prep spaces and the sauna
- space for a crushed ice machine or freezer to store bags of ice

Ice storage is often overlooked and can create ongoing operational friction if not planned for.



12. Planning for change.

Most successful sites change over time.

Operators who plan for adaptation:

- leave space for additional structures
- avoid permanent groundworks early on
- test layouts before fixing them
- observe real behaviour rather than assumptions

Treat the first layout as a prototype, not a final design.



13. Common planning mistakes.

Frequently reported issues include:

- placing saunas too close to public routes
- underestimating smoke, wind or weather impact
- over- or under-specifying capacity too early
- creating supervision blind spots
- underestimating water, cleaning or filtration needs
- locking into layouts before patterns are understood

Learning from these early prevents costly retrofits.



14. Final perspective.

Planning your site and sauna is an ongoing process, not a one-off task.

Strong operators:

- start simple
- observe real use
- adjust layouts incrementally
- prioritise safety, hygiene and calm operations

This guide supports informed planning rather than prescriptive design.

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 so they can be considered in future updates.