



British Sauna Society guidance document.

# Operating a sauna in the UK: The basics of good sauna design, build & experience.

This guide forms part of the British Sauna Society's operator guidance series. It is written for people designing, building or refining saunas in the UK, across mobile, pop-up and site-based contexts.

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

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# 1. What “good” means in practice.

The British Sauna Society sets [clear expectations](#) for both design standards and the sauna experience. This guide is aligned with those standards and is intended to help operators translate them into practical, day-to-day decisions.

At its core, good sauna design and experience are about creating environments that are:

- safe and well maintained
- welcoming and inclusive
- calm, coherent and restorative
- environmentally responsible
- supportive of both staff and bathers

Good sauna experiences are not accidental. They emerge when design, build and operations consistently reinforce these principles.

Across the sector, the saunas people return to are not necessarily the most expensive or visually striking. They are the ones that:

- heat reliably and evenly
- have well planned and effective ventilation
- feel calm and considered
- are easy to understand and use
- make people feel looked after
- deliver consistently good löyly

Good design supports good behaviour. It reduces the need for instruction, correction and intervention.



## 2. Design starts with the body, not the building.

A sauna is experienced with the whole body.

Design decisions should prioritise:

- how heat moves around the room
- how bodies sit, lie and move
- how people enter, exit and rest
- how staff supervise without hovering
- how people rest in between rounds

When design is led by human use rather than drawings or aesthetics, problems tend to be fewer, safer and easier to resolve.



### 3. How löyly works (and why it matters).

Löyly refers to the steam and felt heat created when water is poured onto hot sauna stones. It is not just steam, but the quality of heat and air movement experienced by bathers.

Good löyly depends on several interacting factors:

- a stove with sufficient power for the volume of the sauna
- an adequate quantity of well-heated stones
- air that can move and circulate
- bathers being positioned within the correct heat zone

When these factors align, löyly feels enveloping, soft and immersive. When they do not, steam can feel sharp, uneven or ineffective.

Poor löyly is often blamed on the stove, but in practice it is more commonly the result of design issues such as low benches, poor ventilation or insufficient stone mass.



## 4. Bench height, heat distribution and comfort.

Bench height is one of the most important and frequently misunderstood aspects of sauna design.

Heat stratifies in a sauna, with hotter air rising. If benches are set too low:

- bathers sit in cooler air
- feet remain cold while heads overheat
- löyly feels weak or inconsistent

Correct bench height allows bathers to sit fully within the main heat zone, resulting in:

- even body warmth
- comfortable breathing
- fuller, more satisfying löyly

Bench depth and spacing also matter, particularly for comfort, accessibility and rituals that require people to lie down.

Getting bench height wrong is one of the quickest ways to undermine an otherwise well-built sauna.



## 5. Ventilation, air quality and breathing.

Good ventilation is essential for both safety and enjoyment. Without adequate ventilation, bathers do not receive enough oxygen at a time when their muscles are active and metabolic demand is high. This can lead to hypoxia, where people leave the sauna because they feel suffocated rather than because they are too hot. In these conditions, core body temperature often does not rise enough to deliver health benefits or the deeply satisfying, feel-good sauna effect that keeps customers coming back. Put plainly: good ventilation is one of the most effective loyalty schemes you can build into a sauna.

Well planned ventilation:

- supports oxygen-rich air
- removes stale or overly humid air
- improves comfort during longer sessions
- enhances the quality of löyly

Poor ventilation often presents as:

- breathless or stuffy air
- headaches or dizziness
- a sense of heaviness that shortens sessions

Ventilation should be considered as a core design feature, not an afterthought or a technical add-on.

Effective ventilation does not need to be complex. In many well-functioning saunas it is achieved through simple, reliable measures such as:

- deliberate air inlets and outlets positioned to encourage circulation
- gaps under doors to allow fresh air to be drawn in
- adjustable vents that can be fine-tuned as conditions change

What matters is that fresh air can enter, stale air can leave, and air is able to move through the space in a controlled way. Simple, passive solutions are often easier to manage and more robust than overly engineered systems.



## 6. Materials, toxicity and build quality.

Materials in a sauna are exposed to high heat, moisture and repeated use.

Good material choices:

- tolerate heat without breaking down
- do not off-gas harmful chemicals
- feel solid and reassuring under use
- age gradually rather than failing suddenly
- don't trap moisture where it shouldn't be

Operators should be particularly cautious with:

- treated timbers
- vapour barriers and insulation materials
- glues, sealants and finishes
- cleaning products used inside the sauna

Products that are stable at room temperature can become unstable or toxic under sauna conditions. Materials and finishes should be selected with this environment in mind.



## 7. Safety through design.

Health and safety are foundational, not optional.

Safety-led design reduces the likelihood of slips, falls, burns and fire-related incidents, and supports confident supervision.

Design can reduce risk by:

- providing proper ventilation and air exchange
- ensuring drained floors and non-slip surfaces
- guarding stoves and hot surfaces
- creating clear sightlines for staff
- separating hot, wet and high-traffic zones
- minimising trip hazards

Adequate hydration is essential. Free access to fresh drinking water should always be available as part of a safe sauna environment.

The safest saunas are not the ones with the most rules, but the ones that make unsafe behaviour unlikely.



## 8. Simplicity, reliability and maintenance.

Complexity increases failure points, and one of the most demanding and often underestimated aspects of running a sauna is ongoing maintenance, repair and replacement.

In practice, saunas are hard-working environments. Heat, moisture, repeated use and human behaviour place constant strain on buildings, fixtures and systems. Operators should expect that a significant proportion of time and budget will be spent on:

- routine maintenance and cleaning beyond daily hygiene
- fixing wear-and-tear to benches, floors, doors and fittings
- replacing components exposed to heat and moisture
- addressing issues before they become safety or experience problems

Many experienced operators therefore favour:

- simple layouts with fewer points of failure
- robust systems designed for repeated use
- materials and processes they understand well enough to troubleshoot themselves

This does not mean low quality. It means designing and building with the expectation that things *will* need fixing, adjusting and replacing over time. Saunas that are easy to maintain stay safer, perform better, cost less in the long run and are far less stressful to operate.



## 9. Sensory and multisensory experience

A high-quality sauna experience engages more than temperature alone.

Operator Members are encouraged to consider the full multisensory environment, including:

- immersive heat and enjoyable steam (löyly)
- sound, silence and acoustics
- light levels and shadow
- textures underfoot and on benches
- natural smells from wood, water and heat

Guided sauna sessions and rituals, where offered, should enhance this experience rather than distract from it.



## 10. Cleanliness, hygiene and care

High standards of cleanliness and hygiene are central to trust, safety and comfort.

Operator Members commit to maintaining saunas that are:

- clean, odour-free and well cared for
- regularly cleaned throughout operating hours
- supported by access to fresh running water

Design decisions should make cleaning straightforward rather than burdensome.



## 11. Designing for staff as well as customers

Educated, hospitable staff are central to a good sauna experience.

Design should support staff by:

- enabling clear supervision without constant intervention
- providing safe access to stoves and controls
- allowing space for preparation, storage and reset
- reducing physical strain and cognitive load

Staff experience and customer experience are closely linked.



## 12. Building for learning

Very few saunas are perfect on day one.

Strong operators:

- observe how people actually use the space
- adapt layouts and details over time
- treat early versions as prototypes



## 13. Community, inclusion and sustainability

Saunas are communal spaces. Their design should encourage shared experience, social connection and wellbeing.

Good saunas are:

- inclusive and accessible wherever possible
- free from judgment, exclusion or intimidation
- supportive of communal use and shared ritual

Sustainability is integral to good practice. Operators are encouraged to choose durable materials, responsible sourcing and energy-conscious systems.



## 14. Final perspective

Good sauna design, build and experience are inseparable.

When heat, air, materials, safety, care and community are considered together, saunas become places people trust and return to.

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.