



Local Group Social Walks – Future Policy and Approach

1. Purpose of Paper

Following a review, this paper sets out recommendations concerning the LDWA's policy and approach in relation to local group social walks. In addition, it proposes the introduction of additional support, tools and resources which would be available for all walk leaders and potential walk leaders. The aim is to help ensure that all LDWA group walks are led safely whilst complying with our legal obligations and best practice and keeping the effort involved in planning and leading group walks at a level acceptable to retain existing walk leaders and to encourage new walk leaders to step forward.

2. Context

Group social walks represent one of the LDWA's core activities. Figures for the last 2 years show that 1,500 group walks were held in 2022 and 1,473 took place in 2023. Walk leaders represent our largest group of volunteers. Our current insurers, Sports Insure, treat our activities as low risk and the LDWA's policy and approach in this area was last reviewed and updated in mid-2021 following the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions in England. Since then, there have been no significant changes to relevant legislation or our insurance broker's requirements.

3. Current Approach

Current NEC policy is based on following what is considered to be good practice. A group social walk must be 'advertised' on the group's website in order to be classed as an LDWA walk. A clear policy is in place in relation to developing and storing a record of walk attendees, undertaking a recce of the walk and, based on the recce, identifying / recording hazards and ways of reducing any risks. The extent to which group walks are recced in advance is unknown as we do not collect any data in this area. Walk Register and Risk Assessment templates have been developed for use by walk leaders which standardises the information collected and these can be accessed via the Social Walks section of the Toolkit. Figures show that in 2023, walk registers were uploaded to the national database for approximately 70% of group walks. The actual number of registers completed may be higher as not all groups upload the register to the database. Our current approach doesn't require risk assessments to be documented, stored or retained – hence we do not know whether considering risks, and how to avoid them, is common practice. Our current policy and approach do not explicitly extend to group walks which take place as part of a weekend away. The Association doesn't have a national 'register' of our walk leaders although this may exist at local group level. Currently, the LDWA doesn't offer, or fund, training on a national level for walk leaders. In some cases, local groups organise and fund some relevant training for their walk leaders (mainly first aid and / or navigation skills).



4. Review of Current Approach

4.1 Considerations

Our current arrangements, and the resulting recommendations in this paper, have been considered in the context of;

- the LDWA's moral and legal obligations towards its volunteers and members
- recognised good practice – including benchmarking with the Ramblers
- the requirements of our insurance brokers
- feedback from local groups, in particular walk leaders.

The focus and scope of the review has been local group social walks.

4.2 Duty of Care

The LDWA has a moral and legal obligation to take reasonable care to ensure that its volunteers and members are protected from harm whilst taking part in the Association's activities. Liability for failing to meet our duty of care would arise if an incident occurred and it can be proved that the risk was foreseeable but no action had been taken to avoid it. Where it's established that a duty of care has been breached, the LDWA may be liable for negligence in cases where someone is harmed. Where negligence is proved, damages may be awarded against the Association.

To minimize the possibility of harm to members, and potential allegations of negligence, it is advisable to prevent injury occurring by identifying risks and reducing the likelihood of them occurring as much as possible. As well as having appropriate policies and practices in place, the provision of training and clear guidance to volunteers is advisable.

4.3 Good Practice

As the national governing body for long distance walking, the LDWA has established a clear policy and approach to ensure we meet our obligations to keep people safe when taking part in group walks (set out in the Social Walk Guidelines document on the Toolkit). Research and experience have proved that the current practices help to safeguard individuals – as well as making sure the necessary information is available in case of a claim for negligence / compensation.

Within the sector we operate in, the LDWA has traditionally benchmarked itself against the Ramblers and, where appropriate, aligned its approach. Up until this year, their walk leaders were **required** to register themselves as a volunteer walk leader (in order to be covered by personal accident insurance), recce their walk and complete a risk assessment (to be kept for 3 years). Taking a walk register was recommended but not mandatory.

A recent survey of walk leaders undertaken by the Ramblers highlighted that the requirement for written risk assessments, in a prescribed format, was seen as too burdensome and had resulted in a noticeable reduction in the number of volunteers to lead



walks. This has led to the introduction of a new approach to ensuring group walks are led safely - one which focusses on providing leaders with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to manage risk. To achieve this, a package of support comprising on-line training and a handbook has been launched. The aim is that all volunteers who wish to lead a walk must (still) register and undergo the on-line training.

4.4 Insurance Broker's Requirements

The LDWA has public liability insurance which protects us against the cost of claims, made by members of the public, resulting from incidents which occur in connection with our activities (e.g. injury / damage to property). This insurance covers the costs of any legal proceedings and compensation awarded. In addition, all members are covered by accident insurance which pays compensation in cases of injury resulting from an incident whilst involved in LDWA activities. The insurance policy details can be found in the Insurance section of the Toolkit (<https://ldwa.org.uk/library/toolkit.php>). Sports Insure are our insurance brokers and act on our behalf opposite the insurers.

As part of the review of our policy and approach in this area we sought clarification from our brokers concerning the records they require us to keep to ensure that our group walks are covered by our insurance policies. As the national governing body for long-distance walking, and therefore the 'experts' in this area, the insurers expect us to determine, and communicate, our policy and practice in this area. This includes setting out the information and records we require to meet our legal obligation to take reasonable care to protect volunteers and members from harm. In summary, the brokers will defend a claim against the LDWA provided that our policy and practice has been adhered to and they state "the insurers will back the rules and regulations that you have made". Feedback suggests they are satisfied with the rules and regulations we have in place.

For clarification, several years ago the LDWA decided to make the completion of a walk register mandatory as providing proof of who attended the walk. This would enable claims to be dealt with more quickly and efficiently. The broker's view has always been that whilst obtaining this information represents best practice, the lack of a walk register would not invalidate our insurance cover.

4.5 Feedback from Local Group Officers and Walk Leaders

Overwhelmingly, group officers and walk leaders report that they want a policy and approach which helps ensure the safety of group walks but which is proportionate, workable and avoids time consuming, unnecessary and bureaucratic 'form filling'.

5. Recommendations re Future Policy and Approach

The review highlights that, in the main, the LDWA's current policy and approach satisfies our obligations concerning our duty of care, compares well against good practice requirements and is supported by our insurance brokers. The extent to which our policy is applied by local



groups and walk leaders is a large part of the issue, and needs to be addressed, to ensure group walks are led safely. For this reason, the set of recommendations below are based on the need to;

- help volunteers better understand our policy and good practice concerning group walks and why it is important to apply it
- increase buy-in and support for working with our policy and approach
- refrain from using terminology which our members may associate with bureaucratic processes and ‘form filling’ – and which results in resistance to applying common sense practices proven to keep people safe (i.e.; recce, risk assessment)
- work more closely with volunteer walk leaders to develop and share good practice and guidelines
- provide simple, practical tools and guidance to enable volunteers to easily work with our policy
- respect the autonomy of local groups and, provided they meet the standards set out in the policy, allow them to determine how they wish to work with the policy within their local group – including setting out and requiring ‘higher’ standards.

The recommendations are as follows;

5.1 Group Safety

The LDWA **strongly recommends** that walk leaders check the route out several weeks in advance and, as part of this, identify any potential issues which may affect the group’s safety. Measures to avoid / prevent any safety issues should be considered and necessary adjustments made to the route. A simple safety checklist should be developed (based on the current risk assessment template) for use by the leaders when considering the safety of the group. The checklist may be uploaded to the social walks database.

In cases where it is not possible to check the route in advance (e.g. group walks which take place as part of a weekend away) the walk leader should use maps, guidebooks, any local knowledge and online tools to help identify any safety issues which may affect the group’s safety.

Planning for the safety of the group helps ensure we meet our obligations to keep our members safe. By placing the emphasis on safety planning, rather than assessing risk, we may encounter less resistance from walk leaders – particularly if they are supported in this area by a simple safety checklist to replace the current risk assessment.

In a change to the current policy, in future, the LDWA **strongly recommends** that a register of attendees on social walks is completed. The minimum information required for members is their name and membership number and, for visitors, their name and contact details.



Walk leaders should be encouraged to obtain emergency contact details from walk attendees via the form. The register should be stored securely for 7 years – preferably on the social walks database.

Having a list of walk attendees is an important part of safety management on the day – particularly where the group is large. In the event of an incident resulting in an insurance claim, the register provides a record, and proof, of attendance on the walk and allows potential witnesses to the incident to be identified and approached for information.

Finally, it is important to make clear that anyone joining a group walk is responsible for ensuring they are appropriately prepared for the walk; e.g. having suitable clothing and footwear, food, water, a first aid kit, etc.

5.2 Walk Leader Register

Introduce a voluntary register of walk leaders.

Having this information would enable the NEC to engage and work with this community more easily. In addition, it would allow this community to more readily share information and advice with each other and the NEC.

5.3 Walk Leader Support and Development

Further build awareness and understanding, amongst the walk leader community, of the importance of leading walks safely and how the LDWA's policy and recommended good practice will enable them to do this successfully. This will help gain buy-in, and compliance with, our policy.

A range of approaches to building skills and confidence may include;

- on-line support packages
- face to face or zoom workshops
- webinars
- mentorship (from an experienced walk leader)
- articles in Strider and / or on the website.

Involvement in the above will be on a voluntary basis.

Consultation with local groups, in particular experienced leaders, in developing further support for walk leaders would be beneficial. There are resource and, potentially, cost implications involved in delivering this recommendation which would need to be further explored.

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