



LONG DISTANCE

LDWA

WALKERS ASSOCIATION

Leading Local Group Social Walks

Brief Guidelines for Social Walk Leaders

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Introduction

The LDWA through its local groups offers an extensive programme of local group social walks and it is part of the Association's ethos that any member can participate in any social walks advertised. Social walks aim to be interesting and enjoyable in themselves, but also, they should be at a sociable pace that enables participants to talk and get to know each other during the walk.

The LDWA and its local groups depend on members volunteering to lead group walks. One of the strengths of the Association is that many members are willing to lead.

Here are some 'light touch' guidelines to leading walks that walk leaders need to be familiar with. They are just a reminder to experienced leaders, but should be helpful to those new to leading or anyone considering such an undertaking. Leading should not be a daunting prospect, but rather one that provides the satisfaction of giving a group of walkers an enjoyable and safe day out. There are a few formal matters of which leaders need to be aware, and these are mentioned with links to LDWA policy statements.

Well Beforehand

The LDWA has not applied any additional rules over and above Government Covid-19 guidance. Walk leaders and members are encouraged to show common sense, exercise good hygiene and be thoughtful to the needs of others as well as local communities on walking routes.

Walk leaders must consider that everyone's circumstances and tolerance to Covid-19 transmission risk will be different and any decision to participate, or not, will be respected.

Everyone should be encouraged, supported and given the opportunity to take part. Walk leaders should also properly consider any concerns, not just related to COVID-19, raised by walkers so that reasonable adjustments can be made.

- Decide an outline route, approximate mileage, date and start time, and a suitable start/finish location with adequate parking. Bear in mind the time of year for the walk and length of daylight available. Some groups are introducing a grading system for walks, and this may need to be considered.
- Walk leaders should also review the latest countryside code, requested by landowners. This will demonstrate to them a safe approach has been adopted. Link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code>
- Walk leaders should consider the inclusion of additional communications to walkers on how they can support individuals that require additional support and/or with impairments.

- Walk leaders should give brief essential details of the walk to the LDWA Local Group Walks Secretary for inclusion on the local group LDWA web pages (pre-publicising walks is an insurance requirement). In most cases local group walks will also be advertised in Strider magazine and the walks secretary can provide details of the deadlines for this. Sometimes late changes are unavoidable, and the group secretary or walks secretary can include 'stop press' information on the group and national websites as well as circulate details to members on the LDWA list.
- Walk leaders should consider how to get in contact with walkers in case of late changes or to confirm the precise starting point for those that have booked on the walk or for walkers to alert the walk leader of cancellations/delays. If it is considered appropriate an 'on the day' mobile contact number can be included with the details. Make sure potential walkers are aware of arrangements for lunch, e.g. some groups always have a pub stop for lunch, others never do.
- Work out a detailed route on 1:50,000 or 1:25,000 maps with possible alternatives. This should be on rights of way (or core paths in Scotland), permissive paths or access land unless you get specific permission to cross private land.
- Unless you are very familiar with the route, recce the route, and if necessary seek alternatives that circumvent difficulties or improve the walk. You may wish to make a GPS record of the route.
- Remember that paths which can be walked by an individual may not be suitable for a group, for example, very strenuous terrain, overgrown paths, paths passing close to houses, through some farmyards or livestock areas, across derelict stiles or fences, etc.
- Consider whether access to public toilets is necessary and identify appropriate areas for comfort stops.
- It may be possible to improve a route, perhaps with a little work from secateurs or by reporting a stile that needs replacing to the council.
- Alternative or escape routes must be considered by walk leaders where walks are in remote areas, difficult terrain or where poor weather conditions are expected.
- Think where you might take breaks in fine weather (viewpoints) and poor weather (shelter).
- To add interest, perhaps find out a little about historic buildings, wildlife locations, distant features etc., to tell your group.
- Be prepared to answer queries from prospective walkers who may contact you; be realistic about the standard of the walk, particularly to newcomers.

- **Risk Assessments.** The risk assessment helps walk leaders plan and lead LDWA social walks safely. It does this by helping walk leaders think through any hazards that may be encountered on the walk, the risk involved and, importantly, practical ways to reduce or remove the risk. Although this is not mandatory, we recommend use of the risk assessment (located on the toolkit - <https://ldwa.org.uk/library/toolkit.php>) to demonstrate that walk organisers and leaders have adequately discharged their responsibilities.

There are a number of reasons why it makes sense to do this;

- As part of planning and reccyng the walk, the walk leader will consider the safety and enjoyment of walkers – completing the risk assessment template just involves committing this thinking to paper.
- In the very unlikely event of a claim following an accident on a walk, the risk assessment will help our insurers deal with this and demonstrate the walk leader has discharged their responsibilities effectively. It's important to stress that the risk assessment DOES NOT make the walk leader more liable in the case of an accident.

The Day Before

- Check the weather forecast and consider any consequent changes to the route.
- Ensure that your own equipment is more than just adequate for your own needs, remembering that you may have to cope with an emergency. In particular, carry a bivvy bag, whistle, mobile phone, spare clothing etc.
- Recommend to walkers to bring their own food and drink. If shops are used, allow time during the walk for refreshments to be purchased.

At the start

- Arrive at least 15 minutes before the start time to welcome walkers, particularly newcomers, and advise on parking as necessary.
- Complete the Social Walk Register Form listing those on the walk - for members record their membership number and for visitors record their name and some contact details, e.g. address, email address or phone number. (Our insurers require that those on a walk may be contactable in the event of a claim.) This task could be delegated to another member on the walk. The form may be obtained from your group walks secretary or downloaded from the toolkit and should be returned to the group secretary after completion; it will be stored securely for seven years.

- Note that LDWA policy allows young people under the age of 18 to join social walks if they are accompanied by a parent or legal guardian. Leaders also have a responsibility to young people and vulnerable adults, see the LDWA safeguarding policy with specific documents for young people and adults. Link to the toolkit - <https://ldwa.org.uk/library/toolkit.php>
- Check that everyone is adequately equipped. The Walk leader should consider carrying extra items to use as back-up e.g. a small first aid kit.
- Consider whether the size of the group warrants an appointed backmarker.
- Spend a couple of minutes telling the group about the walk – many walkers like to follow the progress on their maps – and mention arrangements for breaks and lunch. If there are significant changes from the advertised walk, e.g. if the mileage turns out to be significantly longer or shorter, let the group know.
- Point out, especially to newcomers, that photographs may be taken on the walk which may be published in Strider, on the group website or on Facebook, so walkers should let the leader know if they object to appearing in any such photographs.
- Count the group.
- Explain to the group the importance of staying together during the route and politely remind people not to dash off ahead.

During the walk

- There are many styles of leadership – it's not necessary to be at the front all the time, but you should ensure no-one gets too far ahead, and you should be at the front when the route is difficult or not obvious.
- Be particularly alert at hazards such as road crossings, rough sections, livestock areas, etc. Crossing fields with cattle requires particular care and sometimes an alternative route may be necessary.
- Judging the right pace can be difficult: a reasonable rate of progress is needed but always remember these are social walks and that walkers should not feel unduly pushed.
- Whilst walkers may get a little spread out at times, the group must be kept essentially together. Keep in touch visually with the backmarker and if necessary slow down or wait so the party does not get too spread out.

- At gates, consider asking the first person behind the leader to hold the gate open and then ensure it is closed once the group have passed through. This means faster walkers are moved to the back of the group and can work their way to the front again rather than spreading the group out further. Also there is no confusion over whether gates were open or not, possibly allowing livestock to escape.
- Consider waiting a little at stiles or gates (on the far side) to avoid the group becoming too spaced.
- In mist, where the terrain is awkward, or where the route is intricate, ensure that the group keeps close together.
- Count the group from time to time to check no-one is missing.
- If any walker decides to leave the walk for any reason, they must let the leader know. Make it clear that they are no longer part of the walk and you have no further responsibility towards them. If appropriate provide them with helpful information, e.g. directions to a bus stop if they wish to get a bus back.
- At all costs avoid part of the group getting detached from the rest and perhaps going off the wrong way – attempting to get everyone back together can be time-consuming and frustrating for everyone and, worst scenario, some people fail to regroup and get lost, creating problems during and after the walk.
- Be prepared to shorten or modify the route if the state of the weather or the party make this wise.
- Whilst this is undesirable, it may very occasionally be necessary or appropriate to split the group into two, and this needs to be done in a managed way with everyone clear about what is happening. For example, this might be when it becomes clear that some of the group will not be able to complete the full route and need to cut back or divert to a bus stop. It is highly desirable that any split-off group includes a group member who is known to be competent at navigation and who has a map and adequate local knowledge.
- Indicate how long each break will be and give a two-minute warning before restarting.
- Try to talk to everyone, especially newcomers, during the day.
- Do your best to ensure that everyone enjoys the walk.

At the end of the walk

- Thank walkers for coming and remind them of the next walk.

- Have a word with any newcomers to encourage them to come on future walks and to join the LDWA. Non-members are expected to join after coming on three walks.
- If there have been any accidents, injuries or incidents, including damage to property, ensure that an incident form, which is on the toolkit, is completed and sent to the LDWA Treasurer. Note that the LDWA has an insurance policy that covers third party liability. The policy may be found in several documents in the LDWA toolkit, and any queries should be made to the Treasurer. Similarly, any incidents relating to disclosure or witnessing signs of abuse of young people or vulnerable adults should be reported in accordance with the Safeguarding policy within the toolkit.

Possible problems

- **Emergencies:**

Very occasionally there is a serious medical emergency, such as a walker collapsing or breaking a limb, and you must decide what action to take – this will depend on the circumstances. The top priority is to get help by dialling 999 or 112 from a mobile or by dispatching someone to the nearest phone box or house. Whilst a grid reference is essential, other information such as access details may be needed, and someone might need to be sent to the nearest accessible road to meet an ambulance. Unless one of the group is trained in first aid, there may be little else that can be done until help arrives except keeping the casualty warm and providing reassurance. Particularly in bad conditions, a leader may appoint a deputy to lead most of the group to the finish of the walk whilst just a few wait at the incident scene.

An accident report form must be completed for all accidents or incidents that occur on any organised LDWA activity and a copy forwarded to the LDWA Treasurer, even if no further action is thought to be necessary at the time.

- **First aid**

All walkers are strongly encouraged to carry personal first aid kits sufficient for minor problems. A leader may carry extra sterile dressings and bandages but current advice is that leaders should not give tablets, medication or creams to others. Those who lead walks regularly should consider taking one of the first aid courses offered by local St John Ambulance or Red Cross groups. Walkers should be strongly advised to carry an ICE (in case of emergency) card in the top of their rucksack giving details of an emergency contact and of any medical conditions.

- **Bad conditions**

If the weather deteriorates you should consider shortening the walk or diverting to a less exposed alternative.

- The slow walker

If a walker is lagging, encouragement from the leader can be effective; however, if such a walker feels inadequate, they might slow even more. Occasionally someone may fall behind so much early on that it is obvious he/she will not complete the route in a reasonable time. This needs to be pointed out to the person sooner rather than later, and options such as cutbacks, bus options, etc, considered. If it is felt that an inexperienced walker cannot be left alone a member of the group may need to be found to accompany them. Sometimes putting a slow walker at the front of the group can have a psychological effect to speed them up a little.

- The fast walker

Both leader and walkers should remember that the walk is a social undertaking with the aim of enabling like-minded people to enjoy a set route together. Sometimes a walker will persistently dash off far ahead (not always in the right direction) and be difficult to keep track of. Tactfully point out that, on a group walk, walkers are expected to stay with the group. Anyone not accepting this should be told to continue independently and under their own responsibility for route finding. On the other hand, if there is a section where walkers' paces are obviously going to vary, for example on a steep ascent, there is no harm in telling faster walkers to go ahead and wait at an obvious landmark, such as at the top of a hill.

- The Countryside Code

The Countryside Code for England and Wales and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code set out rights and responsibilities for those using the countryside. Any disregard for the Codes can bring the LDWA into disrepute. Most walkers are aware of their responsibilities, but occasionally a walker may drop litter, etc., and you should point out, politely but firmly, that this is not acceptable. Ensure (in conjunction with the backmarker) that gates are left in their original state and any dogs are properly under control. Should a group be challenged by a landowner or other countryside user be polite, calm and cooperative but without conceding access rights, etc.

- Getting lost

It shouldn't happen on a properly reccyed walk, but it does. Be adept enough with the map or GPS device to relocate and get back onto the intended route, perhaps even without anyone noticing the error.

Further matters and links.

- Details of the LDWA insurance policy (as well as other policies) may be found in several documents in the Toolkit. Queries relating to insurance should be referred to the LDWA Treasurer.

- It is important that walk leaders are sensitive to personal information relating to walkers and conform to the LDWA DPA statement.
- Should anyone on an LDWA walk behave in an unacceptable or abusive way, details and names of witnesses should be noted and the matter reported to the LDWA General Secretary who will consider whether there is a case to invoke the Association's disciplinary procedures.
- The LDWA has specific guidance about dogs on walks. The decision to allow dogs on walks rests with the walk leader or walk organiser, though if no dogs are allowed this must be made clear prior to the walk. Some local groups have general policies concerning dogs. Assistance dogs are normally allowed on LDWA walks. The walk leader can insist on dogs being on leads and, in particular, dogs must be kept on leads where there is a potential for livestock.