LDWA Local Groups Social Walks Guidance

Guidance for Local Group Committees, Walk Secretaries/Coordinators, Walk Leaders and Walkers | Version 1 (July 2026)

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Document History

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3 August 2021	Stuart Bain	Moving beyond Level 0 restrictions in Scotland
19 July 2021	Stuart Bain	Updated following lifting of Government Covid-19 restrictions in England.
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1. Introduction

The LDWA, through its Local Groups, offers an extensive programme of 'member led' social walks. This relies on volunteers to lead Group walks and it's one of the Association's strengths that many are willing to do so. It's also the Association's ethos that members can take part in any advertised social walk.

This guidance is divided into the following 'bookmarked' sections - Local Group Committees, Walk Secretaries/Coordinators, Walk Leaders and Individual Walkers - covering the part each plays in making sure that social walks are enjoyable, worthwhile, and safe.

The following terms are used throughout:

Must – actions that are LDWA Policy or legal requirements.

Should / Strongly Recommended – action regarded as 'best practice,' where relevant.

Could – actions that are optional.

2. LDWA Social Walks Policy and Practices

The LDWA has a Local Groups Social Walks Policy which sets out basic principles for all social walks, in summary:

- Local Group social walks must be listed on their Group's website to be classed as an LDWA walk.
- Leaders are strongly recommended to check (recce) their proposed route in advance.
- Leaders should use the LDWA Social Walk Planning Checklist in their walk planning.
- Walkers must complete the Social Walk Register with their name, membership number (contact details for non-members) and, either where they keep their 'In Case of Emergency' (ICE) information (which may include relevant medical details) or give an emergency contact.
- Walkers should make sure they are appropriately prepared for the walk, such as have adequate food, drink, clothing and footwear, any other essential items for personal wellbeing, and carry a personal first aid kit.

Other LDWA practices:

Young people under the age of 18 are welcome on social walks when accompanied by a parent or someone who has parental consent.

People can attend up to three social walks as 'guests' before they should join the LDWA to continue to walk with us.

3. Local Group Committees

Local Group Committees:

- Must be aware of all LDWA Policies and Guidance, and other third-party information, relevant to their social walks programme, such as the Local Groups Social Walks Policy, Data Protection Policy, Environment Policy, Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy, Safeguarding Adults at Risk Policy, Personal Abuse Policy, Equality Diversity and Inclusion Policy, Dealing With Emergencies, Accident and Incident Reporting, Dogs on Walks Policy (for England, Wales & Scotland), The Countryside (England and Wales) / Outdoor Access (Scotland) Codes.
- Must have a procedure to upload Social Walks Registers to the LDWA website.
- Should ensure their Social Walk Secretary/Coordinator is fully supported in their role, especially in communicating with walk leaders and members about the walk programme, last-minute changes,

accident and incident reporting and relevant LDWA / third-party policy and guidance, detailed above, that may be a change of procedure or have other impacts on how social walks are organised.

- Could have their own social walk 'ways of working' or requirements.
- Could arrange relevant training, or mentoring, for their walk leaders, such as basic first aid, map reading skills, changes in policy and procedure and so on.

4. Walk Secretaries/Coordinators

Walk Secretaries/Coordinators should:

- Develop, maintain, and promote a varied and engaging programme of walks for their Group.
- Encourage and support Group members to lead walks.
- Support new Walk Leaders to help them plan, organise, and lead their first walk or arrange other experienced Leaders to mentor them.
- Encourage experienced Walk Leaders to continue to offer walks.
- Receive new walk details (and existing walk amendments) and upload them onto the LDWA website walks database.
- Deal with last-minute changes, such as cancelations or alterations due to weather or other circumstances, and communicate these to members as 'Stop Press' information on the Group/National website and through other Group comms channels.
- Help make sure Walk Leaders are kept up to date with LDWA policy, guidance or procedures relating to social walks.

5. Guidance for Social Walk Leaders

This section is aimed at new Walk Leaders but it's a reminder for experienced Leaders.

Local Groups have different approaches to their walk programmes because of differences in Group size, location, background and what Members offer to lead! A programme may include walks on weekdays and/or weekends. There may be trips away and joint walks with other groups and, inevitably, there's a range of distance and terrain.

Leaders aim to make their walk enjoyable, interesting and take things at a 'sociable pace' so that participants can talk and get to know each other as they walk. Some Leaders devise walks with a theme, interest, or destination.

a) Never led a walk before?

Use this guidance and talk to your Local Group Walk Secretary/Coordinator who can help you plan your first walk and your next steps in the process.

b) Plan your walk beforehand

All walks need planning but, generally, the longer the walk and more difficult the terrain the more thorough your planning should be. Give yourself enough time to plan and recce your route and use the Social Walk Planning Checklist, which covers general points and potential safety issues.

Doing a recce and using the Checklist:

- Shows you've planned and checked your walk to consider walker enjoyment and safety.
- Helps our insurers deal with (the unlikely event of) any claim being made following an accident or incident on a walk. Completing the Checklist doesn't make a Walk Leader more liable if an accident or incident occurs. You don't have to submit the Checklist.

Steps to take:

- Fix the date and start time and your initial route ideas, start/finish location with suitable parking (take space, security, and possible local community impact into account) or public transport options and approximate mileage. Bear in mind the time of year and daylight length.
- Give initial basic walk details (date, start time and place, approximate distance) to your Local Group Walks Secretary/Coordinator as soon as possible; they'll upload this on the Local Group LDWA website (an insurance requirement) and arrange publicity for your walk. Send them the full details once everything is finalised.
- Give your preferred contact details for pre-walk queries and an 'on the day' mobile phone number.
- Work out a detailed route using 1:50,000 or 1:25,000 scale maps (online 'tools' such as OS Maps are useful) and consider possible alternatives. In England and Wales your route must be on rights of way, permissive paths, or access land, unless you have specific permission to cross private land with a group. In Scotland you must comply with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.
- Bear in mind that some paths may not be suitable for all on a social walk, for example – on strenuous terrain, through farmyards and fields with livestock, alongside busy roads, paths with stiles, fords or stepping stones and mainline railway crossings.
- In case of poor weather conditions, an emergency or other reason on the day, you should identify possible short cuts or escape routes. See also Section 7a which includes information about poor mobile phone network coverage.
- Identify suitable places for breaks. Generally, walkers expect short morning and afternoon breaks and a longer lunch break. Depending on the terrain, location, distance, and time of year you might be interested in finding sheltered/shady places, somewhere to sit off the ground, a pleasant view, maybe a churchyard or local park, and other facilities such as shops, pubs, cafés, or public toilets.
- In light of your recce, decide if: you want to limit group size; the walk isn't suitable for dogs, or dogs off leads, for example because of risks to livestock (see Section 7c dogs on walks in England and Wales and Section 7d for Scotland).
- Whilst recceing it's useful to record your route on a GPS device or phone app to produce a GPX file – this gives the actual distance and ascent/descent of your route and, once finalised, can be used for the LDWA Walks Database.
- Send the finalised information to your Social Walk Secretary/Coordinator. Essential final details include a walk name, date, departure time, distance, start/finish location (OS grid ref/What 3 Words/address/post code) and parking/public transport details. Other relevant details could include break arrangements, what to bring, maximum number, pre-notify intention to come, terrain type, particularly demanding sections, pace, accessibility, suitability for children and whether dogs are/aren't allowed.

c) A day or two before your walk

- Check the weather forecast and consider any route changes you may need to make. Contact your Social Walk Secretary/Coordinator as soon as possible if you think changes need to be communicated to Members. If feasible, you may want to check parts of your route that might be affected by adverse weather (fallen trees, flooding, high fire risk) to make sure they're still ok.
- Depending on the type of route and forecast conditions, you may want to take more equipment than you need, for example, you could carry spare clothing, extra food/drink, an emergency group shelter, you could ask the walkers to do the same.
- Provide a route map for a backmarker if you plan to have one.
- If you're relying on a mobile phone or GPS device for navigation, make sure it's fully charged, the GPX file is uploaded and, ideally, have back up power pack.

- Make sure you have a Social Walk Register Form with pen/pencil. This form also includes information about data protection which walkers can read. Add any particular hazards you want to highlight in the space provided.

d) On the day

- Arrive in good time, at least 15 minutes, before the start to welcome walkers, particularly newcomers, and advise on parking, as necessary.
- Everyone must complete the Social Walk Register Form – it's a requirement of LDWA Insurance. You can get it passed round for you. Members must record their name and membership number. Non-members must record their name and contact details. Both members and non-members must either say where they keep their ICE Information (which may include relevant medical details) or give an emergency contact.
- Take the form with you or take a photo.
- Check for late messages from those who may be delayed.
- If relevant, get confirmation from dog owners that they have pet owner liability insurance and tell them if you'll want dogs on short leads during the walk.
- Five minutes or so before the start, introduce yourself and any new members, give brief details about the walk. Highlight any hazards you've identified and say what you'll want walkers to do to minimise safety risk. Let them know if there are significant changes from the advertised walk, such as longer or shorter mileage, before setting off.
- Appoint a backmarker if you want and give them a route map or share the GPX file. Remind everyone to stay together as much as possible and to tell the backmarker, or others in the group, if they're hanging behind for any reason.
- Point out, especially to newcomers, that photographs may be taken and may be published in Strider, on the group website, Facebook, or other social media; walkers should let the leader know if they don't want to appear in any photographs.
- Count the group before you leave.

e) During the walk

- There are many styles of leadership – do what feels right for you and the group you're leading. It's not necessary to be at the front all the time but be there when the route is difficult or not obvious and make sure no one gets too far ahead.
- Try to talk to everyone, especially newcomers, during the day and do your best to make sure everyone enjoys the walk.
- Be particularly careful at hazards mentioned in your walk introduction. Be aware that other hazards may become apparent since your recce, such as storm damage or increased fire risk. Crossing fields with cattle requires particular care – see Section 7f in this document for guidance on walking near livestock.
- Judging the right pace can be difficult, reasonable progress is needed but always remember these are social walks and walkers shouldn't feel unduly pushed.
- Keep visually in touch with the back of the group/backmarker especially at changes of direction, where the route is intricate or in mist; slow down to prevent part of the group getting separated and going the wrong way. Getting everyone back together can be time-consuming and frustrating for all.
- Consider waiting on the far side of stiles or gates to prevent the group from spreading out too much.
- Say how long each break will be and give at least a two-minute warning before restarting.
- Count the group from time to time, especially after breaks, to check no one is missing.
- Make sure you know if any walker decides to leave the walk for any reason.

- Don't hesitate to shorten or modify the route if the weather deteriorates or walkers are struggling.
- Circumstances may make it necessary for you to split the group into two. This should be done in a managed way with everyone clear about what's happening and why. It's highly desirable that any split-off group includes someone who's competent at navigation, has a map and/or adequate local knowledge.
- Where a walker isn't keeping up with the group, encouragement from you and others can help. If someone is clearly struggling with the pace early on, and it's obvious they won't complete the walk in a reasonable time, you should talk to them sooner rather than later and discuss options, such as returning the way you came, other cutbacks or public transport. If you feel the walker is inexperienced and can't be left on their own, then you may need to ask a more experienced group member to go with them.
- Conversely, you may need to remind walkers who keep getting too far ahead to stay in touch with you and the group. Anyone not accepting this should be told to continue independently and under their own responsibility for route finding. However, sections where paces are obviously going to vary, for example on a steep ascent, you can tell faster walkers to go ahead and wait at an obvious landmark, such as at the top of a hill.
- Getting lost shouldn't happen on a properly recced walk, but if it does, you should be adept enough with your map or GPS device to relocate yourself quickly to get back on your route.
- See Section 7a on Serious Medical Emergencies which also has information about poor mobile phone network coverage.

f) At the end of the walk

- Thank everyone for coming and you could remind them of the next Group walk.
- Encourage newcomers to join the LDWA and come again. Non-members are expected to join after coming on three walks.
- Add any comments you may want to make about the walk in the relevant section of the Social Walk Register Form; this could include general feedback, 'near miss'/actual incidents or accidents.
- As soon as possible after the walk, you must give (or email a scan/photo) the completed Social Walk Register to the person who uploads these to the LDWA Website. Remember to be sensitive with any personal information and follow the necessary LDWA data protection requirements.
- If there have been any significant incidents, such as injury or damage to property, you must complete an Accident and Incident Form as soon as possible and send it to the person in your Group who deals with this; they will forward it to the LDWA Treasurer. Information about the LDWA's insurance policy, which covers personal accident and public liability, is available here.

6. Guidance for Individual Walkers

- You must complete the Social Walk Register Form: Members – with name and membership number, non-members with name and contact details. You must say where your ICE information is kept. Your ICE information could include any relevant medical details you want to be used in an emergency. (As most mobile phones can store ICE and health information which is accessible to others [but not the rest of your phone content], you could consider using this option).
- You should be appropriately prepared for the walk, for example – have sufficient food and drink, adequate clothing, and footwear and a personal first aid kit. You could also bring a personal emergency survival bag and other items for your wellbeing.
- Only join a walk if you are fit and well on the day. If you're unsure about your fitness and capabilities you should check with the Walk Leader beforehand what to expect in terms of distance, pace, and strenuousness, and decide if the walk is for you.

- Walk Leaders should state in advance if dogs aren't allowed on their walk.
- If dogs are permitted on a walk, in England or Wales, you must follow the LDWA requirements and the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Act 2025; and you must have pet owner liability insurance and put your dog on a short lead at any time the Walk Leader reasonably asks you to do so. It's good practice to let the Walk Leader know in advance if you are bringing a dog.
- You should let the Leader know at the start if you don't want to appear in any photos taken during the walk and remove yourself from being in pictures before they're taken.
- You must tell the Leader if you decide to leave the walk for any reason. You'll no longer be part of the walk, and the Leader won't have further responsibility towards you.
- You should help the Leader by following any instructions given for good progress and safety for you and the group. Don't go ahead of the Walk Leader unless instructed to do so.
- If there is an accident or emergency during the walk you should help as much as you're able in the circumstances. See also Section 7a on Serious Medical Emergencies.
- LDWA Members come from many diverse backgrounds and have different opinions, beliefs, values, and ideas. Everyone should avoid discriminatory, offensive, or aggressive language or behaviour on social walks. Apart from upsetting people, it could bring the LDWA into disrepute.

7. Other Relevant Information

a) Serious medical emergencies

Very occasionally there is a serious medical emergency, such collapse or broken limb. Walk Leaders have to quickly decide what action to take. The first priority is to get help by calling 999 or 112.

If there's no network coverage you may still be able to contact the emergency services on a mobile phone. (In Scotland – if the walk is in a known poor mobile phone reception area, register your phone with the emergency services in advance to use text messages (which require less signal). See more information here: https://www.mountaineering.scot/safety-and-skills/essential-skills/mountain-rescue/calling-for-help)

Give your precise location (OS grid reference/What 3 Words/Address/'Easting and Northing' grid coordinates) and as much information about the casualty as you can. Access information may also be needed; someone might need to be sent to the nearest accessible point to meet an ambulance. Keep the casualty warm and reassured until help arrives.

It may be appropriate to split the group so that someone leads most of the group to the finish of the walk while a few should stay at the incident scene until help arrives.

An LDWA Accident and Incident Form must be completed by the Leader for all accidents or incidents that occur on any organised LDWA activity, and a copy forwarded by the Local Group to the LDWA Treasurer, even if no further action is thought by the Leader and/or Local Group Committee to be necessary at the time.

b) First aid

All walkers should carry personal first aid kits sufficient for minor problems. A Walk Leader could carry extra first aid items, but current advice is that they shouldn't give tablets or other medication to others but could assist if asked by the recipient.

Local Group Committees could offer to arrange first aid training for their regular Walk Leaders.

c) Dogs on walks in England and Wales

The LDWA has revised the policy about dogs on walks in England and Wales because of legislation changes to protect livestock, landowners, and others. In particular, owners must have pet owner's liability insurance cover – and this is recorded on the Social Walk Register, and dogs must be kept on a lead at all times near livestock.

Assistance dogs are welcome in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. It remains the Walk Leader's discretion whether other dogs will be allowed on their walk. Walkers should seek prior permission from the Walk Leader before bringing a dog on a walk and must provide assurance of insurance cover.

d) Dogs and livestock in Scotland

The law on dogs and livestock in Scotland is different from England and Wales. Walk Leaders and walkers leading or joining walks in Scotland must follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and Scottish legislation (the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2021), not the England and Wales rules.

- Walkers must keep dogs on a short lead or under close control near all farm animals, and must not take a dog into a field where there are lambs, calves or other young animals — even on a lead.
- Walkers must not allow a dog to be 'at large' (loose) among sheep. In Scotland this is an offence even if the dog does not chase or attack.
- Walk Leaders should remember that 'livestock' in Scotland also covers alpacas, llamas, farmed deer, ostriches, enclosed game birds and buffalo, and plan routes accordingly.
- Walk Leaders should brief dog owners at the start of any Scottish walk on lead requirements near livestock and on avoiding fields with young stock, and should use the Social Walk Planning Checklist to identify livestock on the route.
- Walkers should be aware that penalties for livestock worrying in Scotland are severe — an unlimited fine (commonly cited as up to £40,000) and/or up to 12 months' imprisonment, with police powers to seize dogs.
- Groups could add a short reminder of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code dog rules to event listings for walks held in Scotland.

e) The Countryside Codes

The Countryside Code for England and Wales and the Scottish Outdoor Access Code set out rights and responsibilities for those using the countryside.

The countryside is a working environment, it's important that everyone is aware of being respectful of farms and farm animals; your actions could affect people's lives and livelihoods.

f) Advice when walking near animals

- Give wild animals, livestock, and horses plenty of space. Their behaviour can be unpredictable, especially when with young.
- Avoid getting between cows and their calves. Where possible, walk around herds.
- Keep dogs close on a short lead and under effective control – see Section 7c (England/Wales) or 7d (Scotland). Don't hang onto your dog if you are threatened by cattle – let it go as the cattle will chase the dog and not you.
- Close any gates you've opened when walking through fields containing livestock.
- Co-operate with people working in the countryside. For example, follow their directions when animals are being moved or gathered. This helps keep everybody safe.
- Don't feed livestock, horses, or wild animals as it can cause them harm.
- If you consider the route dangerous, look for an alternative reasonable route.
- Report any frightening incidents or attacks to the landowner and, where relevant, to the Local Authority Rights of Way Department, Highway Authority, the Health & Safety Executive, and, if very serious, to the Police; and an LDWA Accident and Incident Form must be completed by the Walk Leader.