RAMBLERS



The Walk Leader Handbook

The Ramblers' approach to group walks

Introduction

At the Ramblers we know that no two walks are the same. Whether you're leading a wild-weather wander or an urban leg-stretch, discovering new routes or exploring close to home, we want you and your walkers to be safe and have fun.

This handbook sets out the Ramblers' eight guiding principles to leading safe, enjoyable and welcoming walks.

While all activities in the outdoors come with risks, these are far outweighed by the rewards. And by working together to identify, communicate and manage risks on the day, we can make walks safer for everyone.

Wherever you are on your walk leading journey, this handbook offers helpful insights and reminders – and for new walk leaders, it's the perfect place to start.

So, get out there, stay safe and most importantly, have fun. Thank you for helping to open up the outdoors for everyone!

For more information, visit
ramblers.org.uk



How we work together to lead great group walks

The Ramblers

We set standards for great group walks and provide general training, tools and resources to help groups and walk leaders get started.

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Local walking groups

We support walk leaders to build local experience and create great walks for our specific location or community.

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Walk leaders

We plan in advance, prepare for the unexpected, put the group first and make dynamic changes on the day.

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Walkers

We look after ourselves and others in the group, acting responsibly so that everyone has a great walk.

Our guiding principles

At the Ramblers, we have **eight guiding principles** to help us plan walks. Whatever type of walk we're leading, these principles help us to consider the route, our walkers and the skills we need.



Principle 1

We work as a team

While this handbook is designed with walk leaders in mind, we all play a part to make sure that walks are enjoyable, welcoming and as safe as possible.

The Ramblers

As Britain's walking charity, the Ramblers is here to support walk leaders across England, Scotland and Wales. We'll help you by providing guidance and training. You'll find plenty of tips, stories and videos on our website – and we're on hand to answer any questions you have about leading group walks too!

Walking groups

Groups work together with their walk leaders to share local knowledge and bring good practice to life. There will be a wealth of knowledge in your walking group and other members may be able to help you with:

- **Local knowledge and experience:** Buddying up with experienced walk leaders is great if you're new to leading walks. They can share local knowledge and tips to help make your walks safer and enjoyable for everyone taking part.
- **Local training:** Sharing local resources or recommended courses to develop your skills.
- **Planning:** The group may have a bank of routes that they have already graded and assessed for risks, so you can make the most of the work that's already been done to plan walks in advance.
- **Sharing information with walkers:** Advertising your walk and providing key information to those who are interested in coming along. This will help people choose the right walk for them and prepare for it.

Walk Leaders

While you will be leading the walk, there is lots of support to help you. In return, you'll follow the Ramblers guiding principles to play your part in keeping walkers safe.

As a walk leader there are certain things you must do:



Plan and assess the risks in advance

We have example risk assessments according to walk difficulty to help you get started.



Adapt plans to local circumstances

Adopt or adapt our resources in a way that works for you to manage any specific considerations for your walk.



Share your plan with walkers

You can do this in your welcome briefing at the start of the walk before setting off.



Make changes if you need to

Stay alert to your surroundings and walkers and take a dynamic approach on the day.

Walkers

Regardless of whether they're a new walker or already have lots of experience, walkers should try to make sure they:

- **Choose the right walk:** The walk should be within their abilities and if they're unsure whether it is, they should get in touch with the walking group or walk leader to find out more.
- **Wear appropriate clothes:** By checking the weather forecast, they can make sure they wear appropriate clothing and footwear.
- **Follow your guidance:** It's important walkers follow any instructions shared by you, the walk leader.
- **Respect the countryside:** All walkers should follow the Countryside Code or Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

Principle 2

We lead within our capabilities

There's a difference between feeling confident and being competent, and we should never intentionally over-reach ourselves.

Lead walks that are right for your level of experience

If you're just starting out, or want to start leading more challenging walks, build your skills and knowledge through training and help from more experienced walk leaders. Check the Ramblers **skills framework** to understand the skills needed and what you might want to develop over time.

Share and learn from others

When you're leading a walk, you don't have to do everything by yourself. You may choose to delegate some responsibilities to trusted people in the group. What's important is that between you, you have everything you need to walk safely and have fun. Plan in advance, to make sure you have everything covered before setting off.



Make the most of opportunities to develop your skills

Training courses, peer support and maybe even getting a qualification are great ways to develop your skills.

Principle 3

We plan walks in advance

As a walk leader, it's a vital part of your role to plan and consider the risks on your walk – helping everyone to keep safe and have a great experience.

Good planning will help you to determine

- How long the walk is likely to take.
- When and where you can take rest stops.
- Alternative routes if you need to cut a walk short, or have time to extend it.
- Any specific hazards and the adjustments you can make to manage the risk.
- Points of interest you can highlight to people along the way.
- Any additional information that would be helpful to share with walkers beforehand.

Plan your route in advance

When planning a walk, doing a recce is strongly recommended. It will help you work out how much time you'll need, find places of interest and good rest stops, as well as spot potential risks and accessibility issues.

If a recce isn't possible, you can plan using maps, guidebooks, existing routes, and blogs. You can also speak to people who know the area and build on their knowledge to plan and foresee any opportunities or challenges. It's important to have a good understanding of the terrain to make sure your planning is proportionate.

Check the conditions

The weather plays an important role on a walk. Check the forecast before heading out and prepare for how different weather conditions might affect your plans.

Assess risks on the route

As a walk leader, you must always plan and assess the risks in advance. Decide the grade of the walk you're leading and refer to the corresponding Ramblers' **risk assessment**. These outline common hazards and steps you can take to manage the potential risks, proportionate to the type of walk you're leading. Someone in your group may have already assessed the route for a previous walk.

You can use these as a starting point to think about your specific walk. We recommend making a note of any additional hazards on your recce – for example if there's an obstruction on the route, or if the weather has made one spot particularly tricky.

Always review your plans again on the day of the walk – and don't be afraid to make changes if you need to.

Remember to share your plan and any important information with walkers before setting off too.



Principle 4

We help walkers come prepared

By sharing information, you can help walkers know what to expect and what is expected of them to help keep everyone safe.

Work together as a group

We recommend sharing our **information for walkers** with everyone. This gives helpful tips and reminders for them to follow, before they join a walk – you can adapt it for your group.



Help walkers choose the right walk for them

When advertising your walk, include as much information you can about the route, terrain, pace, and whether any particular kit is needed. For example, you might remind walkers to bring gaiters for a particularly muddy walk, or additional supplies if you're tackling a long, challenging route.

Answer any questions

Let walkers know how to contact you if they have any questions before the walk.

Principle 5

We manage group size

There's not a one-size-fits-all solution when deciding on the number of walkers you're comfortable to lead.

Refer to the recommended ratios

While every walk is different, our leader:walker ratios are a good indicator of the number of leaders typically needed to manage a group safely.

Walking grade	Ratio of leaders to walkers
Ramblers Wellbeing Walks	1:10
Easy and Easy Access	1:10
Leisurely and Moderate	1:8
Strenuous	1:6
Technical	1:4

Think about the number of walkers you feel confident to lead and whether you would be able to manage in an emergency. This will depend on several factors, including the route, the conditions, your experience and the experience of walkers in your group.

Get help from a co-leader, backmarker or friend

For larger groups you will most likely need support from a co-leader or a backmarker. These roles could simply be taken on by an experienced member of the group who is happy to lend a hand on the day. As well as thinking about others, you should also consider your own comfort levels and safety. Don't ever feel under pressure to walk alone with strangers. If it's helpful, ask a friend to walk with you if numbers are low.

Limit the group size if appropriate

Sometimes you will need to limit the group size – for example, if the route is unfamiliar or you are building your confidence. In these circumstances, you may choose to apply a booking system. Your walking group will be able to help.



Principle 6

We prepare for emergencies

The benefits of walking far outweigh the risks – but sometimes accidents happen, and it pays to be prepared.

Ask for walkers' names and emergency contact details

Knowing who is on the walk is important in case of an emergency. You can do this in a variety of ways, and should choose a method that works for you. For example, you can:

- Ask walkers to provide their details when booking onto the walk.
- Take a register at the start of the walk, using our handy **sign-in sheet**.
- Ask walkers to carry In Case of Emergency information – this might be on a card, key fob or on their smartphone.

It is helpful to know about any relevant medical conditions too. Some walkers may not want to share this information, but we recommend inviting walkers to chat to you privately before the walk if they would like to.

Be prepared to deal with accidents

Accidents can happen on any walk, and as a walk leader you will need to react and manage the situation. This may involve looking after a casualty, making sure the rest of the group are comfortable and calling for help. Our **Preventing and Managing Incidents training** includes first aid awareness and the most common scenarios. Check the **skills framework** too, to ensure you have the right level of first aid skills for your walk within the group.

Share plans for remote walks with someone at home

If you are planning a remote walk, let someone at home know your plans so they can raise the alarm if you don't return at the expected time. Our **route card** is a helpful tool for this.

Principle 7

We pack the right kit

One of the best things about walking is its accessibility – not much kit is needed to start. However, as a walk leader, make sure you're prepared for the group and conditions on the day so there are no nasty surprises.

It's helpful to think ahead and ask yourself if the group may need extra layers, food or water at any stage in the day – this is especially important if things don't go to plan. You can always ask the group to help carry some items if there's a lot to carry.



Go to the **Ramblers website** to learn more about the categories of kit to consider for different kinds of walk, including:

- Clothing
- Food and drink
- First aid kit
- Navigation tools
- Communication tools
- Safety equipment

Principle 8

We're flexible and adaptable

On the day of your walk it's important to stay alert and make changes if you need to. This approach is called dynamic risk assessment.

Stay alert to the group and the conditions

Keep an eye on the group, weather, terrain and time. Continuously assessing risk in this way means you can adapt your plans if the conditions change. Because you'll already have assessed and identified the key risks and hazards in advance, it's usually quite straightforward to spot when something has changed and to draw on your contingency plans.

By walking within the group, chatting with people and keeping in touch with how they are doing, you will have a good sense of what the group needs and anything you can do to help them get the most from the walk. When we only lead from the front it can be hard to know what's happening behind us, gauge team spirit or notice when people are struggling.

Plan regular breaks

Set a pace that suits everyone and makes sure you never leave anyone behind by going too fast. Taking regular breaks that give enough time for everyone to recharge (without getting too cold) helps reduce the risk of fatigue and injury.

Change approach and plans if necessary

Your leadership style may need to change in response to what's happening on the walk. You may need to give people specific instructions to keep them safer in difficult situations, while a more relaxed approach will be appropriate when conditions are more favourable.

When facing uncertain or changing conditions, it's best to be cautious because safety is paramount. Never feel like you can't turn back or change your plans. At times walkers may feel disappointed or try to persuade us to keep going, but your role is to put safety first.

Thank you

By leading walks, you're helping to open up the outdoors for everyone. Thank you!

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