



National
Guidance
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Overseas Expeditions

The Department for Education and the Welsh Government are currently advising against overseas visits with children under 18. See document [4.4k "Coronavirus"](#).

Definition

In this guidance an 'Overseas Expedition' involves travelling through or working in either:

- Countries or locations remote from the accepted standards of safety and health that prevail in the UK (e.g. developing countries or remote areas of some developed countries);
- Challenging environments (e.g. mountain, desert, sea, jungle, glacier).

Expeditions are carried out for a variety of reasons including adventure, exploration, scientific or educational fieldwork, cultural understanding, charitable purposes, or as a fund-raising challenge.

You should refer to documents [7r "Overseas Visits"](#) and [4.2b "Residentials"](#), as Overseas Expeditions are a type of overseas visit and inevitably involve overnight stays.

You should also refer to other National Guidance documents relevant to the location and activities involved in a proposed expedition (for example, [7v "Snowsport Visits"](#)), as well as those that apply to all visits.

The distinction between a 'normal' overseas visit and an Overseas Expedition is not sharply defined. A cultural visit to a European city is clearly an overseas visit; a ski trip to a resort in Europe or the USA is clearly a snowsport visit and an overseas visit, but a walking tour in the Pyrenees or a sporting tour of parts of Southern Africa may well fall into the Overseas Expedition category as well as being an overseas visit, and a ski-tour in Turkey including a stay at a resort may fall into all three categories. Where there is doubt, use all the relevant guidance to decide which is appropriate, and consult your employer's Outdoor Education Adviser.

Expeditions usually require a 12-24 month planning, preparation and training period and fall into two broad types:

- Packages arranged and delivered by an external expedition provider;
- Expeditions led by the establishment's own staff (these may be conceived by establishment staff and completely 'do-it-yourself', or may involve input from a

variety of partners and providers in the UK and overseas, but the overall delivery is co-ordinated by the establishment rather than by an external provider).

In either case it is essential that there is one clearly identified expedition provider (which may be the establishment itself) that is accountable for all aspects of the expedition, including safety. The provision of some aspects of the expedition (e.g. travel, accommodation, activities) may be delegated to third parties but the expedition provider remains responsible for ensuring that these are appropriate.

Clearly the roles and responsibilities of the establishment and its staff are considerably different in these two cases. Each is explored more fully later in this document.

Why Undertake an Expedition?

Expeditions often leave participants with powerful and lifelong memories and friendships. They provide opportunities for development in self-confidence, self-esteem, judgement, leadership, teamwork skills and problem-solving ability. They often provide a new viewpoint to reflect on prior experience and attitudes. Scientific expeditions can provide a unique opportunity to carry out fieldwork in environments that can't be experienced in the UK.

An expedition will often require a significant commitment to preparation and training. It will involve working towards a long-term aim; travel in very different environments and cultures, sometimes overcoming hardship, difficulty and uncertainty. Involvement in an expedition, therefore, requires an effort of will from young people, and this commitment to a long term and challenging aim provides unique opportunities for them to learn and grow. During the expedition, a group is often isolated and dependent on its own resources, and participants are totally reliant on each other. This interdependence can be a powerful learning opportunity.

Expeditions should not be seen as exclusive to better-off young people. Given appropriately competent staff, an establishment may run an exciting Overseas Expedition at minimal cost to the participants, with fundraising part of the challenge.

Principles

The following apply to any expedition and form the basis for planning and execution:

- There should be clear agreed aims – the subsequent planning and risk-benefit assessment flows from this;
- There must be a single clearly identified accountable expedition provider – this can either be a third party responsible for a complete package, or it can be the establishment itself;
- The competence of the leadership team and participants is fundamental – the competencies required (in terms of experience, qualifications, health, fitness, maturity etc.) should be clearly identified in the planning and matched to appropriate leaders and participants;

- Contingency plans and emergency procedures should be in place and capable of providing an effective response should they be needed;
- Informed parental consent is essential – there are three important issues here:
 - Participants and their parents must be fully informed of all the risks involved and how these will be managed so that any decision to participate is based on full information;
 - The expedition provider must be fully informed of all health issues and individual needs of participants (including emotional wellbeing or mental health issues which may affect participation in the expedition);
 - Everyone on the expedition (leadership team and participants) should commit to the expedition aims and to any agreed behaviour standards, including the need to co-operate with the leadership team and to take reasonable care of themselves and others.

Leader Team Competencies

The competence of the leadership team is the single most important factor in ensuring a safe and successful expedition.

See also document [3.2d "Approval of Leaders"](#).

The leadership team must contain, in sufficient depth to be able to manage the risks and make the most of the benefits, the following competences:

- An appropriate level of experience and technical competence – this must include experience of making active risk-benefit judgements within the physical and cultural environment in which the expedition will take place, and so local knowledge or (as a second-best alternative) experience of very similar environments is critical;
- Pastoral competence to manage the care, welfare and developmental experiences of the participants – the specific requirements will vary between groups and take into account their age, maturity, gender, experience, abilities and disabilities;
- Relevant technical activity leadership skills;
- Relevant and sufficient language ability;
- First aid and/or remote medical training and experience suited to the setting;
- Proven ability to take control of critical situations, to remain calm and make sound judgements under pressure.

Often these competencies will be shared within the team and it is possible that some, for example language skills or swimming safety qualifications, may rest with participants. In whatever way these competencies are distributed, it is important that:

- A single expedition leader is designated as in overall charge – this person must be able to exert authority when needed while knowing when to defer and delegate;
- Areas of responsibility for decision-making are clear and understood by all;
- The number of leaders takes into account possible contingencies that may remove individuals from the leadership team.

Should a single leader have all the above qualities, they need to be clear about their responsibilities and aware that such competence may not justify a reduction in the number of leaders.

Emergency Procedures and Evacuation

See also document [4.1c "Emergencies and Critical Incidents – Guidance for Leaders"](#).

Contingency plans and emergency procedures should be in writing and discussed and understood by all involved in the expedition, including young people. The following elements are essential:

- Effective communication both within the country and back to the UK;
- Current and accurate knowledge of the scope and limitations of the rescue services and medical facilities available locally and elsewhere in the countries to be visited – arrangements must effectively manage any limitations in local facilities;
- Evacuation plans from anywhere on the expedition to local, national, or international medical facilities as appropriate, and repatriation plans to return someone to the UK should this be necessary (the evacuation of a participant will normally require an accompanying leader, so the implications of this for the continuation of the expedition need to be considered at the planning stage);
- All members of the Leadership Team should be competent to successfully apply the contingency plans or emergency procedures.

Buying a Complete Package from an Expedition Provider

This may be the easiest and most common way of undertaking an Overseas Expedition but it may involve a compromise: in exchange for simplicity and security, the costs may be higher with a loss of some of the learning opportunities that come from a self-organised expedition. However, organising an Overseas Expedition may be too daunting and time consuming for many, in which case using one of the many providers is a realistic alternative.

When a complete package is purchased, the expedition provider becomes accountable for all aspects of the expedition. This must be made clear to all stakeholders. An expedition provider can typically provide the following:

- A suitable destination;
- In-country support and awareness of local laws, conditions and customs;
- A programme (often including a project phase and an adventure phase);
- Emergency support including rescue, medical care and repatriation;
- A suitably experienced and competent leader;
- Risk management;
- Insurance;
- Providing information for participants and parents;
- Pre-expedition training for all leaders and participants;
- International travel arrangements;
- In-country transport;

- Accommodation and venues;
- Supervision of all phases of the expedition.

Choosing a Provider

See also document [4.4g "Selecting External Providers and Facilities"](#).

There are no UK statutory standards regulating Overseas Expedition providers, but the following are relevant:

- The Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC) Quality Badge for Overseas Expeditions gives assurance of both quality and safety, and is evidence that the provider declares compliance with British Standard BS 8848:2014 – it does not involve any inspection of overseas work;
- British Standard BS 8848: 2014 "a specification for the provision of visits, fieldwork, expeditions, and adventurous activities outside the United Kingdom" is a non-statutory standard against which providers can declare their conformity following self-assessment or assessment by an external body (there is no regulation of the assessing bodies) – any provider claiming to conform to BS8848 who was found not to provide what is required by the standard would be in breach of contract;
- An Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA) licence is held by some providers for the work they do in the UK, but it only applies in the UK – this gives reassurance of a culture of safety within the organisation but the overseas provision will not have been inspected by AALA.

So when choosing a provider it is good to shop around, do your research, ask questions, seek recommendations from other clients, consult your employer's Outdoor Education Adviser and clearly state your requirements and expectations as a customer. There is a range of providers, from small companies with one leader working for themselves, to large organisations running many expeditions each year. Selecting the right type of organisation to match your needs is important.

Some issues to consider are:

- Sound aims and educational outcomes for any expedition;
- Flexibility – consider whether you need an off-the-shelf package or a bespoke product tailored to your particular aims and group;
- Track record and experience in the preferred destination and type of expedition;
- Openness and approachability – you are going to be dealing with this provider for some time, so you must feel that you can establish a good working and trusting relationship;
- Expedition leadership team experience and competence – this is the single most important factor in a safe and successful expedition:
 - The minimum competencies and roles/responsibilities, for both the establishment's and the provider's leader(s) should be agreed in advance and should be part of the contract – the reality is that there are very many expeditions each year and only a finite number of excellent leaders so it is good to be clear and demanding on this point;
 - If in any doubt about the competencies you need in a leader, you should consult your employer's Outdoor Education Adviser;

- It is recommended that the provider's expedition leader should be appointed to the group well before the expedition takes place - not less than 4 months and ideally 6 months prior to the expedition is a reasonable expectation – so that they have the opportunity to work with the group and complete the training programme in good time;
- Financial security and insurance – monies must be protected and return travel to the UK guaranteed:
 - There are various ways of doing this: membership of one of the bonding schemes being the most common;
 - If your package involves flights, these should be financially protected by an ATOL licence;
- Establishment staff accompanying the expedition should clearly understand their role before any contracts are signed;
- Establishment staff should attend the expedition as employees of their establishment – they should not sign a separate employment contract with the provider;

The contract establishing the booking should be between the establishment and the provider. The establishment should ensure that they retain financial control of the contract by collecting monies due. Where parents make any direct payments to the provider the contract should be clear that this does not constitute a separate contract between parents and provider and that the establishment retains control of the booking.

Contractual arrangements should ensure that where a provider revokes on a significant aspect of the contractual arrangements – as where the provider is unable to supply an expedition leader with the previously agreed level of competence (and it is not possible to resolve the matter to the satisfaction of the establishment) then the establishment should have the right to cancel the expedition and for all monies paid to be refunded. However, this should be without prejudice to any reasonable payment due to the provider for work carried out up until cancellation. The provider's right to initiate a cancellation should be 'fair and reasonable'.

See also document [3.2i "Contracts and Waivers"](#).

Establishment Staff on Provider-Led Expeditions

The relationship between the provider's expedition leader and the establishment's Visit Leader is very important. They must trust one another and be able to work together and share their skills and knowledge. The provider's expedition leader should be available to undertake training with the group to enable them to:

- Become personally acquainted with the participants and their leaders to decide if they can work together;
- Make a proper assessment of individual, group, and Assistant Leader competencies;
- Reconfirm aims and expectations.

It is best to avoid having either an expedition leader or a Visit Leader change part way through the planning or the expedition. If this happens, the provider or establishment should ensure that the replacement leader has competencies similar to, or greater than, the leader who is being replaced. Both the establishment and

the provider need to be certain that the safety of the group will not be adversely affected. Otherwise they should amend or cancel the venture.

The establishment's Visit Leader should:

- Agree clear roles and responsibilities, and how decision making and supervision will operate with all members of the leadership team (often this will give control of technical and safety decisions to the expedition leader and pastoral supervision to the Visit Leader).
- Take opportunities, offered by the provider and others, for training in relevant areas such as first aid, water safety management, environmental hazards etc.;
- Hold an appropriate first aid qualification and consider attending the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) "Overseas Expeditions Fieldwork Course";
- Ensure they are sufficiently competent to instigate and manage the emergency procedures in the event of the expedition leader being taken ill or injured;
- Support, monitor and supervise, as appropriate, the planning and preparation of each of the participants to ensure that the whole team is ready at the right time;
- Know the fitness levels required and assess participants' progress towards this in readiness for any physically demanding expedition (many young people and parents will have little real idea of how demanding an expedition could be);
- Ensure that their own personal level of fitness and health is appropriate to the role;
- Ensure that parental consent is given on the basis of their being fully informed about the programme, its attendant challenges and risks, and the risk management and emergency procedures put in place;
- Ensure that the provider is fully informed of any medical, health or other needs of participants and establishment staff.

See also document [4.4h "Using External Providers"](#).

Establishment-Led Expeditions

When an establishment organises its own expedition, either as a completely 'do-it-yourself' venture or as a package involving the delegation of various particular aspects to partners and third party providers (either in the UK or overseas), it takes on the accountability for all aspects of the expedition.

The Package Travel Regulations 1992 may apply even to establishment-led expeditions: see document [3.2h "Visits and the Package Travel Regulations"](#).

A good place to start planning is to look at the advice available from the Royal Geographical Society/Geography Outdoors website: www.rgs.org/GO.

Establishments planning their own expeditions are advised to use BS 8848: 2014 as a way to ensure they are complying with current good practice.

Organising and leading an expedition for your establishment is exciting, fulfilling, challenging and demanding. Being the person 'in-charge' for the first time is very different from being a participant or even an Assistant Leader. First time leaders of an expedition are advised to have experienced being in charge as a Visit Leader on less demanding visits first. Potential leaders with significant personal travel experience should remember that leading young people is a completely different

proposition. A golden rule must be that leaders always operate well within their own comfort zone.

The following, in no particular order, are points you will need to consider and address in any risk-benefit assessment, when planning an expedition:

- A clear and achievable aim, which should provide answers to – Why? Where? When? What? Who?
- Security – is the destination sufficiently stable and secure (and is it still likely to be at the time of the trip)?
- Is there an alternative 'Plan B'?
- Local knowledge – it is best if this comes from a preliminary visit and/or the leaders' personal experience, but guidebooks and the internet can also provide useful information;
- An appropriately competent and experienced visit leadership team of sufficient size;
- Consideration of staff/participant ratios (and of emergency procedures) needs to include the possibility that one of the visit leadership team could be taken ill or injured on the trip, or may have to accompany a sick participant to hospital or back home;
- A contingency plan for a leader dropping out during the preparation phase is sensible;
- Team size and selection arrangements;
- Funding and financial security – remember that many bonding schemes cover only packages, not items purchased separately;
- Adequate insurance – all participants and parents should be fully aware of the limitations of any insurance cover;
- Travel (both to the expedition country and in-country):
 - Flight prices can fluctuate wildly;
 - Domestic flights in some countries may not be as safe as western norms;
 - Road transport in-country may be far less stringently controlled and far less safe than UK citizens are used to, and decisions will need to be made about whether this is pre-booked, and what types of transport will be acceptable;
 - Ferry and boat travel in many developing countries can be highly dangerous and needs careful consideration;
- A balance must be struck between safety and isolating the group from the culture they have gone to experience, for instance by travelling everywhere in a private air-conditioned bus;
- Selection criteria for the use of third party providers in country (for example: transport, accommodation, porters, and guides);
- Emergency procedures including effective communications, appropriate rescue and medical arrangements in country, 24-hour support in the UK;
- An experienced and competent base contact team in the UK:
 - This must involve establishment/employer staff with sufficient authority to make serious decisions and initiate appropriate action;
 - This team must be contactable and available 24-hours a day for the duration of the expedition;

- Emergency communications may make use of mobile phones, satellite phones, radio, personal locator beacons (PLBs), local runners, etc., but the restrictions and technical limits on each of these, in the areas to be visited, must be understood;
- Accommodation:
 - Whether this is pre-booked completely, for odd nights or not at all may depend on the aim of the venture;
 - Pre-booked accommodation restricts the flexibility of the expedition and denies the participants a learning opportunity but it does provide some reassurance;
- In country support/contact;
- Travel health, including vaccines and medication required prior to and during the expedition as well as appropriate avoidance actions;
- First aid and medical support during the expedition:
 - Training for participants and leaders, equipment and medications to be carried (be aware that controls on medication vary from country to country);
 - Medical support beyond first aid – if there is a gap between what is required and what might be available, how do you address it?
- Environmental issues, including both the physical and cultural environment such as altitude, heat, cold, humidity; dangerous animals, insects, snakes; behaviour appropriate to cultural norms and expectations; language:
 - Risk assessments and plans for the expedition should include detailed attention to the risks posed by such environmental factors, for example by planning for altitude acclimatisation;
 - All participants should be aware of the signs and symptoms of an adverse response to environmental factors such as altitude, heat, cold, insect bites/stings etc.;
 - Leaders should be trained in appropriate first aid and carry appropriate medication/equipment;
- Ethical issues – these might include the impact of the expedition on local people, the local environment and the global environment;
- Equipment – what will be needed, what quality and where will you get it from?
- Passport and visa requirements and any requirements for in-country permissions – particular attention may be needed for participants who are not UK citizens;
- Permissions from the establishment/employer and parental consent:
 - Parents should be made aware that whilst every step will be taken to ensure the safety of the participants, such activities are by their very nature potentially hazardous;
 - It is important to identify the risks and have them acknowledged by parents on a fully informed basis;
- Training for the visit leadership team and participants – this should include tabletop exercises of the emergency procedures and UK emergency contact plans.

Local Staff (e.g. Guides, Porters, Cooks, Animal Handlers, Drivers)

Where the use of local staff is a safety factor, particularly where they are going to be relied upon to supply local knowledge and emergency support, the following questions should be answered:

- Where is the evidence of current good practice/competency of the staff to be used?
- Do they work under the control of a recognised company or are they working as individuals?
- Have they been used before, and to what effect?
- Have they sufficiently good [English] language skills, to discuss nuanced safety issues?

Some countries have adopted international standards relating to certain aspects of adventure tourism. Although these standards are less stringent than UK ones (where we have a well-established system of National Governing Body leader accreditation) they may provide some useful reassurance in countries where they have been adopted.

The relevant standards are:

- ISO 21102 Adventure Tourism – Leaders - Personnel competence
- ISO 21103 Adventure Tourism – Information to participants – Minimum requirements before, during and after the adventure tourism activity.

Where there is no recognised in-country training/accreditation scheme, evidence that can justify the appointment should be collected.

Those wishing to appoint guides should also consider the following:

- Guides are normally employed for specific route-finding and technical knowledge;
- Whilst a guide can complement the expedition leader, they must not replace the expedition leader;
- Where sound evidence of competence cannot be obtained, the expedition leader should have sufficient competence and local knowledge to make their own decisions – this must be considered before routes are agreed;
- Where the length of the expedition requires porters to support the carrying of equipment, the Visit Leader must ensure that sufficient numbers are available;
- The expedition should have a policy for the welfare of all porters and pack animals;
- Their experience and fitness, as well as the demands of the terrain, environment and weather, should determine the weight of the pack or load that participants carry.

Where credible evidence of the history/character of local staff is not available, then the expedition leader should put in place appropriate controls to manage the contact between young people and local expedition staff. Appropriate controls will vary considerably from group to group and may range from simply discussing the issues with young people, through to avoiding unsupervised contact where possible. The last thing one wants on an expedition is to limit the participants' interaction with local people but, as with all aspects of any visit, this needs to be within an appropriate overall supervision and safeguarding plan.

Where an additional risk-benefit assessment is required to deal with unforeseen changing circumstances - such as weather, fitness, injury, local conditions - the Visit Leader must be satisfied that the local staff and available local information are of sufficient quality for the expedition to proceed with the preferred expedition plan, or the Visit Leader must use the contingency plan alternative.

Codes of Conduct and Safeguarding

All leaders and participants should be clear about the standards of behaviour to be expected during the expedition and about any sanctions to be applied in the event of inappropriate behaviour. It should be made clear to participants and parents about the responsibility for any costs incurred should a participant be returned to the UK early for a serious breach of the code of conduct.

See documents [4.3e "Safeguarding"](#) and [8i "Model Code of Conduct"](#).

The following should be considered when drawing up a code of conduct for any adults on the expedition:

- Treat everyone with respect;
- Avoid working in isolation or being alone with a young person wherever possible;
- Remember others may misinterpret your actions no matter how well intentioned;
- Be aware that local people dress differently from those in the UK – leaders should provide a role model for young people in cultural sensitivity;
- Be aware of your actions and explain to a young person what you are doing if you are in a situation where you may be giving first aid treatment, helping with equipment or comforting a person who is upset;
- Have separate sleeping accommodation for adults and young people or, where this is not possible (e.g. in mountain huts or village community houses) make sure that adults and youngsters are separated;
- Have a clear policy on adults smoking and drinking alcohol;
- Encourage a healthy and environmentally aware lifestyle during the expedition.
- Avoid taking illegal or recreational drugs;
- Respect local cultural norms;
- Avoid inappropriate physical or verbal contact with others;
- Avoid being drawn into inappropriate attention-seeking behaviours or compromising positions;
- Avoid showing favouritism.

