



National
Guidance

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Unaccompanied Expeditions

Unaccompanied expeditions, where young people undertake a journey without direct supervision or leadership, can bring significant benefits including leadership, teamwork, self-motivation, self-reliance, communication, confidence, resilience and consideration for others. Expeditions provide challenges that typically take individuals out of their comfort zone. The learning and sense of achievement from completing an expedition can be significant, profound and life-long.

Unaccompanied expeditions are part of some youth award schemes, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE) and the Queen's Scout Award. For DofE expeditions, see also document 7b "Duke of Edinburgh's Award Expeditions".

For expeditions overseas, see also document 7q "Overseas Expeditions".

Using External Providers

Many establishments buy in support for running expeditions from external providers. If you are considering using such a provider, see document 4.4h "Using External Providers and Facilities". If the provider is a DofE Approved Activity Provider (AAP), see also document 7b "Duke of Edinburgh's Award Expeditions".

Adventure Activity Licensing

If you are organising your own expedition, or providing an expedition for others, you should check whether you are required to hold an Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA) licence. See document 3.2f "AALA Licensing" for more information.

Planning and Preparation

By their very nature, unaccompanied expeditions should be the culmination of a significant period of training, planning and preparation. Training should include:

- Relevant activity skills;
- Camping skills for overnight expeditions (see document 7L "Camping");
- Navigation;
- Route planning;
- Emergency procedures and First Aid;
- Practice expeditions with direct or indirect supervision.

Each expedition group should normally have a minimum of four participants (so that in the event of a casualty one can remain with them while two go for help), and no more than eight (so as to be able to operate as a cohesive team).

Route planning considerations should include:

- Suitable terrain/water conditions for the competence of the group and leaders;
- Awareness of significant hazards in the area (e.g. steep ground, fast-flowing water);
- Suitable campsites;
- Anticipated weather and ground/water conditions at the time of year;
- Alternative routes for different weather and ground/water conditions, especially in wild country;
- Escape routes;
- Emergency communication (e.g. phone boxes, mobile phone, VHF radio);
- The need for suitable check or message drop points on the route;
- Suitable start and finish points, accessible by public transport if possible in order to allow greater independence;
- If more than one group is taking part in an expedition at the same time, the need for reasonable proximity in order to facilitate transport and supervision.

There are serious hazards associated with camping stoves. Participants should be trained and directly supervised by a competent leader until the Expedition Supervisor is confident that they can operate the stoves safely without supervision.

For cycling expeditions, participants will be carrying all of their expedition equipment on their bikes and on their person, and so good route selection and planning is essential, as bike handling becomes more difficult with a loaded bike.

Remote supervision of expeditions can involve staff working alone in remote places. They must be competent to do this, and the risks assessed to ensure their safety.

See also documents 4.3c "Risk Management – An Overview", 4.3f "Risk Management - Some Practical Advice" and 4.3g "Risk Management – What to Record and How".

There should be an emergency plan to cover the whole period of the expedition. See section 4.1 of National Guidance for documents about emergency planning.

There should be careful scrutiny of plans for unaccompanied expeditions by a competent person (e.g. the employer's Outdoor Education Adviser).

Supervision during Expeditions

Unaccompanied expeditions are NOT unsupervised - leaders remain responsible for the supervision of participants throughout.

Supervision of an unaccompanied expedition might be indirect or remote. See document 4.2a "Group Management and Supervision". Further guidance about remote supervision is available at

www.mountain-training.org/help/resources/downloads/walking-downloads (click on "2016 Remote Supervision Guidance").

Before participants take part in unaccompanied expeditions, they must have acquired the necessary skills, knowledge, experience, confidence, physical ability and judgement. It is critical that the training provided is sound and thorough. Expedition Supervisors must exercise careful judgement before withdrawing from direct supervision, and this process should be gradual and progressive.

Expedition Supervisors must determine the nature and extent of supervision required to ensure that it remains effective - whether it is direct, indirect or remote. Decisions must take account of:

- The experience and competence of the group;
- The experience and competence of any other leaders and helpers;
- The effectiveness of communications in an emergency;
- The weather (both prevailing and forecast);
- The nature of the activity;
- The terrain or environment;
- When supervision is remote, the maximum acceptable time to restore direct supervision if this becomes necessary.

By the time groups undertake an unaccompanied expedition, they should have been judged capable of operating independently. The key issues here are that the overall supervision plan must be effective, and that no leader is given responsibilities beyond their level of competence. See the section on Roles and Responsibilities below.

Methods of Remote Supervision

There are several techniques commonly used, sometimes in combination, to supervise groups remotely. For example:

- Shadowing (a leader follows the group at a distance);
- Oversight from vantage point(s);
- Physical checkpoints or rendezvous (e.g. the group leaves a note in a pre-arranged place, which is checked by a leader);
- Messaging (e.g. a mobile phone call or exchange of text messages at pre-arranged times);
- Electronic tracking (e.g. the use of a GPS tracking device);
- Emergency-only contact (when it is judged that the group is competent enough not to need closer supervision).

The emergency plan should relate to the methods of remote supervision used, so that it is triggered if, for example, a pre-planned message does not arrive.

Whichever methods are chosen, care must be taken to understand their weaknesses and the need to have 'fail-safe' plans. For example:

- A leader shadowing a group can easily lose contact with it, perhaps if incapacitated for some reason (or even mistakenly shadow the wrong group!);
- A physical checkpoint such as a 'letterbox' might be found and removed by a member of the public;

- There may be gaps in mobile phone reception, or batteries may go flat;
- Electronic devices can fail.

Roles and Responsibilities during Expeditions

For an understanding of roles (including Visit Leader, Activity Leader, Assistant Leader and Helper) and responsibilities, you should ensure that you are familiar with document 4.2a "Group Management and Supervision".

Expedition Supervisor

The person in overall charge of an expedition is sometimes known as the Expedition Supervisor. If the expedition is not part of a wider visit, then the Visit Leader is the Expedition Supervisor. Sometimes an expedition takes place as part of a wider visit such as a residential: in this case the Expedition Supervisor might not be the same person as the Visit Leader.

The Expedition Supervisor has overall responsibility for the expedition including the deployment of Group Supervisors, Assistant Leaders and Helpers.

Group Supervisor

The Group Supervisor is an Activity Leader as defined in document 4.2a.

It is essential that, at any one time, there is a Group Supervisor responsible for the supervision of each group taking part in the expedition. In many cases, the Expedition Supervisor will act as Group Supervisor as well as taking an overview of the expedition.

It may be possible for one Group Supervisor to be responsible for (and therefore to remotely supervise) more than one expedition group, provided that the risk assessment demonstrates that this is acceptable. See the section on Staff Ratios below.

Assistant Leader, Helper

If more than one leader works with a group, it must be clear who is the Group Supervisor: the other(s) will be Assistant Leader(s). There must be a clear handover if responsibilities change. An Assistant Leader should be sufficiently competent to deputise for a Group Supervisor (or the Expedition Supervisor) in an emergency.

Assistant Leaders and Helpers may be delegated tasks to support the Expedition Supervisor or a Group Supervisor in various ways, depending upon their level of competence. For example:

- Welfare support;
- Logistics/transport/communications/backup;
- Staffing check points (non-remote unless competent to operate remotely);
- Supporting lone working by other staff.

Leader Competence

All Leaders and Helpers should be approved by the employer for the role and responsibilities they are to undertake: see document 3.2d "Approval of Leaders". Approval should include assessing competence for the specific adventure activity (mode of travel) to be undertaken, taking into account the terrain in which the expedition takes place, their ability to look after themselves in that environment, their knowledge of the area and their familiarity with the participants.

Group Supervisors should be competent in First Aid: see document 4.4b "First Aid". A recommended qualification for an unaccompanied expedition in the UK is completion of a 2-day/16-hour course designed for outdoor activities and remote environments, taken within the past three years. The appropriate level of competence in First Aid for an Assistant Leader or Helper depends upon the responsibilities assigned to them.

The following training can be useful in developing the necessary competence:

- Professional training (teaching, youth work, etc.);
- Training courses for the relevant AALA-recognised awards;
- DofE courses (e.g. Expedition Supervisor, Expedition Skills);
- Relevant in-house training provided by employers;
- Relevant training provided by voluntary organisations (e.g. Cadets, Guides, Scouts, John Muir Trust).

Group Supervisor Qualifications

The following is a summary of the types of terrain (for walking and cycling) or water type (for paddlesports) used to determine the appropriate minimum leadership qualifications for the most popular modes of travel used in expeditions. Minimum AALA-recognised qualifications are summarised for walking.

For further information see AALA inspector notes 5.15 (for paddlesports), 6.12 (for off-road cycling) and 5.18 (for other adventure activities) at the following link: webcommunities.hse.gov.uk/connect.ti/adventureactivitiesnetwork/view?objectId=205776&exp=e1

For guidance about other forms of travel, such as by horse or wheelchair, see the relevant AALA note or consult your employer's Outdoor Education Adviser.

Walking (Trekking)

The matrix in AALA note 5.18 lists the approved minimum qualifications for three levels of terrain. These levels are described by the awarding bodies in their course information, and are summarised below. There are different qualifications for summer and winter: those shown below are for summer conditions only (i.e. when there is no unavoidable snow or ice on any part of the route); for winter qualifications see the AALA matrix.

Lowland Country

Farmland, valleys and woodland with no hazardous terrain (e.g. cliffs, very steep slopes, water hazards etc.) and no more than 3km away from a key access point such as a car park, lay-by or populated area (any potential escape routes should also lie within Lowland Country). Walks must follow paths or tracks that are both

marked on a map and clearly visible on the ground and that do not require navigation across untracked areas, and must use bridges or other recognised water crossing points.

Minimum recognised qualifications:

- Lowland Leader Award, with Expedition Skills Module if camping (www.mountain-training.org);
- Lowland Expedition Leader Award (previously Basic Expedition Leader) (www.sportsleaders.org);
- Countryside Leader Award (www.countrysideleaderaward.org).

Moorland Country

Open, uncultivated, non-mountainous, high or remote country (known variously as upland, moor, bog, fell, hill or down), which should not require movement on steep or rocky terrain in either a planned or unplanned situation. Walks should be in areas enclosed by well-defined geographical or man-made boundaries such as classified roads (areas that merge with mountain regions without well-defined boundaries should be regarded as Mountain Country).

Minimum recognised qualifications (see www.mountain-training.org):

- Hill and Moorland Leader Award, with Expedition Skills Module if camping;
- Walking Group Leader.

Mountain Country

Wild country, which may contain steep and rocky ground where walkers are dependent upon themselves for immediate help.

Minimum recognised qualification (see www.mountain-training.org):

- Mountain Leader.

Cycling

There are two levels of terrain for cycling, which are described in the matrix in AALA note 6.12, along with the appropriate qualifications. Leaders should also hold the relevant minimum walking (trekking) qualification for the terrain through which the expedition passes.

Paddlesports

The matrix in AALA note 5.15 summarises the appropriate qualifications for canoeing, kayaking and other paddlesports in various contexts, including:

- "Open Water (Local)", e.g. a canal journey;
- Open water journeying;
- Simple and advanced white water;
- Simple and advanced sea journeys.

The paddlesport qualifications should be complemented by walking expedition qualifications as detailed above, relevant to the terrain through which the expedition passes.

Staff Ratios for Unaccompanied Expeditions

Decisions about staff/participant ratios should be made through a process of risk assessment, taking into account the 'SAGE' variables (Staff, Activity, Group, Environment) and the need for sufficient staffing in the event of an emergency or (if required) to continue with the expedition if a member of staff is incapacitated. See document 4.3b "Ratios and Effective Supervision".

It is therefore not possible to set down definitive ratios for supervising unaccompanied expeditions. The following guidance is to help you make decisions based upon your specific circumstances.

A useful starting point is to consider the emergency plan and answer the 'what if?' question: e.g. what if a Group Supervisor is incapacitated or diverted, for example to deal with an emergency? This is likely to produce a default position of each group being supervised by a Group Supervisor supported by an Assistant Leader or Helper who is at least sufficiently competent to implement the emergency plan should the Group Supervisor be incapacitated.

Where there is more than one group on expedition, it may in some circumstances be possible for one Group Supervisor (supported as necessary by an Assistant Leader or Helper) to remotely supervise two groups, either as part of the initial supervision plan or as a 'Plan B' in the event of a Group Supervisor being incapacitated or diverted. This should be considered only where the groups are in close proximity and the terrain allows this to be done effectively (see AALA note 5.13).

However, with such a minimum level of staffing, it is likely that if one Group Supervisor is incapacitated or diverted to deal with an incident in one of the groups, both groups might have to curtail their expedition. It would be better to have sufficient Group Supervisors and Assistant Leaders so that in such circumstances the groups could continue their expeditions with adequate supervision.

Some establishments might be able to have a reserve of staff competent to take a Group Supervisor role back at base (if this is close enough to the location of the expeditions). Otherwise a more robust staffing level would be advisable.

In some circumstances, a higher level of staffing could be needed. For example:

- If leaders are not highly experienced;
- If the nature of the activity requires a higher level of supervision;
- If the nature of the group could require support or intervention;
- In complex or challenging terrain;
- In poor weather.

In exceptional circumstances, the risk assessment might justify a lower level of staffing than that suggested.

