

Oxford University Cave Club

Guidance notes for leaders on novice trips

[reviewed and slightly updated by SGR, June 2026]

1 General

You have a special “duty of care” to the novices on your trip. This means that you have a higher degree of legal responsibility for their safety than you have for your caving peers.

Remember at all times that the novices on your trip have no experience of caving. Whatever expectations they may have about what is involved are likely to be incorrect. You cannot expect them to know anything about what equipment to use, or how to use it. They are not likely to be as fit as you are; even if they are, their lack of experience will mean that they will move less efficiently and will get tired more quickly, possibly far more quickly, than you might. They will have no idea of what degree of difficulty to expect of a "normal" caving trip, and so may easily exceed their strength and endurance. They may not recognise this until it is too late, or may be too inhibited to let you know. They will not necessarily recognise a dangerous situation, even if it is one that you would think obvious. They may find underground conditions, which to you are perfectly normal, intimidating or even frightening. They won't necessarily know when things are going wrong; it is up to you to keep a close watch on the team and on cave conditions, etc.

2 Before the Trip

2.1 *Personal details, etc. (meeting leader)*

- The meeting leader must send details of expected participants to the Sports Federation in advance of the trip.
- Before departure from Oxford, check those turning up against this list. If some novices don't show, no big deal. If novices **not** on the list show, then they can't go; we won't have details for them. Tell them to sign up for another day.
- Check the ratio of experienced to novice cavers. If party sizes won't work, then some novices will have to stay behind.

2.2 *Cave and route selection (meeting leader and trip leaders)*

Remember that the purpose of the novice trip is to give the novices some experience of caving and the cave environment. This will probably mean doing a trip that you might regard as easy or even trivial. This is fine. It is far better that the novices should come out feeling good about the trip and wanting more, rather than exhausted, intimidated, and feeling that "that was an interesting experience, but never again!". Too hard a trip also significantly increases the risk of an accident, as your novices get more and more tired, and possibly as the experienced members also start to get tired due to continually helping the novices. Make it easy and make it an enjoyable experience. Aim for two or three hours of relatively straightforward caving.

Check local water conditions and the weather forecast.

2.3 Equipment

2.3.1 General equipment (meeting leader and trip leaders)

It is unlikely that large amounts of tackle will be needed for a novice trip. Any trip that involves rigging more than a couple of short ladder pitches or hand line climbs is probably far too difficult for novices.

You must make sure that the equipment used is in good condition and suitable for the cave. You must make sure that suitable lifelining gear is taken for any ladder pitch, and for any climb that might require it. It is good practice to carry a short "travelling line" to assist novices in places where they might have difficulty.

If the trip involves ladder climbing, then this should if possible be practised on the surface, so that the novices can have some experience of the difficulty of climbing a caving ladder, and also so they can practice "their end" of lifelining. Go through the calls used in ladder climbing ("take in", "that's me", "climb when you're ready", "climbing", "ladder free", "slack", "resting", "falling!" etc.). With another experienced caver, demonstrate how it is done properly, then give each novice a turn at being lifelined up and down a short ladder..

2.3.2 Novices' clothing and equipment (meeting leader and trip leaders)

Meeting leaders must make sure each novice is issued with a full set of equipment:

- Light
- Helmet
- Belt (if needed)
- Undersuit
- Oversuit
- Boots
- A bag to keep it all in.

Novices should have brought underclothing and socks, and a towel etc. if they are that way inclined.

Trip leaders must check each novice's clothing and equipment before going underground. If you do not think it is suitable or in good enough condition for the trip anticipated, you must do something about it. These checks should therefore be done where there is a possibility of rectifying any errors (not at the cave entrance!). In particular:

- check that helmets fit and are in good condition;
- check that belts, if used, are in good condition and done up properly;
- check that lights function correctly, and show each novice how to turn the light on, off and on to reserve;
- check that clothing is not excessively torn;
- check that boots fit correctly and are in good condition.

2.3.3 Your own equipment (trip leaders)

It is particularly important that your own equipment is in good condition. Make especially sure that your light is in good condition and is fully charged well beyond the anticipated duration of the trip.

For all novice trips, you should carry:

- a first aid kit;
- a survival bag;

- a warm balaclava or similar;
- some spare food;
- a spare light source;
- a watch.

If vertical work is involved, you should carry and know how to use:

- a suitable belaying device;
- equipment to ensure your own safety on ladder pitches;
- enough stuff to rig a hauling system if needed.

2.4 Make-up of the team(s) (meeting leader and trip leaders)

The team will need a good balance of experienced cavers and novices. This will normally consist of the team leader (an experienced caver with a knowledge of the trip to be undertaken), at least one other experienced caver, and up to three or four novices.

It may be possible for the team leader to be the only experienced caver on the team, particularly if only one or two novices will be taken and the trip is in a system with few hazards or difficulties and if several trips are being simultaneously undertaken in the same system.

2.5 Briefing (trip leaders)

The pre-trip briefing has several purposes. It introduces members of the team to one other; it gives the novices information about what they are about to experience and what is expected of them; most importantly it is to brief the novices about safe caving practices and about conservation issues. Do not be casual about this briefing; it is important, not least from the point of view of your "duty of care".

Introduction & information:

- Introduce yourself and any other experienced members of the team. Tell the novices how much caving experience you have.
- Get the novices to introduce themselves. Memorise their names.
- Try to assess each novice's level of fitness, endurance and attitude. Check what sorts of thing they have done related to caving (hiking, climbing, etc.)
- Give the novices a brief outline of what the trip will involve, and how long it is likely to take.

Safety: Make sure you cover at least the following points.

- Explain that you are now going to talk about safety issues and that this is important.
- The most important aspect of trip is that everyone returns to the surface safely; if there are any problems we just come out and this is not a hassle. We can always come back another day.
- If any member of the team has any worries, they should voice them so that things can be sorted out quickly.
- They should let you know immediately if:
 - they feel frightened or claustrophobic
 - they feel cold or tired
 - they feel anything they are about to do is unsafe
 - they think that their light or other equipment is giving problems
 - there have any other cause for concern about the trip, themselves or other members of the team
- All team members should always stay within sight and/or hearing of those in front of or behind them. If someone gets ahead they should shout for them to wait, if someone gets left behind they should wait for them, letting those in front know.

- Cave rescue is difficult and lengthy; even minor injuries (twisted ankle, etc.) can significantly slow the trip, leading to further difficulties, getting cold, light problems, and so on.
- Brief them about particular hazards of the trip they are about to do: pitches, climbs, squeezes, water hazards, etc.
- If ladder climbing is involved, they should have practised this on the surface before going underground. Check that they have done this, and that they understand the instruction code for ascending and descending a ladder.
- Make sure they are aware of conservation aspects of caving. “Take only photographs, leave only echoes”. They should not damage any formations or any other aspects of the cave. No litter to be left in the cave. No polluting the cave or cave streams (go to the toilet before going caving!). No smoking underground.
- They should follow the normal "countryside code" on the surface.

2.6 **Call out** (*meeting leader and trip leaders*)

Before going underground, each trip leader should leave a record with a responsible person, giving details of:

- the names of team members;
- cave system to be entered, and where appropriate, route to be followed;
- location where transport is parked (if not obvious), and if possible vehicle identification;
- time of departure, expected time underground, expected time of return, and "callout" time.

For day-trips, the most appropriate procedure for setting up a callout and reporting back may be by telephone, or by text or equivalent; make sure the message has been received and understood. For weekend or longer trips, the normal procedure is by entering callouts in the club logbook. If all those present are going caving simultaneously, even on different trips, the callouts should be backed up by telephone, etc., to someone remaining on the surface.

3 **During the Trip** (trip leaders)

Make the trip safe

- Don't risk injuring yourself. If *you* get crocked, the novices are going to suffer.
- Experienced cavers at front and back, novices in the middle.
- Make sure the party keeps together
- Warn of any hazards in good time
- Be prepared to use a lifeline even if it's “un-necessary”. Don't wait to be asked.
- If you are asked for help or a line, either give it or demonstrate how the obstacle can be overcome.
- Keep an close eye on novices, watching especially for signs of tiredness or uneasiness. If necessary, “have a quiet word” to see how they are.
- If you think any caver's condition warrants it, rest, warm up, have a food stop and/or start the exit.
- At climbs or pitches needing tackle:
 - Remind novices of technique and calls
 - Explain your belaying system
 - Send an experienced caver down first
 - Lifeliner ties novice in and checks belts, carabiners, etc.
 - Experienced caver down “fields” each novice and gets rope returned.
 - On climbing up, be prepared to give a “boosting” line.

Make the trip enjoyable

- Look like you're enjoying it yourself (you probably are...)

- Describe features of interest, “how this was formed”, point out examples of bad conservation, sing, whistle, whatever.
- Possible exception to “trip leader in front” rule *after* you’ve sized them up and if the passage ahead is non-hazardous; it adds interest if each novice has a short go in front.
- Don’t overstretch the novices. You have plenty in reserve for the exit. They may not have.

4 If an accident occurs

From the OUCC “standing orders”:

“In the case of an accident or incident underground, the actions to be taken by the team involved are so dependent on the circumstances that few useful recommendations can be made in a document of this type. Only those on the spot can decide whether to continue with the trip, to return as a team to the surface, to send some members out to call in outside help, or to stay put or move to a safer part of the cave and wait for help to arrive.”

It’s up to you, the trip leader, and any other experienced cavers, to take best action based on your judgement. Your main concern is to keep the novices *safe*, and only secondarily to get them out.

5 After the Trip (meeting leader and trip leaders)

(trip leader)

The trip isn’t finished till the novices are changed, warm, fed and watered. You should:

- Keep the team together till all are returned to the vehicle or hut
- Cancel the call out
- Help novices change if needed
- Check that loaned clothing, etc. is kept together and put in bag.

(trip leader / meeting leader)

- Check all gear back into vehicle or hut
- Check everyone is out of the cave and back at the hut
- Get novices warmed up; take them to a place of refreshment if possible.
- Be sociable with the novices, not just with each other!

On return to Oxford

- If necessary do a “drop off” run for the novices
- Check all kit back into hut.