



Guidelines for University and College Caving Clubs

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(1) Introduction

These guidelines have been updated by CHECC (the Council of Higher Education Caving Clubs) in partnership with the BCA (British Caving Association). A diverse range of cavers with different experiences and backgrounds have given input to these guidelines. They are intended for use by university and college caving clubs and authorities as a code or set of guidelines that can be used to promote safe caving.

There are a broad range of university or college based clubs in the country ranging from the well established and respected with a good continuity of members and experience to those with enthusiasm but with a less experienced membership. In many clubs it is the large annual change of membership that, in the main, causes problems.

Caving by university and college caving clubs is an important part of the tradition of British caving, as it is one of the main ways in which people are introduced to caving and the established principles of good practice, which ensure both personal safety and concern for the cave environment. These guidelines should be seen as suitable for any group of cavers seeking to establish a caving club or an existing club of recent formation with members of relatively little experience.

It is the adventurous nature of caving, potholing and the exploration of abandoned mines that is one of its attractions. The accident rate in caving is thankfully very low but from time to time serious and fatal accidents do occur (usually attracting a large amount of publicity). It is therefore important that beginners who seek to go caving are aware of and accept the element of risk and take responsibility for their own actions.

The BCA sees formal leadership systems as undesirable in recreational caving conducted by adults, which should have as its essence, individual competence and the companionship of friends unfettered by unnecessary rules and regulations. The tried and tested system of leadership within adult clubs is of a peer review style, in which knowledge is passed down by leaders, and aspiring leaders are assessed by

current leaders. This may necessitate significant input from alumni members to ensure best practice is passed on, and club structure should reflect this.

Qualifications for leaders such as the BCA Cave Instructor Certificate (CIC) or Local Cave/Mine Leader Assessment (LCMLA) schemes are not intended for recreational caving and are not considered appropriate within a club environment. However, the syllabuses are excellent guides to training and standards of personal competence within the club environment.

It is therefore the intention of these guidelines to set down a broad framework for the establishment and operation of university and college clubs within the informal environment of recreational caving.

(2) Caving Safely

2.1 General Points for consideration:

- Clubs should be properly constituted. It is helpful to encourage ex-students to remain in the club to provide a depth of experience which otherwise can fluctuate dramatically.
- Clubs should join their appropriate regional caving council and seek to form an association with a club or clubs local to each area they visit, to seek help and advice as necessary. This can often be done with clubs who can offer accommodation in their own huts.
- If a club or union/guild has concerns about the safety standards of the club, CHECC should be contacted as a first port of call. They will be able to give advice, or recommend a suitable person to review their practice.

Caving is in general a very safe sport if good practice is followed. The relatively low rate of accidents should not however be allowed to give rise to any sense of complacency, indeed a disproportionate number of rescue call-outs are to assist members of those clubs with least experience and in most need of a set of guidelines.

Club members should ensure that they understand the following points and if they do not they should be encouraged to ask questions of the more experienced members of their club before agreeing to go on trips. More experienced members should take responsibility for ensuring that everyone is properly briefed for the trip. Experienced members who choose to take on responsibility for beginners must be aware of what this involves.

2.2 Preparation for a trip:

- When the party contains novices the leaders of the party should be familiar with the cave to be visited. Party size and the ratio between competent and less experienced members should be considered. When all party members are experienced but are unfamiliar with the cave to be

visited local advice should be sought in addition to guidebook or survey information. Survey or guidebook information should be taken underground.

- The weather forecast, information about previous wet weather, stream levels, risk of flooding and local advice on how the cave reacts to rainfall should all be obtained before going underground. If in doubt stay out and do not be afraid to turn back if conditions appear dangerous. The caves will still be there for another day.
- A destination note giving adequate details of the trip, i.e. party members, name of the cave, proposed route and time of return should be left with a responsible person who knows how to call-out an official cave rescue team if necessary. This person needs to be informed when all party members are safely out of the cave.
- All members should be aware of hypothermia, its causes, symptoms and treatment. However, prevention is the best strategy, i.e. be well fed, wear adequate clothing and stay dry if possible.
- All members of the party should know what to do in the event of an accident, including rescue call-out procedure. Each party should include persons who are first aid trained.
- Technical skills such as lifelining, laddering, abseiling or SRT must be practised on the surface before going underground.

2.3 Safety during a trip:

- The caves to be visited should be appropriate to the experience of all members of the party.
- Leaders should give a group briefing prior to departure covering all aspects of the trip (e.g. the route and features of the cave) and make a check of clothing and equipment.
- Party leaders should be aware of the least able members of the party and should always consider that they may get tired or cold more quickly; never be afraid to turn back for reasons of safety. A trip should never be considered as a failure if the objective is not reached, it will be there for the next visit. Party leaders should be responsive to all members of the party, alert them to dangers, and safeguard them against hazards. Methods such as use of a lifeline or handline, and spotting should be used where falls are deemed likely by the leader.
- Appropriate clothing is essential, especially in wet caves, all party members should ensure that they are adequately dressed for the proposed trip. When deep water is to be negotiated by wading or swimming appropriate clothing should be worn to reflect this. Drowning is not an uncommon form of death in caves so care should be taken. Some types of clothing hold large amounts of water making movement difficult. Party leaders should always consider whether the less experienced are appropriately dressed; jeans, t-shirts and trainers are never suitable clothing under any conditions. Each party member should have a suitable helmet, and lighting which leaves both hands free.

- Emergency equipment should be carried. Personal responsibility should be encouraged for items such as spare lighting, survival bag, whistles and food being carried by individuals with first aid kits, writing material, and a group shelter for the whole party taken underground in suitable containers. In the event of an emergency, these basic essentials may be vital.
- Anyone rigging for SRT or lifelining on ladder pitches should have basic competence but should also be able to deal with basic problems which might include a tired person with a leg through a ladder rung or a party member becoming jammed whilst abseiling with hair, clothing or helmet chin strap stuck in descender.

2.4 Other Points to be considered:

- Rigging for SRT or laddering involves understanding the strengths and safe use of components, traverse lines, fall factors, and shared loading of anchor points in the main anchors.
- Clubs worried about the level of their members training and experience should organise with CHECC, their regional caving council, or the BCA, training courses specific to their needs. Details of training courses are available from the CHECC or BCA Training Officers whose contact details are given below.

In particular three fundamental areas of skills training which are likely to require some element of external input are:

- Vertical Caving Techniques
- Pitch Rigging Techniques
- Self Rescue and Survival Skills

Skills courses tailored for students covering these skills and more are taught to a high standard at the annual CHECC forum and the regional CHECC events. These should be the first port of call, but do not preclude clubs from sharing knowledge internally, or seeking other external training.

(3) Access

Caves are more often than not located in upland areas and away from public footpaths. As such, access to them may involve crossing private land and the caves and potholes can themselves be private property. It is only with the consent of owners or tenants that cavers can explore such caves. This consent has often only been obtained after long negotiation and with conditions attached.

It is therefore important that access procedures should be adhered to where they exist. These are described in the handbooks of the regional caving councils, their online resources, or in guidebooks. Access to some entrances may require knowledge of navigation techniques and maps which, at times, may have to be practiced in darkness or adverse weather conditions.

The Countryside Code should be adhered to.

(4) Conservation

Caves are a unique and very special part of our natural environment. Because of their slow and gradual formation over many thousands of years, fantastic passage shapes develop, breakdown occurs, sediments are deposited, beautiful calcite formations build up, and various creatures find a home. To be the first to enter such a place is an experience unlikely to be forgotten, and every effort must be taken to conserve that experience for those that follow.

Careful caving is not difficult and should be practiced by all cavers. This includes, but is not limited to, taking care not to damage speleothems (stalactites etc) or mud formations, and minimising disturbance of cave fauna e.g. bats. This can generally be accomplished by sticking to established routes, which are often clearly marked by conservation tape. Extra care must be taken with tired or inexperienced groups, as they are more likely to misstep.

The BCA Minimal Impact Caving Guidelines provide good advice for both recreational and exploratory caving, and are a must read for any caver operating in the UK.

The advice is summarised succinctly in the BCA Cave Conservation Code:

1. Cave with care and thought for the environment.
2. Disturb nothing whether living or geological.
3. Avoid touching formations.
4. Keep to marked routes and never cross conservation tapes.
5. Take nothing but photographs.
6. Do not pollute the cave, leave nothing behind.

(5) Insurance

A common concern for university clubs is that of insurance and liability. Obtaining public liability (PL) insurance for a 'high risk' sport can be difficult and expensive. Luckily, the BCA has negotiated PL insurance on behalf of its members. This insurance has been negotiated by cavers, for cavers. Cover is only available to members of BCA and comes as a membership benefit. The policy is a liability policy NOT a travel policy.

BCA insurance covers all recognized caving activities and those related to the sport. This means that non-sporting activities such as digging, bolting, and conservation are covered. Above-ground training activities, such as use of climbing walls, trees etc. are also covered by the policy. For further details see the insurance section of the BCA website (FAQs being a good place to start).

It is recommended that university clubs join the BCA, not just for the PL insurance scheme, but in the spirit of assisting caving on a national scale. The BCA works hard to negotiate access, raise the profile of caving, and can give valuable support to clubs in the form of training and grants (where appropriate).

The BCA offers a reduced membership rate for students and has tailored the policy to the needs of student clubs. New members of a student club are fully covered as temporary members without charge for any number of trips between the 1st September and 31st December. Persons joining a University

Club which is itself a BCA member during the busy fresher's season will therefore not need to seek individual BCA membership until the New Year. At other times of year new members are covered for a standard 4 trips before BCA membership will be required.

For those clubs that have both mountaineering and caving sections, British Mountaineering Council (BMC) membership and associated PL insurance is acceptable, as it covers caving as a secondary activity. However, those members that do engage in caving to the extent that it could be considered their primary activity should join BCA.

(6) Equipment

All equipment for traverses, SRT, and ladder pitches should be suitable and in good condition. Advice on the selection, use and maintenance of equipment may be sought from specialist caving retailers, technical catalogues, CHECC, or the BCA.

A suitable system of cleaning and storage of these items after trips should be put in place.

A system of regular inspection, testing and discarding of items that have been damaged or are at the end of their safe life should be put in place. This should cover all safety items i.e. ropes, ladders, slings, lights, helmets etc. Records should be kept which will require the individual identification of key safety items, e.g. ropes. A full kit inventory and safety check should be carried out at least twice a year. It is vital that kit is visually inspected before, and during, each trip, as wear (such as sheath damage to a rope) can develop quickly.

While it can be helpful for those performing a full kit check to have experience working as a cave leader or rope access worker, there is usually no need for an outside agent to be recruited. Information on how to check and test safety equipment can be found in published material such as 'Inspecting Personal Fall Protection Equipment' (D.F Merchant).

(7) Liability

Cavers should remember that they owe a duty of care to other cavers in their own party and people that they meet in the course of their trip. Leaders should be aware that they have a special responsibility to act prudently when leading novices.

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British Caving Association
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Contact the CHECC Committee (www.checc.org) or the BCA Youth and Development Officer (Youth@british-caving.org.uk) for more information or support.