



INFORMATION

Leader-placed Protection at Climbing Walls **MCofS Position Paper** **2002**

Introduction

Indoor climbing wall facilities have been developing across Scotland for the past 20 years. From the initial walls, the majority of which were 'high' and catering only for 'top-roping' systems of protection, through a period when most new walls were being designed as 'low' walls catering only for 'bouldering', to modern high 'lead' walls where protection is from in-situ bolts.

However, the MCofS has from the first policy and strategy it developed in 1990, seen a requirement for the provision of high walls that allow 'leader-placed' protection; this being the style of climbing on the vast majority of climbs outdoors in Scotland and the preferred style by the majority of climbers. This Policy and Strategy has been updated (2002) and it is identified that for large strategic centres there should be a requirement for all styles of climbing including pure leader-placed protection climbs.

However, this is a relatively new concept, with the major manufacturers only recently developing the structural techniques to allow such use, and managers of centres are often reluctant to take on these designs due to fears about safety and possible litigation, or difficulty of management regarding health and safety requirements.

This paper outlines the MCofS's position regarding the design and management of 'leader-placed' protection climbs at indoor facilities.

MCofS Strategy for Wall Development in Scotland

1. The MCofS identifies the need for 'Regional Centres of Excellence' across Scotland as part of a development strategy that we have agreed with the Sports Council (sportscotland).
2. One aspect of the criteria for which we judge this recognition, is the provision of facilities, which cater for the full range of styles, and abilities found in climbing. This includes a range of graded climbs from beginner to elite, a range of wall angles from slab to steeply overhanging, and a range of climbing styles to include bouldering, leading on 'sport' climbs (bolted) and leading on 'natural gear'. It is a requirement that a wall must offer all these options before being able to gain the 'Regional Centre' status.
3. It is considered important to MCofS that the use of 'gear' placements at the wall offers the full experience required of this style of climbing. The placement of bolts on these climbs would be detrimental to that aim.

Safety Considerations regarding ‘Gear’ only climbs on Indoor Facilities:

1. The MCofS aims to encourage indoor facilities that offer a facility, which enables climbers to learn techniques in a more controlled environment (without factors such as weather, exposure, loose rock etc), which they can then transfer to real rock outdoors. This not only refers to physical techniques such as strength and stamina, but to psychological techniques such as red-pointing (on bolted climbs) and gear placement (on natural gear climbs). In order to gain training in the latter, it is imperative that the psychological element is maintained. This means that the ‘gear’ climbs must NOT have the option of removing this element by being supplied with bolts.
2. The placements themselves should be designed so that a range of size of protection devices can be used either throughout the line of the route or in any one slot, so the risk that an ill-fitting piece of ‘gear’ could be placed is limited. The placements are not going to fail under stress as they are over-specified and fully tested by the manufacturers. It is our recommendation that recognised manufacturers who have developed this style of walls are the preferred suppliers and that full specifications are gained.
3. There is no requirement to place bolts on the ‘gear’ routes to make them ‘safe’. The management measures below are as relevant to the bolted climbs as they are to the ‘gear’ climbs. It is no more likely that a climber will fail, under extremis, to place and safely clip into a piece of natural ‘gear’, or to drop an item of ‘natural’ equipment, than to fail to safely clip into a bolt, or drop the equipment necessary for this style of climbing. A risk assessment shows that overall, there is little difference between climbing the bolted or the gear climbs.
4. The MCofS’s views on ‘gear’ walls are supported by the Association of British Climbing Walls (ABC).

Active Management:

In order to help visitors to the wall understand the hazards they will encounter using any part of the wall, the MCofS recommend that wall managers put in place measures which impart information, which can then be acted upon by the individual, but which is not proscriptive. This is the ethic of climbing, that the individual takes responsibility for his or her own actions. MCofS feels that this approach at an indoor facility is vitally important as it then encourages the individual to be safer, not only at the wall, but also when they transfer to real rock. Examples could include:

- a. Information for people first registering at the wall, including the participation statement and personal responsibility.
- b. Signage at the wall to raise awareness of such things as ‘tying-in’, ‘belaying’, walking beneath active climbers, dropping equipment, grading of all the climbs etc.
- c. A detailed information sheet with easy-to-understand graphics, which explains the best methods of using the ‘gear’ climbs.
- d. A clear policy on the use of the wall for novice groups and the responsibilities of group ‘leaders’.
- e. Offering opportunities for novices and beginners to take courses and for young people to gain experience through the ‘Kids Club’.
- f. Allowing novices (minors and adults) to attend the wall when supervised by more experienced adults, who take responsibility for them.

Experience from other walls:

1. The development of 'gear' placements is relatively new and so there are not many walls across the UK which have installed them. There are currently 'gear' walls at:
 - a. Rock City, Hull: Bolts were placed on the gear climbs after one of the placements failed. This was due to the fact that the manufacturer (an in-house build) had been built to lesser standards. It was felt by the management to be cheaper to install bolts rather than to reinforce the gear placements.
 - b. Preston: This facility is operating without problems.
 - c. The Welsh International Indoor Centre: There are 4 natural protection lines, 2 on slabs, 1 on a vertical wall and 1 on an overhanging wall. These routes are also equipped with bolts.
 - d. Alien Rock, Edinburgh: - A single 'gear' climb has been provided onto an existing section of bolted wall, due to a shortage of space for developing a separate new section for gear climbs.
 - e. Inverness: The Leading section of the Climb Caledonia Wall includes 3 'gear' protected lines without bolts. There have been no incidents relating to their safe use and they have proved popular.
2. Two of the above walls, having placed bolts next to the 'gear' placements, are now insisting that climbers use the bolts as well as the gear placements. This management system seems to become a requirement in such circumstances as in not doing so, the management may be seen to be negligent. It can envisaged that situations would arise, where climbers do not clip into the bolts and without them being watched continually there could be no guarantee they would. Management of this 'rule' would be almost impossible. Further, past experience of climbers and climbing walls shows that the enforcement of a 'rule' which would be seen as unnecessary would generate bad feeling and resentment amongst users as the intention of the facility is to offer what the climber wishes – a relatively rules-free, open environment. The advice about management that the British Mountaineering Council and MCofS have outlined in the Climbing Walls Manuals takes account of this and from nearly 25years of experience of developing and being involved in managing walls across the UK. It is likely that such rules would either be overlooked or they would discourage use. Both of which undermines the reason for having a facility.
3. It is the intention that the walls in the major conurbations of Scotland, which MCofS would target as requiring Regional Centres, all have 'gear' climbs as currently offered at Inverness.

Lottery Funding Support:

1. Lottery applications made with the support of the MCofS (which is a requirement) are made on the understanding that the aims and strategy of the sports governing body (MCofS) are being met by the proposal.
2. If these agreed aims of the MCofS for any wall were substantially altered after completion, then MCofS would consider that the facility no longer met the necessary criteria (as a Regional Centre). This could lead to invalidation of the original Lottery application. The MCofS see it as vital that the original aims regarding the 'gear' placements and climbs be maintained as they were originally proposed. If changed by the addition of bolts, then we would see this as a fundamental alteration that went against our aims and strategy. If a wall subsequently experienced problems we would recommend that a full new risk assessment be made and the adoption of an alternative management strategy to meet those identified risks be the preferred option.