

A proposal for allowing limited access for commercial climbing activity in Cheddar gorge

1. Background

The Cheddar Gorge Climbing Project ran from 2003 until 2005. Its objective was to clean and restore routes in the gorge, many of which were being lost to vegetation. Loose rock was (and remains) a hazard. Selected routes were cleaned of vegetation and loose rock. Many were equipped with bolt protection. Almost all had twin bolt lower offs installed.

One of the new outcomes agreed in the project was that climbing in the gorge was not suitable for commercial groups. The landowners - National Trust and Longleat Enterprises Ltd. (CC&G) - agreed not to allow any commercial activity. The guidebook states that “climbing activity is prohibited to all ‘commercial users’” and “applies to all the cliffs in the gorge” both NT and Longleat owned. (P165 point 10 Cheddar Gorge Climbs).

However the guide also says (P.11 Commercial and Group Use) that access is prohibited to all commercial users and that explicit permission must be sought in every instance.

The reasons for the prohibition were over-use and subsequent damage to the rock by groups climbing, and especially abseiling, over routes. This would take the form of polish and loss of holds. Also the conflict for access for individual climbers confronted with outdoor activity providers setting up top ropes over multiple routes. There were also concerns over additional wear to lower offs.

In addition CC&G wish to retain all commercial climbing opportunities for their own business interest. They run climbing taster sessions for non climber visitors on some of their own rock faces.

Until 2022 all applications by Outdoor Activity Centres to use rock faces for group use were declined by both landowners.

In 2022 a local provider made an application to the National Trust for a licence allowing small group use to climb on NT rock faces, specifically to facilitate learning of outdoor and lead climbing skills and as a progression route for climbers emerging from climbing walls with no experience of real rock.

The application was made without reference to CC&G or the BMC and a licence was granted by NT to the provider. CC&G were extremely annoyed by this and called for a meeting with NT and BMC. The Provider was not invited. At the meeting NT agreed to rescind the licence on the grounds that a prior agreement was in place – prohibiting commercial activity, as with changes in staff over the years they had not been aware of it.

The Provider has responded with a detailed proposal for allowing qualified guides to work in the gorge with clients learning outdoor lead climbing skills and in particular multi pitch climbing skills. Attached below. He has the support of a local business consortium - The Cheddar Vision Group. He intends to apply again to the National Trust for a licence on the grounds that refusing to licence contradicts NT national policy on encouraging the learning of outdoor skills on their properties.

Whilst licensing would most likely be site specific, if NT felt that there was no conflict of interest in Cheddar gorge and it fitted with their National Objectives, they may revisit their prohibition and allow some commercial climbing activity as outlined in the proposal.

CC&G will almost certainly oppose it. The question for climbers is, will it cause any issues for climbers coming to Cheddar, or will it be a positive development for the future of climbing in the gorge? Things have changed since the 2005 project and many people are learning to climb indoors and want to make a safe progression to climbing.

2. The Proposal

Proposal for allowing commercial guides to take clients on routes in Cheddar Gorge

From Andy Sparrow, local Outdoor Activity provider

1. Cheddar Gorge is not a suitable or appropriate venue for large groups of novice climbers or abseilers.
2. Instructed groups should not exceed 5 persons including instructors.
3. Instructors must be BMC qualified - SPA, RCI, MIA, or MIC.
4. Instructed groups have no special privileges or priority over other climbers.

The benefits of this proposal for climbers and aspirant climbers are:

1. Aspirant climbers will have the opportunity to climb and to receive coaching and training in Cheddar Gorge.
2. Climbers aspiring to use sport climbs will be able to receive appropriate instruction.
3. Climbers aspiring to 'trad' climb will be able to receive appropriate instruction.
4. Climbers will have the opportunity to be guided up classic multi pitch routes.
5. BMC members will have access to BMC instructors, and vice versa.

Regarding concerns that climbers may have over these proposals:

1. They will not result in large groups of novice climbers using the Gorge.
2. The increased number of climbers using Cheddar Gorge will be negligible (there are over 600 climbing routes at Cheddar).
3. There will be no 'hogging' of routes or excessive wear on anchors.
4. The instructors could be asked to make a financial contribution towards anchor maintenance.

Benefits to the business community of Cheddar.

1. Allowing BMC qualified instructors to work with small groups will raise the profile of Cheddar Gorge.
2. Cheddar could become a nationally recognised centre of excellence for climbing instruction and coaching.
3. Guided and instructed climbing will generate extremely powerful social media images.
4. As Cheddar's climbing profile rises it will attract more 'high quality' visitors.
5. As a climbing centre of excellence Cheddar will attract more media attention further raising its profile which will generate increased public awareness and visitor numbers.