



myplace
support team

Climbing Walls

Introduction

Climbing is a more popular activity than ever before and indoor climbing walls are springing up all over the place – not just in **myplace** centres but in schools, leisure centres and even on cruise ships. But developing a climbing wall is a complex process with design, construction and safety issues to be considered. This briefing will provide some useful pointers and advice on what to consider.

How to build and run a climbing wall

Each year there are about five million climbing wall users in the UK – and with over 300 public access climbing walls around the country it's a sport that's on the up. Recent years have seen a revolution in climbing wall design and a demand for better and more up-to-date facilities. But before you go too far in planning a new climbing wall project in your **myplace** centre do a quick audit to see what other facilities there are nearby and what they offer. Climbing walls are far from all the same and, if there are other centres, think about doing something complementary rather than copying it.

As with other activities in the centre it's important to consult fully with the young users. Perhaps running a few sessions with them so they're aware of the different sort of walls available, what each offers and any limitations, would be a useful exercise. Climbing can be an enjoyable and educational activity for young people with a wide range of physical and learning difficulties and their use of the facility should be fully considered.

The main categories of wall are:

- › Bouldering walls: Typically up to 4.5 metres high and used mostly for climbing without the use of ropes. Can be built against walls or as free standing structures.
- › Traversing walls: Typically created on low vertical walls such as corridors and balconies by placing holds directly into the concrete or brickwork.
- › Beginner walls: Usually have many large holds and features suitable for novices. Allows for tuition at top and bottom of the wall and for setting up ropes.
- › Freestanding boulders: Replicas of natural rock boulders and increasingly popular as outdoor features.
- › Adventure walls: Designed for less experienced users and with an emphasis on fun. Includes ropeways, caving and abseiling.
- › Outdoor towers: Tall structures providing a wide range of climbing styles.
- › Mobile climbing towers: short rock effect towers, normally 8 metres high mounted on a trailer and can be easily and quickly positioned.
- › Loading walls: Taller than bouldering walls and ideally more than 10 metres high. They should have varying angles from slabs to overhanging sections.
- › Ice walls: Giant freezers big enough to allow the practice of ice climbing. Perhaps not the one for your **myplace** centre.



Think carefully about the location of any climbing wall and try to avoid conflict with other activities. For this reason it's a good idea to try and avoid locating it in a wider gym or indoor multi-games area. Height and circulation space are obvious factors to consider and architects will need to consider ensuring the floor of the building is suitable for a climbing wall, that there is visible steelwork for the wall to be attached to and that there is enough height clearance for climbers to climb safely. Whatever the scale of your development, including a range of wall types and designs for various grades of climbing will maximise use.

Plywood panels with a friction coating is the most common type of material used on climbing walls, because it is relatively inexpensive and it can be used to create large climbing walls with interesting features. Each panel is drilled with a matrix of threaded bolt-on hold placements called T-Nuts to allow a variety of colour coded routes to be set up each climbing line. Other common, though more expensive, materials include the use of fibreglass panels. Specialist manufacturers (see below) will be able to advise you and your architects on the options available and discuss appropriate solutions.

There are a few other issues you will need to consider in running a climbing wall in your **myplace** centre. Clearly, in common with all activity, you will need to be aware of and have in place a safeguarding and protection policy that sets out what constitutes good practice. This is about ensuring young people are able

to enjoy the activities without abuse of any kind. You'll need to have carried out your risk management assessment and have a set of protocols and procedures arising from this. By law, managers need to ensure that any facility is in a safe and proper condition, that operating systems used are appropriate, and that these are safe and properly applied. Health and safety inspectors, from either the local authority or the Health and Safety Executive, will be carrying out inspections to check this.

Planned maintenance and inspection of the wall and the equipment used will need to be carried out, and repairs and replacements done as necessary. Suppliers will be able to advise on the level and frequency of inspection needed.

You should ensure you have an adequately equipped first aid room, and appropriately qualified staff. Although accidents at climbing walls are rare and even-more rarely serious, it's important to instil in the young people the importance of taking due care and diligence, and that the presence of mats does not, in itself, remove the risk of injury.

Much of the responsibility for the day-to-day running of the facility, and with it the issues outlined above, may of course be passed on to a professional and specialist climbing wall manager, if this function is tendered out. How the facility is managed and run - whether by centre staff or outside contractors - is something you will need to consider in the early planning stages.

Action planning

Young People

Get the young people who are advising you to organise a fact finding trip to another climbing wall to find out what others have done and get their feedback. Ask them to arrange for a supplier to visit your centre to explain more about options.

Making a Difference

The National Climbing Wall Achievement Scheme is a UK wide scheme designed to introduce individuals to climbing on artificial structures and to accredit their achievements. The scheme is administered by the Association of British Climbing Walls (see below).

Vision and Values

Climbing walls are an exciting activity in their own right, but using them also teaches young people about responsibility, safety, support for others and a host of other personal development issues. As such, they should fit neatly in your wider ethos for your **myplace** centre.

Practicality

Climbing walls don't come free. The cost and the spaces required for them may mean you have to compromise on other activities or facilities, so be realistic in your aspirations.

“Although offering good height potential, a sports hall is nearly always a poor location for a climbing wall unless easy and uninterrupted access can be guaranteed.”

BMC

Tools, ideas, exercises:

With a group of interested young people watch the beginner's guide to climbing walls on the BMC website. This takes you through everything you need to know to get through your first visit. Stimulate a discussion about climbing walls in the group - what they like, what they don't like, what their expectations are, would they pay to use them and, if so, how much etc.

Then, use the directory on the same page of the website to find a wall near to you and support the group to arrange to visit this facility. Devise a simple feedback form and use the information gathered from this to inform the development of your own wall.

Links and Further Guidance

Visit the British Mountaineering Council website at www.thebmc.co.uk for a range of information on climbing walls, including how to find one in your area, a wall users' survey, and films for beginners. There's also a free-to-download wall managers information pack.

Get a copy of the BMC Climbing Wall Manual. This is the essential guide for anyone planning to build, manage or use a climbing wall. Designed for leisure managers, designers, architects, facility owners and climbers - anyone who is or wants to get involved in the climbing wall industry. Full of essential information, independent advice and technical know-how it provides a wealth of guidance and information on the history and development of indoor climbing and planning a new facility including advice on funding, location, design, materials and management issues such as child protection and maintenance.

The manual also covers staffing, access and teaching beginners. The responsibilities and regulations sections cover everything from the safe design of walls to all the health and safety legislation that climbing walls have to conform to. It's essential reading if you're thinking about setting up a climbing wall and want to know where to start. Buy online at the BMC shop (www.bmcshop.co.uk). The BMC also has a series of short films on its website giving a beginner's guide to climbing walls. These show young people everything they need to know to get through a first visit to your climbing wall, starting from the second they walk in the door to putting their harness on, tying into a rope and doing a first climb. Find out more at www.thebmc.co.uk/Feature.aspx?id=2309

The Climbing Wall Manufacturers Association (CWMA) exists to provide for the highest standards in construction, supply and maintenance of artificial climbing structures. Using a CWMA member ensures that your wall will meet both your needs and the exacting standards set down in the European Regulations. CWMA liaises with the BMC, government agencies and departments and other bodies whose work affects climbing walls. Visit www.cwma.co.uk for more information.

The Association of British Climbing Walls (ABC) is the representative body of climbing centre managers and owners. Its main objectives include the development and benchmarking of safe practice and quality management processes for operating climbing centres. Find out more at www.abcclimbingwalls.co.uk

See also the Mountain Leader Training website at www.mltuk.org for details on the Climbing Wall Award, the Climbing Wall Leader Award and the Single Pitch Award, and to download registration forms (www.mltuk.org/spa.php). These are the qualifications those running climbing walls should have.

Get inspired with a virtual tour of the climbing wall at the Salmon Youth Centre in London, one of the **myplace** projects. Go to www.salmoncentre.co.uk/virtual-tours/climbing-wall