

PACE INCLUSIVE RACE GUIDELINES

Guidance for event organisers and race directors to improve participant experience at the back of the pack

Pace Inclusive Event Guidelines

This guidance is informed by hundreds of first-hand comments from endurance-sport participants sharing experiences of how races treat those finishing towards the back of the pack. These are practical, achievable recommendations that improve participant experience, safety and long-term event reputation. Not all guidelines will be relevant or appropriate for all races, but every organiser can use them to assess whether the race experience they're offering truly extends to the back of the field.

GUIDELINE 1: PLAN FOR THE LAST FINISHER

a) Equal event experience

Every registered participant should receive the core event experience promised to all entrants, regardless of where they finish in the field.

- Keep aid stations stocked for the duration of the event.
- Keep the finish line, timing mats, photographers and medal distribution in place until the final finisher or final stated cut-off.
- Order medals, t-shirts and goody bag items in sufficient quantities and distribute them fairly.
- Keep bag storage secure and staffed until all participants have finished or been accounted for.
- Provide finish-line hydration and, where relevant to race distance, appropriate food or recovery support for later finishers too.
- Stress-test the athlete experience specifically from the perspective of the final third of the field.

"My first half marathon consisted of two loops. In the second loop, they were already closing the aid stations and had only water left. On a warm summer night in June. I finished in 2hrs 45mins."

"I was one of the final finishers in the New York City Marathon this year (8hrs 36mins) and volunteers came out specifically to cheer for the back of the pack. Since it was dark, I got given glow sticks by the staff and I crossed the finish line with them. It was so special."

b) Course management

Where a course cannot remain fully closed for all participants, later athletes should still be supported to complete the event safely whenever possible.

- Allow participants to complete an event on pavements or safe alternative routes when roads must reopen.
- Use sweepers to support and assist, not to intimidate or pressurise participants.
- Ensure sweepers operate on foot, or use bicycles or low-emission vehicles where feasible.
- Give sweepers secondary duties, such as signage checks or course clean-up, so they do not create constant pressure on slower participants.

c) Design for the safety and wellbeing of all athletes

Those at the back of the field need additional safeguarding consideration, especially in longer events. There may also be entrants who have picked up injuries during the race who want to continue but who may not have anticipated (or be prepared for) spending additional time on the course.

- Ensure medical and safety cover extends to the last finisher.
- Review lighting, navigation and isolation risk for back-of-the-pack participants.
- Brief sweepers/back marshals that they should support, not pressurise, slower athletes.

GUIDELINE 2: MAKE CUT-OFFS CLEAR & CONSISTENT

Sometimes races need to have cut-offs. This could be due to road closure limitations, lighting conditions, availability of volunteers or other safety issues. Cut-offs could also be an inherent part of the challenge of the event. However, transparency and tone significantly affect how cut-offs are perceived. The key issues are when cut-offs are poorly explained or enforced abruptly.

Most entrants will self-exclude based on the cut-offs if they are clearly communicated. However, if a cut-off is stated, the race experience needs to be consistently maintained up until that time. There also needs to be a compassionate conclusion to the event for those who miss the stated cut-off.

- Communicate cut-offs clearly in pre-race materials – participants should not have to hunt through pages of small print to find them.
- Explain what happens if a participant misses a cut-off.
- Train staff/marshals to enforce cut-offs with respect and empathy.
- Where possible, allow unofficial finishes with recognition by, for example, moving participants safely to the pavement if roads need to be reopened.
- Ensure the cut-off time is from the actual start time of the final participant – the chip time – not the gun time.
- Where possible, give as long a cut-off as possible to allow more people to finish: women have a slower average time at all distances compared with men.
- Consider an 'early start' option for those who need the most time on the course.
- Be careful in your language around cut-offs. Don't call a cut-off 'generous' if it's not actually generous based on potential finish times

"I've had aid stations emptied, people pack up finish lines on me, finish-line cameras turned off and just generally been made to feel awful for being slow. I've cried many times trying to be 'fast enough' to beat the cut-off."

"If a race has a cut-off time, the finish line should be there right up to the very last second. I've finished a half marathon with 15 minutes to spare and the finish line was already dismantled."

"I walked/jogged the [REDACTED] a couple of years ago – I only signed up because the race promoter told me there was 'no cut-off time and all were welcome'. The reality was that there was a hard three-hour cut-off from gun time and my starting corral was 10 to 15 minutes after the gun. Aid stations were down by the time I reached mile eight and I was basically chased by city trucks and street sweepers."

GUIDELINE 3: SUPPORT & CELEBRATE ALL ATHLETES

Later finishers should be recognised with the same warmth and legitimacy as front-runners. Celebration is not a luxury extra; it is part of what participants have trained for.

- Ensure final finishers are welcomed over the finish line with energy and respect.
- Encourage announcers, volunteers and spectators to remain present for later finishers.
- Keep music, atmosphere and finish-line acknowledgement going throughout the duration of the event.
- Consider positive recognition that goes beyond speed alone, such as perseverance awards or a celebratory moment for the final finisher.
- Build a culture in which finishing last is never treated as shameful.
- Consider having prizes/spot prizes that are not just based on time.



GUIDELINE 4: ALIGN MARKETING WITH RACE-DAY REALITY

Inclusive messaging is undermined when slower participants feel unwelcome at events. Participants are more forgiving of constraints (such as cut-offs) than of mixed messages. If you say your event is inclusive and open to everyone, that needs to translate to a good race-day experience from the front all the way to the back of the field.

- Match marketing claims ('all abilities welcome') with operational planning.
- Be honest about limits if full inclusion is not possible.
- Avoid language that frames slower participants as exceptions.

"[REDACTED] annoys me as they say they 'welcome all', yet there is a six-hour cut off. I understand smaller events might have to set a cut-off due to problems finding volunteers, but a big event like this should be able to get enough support to implement a longer cut-off."

- Brief volunteers on inclusive language and tone, as well as what constitutes unacceptable comments that are sexist, racist, ageist, ableist, patronising or belittling.
- Draw up a code of conduct for all volunteers to follow.
- Have a clear way for participants to report unacceptable behaviour and explain how it will be dealt with.



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GUIDELINE 5: DESIGN INCLUSION FROM THE BEGINNING

Inclusive races attract broader participation which results in long-term growth. The best races build inclusion into their design rather than trying to retrofit it late in the planning process.

- Offer pacers across a broad range of realistic finishing times.
- Consider early start waves, staggered starts or formats that allow a broader range of paces.
- Design events with walkers and run-walkers in mind where appropriate.
- Maintain atmosphere and entertainment for the full event window, not just the first part of the race.
- Seek structured feedback from later finishers after the event and use it to improve future editions.

"The Cardiff Half Marathon was amazing – I was at the back of the pack without feeling like it. So many people still around me, crowds still out in force, not made to feel anything but a superstar for being out there and giving it my all! And to top it off, the event village was still buzzing with people at the finish. I loved it and would do it again!"

Race Director Checklist

This short checklist can be used in planning meetings, volunteer briefings and final operation reviews.

Fair time policies

- Are all cut-offs – including intermediate cut-offs – clearly publicised?
- Are cut-offs based on chip time whenever possible?
- Is the process for missed cut-offs explained in advance?
- Is there an early start option, where appropriate?
- Is there a plan for recognising participants who complete the distance after the official cut-off?

Course management

- Is there a safe plan for later finishers if roads reopen?
- Are sweepers briefed to support rather than pressurise?
- Does safety, medical and welfare cover extend to the final participant?
- Has the event reviewed lighting, signage and isolation risk for slower entrants?

Communication

- Do race materials explicitly welcome run-walkers and walkers?
- Are staff and volunteers trained in inclusive language and behaviour?
- Is there a clear reporting channel for poor conduct?
- Does marketing accurately reflect the event's operational limits (for example, if roads have to reopen at a set time)?

Equal event experience

- Will aid stations remain operational until the final participant passes?
- Will medals, t-shirts, hydration and key supplies still be available at the finish?
- Will bag storage, finish-line timing and photography remain in place until the end?
- Who is responsible for keeping finish infrastructure intact until the event has truly finished?

Celebration

- Who will be present to welcome the final finishers?
- Will announcers and music still be in place later in the event?
- How can the final finisher feel celebrated, not hurried?

Inclusive design

- Do pacing support and event timings reflect a realistic range of participants?
- Have walkers and run-walkers been considered during planning?
- Has the event been reviewed from the perspective of a back-of-the-pack athlete?

Accountability

- Do policy, marketing and race-day delivery align?
- Is post-event feedback gathered specifically from later finishers?
- Has action been taken to address any known areas for improvement before the next edition?