OFFLINE RESILIENCE GUIDE // UK EDITION

Navigation When Your Phone Fails: Map, Compass and Grid Reference Basics

A practical UK navigation fallback: plan before leaving, carry a paper map and compass, understand grid references, preserve phone power and avoid turning uncertainty into a rescue.

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LAYER 1 // ACT

FIRST ACTIONS

Start here. Then read the conditions and exceptions below.

1. Plan the route, weather and daylight before leaving.
2. Carry a paper map and compass when the consequences of getting lost are meaningful.
3. Learn to read a six-figure OS grid reference before you need one.
4. Use GPS as a tool, not the only copy of your route.
5. Tell somebody your intended route and when you expect to return.

> **IMPORTANT**
> This is preparedness information, not a substitute for emergency services, medical advice or instructions from responsible authorities. In immediate danger call 999 or 112.

Navigation starts before the walk

Ordnance Survey recommends plotting the route, carrying suitable clothing, map, compass, torch, food, water and first aid, and telling somebody where you are going and when you expect to return. That preparation is more valuable than trying to recover from a navigation error after dark.

Check the weather and sunset time. A route that is straightforward in clear daylight can become a different problem in mist, rain, ice or darkness.

Keep an offline reference

A phone is excellent for location, route recording and maps, but battery, impact damage, water and screen failure are single points of failure. For remote or consequential journeys, carry a paper map covering the route and a simple baseplate compass, and practise with them somewhere familiar.

Do not wait for an emergency to learn what the symbols, contour lines or grid look like.

Learn the grid reference you may need to give rescuers

On an Ordnance Survey map, eastings are read before northings. A four-figure reference identifies a kilometre square; a six-figure reference narrows the location to a 100-metre square. That is often enough to describe a useful rescue location.

OS Maps can also show a grid reference using the phone's GPS even when mobile coverage is unavailable. Capture or write down the position before the battery becomes critical.

If you become uncertain, stop the error early

If the ground no longer matches the route, stop and identify the last point you can confidently place on the map. Compare terrain, paths, streams, buildings, slope direction and distance travelled. Do not keep walking simply to make the map fit your assumption.

If you cannot relocate safely, conditions are deteriorating, somebody is injured, or continuing would expose the group to cliffs, floodwater, severe weather or darkness, switch from navigation to the rescue plan.

Preserve the phone for communication

When you may need to call for help, reduce non-essential screen use and preserve battery. A head torch is better than using the phone as your main light. Mountain Rescue specifically warns against relying on a phone to get out of trouble because signal and battery can fail in the hills.

The useful redundancy is simple: charged phone, power reserve where appropriate, paper map, compass, torch and the skill to use them.

Useful kit for this plan

Equipment should support the plan, not replace judgement or skill. The commercial catalogue is kept on a separate page.

KIT IS KEPT SEPARATE
Named products and Amazon UK affiliate links are kept on the dedicated KIT page so this guide remains editorial. Use the kit only after the plan identifies a genuine equipment gap.

OPEN KIT →

Sources checked for this guide

We use public sources for the factual backbone and write the guide in our own words. Source pages can change, so the links below are the place to check current official advice.

PRIMARY / AUTHORITATIVE SOURCE

Ordnance Survey: Map-reading guide

Route planning, equipment, map and compass use, grid references and telling somebody your plan.

https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/documents/resources/map-reading.pdf

PRIMARY / AUTHORITATIVE SOURCE

Ordnance Survey: Locate Me in OS Maps

How a phone GPS can provide OS grid references and coordinates without a mobile signal.

https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/news/major-new-safety-feature-in-os-maps-could-save-your-life

PRIMARY / AUTHORITATIVE SOURCE

Mountain Rescue England and Wales: Stay safe

Navigation kit, phone limitations, weather and emergency procedure.

https://www.mountain.rescue.org.uk/safety/

Editorial review date: 25 September 2026. If an official source conflicts with this page, follow the official source.

INFORMATION CHECK✓ CURRENT REVIEW

REVIEWED	NEXT REVIEW DUE	OFFICIAL REFERENCES
25 Sep 2026	23 Jan 2027	3 primary sources

If an official source conflicts with this guide, follow the current official source.

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