

# Review of Ramblers' Association Led Walks

Report by Bob Barton

## Executive Summary

The review concludes that led walks are a splendid institution that owes much of its success to the unstinting work of leaders and groups. Many excellent features of led walks were identified but it was felt that there is a danger of led walks becoming increasingly separated from public expectations of safety and quality.

Recommendations are made under the following headings that the organisation takes significant steps towards a new culture and improved methods of operation:

- Increasing the prominence and acknowledged importance of led walks within the RA
- Enhancing the assurance of quality and safety in leaders
- Enhancing the flow of key information to those attending led walks
- Raising the profile of risk management in connection with led walks
- Enhancing the assurance of quality and safety of led walks

## Introduction

1. I was asked to undertake this Review in order to survey the led walks provided by groups of the Ramblers' Association (RA). The initial Terms of Reference for the review were issued by the RA and included the following summary of the main focus of the Review:

2. *The RA therefore needs to know whether its walks are well led – in as much as they should be safe, welcoming, provide a satisfying walking experience and enhance the reputation of the RA. In particular the RA needs to answer the following questions:*

- *Is current practice acceptable?*
- *What, if any, quality assurance standards need to be put in place to monitor and assess leader performance and safety?*
- *With regard to the RA's GB wide programme of led walks, are there any recommendations about safety, insurance, liability, training or accreditation that the RA needs to consider implementing?*

## Method

3. The Terms of Reference suggested that I should:

- Talk to key members of staff, some trustees and a range of volunteers involved in leading and supporting RA led walks
- Sample a wide range of RA led walks
- Consider existing arrangements regarding the organisation and support of RA led walks
- Take account of the external environment (the legal situation, the insurance situation, what other organisations do in similar circumstances, best practice etc)
- Take account of the RA's culture, ethos and current practice
- Demonstrate an awareness of the implications for the RA of any recommendations made

4. What actually took place closely resembled this. My activity included:

- Meeting a representative of the Executive Committee with a special interest in safety and quality issues, and another who, by coincidence, was leading one of the walks visited

- Interviews with key management staff including the Chief Executive, the Directors for Scotland and Wales and individuals with responsibilities for the promotion of walking and the support of volunteers
- Sampling documentation, guidance and publicity materials relating to led walks and gaining an understanding of the systems and controls in place
- Observing a range of led walks representing a variety of terrain, region, client group and degree of challenge.
- Interviews with a representative range of leaders and members, including office holders at local and area level, other volunteers and new participants
- Examination of previous incidents and the insurance claims record
- Attendance at a group AGM

## Acknowledgement

5. I am most grateful to all the professional staff and volunteers who gave generously of their time and opinions, and particularly to the individual leaders who agreed, with grace and humour, to my joining them. Without exception, my days with them were enjoyable and in excellent company.
6. My survey could only sample a tiny proportion of the total activity of Ramblers' groups, but on each walk I met a number of leaders and heard about other walks and other situations. I therefore have some confidence that my comments are, in the main, accurate, but it is certainly possible that I have reached some conclusions that are unrepresentative of the whole or inapplicable to a particular walk, leader or group.
7. This report is concerned with the overall picture and so does not identify the groups with which I walked. Comment should not be assumed to apply to any particular group or leader.

## Overview

I started this review knowing little about led walks in the RA and was not at all sure what to expect. In the event, I have been very impressed by a great deal of what I have seen and learned. Particularly praiseworthy have been:

- The extensive range and scale of operation of led walks, which, without doubt, contribute greatly to the sum of human happiness
  - The warmth of welcome extended to me and to other new faces
  - The quality of the landscapes visited, and the interest of the routes chosen
  - The enthusiasm, commitment and level of preparation of leaders, both on walks and behind the scenes
  - The calm, efficient style in which most walks are conducted
  - The way in which, during walks, campaign issues are, with a light touch, routinely kept in view
  - The presence on most walks of leadership expertise in breadth
  - The excellent insurance claims record of the organisation
  - The effectiveness of the web based sources of information on led walks
  - The quality and relevance of supporting advice to leaders
8. These strengths are considerable and deserve acknowledgement.
9. During my survey of led walks I reached the view that safety and quality were of a good general standard. I formed absolutely no impression of an operation on the brink of catastrophe and had no sense of dangerous incompetence in leaders. This view is buttressed by the fact that the insurance claims record in recent years is most impressive, with no claims going to court or requiring financial settlement. With justification, the insurance brokers regard Ramblers as an exemplary client.

10. However, I felt that there were a number of areas relating to led walks where opportunities are being missed and where practice could be improved. These include:

- The methods of assuring of quality and safety
- The style of operation of walk leaders and its comparison with professional leaders
- The provision of training to leaders and, more generally, the support available to them
- The authorisation of walks and leaders
- The method of reporting and reacting to incidents
- The safety culture of the organisation
- The level of management time devoted to led walks and the apparent view of their importance
- The flow of information and opinion between leaders, groups, areas and the professional function

11. Since many of these issues are closely interwoven I will report on some of my main areas of observation and follow this with a summary of my recommendations.

## Maintaining the *Status Quo*

12. An occasional leader attending one of the walks that I joined was eloquent in defence of the *status quo* concerning led walks. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” was her direct advice. I think that this is a reasonable comment and it would certainly be misleading to contend that Ramblers’ led walks are riddled with serious problems, requiring urgent and radical solutions.

13. However, I hope to show below that there are many opportunities for improvement in this area of activity by the RA, but simply to continue with minimal change is certainly an option for consideration. This would be a calculated risk; the calculation being that a serious occurrence that might bring the extant arrangements into question, is sufficiently unlikely to warrant maintaining the *status quo*.
14. However, although the risk of such an occurrence may be low, there is no guarantee that it may not happen tomorrow. I certainly hope that the RA will grasp the opportunity to embrace change for led walks, but also hope that this is done in a manner that does not jeopardise existing strengths, especially those built on the outstanding support given by many volunteers. Getting this balance right should be given great importance in the implementation of my recommendations.

## The Walks

15. I joined seven walks which were widely distributed between England, Scotland and Wales and which ranged from simple country walking to challenging high mountain terrain and from hot sunshine to lashing rain. The smallest group consisted of eight people, the largest of more than forty.
16. I chose these walks by a simple process of:
- identifying dates when I could make visits
  - finding what walks were available on those dates via the online walks finder
  - then selecting walks which would give geographical spread and an efficient minimisation of the amount of long distance travel I had to undertake
17. I feel that this process was, on the whole successful. One important area that, in the end, was not visited was the south of England, as a result of a suicide on the track severely delaying the train on which I was travelling to the rendezvous for a

- walk. I had also hoped to join a walk in full winter conditions but climate change appears to have prevented this being achieved in the available time.
18. All walks took me through fine scenery in the company of friendly and interesting people. The levels of enthusiasm for and satisfaction with led walks appeared to be high among all those attending and I was left in no doubt that huge social benefit flows from this aspect of Ramblers' work. I was ready to hear dissenting or dissatisfied voices but was impressed that I did not.
  19. I found the online walk finder to be a very effective and impressive resource. Several groups had noticed an increase in the arrival of newcomers on walks, often temporary visitors to the area, who had found these led walks from the RA website.
  20. My reception on phoning the contact number obtained from the Walk Finder was always very friendly and arrangements went smoothly, except in two cases, one, already mentioned, where my train was severely delayed and the leader appeared not to have a mobile phone, and another when an advertised walk had been cancelled some time before without this fact being posted on the web.
  21. One well attended walk seemed in danger of monopolising the small village car park with accumulated cars but there was a clear awareness among leaders of the needs of other users of the countryside. Another group minimised the use of cars by offering only coach based walks. This appeared to be a very effective and green approach but was viewed by the group as making the pre-walk reconnaissance by leaders impracticable, although it is not clear to me why this should be so.
  22. A high proportion of those attending, both leaders and led, were retired professionals in the 50-70 age group although a few younger people, and a fair number of older, were present. One person, aged 89, had been a Ramblers

member for many years and, the following week, was planning to lead an eight mile walk on his ninetieth birthday. Interestingly, he had concerns that his planned route might be “a bit much” for some of the other members and had asked another leader to offer a shorter alternative. He also wore the only bobble hat that I spotted!

23. Several groups explained that the mid week walks were the best attended and tended to attract the older, retired members. Weekends tended to offer longer and faster walks targeted at younger members who were still in employment. In contrast, a few members commented that they found that younger groups were more “social” and therefore less goal orientated with their walking. I did not have the opportunity to attend a young persons group walk.
24. I had a warm welcome extended to me on all walks. I met a number of new recruits on their first or second walks and all were very positive about the welcome, the kindness and the enthusiasm extended to them by existing members.
25. The majority of walks seem to consist of countryside walking, are typically of about 8-12 miles in length and do not include any unduly rugged or challenging terrain, although stiles in poor condition, steep banks and wet tree roots regularly present difficulties. As mentioned, the make up of these groups is largely composed of retired professionals. I have come to regard this typical walk, and this typical client group, as representing the “core activity” of led walks and have formed a view that, although many of the arrangements and systems work well or adequately well for the core activity, the position outside of the core may be less convincing.
26. Outside the core offering, some much shorter walks exist, most notably the various health promotion walks, which may be of limited length and duration, perhaps two or three miles or less. Some of these are provided in house but most seem to be offered by external agencies and are usually supported by specific

- leader training. One regular Ramblers' leader had undergone training in connection with these walks and was strongly resistant to "signing liability clauses and checking pavement kerbs" – recommendations within the training he had received.
27. There was a fair amount of enthusiasm from members for the idea of groups offering shorter walks for ageing members (and ageing leaders), and a recognition that this might also provide a stepping stone for the graduates of health promotion walks. This may be a growth area in future.
28. Work in recent years to make walking more accessible to people who are not immediately ready or able to walk 10 miles, is a positive step but its effect was not noticeable in the "core" led walks that I attended. Virtually all those attending had followed the traditional route of recruitment, albeit through shorter walks in the early stages. Few of the members I met showed much enthusiasm for personal involvement in the health promotion walks either as leaders or participants.
29. There was much evidence of sympathetic support of walkers who were having difficulties with the terrain or their own fitness, but the great majority of members on led walks simply want to enjoy their own walking in congenial company and do not display any obvious missionary zeal to reach new categories of walkers. I did not find this an unreasonable position. Walks took place at a generally brisk pace and leaders were at pains to avoid being late to leave or late back.
30. On two separate occasions, people described to me cases when individuals with behavioural difficulties or possible mental illness had attended and placed demands on groups and leaders that were judged unreasonable, or beyond the group's ability to manage. External advice was taken in one case, discussions with colleagues in the other, and the individuals were politely but firmly asked to stop attending.

31. I think it is arguable that health promotion walks, or walks where there may be a purpose of some kind of social rehabilitation, can require specialist skills in their leaders in the same way as do the most rugged and challenging walks, though of course, each type of walk needs an entirely different set of skills. If these walks deserve specialist expertise in leaders, then it seems desirable to make specialist training available to their leaders.
32. Falling outside the “core” at the opposite end of the scale, and at the upper end of physical difficulty, are mountain ascents, many but not all of them in Scotland. Some walks include the ascent of Munros or other 3000 foot peaks and may, occasionally, take place in winter conditions with lying snow and a requirement for the use of ice axe and crampons. It would be normal practice for any leader in rugged mountain terrain to carry a so called “security” rope or hill rope at any time of the year (with, of course the necessary know how in its use).
33. In order to determine the limits of activity, I asked a number of leaders and staff in Scotland whether Ramblers’ groups might venture up Munros on the Skye Ridge, these representing the upper limit of mountain ascents in Britain and involving difficult route finding, exposed scrambling and considerable exposure. These peaks also represent the upper limit of application of the Mountain Leader qualification – the National Governing Body (NGB) qualification for mountain walking.
34. It is, at present, very unusual for any Ramblers leader to hold an NGB award such as Mountain Leader. One leader told me that she was keen to register for the Mountain Leader scheme, but saw this as a way to get work as a leader on Ramblers’ Holidays rather than an immediate assurance of competence on led walks. Ramblers’ Holidays and Countywide Holidays lie outside the remit for this survey, but a comparison between the requirements for leaders for those holidays and for “standard” UK led walks may be illuminating.

35. One Skye peak, the Inaccessible Pinnacle or “In Pin” on Sgurr Dearg, requires some rock climbing expertise and use of the rope, and is therefore even beyond the normal remit of a Mountain Leader qualification. Ramblers’ groups have certainly gone on the Skye Ridge but this is a relatively infrequent event. One leader commented “Leaders could do the In Pin – but most wouldn’t”. “Climbing the Inaccessible Pinnacle would be outside what should be done by Ramblers’ walks” said another.
36. I hold a high level mountaineering qualification and have regularly led parties on the Skye Ridge but have never found this to be a simple and routine matter. On the contrary, the demands on mountaineering judgement and navigational skill have regularly been at a very high level, most especially in bad weather. To allow volunteer leaders to operate in a similar environment with few assurances of quality and expertise seems to me undesirable. I have no reason to believe that the leaders who emerge to lead these upper end activities are not competent, but I recommend that for their protection, and that of the Ramblers, some formal assurances should be implemented.
37. One approach to this would be to define the “upper end” walks that lie outside the core activity of the Ramblers. These might include ascents involving rock scrambling, those of unusual remoteness, or those in winter conditions. When such an upper end walk is planned, I would advocate that a responsible person or persons of relevant expertise screens the plans in order to confirm that the necessary conditions are likely to be met. More detail of a possible approach to the management of “upper end” walks is given in Appendix 1.
38. The Scottish Director pointed out that one of the key charitable objectives of the RA is the “promotion of walking and mountaineering”. This needs to be taken into account in the RA’s training programmes, as membership increases and walk programmes become ever more diverse. He was aware of some groups, for

example, venturing onto the Cuillin Ridge on Skye, where, as mentioned above, high levels of mountaineering competence might be required.

39. Whilst I applaud the intention of the RA to develop further in this direction I think that, to do this with credibility, the organisation needs to satisfy itself that the quality and competence of leaders, and the approach to safety in such terrain is adequate and capable of bearing comparison with other organisations. With those assurances raising the confidence of the many leaders who may be standing in the wings, these more challenging walks might well become increasingly regular events.

## Leadership

40. Led walks have a number of intrinsic strengths that lead to a good general standard of safety and quality. These include:

- A membership, dominated by retired professionals, from which mature, careful and responsible leaders are drawn and which produces group members who are cautious, well prepared and unlikely to be litigious
- A time proven method of operation, with sound basic systems
- Areas of field operation that are rarely of an extreme nature and that are usually well-reconnoitred
- Leadership expertise in breadth – most walks have several experienced leaders in attendance even though only one is the nominated leader

41. Leaders seem to be like the membership in general, but more so! They are serious and committed but apparently resistant to any sort of change being imposed on them. Many of them are nostalgically attached to the freedoms that were more readily enjoyed in the past and pour scorn on risk assessments, litigation, qualification and so on, and yet, at the same time, are gracious enough to accept that safety and quality deserve careful attention. Some were more militant in their

opposition to any sort of intervention, “Bring in risk assessments and qualifications and we’re off!” stated one.

42. Perhaps my most persistent impression was that few of those involved as leaders have come to terms with the increasing public expectations falling on providers of outdoor experiences. This is often characterised as being about litigation alone, but there is a more positive aspect which reflects the fact that standards in the field are genuinely increasing with every passing year. This alone is a threat to any organisation that chooses to stand still. There is a risk of loss of reputation and an additional threat of the loss of membership to other “providers” who may start to be perceived as offering better quality.

43. Walks were of a good standard overall but quality of leadership varied somewhat.

At their best leaders:

- had a warm rapport with group members
- warned members of hazards in a friendly way
- gave appropriate assistance to those who might need it
- communicated information about the walk and the surroundings
- managed pace and spacing appropriately

44. In contrast, in some cases:

- groups were spread out over wide distances in awkward terrain
- members experiencing difficulties at obvious hazards were left to fend for themselves
- leaders had little to say once the walk had started
- the walk was not brought to a proper close but simply fizzled out with members returning to their cars without any sort of culminating input.

45. I felt that, in the main, leaders did remarkably well considering the limited opportunities for them to develop their skills. Where their standards of operation fell below my view of “best practice” this seemed to be as a result of them never having been made aware of how the best leaders actually operate. I believe that the great majority of leaders are capable of responding positively to the chance to do what they do to even higher standards of safety and quality, if the chances to achieve this are offered to them in positive terms.
46. Although other leaders were present on all walks, none of the appointed leaders appeared to take the opportunity to sub-divide into smaller, more manageable groups delegated to the charge of a second leader. This seemed to me to be desirable once groups are greater than 15 people or so. I was not aware of any formally appointed assistant leaders but there was always a number of off duty leaders who assisted with information and arrangements. Most leaders appointed back markers, who were generally effective except in the cases where people became very widely spread.
47. The most evident problems of spacing seemed to occur when leaders had a small contingent of younger, fitter walkers (invariably male) who wanted to walk at speed. In my opinion, a professional leader (for whom such things are easier) would have spoken rather firmly to people rushing ahead and would have aimed to impose a common pace. It was noticeable that this was a lesser problem for the groups that had divided their advertised activities into faster and slower walks.
48. In general, professional leaders would have taken a rather more directive role than most of the Ramblers’ leaders, several of whom were of the stated opinion that they should “only advise and not direct”. This may be laudable but the result can be some lack of clarity and purpose and a generally less successful experience for all. I think it is entirely possible for the leader to give clear briefings and apply appropriate control and management without being excessively authoritarian and I saw examples of this. In my opinion, if Ramblers are to have appointed leaders

- then these key individuals must be helped towards the best quality of operation, high standards of leadership and a well developed understanding of risk and safety.
49. I want to recognise the high quality work that has been done by the Navigation and Leadership Panel. Unfortunately little of their high quality published material and few of their good opportunities for training had actually reached the individual leaders that I met. A shift in culture may allow the cascading of this and other worthwhile information and expertise, through areas and groups to leaders in the field, to occur more readily. Making this happen seems an onerous responsibility to give to volunteers and an increased commitment of paid staff time towards achieving this should be considered. Since a number of my recommendations call for increased staff time it may be that consideration should be given to an appointment dedicated to led walks, but other solutions may be applicable.
50. Members were astute at forming an opinion of their leaders and a number told me that they voted with their feet. “No, there is one leader I won’t go with because he is always getting lost”; and, on another, “He doesn’t get many takers – once we start we never see him till the finish”. There would be value in capturing some of these views and using them to enhance quality and awareness of quality. It is entirely possible that the leader who streaks ahead is not aware that this is neither popular nor desirable.
51. I learnt that some alternative walking groups (not Ramblers’ groups) include in their constitution an affirmation that their members were all like minded enthusiasts and deliberately chose not to appoint leaders. Moreover, their members were required to accept, and perhaps sign, a participation statement such as that of the British Mountaineering Council (BMC):

52. “The BMC recognises that climbing and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions and involvement.”
53. I will return later to the “risk contract” with those joining walks, but on the earlier point, I put it to a number of leaders and members that it might be simpler for the Ramblers to operate without an appointed leader. This, as expected, provoked vigorous responses, all of which were in the strongest support of the retention of appointed leaders.
54. These comments focus attention on what I regard as possible areas of improvement. I repeat my view that leadership observed was of a good general standard, but this standard seems to be achieved in an unstructured way with few evident systems of control. Unfortunately, a good general standard, especially one with an extended period of successful operation, is a poor guide to particular cases. It is isolated and uncharacteristic examples of bad practice that can be the most damaging to reputation and record of an organisation that is mostly excellent.
55. On the basis of previous cases concerning outdoor activities, my opinion is that, should the Ramblers be unfortunate enough to face in court a claim for damages by a participant injured in a led walk, great attention in the proceedings would be paid to:
- How the competence of the leader was assured
  - Whether the choice of route was appropriate
  - Whether the situation had been adequately managed

56. Although I do not believe that a flood of such claims is likely, a small number of hostile claims must, in my view, be recognised as a possibility. So how would present arrangements meet a possible appraisal?
57. Leaders appear generally to be self selected although some are invited or persuaded by others. There is no formal process of identifying the would be leader's attributes and matching them to what are judged to be the necessary skills, nor is there any recording of experience, nor any register of leaders.
58. Some leaders had been given standard RA literature and guidance but this was not always the case, even within groups where some leaders had received such advice. It was usually the case that a more experienced leader would accompany the new leader but this seemed simply to happen rather than being a recognised requirement.
59. Many leaders expressed concern about their legal position in the event of any claim and the level of support that would be forthcoming from RA. The advice given to me by professional staff was that very good support would be given to any leader engaged on officially authorised activity. Clarification for leaders in the field does seem desirable, and this might usefully include some indications of what might be the limits of "reasonable" behaviour by the leader. Could leaders still expect support from the RA and its insurers if they had, for example:
- Neglected to appoint a back marker
  - Made a serious navigational error
  - Led the party on a route more challenging or more hazardous than that planned
60. Leaders are certainly well equipped with common sense but I find it hard to escape the view that some assurance of minimum competence and/or experience is desirable. One person described to me how, on his first walk as leader, it

- snowed overnight and he found himself ploughing a furrow up the deep snow covering an extremely steep hillside. Another confessed to becoming seriously lost when leading a group across moorland, the end result being an unpleasant wade across a river for the entire group.
61. These leaders were much more positive about having access to training than were the general run of leaders, as were a great many of the younger leaders, some of whom already had a substantial body of experience. One of the most effective leaders I saw in action had never walked until persuaded to join the Ramblers on his retirement. After a couple of seasons he decided to lead and enrolled in a local class in navigation and leadership. In my opinion, the benefits of this training were clear to see. It is telling that, even as a member of one of the largest groups, he had to go outside of the organisation to get the training he felt necessary.
62. Many of the people who were most keen on leader training were of the impression that training was not a legitimate or authorised use of Ramblers' funds (possibly because of the charitable origin of the funds). Since I am told by a Trustee that this may not be the case, I suggest that it would be desirable to clarify the situation and if appropriate to then publicise and promote this opportunity to improve quality and safety, alongside ideas for the cost effective sourcing of training.
63. I met a number of very experienced walkers who were not unaccustomed to responsibility in their careers, yet who were reluctant to lead walks. There will be a number of reasons for this, but for at least some, a clear indication of what would be expected of them as leaders, and a route of access to training and guidance would seem likely to stimulate their willingness to volunteer.
64. I do not think that, at this stage, it is desirable to make training compulsory for leaders but I am sure that greatly improved availability and promotion of training is essential.

65. Another group dependent on its volunteers, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, faced a comparable situation of quality assurance with volunteer assessors. Over a number of years a progressive transition has occurred from an initial promotion of access to training to a point where virtually all new assessors now undertake assessor training and accreditation. A plan where the RA would make an initial commitment to improved access to training with, perhaps, a medium or long term target of training and/or accreditation of all new leaders would be worth serious consideration. This may well be a 5-10 year project.
66. There is a need to avoid the alienation of the many skilled and experienced leaders that currently operate and such a phased introduction of more "assurance" would, be likely to recognise what several members called "grandfather rights". However, there is a need for minimum standards of accomplishment in leaders and occasional individuals who have not been exposed to external influences may well be operating at an unsuitable standard. Some vocal opponents of training in other organisations make much of their "twenty years of experience" but if a leader is uncritical of his or her own performance and is not exposed to the views of others, this twenty years can all too readily become a single year of experience, undertaken twenty times.
67. I asked members and leaders to tell me what would happen if a leader was to come forward with overambitious plans and what might be seen as an unsafe approach to the walks. Most expressed disbelief that this would ever happen in their group but were also confident that "someone would have a word" and the leader encouraged to adopt more moderate plans.
68. I accept that, in most cases, this would indeed occur, but on the basis of my earlier comment that it is the occasional, and entirely atypical "rogue" leader that is likely to cause the greatest problems, I am troubled that the safeguards are rather vague. One might almost compare them to the negative reporting, so

notorious in the case of the Zeebrugge disaster, which operates on the assumption that, “if there was a problem, someone would have told us about it”. In my opinion, and, in comparable situations, that of the courts, a more positive assurance of quality is desirable.

69. I am quite sure that, for the great majority of RA leaders of core walks, the solution does not lie with external qualifications (although I would welcome the encouragement of improved access to these) but would instead rest with the adoption of a more systematic way of appointing, training and authorising leaders. Some expertise to achieve this already exists within the organisation - the biggest obstacle may be to overcome the cultural resistance to such a step that exists in leaders and groups.

70. Appendix 1 outlines an approach to upper end walks. Core walks require something less stringent but a process might be adopted such as this:

- A candidate for Leader status is identified and matched against basic criteria for this position
- Standard induction information is supplied to and collected from the would be leader
- Training on core matters is given ( this might include Group Management, Navigation, Emergency Procedure, Route Choice, Access etc.)
- A competent person agrees Leader status and defines any restrictions on operation
- A standard Leader pack of information and/or equipment is issued
- A mentor is identified and attends the first walk as Leader
- After a period of probation full Leader status is given and recorded

## Safety

71. The attainment of safe operation is implicit in the operation of led walks and, broadly speaking, is achieved. However, the impression I gained is that very few leaders and officers have a modern conception of “risk management” as the term would be recognised by professionals in adventure activities. This is not surprising, since most RA leaders are volunteers and very few have had training in this area. The effect is to restrict the success of risk management and to increase the possibility of unexpected disaster coming out of a sky previously thought to be blue.
72. Ramblers’ activities are certainly not risk free, nor should they be. Fractured ankles and wrists are almost commonplace, yet no guarantee of full recovery ever exists for such injuries. Fatalities from heart attacks occur on a regular basis. Road safety hazards are often at a high level and, in my limited experience, are not addressed in a consistent way. If there was a catastrophe involving multiple fatalities then a traffic accident seems one area where this could happen.
73. When asked about safety, a great many leaders responded by saying, as if playing their strongest card, “All the members know they attend at their own risk”. This may be true, indeed I think it important to ensure that there is no ambiguity in the minds of participants on led walks concerning the voluntary status of the leader and the potential hazards of walks, but the leaders’ position on this important issue seems somewhat ostrich like. This aspect of the relationship with the client is sometimes described as a “risk contract” or an “acknowledgement of risk”. Few leaders commented on leader competence, training, identification of hazards and so on, and I wondered if they perhaps believed that these things did not really matter if no liability claim ensued.
74. Similarly, HQ and other professional staff seemed to take little active interest in accidents, unless particularly grave, and seemed to perceive themselves as a

- simple conduit to the insurers, rather than as active stakeholders in an important process. There is no routine consideration of incidents, and little or no awareness of the potential value of identifying “near misses”, of identifying patterns of accident and injury and of a consequent raising of awareness among leaders.
75. Some voluntary outdoor organisations devolve the legal and operational responsibility for safety to the individual operating units, with HQ staff deliberately adopting an approach of non-intervention. I do not find this convincing as a model of operation for the Ramblers.
76. In my view, there is a need to develop a culture that engages with risk and safety in a less passive way. We should not lose sight of the good safety record thus far and pretend that the organisation is suddenly on the edge of a precipice. It is not, but it is certainly possible that some of the injuries that do occur could have been avoided by better awareness and better training. I think that the professional staff of Ramblers need to win support for this concept and to provide future guidance and direction.
77. Medical issues become prominent for many people over 50 years of age and the incident record indicates significant levels of occurrence of medical emergencies on RA walks. Few leaders that I met held first aid qualifications and there is no standard expectation of the level of first aid kit to be carried. An incident on one walk resulted in the use of first aid materials. Although a number of members carried first aid kits, and several individuals were from a nursing background, the kits appeared to be primarily equipped for minor cuts, abrasions and headaches. In my opinion, the leader should have access to bandages and dressings appropriate to the rare serious occurrence and possess the necessary know-how in their use. Requiring all leaders to hold a first aid certificate is probably unacceptable but a basic first aid component in leader training and encouraged access to external first aid training is worth consideration, as is the provision of a standard leader first aid kit.

78. Most professional leaders would expect participants to declare any medical condition that might affect their participation. Similarly, most professional outdoor providers expect similar disclosure from their employees. These are sensitive matters that impinge on personal privacy but the intention is to ensure proper immediate care in the event of illnesses such as asthma, diabetes, epilepsy and so on, and also to avoid exposing individuals to undue threats to their health.
79. For a voluntary organisation the sensitivity may be even greater but I think that there is a case for the RA to consider whether a more open approach on these matters, or better levels of “declaration” would lead to better levels of care on led walks.

## The Standing of Led walks

80. I was told by several people that only about 30% of the total membership take part in led walks. Perhaps it is unsurprising that those who are in this active minority see led walks as the cornerstone of the Ramblers' existence and success. Of course, many members prefer to walk independently and may have limited personal interest or involvement in led walks, but even they would recognise that those walks represent an important aspect of the public face of the Ramblers.
81. The anecdotal evidence from the members I met was that led walks are an important source of recruits – the walks had led to their own joining and to them recruiting others. In some cases that I came across, the led walks were actively integrated with the campaigning and access work; in others, walkers were in general support of the campaign work but took no close interest in it.
82. All the professional staff that I met were committed and very able. There is a walks promotion function at HQ but this seems to be primarily concerned with expanding the range of what is offered, health promotion walks and walking festivals being good examples of this. There may be some sense among professional staff that led walks are a distraction from the “real work” of campaigning, but most seem to have a rather distant, avuncular affection for the walks, and are happy to let them continue as they are and have been.
83. When I asked group members what they would most like the professional staff to do for them and for led walks, the most common reply by far was along the lines of “Keep out of our way!” and there was a feeling voiced by many that HQ only make contact “when they want something”.
84. I find it hard to avoid the suspicion that led walks are in danger of being taken for granted by the professional function. In my view, the walks represent the best kind of mass movement, bring enjoyment and satisfaction to many and contribute

strongly, if indirectly, to the campaign work of the organisation. They are of a scale and variety that many national organisations would envy.

85. Therefore I think it desirable for the professional function in the RA to attempt to build bridges to leaders and groups so that there is no doubt that volunteers' work on led walks is recognised, valued and supported. Some of my other recommendations are concerned with putting greater expectations on leaders concerning matters such as authorisation or incident reporting. Such changes are more likely to happen in a climate of trust and if leaders also perceive or receive corresponding benefits.

## Conclusion

86. Led walks are a splendid institution that owes much of its success to the unstinting work of leaders and groups. Although there is no current crisis, there is a danger of led walks becoming increasingly separated from public expectations of safety and quality, or at least failing to progress. My recommendations are that the organisation takes significant steps towards a new culture and improved methods of operation in these areas.

## Recommendations

87. I make these recommendations on the basis of my views and observations as summarised above. For each recommendation it is necessary to balance any advantage against potential disadvantages. My own view is that all are worthy of serious consideration, but persons with a greater knowledge of the RA may be aware of obstacles that I have overlooked.

88. Few of these suggestions are instant solutions and some will take several years of patient work to establish new attitudes and practices. However, I do not believe that any of the recommendations are unattainable and most require modest

amounts of work, albeit work sustained over an extended period. Taking the first steps may be the most difficult part.

I have grouped the recommendations under some of the main issues. The main groups of comment are not in any order of importance:

**89. Increase the prominence and acknowledged importance of led walks within the RA:**

- Celebrate the success of led walks and their leaders
- Allocate further professional staff time to the development and support of led walks, particularly in the area of safety and quality
- Work towards a culture of quality enhancement of led walks and support this by training, conference events, regular magazine features, recognition awards
- Give led walks a clear identity in any future processes of strategic planning that succeed “ Waymarking the Future”

**90. Enhance the assurance of quality and safety in leaders:**

- Define and apply minimum standards of experience and competence for leaders which are related to the intended level of operation
- Ensure that leaders know what is expected of them in terms of quality, safety and ethos, and have access to information and training to support this
- Identify what training might be necessary to support these standards in new leaders and promote the use of RA funds for leader training
- Clarify the nature of the organisation’s legal protection of leaders
- Develop a formal process of approval and/or mentoring of new leaders by established leaders of recognised competence
- Make the process by which leaders are matched to walks more consistent and more open.
- Consider developing a register of leaders

- Consider the issue to authorised leaders of standard “leader packs” (which might include core literature, first aid kit, survival bag, fluorescent waistcoat, compass, map voucher, badge, T shirt...)
- Formalise the probationary period for new leaders and ensure the influence of a mentor during their first walks as leader

**91. Enhance the flow of key information to those attending led walks:**

- Encourage the consistent briefing of new members attending led walks, on the volunteer status of leaders, on the acknowledgement of risk, and on the importance of matching capabilities to the level of challenge of the walk
- Introduction of a participation statement might be considered

**92. Raise the profile of risk management in connection with led walks:**

- Introduce a Safety Committee to consider notable incidents and developments and to advise professional and volunteer staff
- Introduce a simple system of reporting and analysis that allows learning to be drawn from adverse occurrences
- Have safety issues concerning Led walks as a routine agenda item at all group, area and trustee meetings

**93. Enhance the assurance of quality and safety of led walks:**

- Identify those categories of led walks that fall outside the core provision and identify what special measures are necessary for these
- Encourage the formal appointment of assistant leaders
- Encourage the sub-division of larger walking parties into smaller
- Make efforts to spread awareness of best practice more widely, through dissemination by professional staff and use of magazines and conferences
- Campaign for consistent best practice in higher risk areas such as traffic hazards
- Continue to encourage the availability of two speed programmes and shorter walks

## Appendix 1

### A Possible Approach to The Screening of “Upper End” Walks

94. For the walks identified as “upper end”. A responsible person or person would be expected to address the following questions:

- What is the leader’s previous experience of this kind of walk?
- What experience of party leadership?
- What level of mountaineering expertise in route finding, navigation and the use of the rope in an emergency?
- What knowledge of first aid and emergency procedures?
- What is Plan B in the event of adverse conditions?
- Is there an entrance requirement for those attending?
- Is the planned route appropriate to those targeted and the number likely to attend?

95. An identified, competent assistant leader seems to me to also be desirable.

96. The screening of the leader and the walk may be done on a walk by walk basis or there can be a generic process by which certain leaders are approved for upper end walks. There is an obvious connection with a possible register of leaders.

97. There is no doubt that, in the event of some serious accident, the Ramblers and the leader responsible would be in stronger positions if the leader held a national qualification such as a Mountain Leader award, but other means of demonstrating competence can be acceptable. A statement such as:

“Our leader, Mary Smith, has been a Ramblers’ leader for five years. She has led parties in Torridon and Skye on three previous occasions and has made regular independent visits to the area including, in May, a reconnaissance of the route.

She is a qualified teacher, holds a Red Cross certificate and has undertaken climbing ascents in the Alps”

carries a deal of authority.

98. Even more convincing would be to be able to add:

“Ms. Smith’s competence to lead was assessed and approved by John Wilson, who is the area trainer for the Ramblers’, an extremely experienced Ramblers’ leader and a member of the Ben Stride mountain rescue team. She underwent a two day training course in Glencoe for Rambler’s leaders. Her plans for the day in Skye had been approved by Flora MacDonald, the Glentrudge group walks co-ordinator”

99. Although when described, this sounds impossibly bureaucratic, much of what is suggested is probably already taking place in an informal manner. My recommendation is to make the process more clear and open, and to keep basic records of the decisions made and the evidence on which they are based. I do not think that this requirement is unduly onerous, but its introduction would require careful management in order to avoid provoking the hostility of leaders and groups.

100. The following points should be emphasised:

- The crucial step in the process is the approval of the leader’s competence by John Wilson, who should recognise that he is taking on an important responsibility
- The credibility of this approval depends on the Ramblers’ ability to demonstrate the competence of John Wilson. This is best achieved if he holds a National Governing Body qualification but this is not likely to be a widely available option in the near future. Nevertheless, having a process

of approval of both leader and walk strengthens the position even if those approvals are not by externally qualified individuals

- The screening process collects information and opinion on the would be leader and the plans for the day. One would hope for leaders normally to be reinforced in their confidence but a robust system must occasionally result in a decision that says “this leader is not yet ready for such a level of walk” or “this walk is not appropriate for the target group”
- Although the importance of a process like this is most clearly seen for “upper end” walks a comparable, but less stringent, process for the approval of both leader and walk is desirable for all walks.
- The process of identification of walks as being outside the core could apply equally well to health promotion and similar walks, though of course, for these, an entirely different skill set is needed.
- The number of upper end walks is not very large but represents an area of significant hazard and one where there is ready comparison with professionally led parties – a comparison that may be unfavourable to the Ramblers.

## Appendix 2

### Bob Barton - Summary of Credentials

#### Education

- Graduate of Cambridge University - Natural Sciences, including physics and mathematics
- Post-graduate Certificate in Education - Outdoor Education, UCNW Bangor
- Dip RSA (Management) Lancaster University

#### Employment

Positions held in the field of outdoor education and training since 1975 have included:

- Tutor, Brathay Hall Trust
- Instructor, Scottish National Outdoor Training Centre, Glenmore Lodge
- Principal, Outward Bound Eskdale
- Operations Director, Outward Bound Trust
- Safety Adviser, Outward Bound Trust
- Safety Consultant, Outward Bound International
- Technical Adviser, Duke of Edinburgh's Award
- Director, European Avalanche School

#### Other Professional and Voluntary Experience

- Worked extensively as a mountain guide and instructor in Britain, the Alps and the Arctic, specialising in alpine mountaineering and ski-mountaineering.
- A Mountain Rescue Team Leader for 8 years and a recent Chair of the United Kingdom Mountain Training Board - the co-ordinating body for mountain training and qualification
- Member of Expedition Advisory Panel, Duke of Edinburgh's Award

## Outdoor Qualifications

- International Mountain Guide (UIAGM / IFMG / IVBV)
- Mountain Instructor Certificate – the highest UK award for rock climbing and mountaineering
- Mountain Leader Award (Winter and Summer)
- has been responsible for the training and assessment of candidates for the above awards
- Qualified in both Nordic and Alpine skiing by British Association of Ski-Instructors
- Mountain Bike Leader

## Personal Experience in Mountain Sports

- First ascents on rock and ice in Britain, the Alps, the Arctic, Africa, the Andes and the Himalayas
- Attempt on the unclimbed North East Ridge of Everest from Tibet
- Member of the Alpine Club and the Scottish Mountaineering Club

## Publications and Presentations

- “A Chance In A Million?”, a manual of Scottish Avalanches
- “The Outward Bound Rock-climbing Handbook”
- “Outdoor Management Development - A Guide for Human Resource Specialists”.
- “The Outward Bound Survival Handbook” (editor)
- “Risk Management as Opportunity” Conference paper, Royal Geographical Society
- “Challenging Ourselves” Conference paper, Heads of Outdoor Centres
- “The Human Factor and Pattern Recognition” Conference paper, Scottish Mountain Safety Seminar

## Experience as an Expert

- Prepared reports for more than thirty cases concerning mountaineering and the provision and management of outdoor activities
- Has acted for both Claimants and Defendants
- Has acted as a Single Joint Expert

Has given expert evidence in Civil, Criminal and Coroner’s Courts