

THE RAMBLERS' ASSOCIATION

HANDBOOK FOR AREA SECRETARIES

June 2006

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WELCOME

Welcome to the Area Secretaries Handbook. We'd like you to see this as a guidebook and resource rather than a rule-book. The information contained here was initially pulled together some years ago at a conference of all Area Secretaries in England, Scotland and Wales and in many respects it represents a "counsel of perfection". We hope that you find the contents clear and helpful.

As an Area Secretary, you play a central and very significant role in the work of the Ramblers' Association. You almost certainly have loads of pressures on your time and we are fortunate that you are prepared to devote some of that time to the Ramblers. Thank you.

The most important message that I have for you is that you should feel free to do the role in a way that seems appropriate to your own circumstances. Hopefully this handbook will help you but it would be crazy for you to 'beat yourself up' because you are unable to do everything mentioned in this book. You know how much time you have to spare and you have the best feel (or will have soon!) for where the priorities lie within your Area. Areas function in different ways and I regard this as a strength rather than a weakness of our operation.

The post will undoubtedly keep you as busy as you want to be and I really hope that you will derive enjoyment and satisfaction from the work. You can be absolutely sure that, as one of the RA's key volunteers, you are making an invaluable contribution to the RA's work.

If you have a query about any aspect of your work as Area Secretary or need any support in the role, the Volunteer Development Team at Central Office should be your first port of call. Think of them as your "one-stop shop" for queries, concerns, help and advice.

Contact

Volunteer Development Team
volsupport@ramblers.org.uk / 020 7339 8520

1 YOUR JOB AS AREA SECRETARY: AN OVERVIEW

The Area Secretary's role in a nutshell

The function of an Area Secretary of the Ramblers' Association is to pursue, within the Area's territory, the aims of the Association (to promote walking, to promote the integrity of the path network, to secure greater access on foot to the countryside, and to protect the outdoor environment). Your role as an Area Secretary, with the Area Chairman, is to try to ensure that your Area (which includes for this purpose local RA Groups within the Area) carries out this function as efficiently and as effectively as possible.

As part of the Ramblers' Association function, an Area (and its Groups) should seek to comply with charity law (see end of this section) and with the policies and directives of the Association's General Council and Executive Committee.

The five (six) points of the Area Secretary's compass

Your work as an Area Secretary involves dealing with five sets of people and organisations (six if you are in Scotland or Wales). These are the main points on your Area Secretary's compass. The sets are (not in any order of importance):

- **The RA at national level (GB) level:** General Council, The Executive Committee, Central office (RA headquarters in London). The national RA offers you support, advice and information. In turn, it is part of your job to give certain information to the national RA and to cooperate with them in pursuit of the RA's aims.
- **RA members in your Area:** Here, your main role is to give members an opportunity to have their say in the running of the RA, especially at the Area annual general meeting.
- **Your Area Council and/or Committee and other Area officers and volunteers:** Your job involves, in particular, convening meetings of and implementing many of the decisions of your Area's governing body.
- **RA local Groups in your Area:** For a local Group, the Area Secretary is their key point of contact within their Area. Your role is to promote good co-operation and communication between the Area and its Groups, and to encourage Groups to carry out their role properly.
- **The wider public, other organisations and the media in your Area:** You or your designated Area media contact is the principal spokesperson for your Area. As such, members of the public, and outside organisations, may often approach you for information about the RA and its work.

- **The RA at Scotland/Wales level:** The Scottish/Welsh Council, the Scottish/Welsh Executive and the Scottish/Welsh office. Here again, Area Secretaries play a key role in ensuring good co-operation between Areas in Scotland/Wales and the RA at Scotland/Wales level. (If your Area is in Scotland or Wales).

Your role in relation to each of these groups of people and organisations is described in a little more detail in the following sections of this handbook. Some key action points are summarised at the beginning of each of those sections.

The Area Secretary's role in RA campaigning and other Area work

This handbook concentrates on the Area Secretary's roles of administration, communication with other parts of the RA, and co-ordination and leadership within their Area.

In the past, several Area Secretaries have played an active role in footpath, countryside or access work at Area level. Some have managed to combine their Area Secretary's work with other RA jobs, such as acting as Area Membership Secretary, or as editor of the Area Newsletter, or as a walks leader for their local Group.

The RA owes much to volunteers who have been able to play such a multi-faceted role in their Areas. But as Areas grow in size, and as the Area Secretary's work (as described in this handbook) thus becomes more time-consuming, it is likely that fewer Area Secretaries will be able to combine more than one role in the way just described. It is certainly not compulsory to do so!

In any event, it is assumed for the purpose of this handbook that footpath, countryside and access work within an Area, the maintenance of Area membership records, the production of Area newsletters, etc will largely be undertaken by volunteers (footpath secretaries, etc) other than the Area Secretary. Advice on pursuing such campaigning and other work can be found in other RA guidance notes produced by the RA's offices, such as guidance notes for RA footpath workers.

However, the Area Secretary, along with other Area officers, should play a role in formulating policy and planning campaigns in their Area (largely through contributing to discussion at the Area's Council and/or Committee meetings), and may play a role in speaking on public platforms and in the media in support of the Area's campaigns.

Tools for your job

Although the RA is a large and growing organisation, the resources which it can afford to allocate to each of its fifty or so Areas are very slender.

Nevertheless, your Area may have sufficient resources to provide you with essential equipment, such as a computer and printer or a typewriter; a small photocopier; filing cabinets; an answerphone, etc. And all your reasonable expenses - for example, traveling costs, postage, telephone calls, etc - are of course reimbursable by the Area. (See Section 2 – Advice on office equipment)

However, your most important resources will be the time, skill and experience that you can bring to bear on your work as Area Secretary. The RA benefits enormously from the fact that people with relevant skills and experience (often acquired at a very professional level) are willing to volunteer to spend some of their time working for the RA at Area or Group level.

If you wish to undertake training courses to enhance your skills, in ways which will help your work as Area Secretary (for example, in developing your skills in using a computer, or in handling interviews with the media), it would be perfectly reasonable for your Area to meet the cost of your doing so - see Section 7).

As outlined in subsequent sections of this handbook, the RA itself (particularly at Great Britain level) may from time to time organise training events for Area Secretaries and other volunteers. You will be notified of these and may find them helpful.

And, of course, you may learn much from your predecessors as Area Secretary and from other officers in your own Area (or from neighbouring Area Secretaries if you want to give them a ring).

Delegation

Of equal importance is the fact that, with a growing membership and with more and more people willing to work in a voluntary capacity for the RA, you may be able to find other volunteers to help you with work that would otherwise fall entirely upon your shoulders.

Indeed, perhaps the most important skill that an Area Secretary should cultivate is the ability to delegate - that is, to find, train and persuade other volunteers to help you carry out your work as Area Secretary.

You may find it easier to recruit such volunteers if you can parcel the work which you want done into discrete and manageable "packages" - for example, taking minutes of Area committee meetings; booking rooms for committee meetings and the Area AGM; arranging for the text of the annual report to be set and printed; etc. Each of your helpers can then deal with one or more "packages", according to their ability and the amount of time they are able to give.

And, by being offered well-demarcated and modest-sized pieces of work, your helpers won't feel that they are making an open-ended commitment which could lead to much more of their time than they really wish to spare being taken up! A fear of being drawn into such open-ended commitments is often the reason why many people hold back from offering to act as volunteers.

If you choose to be a spokesperson or ambassador for the Area, it is important that the Area delegates to you authority to speak, write and act on behalf of the Area as occasion reasonably demands. As Area Secretary you are one of the Area's principal spokespersons and a leading "ambassador" for the RA generally. For example, local newspapers and radio stations may approach you for comment on issues of concern to the RA, and you should feel able to comment immediately if you can, without having first to obtain permission from your committee or from another Area officer.

Common-sense constraints and obligations

Of course, in making any statement on behalf of the RA, you should write or speak in a way that you are sure your Area Committee or Council would approve of and everything that you say or do as Area Secretary should be in accordance with RA policy (whether or not you personally are fully in support of that policy). If you are unsure, do not hesitate to consult with the appropriate member of staff responsible for that area of work. It may be that an RA statement or news release has been issued.

In acting on behalf of the RA (whether you are speaking or writing for the RA, or incurring any RA expenditure), you are not at risk of being faced with any liability, as long as you act with commonsense and with good reason for believing that you are acting within the RA's remit.

If any threat or question of legal liability arises, contact the RA Chief Executive's office at the earliest opportunity. Act on the advice which you are given and you will have the RA nationally behind you.

In the highly unlikely event that you are faced with some kind of potential liability in your role as Area Secretary, there are at least two further safeguards. The first is that you (and all other people acting on behalf of the RA) are covered by the association's public liability insurance policy. The second is that liability for everything done in the RA's name (including everything done at Area level) ultimately rests with members of the RA's Executive Committee. However, members of the Executive Committee are sure that they can rely on you not to place them in an embarrassing position!

Handing over to your successor

Without a shadow of doubt, the most important job you can do as Area Secretary is to 'talent-spot and groom' your successor. Far too many of the RA's volunteers do not give adequate thought to finding someone to replace them.

Charity law

Under charity law, the RA is not empowered to speak or act on matters which are outside its remit (as broadly defined by the RA's four key directions). The RA must also be very careful not to take, or be interpreted as taking, a party political position. You should therefore avoid making any statement on behalf of the RA that might be interpreted as an expression of party political opinion, or that is on an issue which is clearly outside the RA's remit.

The Charity Commission has produced a wide range of leaflets and booklets explaining the duties of charity trustees. These are available free of charge from the Charity Commission, (www.charity-commission.gov.uk ; 0845 3000218).

As part of a charity with responsibility for disposing of charitable funds, Areas and Groups must produce annual reports and accounts (see section 2).

In general, charity trustees have a duty of care - ie, they are responsible for ensuring that the charitable funds at their disposal are spent prudently and only in furtherance of the charity's objectives.

Although charities must not have political objectives, and must not take part in any activities of a party political nature, they could, within certain limits, engage in the political process (ie, seek to influence political decision makers such as national governments). However, all such activity has to be in pursuance of the charity's objectives, to be conducted reasonably, and to be ancillary to other work. The RA should have no difficulty in meeting these criteria.

2 THE RAMBLERS' ASSOCIATION AT GREAT BRITAIN LEVEL

KEY ACTION POINTS

- Compile and send to the Chief Executive's office by not later than March 31st, an Area annual report summarising the work of your Area and Groups in the year ending the previous September 30th.
- Invite a member of the RA Board of Trustees or an appropriate member of staff to address your Area annual general meeting and/or other appropriate event.
- Ensure that your Area is represented at RA General Council meetings.
- Read and take action as appropriate on circulars which you receive from central office.
- Inform central office of changes to Area officers and other key volunteers in your Area.
- If proposals for amendments to your Area's constitution are made, submit them to the RA Board of Trustees for approval.
- If any serious internal conflicts, or other major issues arise within your Area, which cannot be resolved within the Area, report them to the Chief Executive (especially if there is a possible conflict with charity law or RA national policy).

Your Area is largely funded by and is responsible for its actions to, the Executive Committee of the Ramblers' Association. Through its officers and staff in particular, the Board of Trustees endeavours to give support and advice to Areas in as many ways as possible.

The Board of Trustees takes a close interest in the work of Areas and their Groups.

The Board of Trustees often consults Areas (usually through Area Secretaries) before adopting any major new policies. The Committee also takes seriously any representations made to it by Areas. If your Area wishes to make representations to the Board of Trustees at any time, please write to them. If you want them to consider an issue at a particular Board meeting, please write to the Chief Executive's office about the issue not less than a month in advance of that meeting.

Information supplied by central office

Appendix A of this handbook contains a list of records which you will find useful to keep. If you do not have any of the items in that list, please try to obtain them. Central office in London will be happy to supply you with any such items that have been circulated from the office - for example, the RA Memorandum and Articles of Association, Board of Trustee minutes etc. Much information is available directly from our website too either at www.ramblers.org.uk/volunteer/support or on the Members' Section

Central office can also supply you with:

- Lists of circulars and guidance notes issued by central office over, say, the last three years, so that you can check to see if any particularly important items are missing from those handed to you by your predecessor – please contact the Admin team;
- RA guidance notes (such as Guidance Notes for Footpath Workers, Guidance Notes for Countryside Secretaries, Campaign Guidance Notes, and the Treasurers Guidelines). These were generally written for RA volunteers other than Area Secretaries, but you might like to have copies.

Mailings to look forward to

You will receive a weekly mailing from central office. In these mailings you will be sent:

- Board of Trustee and General Council minutes;
- numbered circulars;
- other documents of particular relevance to your Area;
- A Board of Trustee Bulletin which is produced after each meeting of the national Executive Committee. This summarises the key decisions taken at the meeting and is issued to Area Secretaries, Group Secretaries and other Area officers;
- Central office may also pass on to you letters received at the office which are on matters that your Area should try to deal with. It will often be appropriate for you to pass such letters on to other Area officers, such as your Footpaths Secretary or Countryside Secretary;

Circulars can also be downloaded from the Committee section of the website.

Unless it is felt that any item should be sent to you individually, as a matter of urgency, all material from Central Office that is intended for you as Area Secretary will be sent with your weekly mailing.

Each quarter you will receive a list of the numbered circulars that have been sent to Areas and Groups in the previous three months. Please check the list to ensure that you have indeed received all circulars intended for Area Secretaries. Where action is called for in a particular circular this will be highlighted.

Central Office can supply you with copies of any circulars on the list that you may not have received (eg, circulars aimed mainly at footpath workers), but which you would like to have.

This quarterly list will also give you an indication of the period of time for which each item should be retained. Some circulars should be retained indefinitely for reference; others can be discarded after a particular event has taken place, or once certain relevant action has been taken in response to the circular.

There will generally be no need for you to copy circulars, etc to your Group Secretaries or other Area officers (although circulars will often ask you to arrange for your Area to take some action, so you may need to report its principal contents to an Area committee meeting).

Some circulars which are sent to you are also sent to Group Secretaries and some other Area officers. The distribution list for each circular will be indicated at the beginning of the circular.

There is a monthly mailing from Central Office to all Group Secretaries. Group Secretaries receive less from Central Office than Area Secretaries and except in very rare cases, everything which is sent to Group Secretaries will also be sent to you in your capacity as Area Secretary.

Lists of Area and Group officers

At Central Office, lists of Area officers and of certain Group officers for each Area are maintained. Whenever central office receives notification of an amendment to this list of Area/Group officers for your Area, the Administration team will issue you with a copy of the updated list.

Do please keep the office in touch with any changes to officers within your Area; and do let the office know if you think that Central Office's list of Area and Group officers for your Area is incorrect. Please contact the Administration team on such matters.

Telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of Area/Group officers are only included on this list with the permission of each person concerned. If a number/address is included in the list, Central Office acts on the assumption that the person concerned is willing for it to be given to members of the public and to the media.

A list containing the addresses (and in some cases telephone numbers) of all Area and Group Secretaries can be found in *Walk Britain*.

Ramblers' Association staff

Annexes to this handbook include a list of staff currently employed by the RA and a description of responsibilities. This will be updated regularly.

Using this as a guide, you will readily be able to work out, in most cases, whom you should contact at the RA's offices to answer any particular query that you may have.

In particular, please note that, as a general rule:

- queries relating to *financial matters* should be directed to the Finance Director;
- queries regarding your *weekly despatches* should be directed to the Admin team;
- queries relating to the *administration of General Council* and *requests for EC speakers at Area AGMs* should be addressed to the Chief Executive's team;
- queries regarding calls to you from *the media* should be directed to the media office;
- queries relating to matters concerning RA work in *Scotland* and *Wales* should normally be referred to the Scottish and Welsh Directors respectively.

Visiting the RA's offices and meeting staff and Executive Committee members

Opportunities for Area Secretaries to visit Central Office in London and to meet members of staff who work here, are offered from time to time. You will be informed when the next one is arranged. Alternatively, if you are visiting London at any time and would like to be shown around Central Office while you are here, the Chief Executive's team will be pleased to try to arrange that.

You can also meet many members of staff and Board of Trustee members at General Council meetings (should you attend these meetings). In any event, please ensure that your Area sends its full quota of delegates to all General Council meetings.

Areas are also urged to invite Board of Trustee members to their annual general meetings, to speak to members and to meet Area officers. So that Trustees can take up these invitations, Areas are urged not to hold their AGMs on weekends that are booked for Trustee meetings. Dates of these meetings are sent out from Central Office.

Advice on office equipment

If you are ever acquiring major new items of equipment for use during your work as Area Secretary, the Administration team at Central Office can give you advice on photocopiers, fax machines and some other items of office equipment.

If you want advice on computer equipment, Central Office can put you in touch with other Area Secretaries with special expertise in this field; or you can contact the IT team at Central Office. (It is not essential for your computer equipment to be compatible with that used at the RA's office but, for information, the system in most use at the office at present is Word.)

Although no specific grants for Area Secretaries' equipment are available from the office, your Area Treasurer will have details of the basis on which your Area receives funds generally from the Trustees.

Information to send to the RA's offices

Ensure that you send to Central Office copies of minutes of your Area annual meeting and Area Committee/Council meetings.

Please compile and send copies of your Area annual report and accounts to central office. Please do this by not later than March 31st in any year (as the RA Memorandum and Articles of Association requires).

It is essential that Central Office receives at least one copy of your annual report and accounts. Ideally, we would like two. These should be sent to the Chief Executive's team.

More advice on compiling Area annual reports is contained in section 3.

Inform the Chief Executive's team of any proposals for change to your Area's constitution. These changes will need the approval of the Board of Trustees. Once the constitution has been amended, send a copy of the revised Area constitution to Central Office for office records.

3 MEMBERS IN YOUR AREA (with particular reference to your Area's annual general meetings)

KEY ACTION POINTS

- Organise your Area annual general meetings and hold them on dates and at locations which are convenient for as many Area members as possible.
- Give members a good opportunity to influence RA policy at the Area AGM.
- Ensure that all Area members are sent, or can easily obtain, a copy of the Area's annual report and accounts.
- Develop a system for ensuring that any offers of help from RA members are acted upon immediately in some suitable way.

It is probably true to say that most RA members have no more than a vague idea about what their Area's role is and what it does. This situation is to be expected because most members are much more likely to identify either with their Group (because they go walking with their Group), or with the RA nationally (because they joined primarily to support the RA's national campaigns), than with their Area.

As a result, contact between the Area Secretary and members is unlikely to form a major aspect of the Area Secretary's work. Nevertheless, communication between an Area and its members is especially important in one respect, and that is in giving members a voice in determining RA policy. Here, the Area Secretary has a very important role to play.

Area annual report and accounts

The Area Secretary normally takes the lead in preparing the Area's annual report. As explained in section 2, it is essential that an Area annual report and accounts are produced each year and submitted to the RA Board of Trustees via the Chief Executive before March 31st. This is because the RA M&A requires it and because the Trustees (members of which are ultimately responsible for everything that is done in the RA's name, including that done at Area level), rely upon Area annual reports and accounts to inform them of what has been undertaken in the RA's name and how RA funds have been spent at local level.

The Area annual report and accounts is also important as a source of information to RA members in the Area. So it is important that the Area's annual report and accounts is sent to all Area members, or that members are told how they can obtain copies.

Central office advertises the availability of the RA's national annual report and accounts in the RA magazine (*Walk*) and sends copies to members on request without charge and without asking for a stamped addressed envelope. Areas are recommended to adopt a similar practice (advertising the availability of the annual report in the Area newsletter). It is important that members are able to obtain easily the annual reports to which they are entitled.

The Area annual report and accounts should also be available to members in good time before the Area annual general meeting. This is so that members can, if they wish, read the annual report in advance of the AGM and come to that meeting and ask questions on the annual report.

As Area Secretary, you are responsible for compiling, printing and distributing the annual report. There are at present no central guidelines on the format that Area annual reports should take, but if you would like ideas on this, ask other Area Secretaries or ask central office to send you a few examples of how other Areas have produced their annual report.

As for the contents of the annual report, it should be for the year ending on September 30th and should contain a list of current officers and Committee members. It should be written as a factual account of the year's work, and its achievements (and disappointments) in relation to the RA's aims and to any targets that the Area may have set for itself.

The annual report should include sections (edited by you as appropriate to make the style of writing as consistent as possible) from key Area officers (chairman, secretary, footpath secretary, countryside secretary, membership secretary, treasurer, etc), and from all the Area's Groups. The Area Treasurer should supply a set of audited accounts to include in the report.

The Area Annual General Meeting

Advice on the organisation of your Area AGM is given in appendix C.

Ensure that your members are given reasonable notice of the date of the annual meeting and tell them how they can, if they wish, submit motions for consideration at the meeting.

Hold your annual meetings on dates and at locations which are convenient for as many Area members as possible.

To allow motions approved by members at annual meetings to be passed from Group to Area to national level, it is highly desirable that, within a given Area, Group AGMs are held before the Area AGM, and that the Area AGM is held before the final date for submission of motions to General Council (which is six weeks before the date of General Council (eight weeks for proposed amendments to the RA M&A).

Advice on how to submit motions to General Council, and a submission form are sent out to you every year in September. These come as part of the formal notification of General Council. If you need further guidance and advice on the wording of General Council motions, please contact the Chief Executive's office.

The AGM is also an important opportunity for members to question Area officers about the Area's work and to take part in elections for Area officers, Committee members and delegates to the forthcoming General Council meeting.

Requests for information, etc from RA members and members' complaints

As Area Secretary, it is likely that your address and telephone number will be widely available to RA members and to the general public (for example, by being published in *Walk Britain* and possibly in telephone directories). You may therefore receive a substantial number of requests for information about the RA from many sources.

Advice on dealing with such requests and with any complaints from RA members and others to yourself, is offered in appendix D.

Requests for walk programmes from RA members

In particular, you may receive requests from RA members for copies of local RA walk programmes. Such requests may come from all parts of Britain, especially if your Area is in a popular holiday area.

If you are able to do so, you should try to make RA walk programmes as widely available as possible to RA members, whether or not they are members of your Area. This is best done by participating in the Walkfinder project. You are warmly encouraged to get behind this Central Office initiative which encourages all Groups to list their walks online so that details can be accessed from our website. www.ramblers.org.uk/walksfinder . As well as making walks accessible, it also cuts out the need to mail out paper programmes to enquirers.

The general point here is that, as far as possible, all RA members should feel free to take part in RA walks throughout Britain and should be able to obtain, reasonably easily, details of RA walks both within and outside their own Area.

Offers of help

From time to time you may receive calls from RA members or members of the public offering to help the RA in its work. Such offers are, of course, to be warmly welcomed and you should develop a system for ensuring that they are acted upon immediately in some suitable way.

For example, if the person calling has skills which might be directly useful to you in your work as Area Secretary, arrange a time to talk to them about taking on one of the "packages" of work which section 1 recommends you have ready for delegation to any assistants whom you can enroll. If their interest is more specific - for example, in footpath work - arrange for them to meet the Area Footpath Secretary. If they are more interested in leading walks, or otherwise helping at local Group level, arrange for them to meet the appropriate Group Chairman or Secretary. (In most Groups the Secretary is the best point of contact, as is the case at Area level.) If no particular ideas for taking up their offer come to mind straight away, arrange for them to talk further with the Area Chairman perhaps with a view to co-opting them onto the Area Committee for a while, so they can learn how the Area operates before they take on any specific task.

4 YOUR AREA COUNCIL AND/OR COMMITTEE; LOCAL GROUPS IN YOUR AREA

KEY ACTION POINTS

- Convene meetings of your Area's governing body, keep records of its proceedings and endeavour to ensure that decisions body are implemented. Circulate copies of minutes of Area meetings to relevant Area Committee members.
- Keep members of your governing body well informed about developments in the RA at national level and encourage your Area to act in accordance with requests and advice from the RA at national level.
- Note that the RA, as well as being a registered charity is also a company limited by guarantee.
- Produce Area letter-headed paper and other stationery and when doing so, please use only the RA's logo and quote the RA's charity and company numbers.
- Encourage your governing body to provide a continuing training programme for all members, by making use of opportunities provided by Central Office, or in Scotland or Wales and through locally-developed courses.
- Keep yourself and your Area governing body well informed about the activities of local Groups in your Area. Make sure you receive copies of the minutes and reports of Groups within your Area.
- Keep your Groups well informed about activities and decisions at Area level. **Encourage Group representatives to report on Area meetings to their Group committee.**
- Encourage local Groups to make use of training opportunities provided by Central Office, or in Scotland or Wales and of any locally-developed courses.

Servicing your Area's governing body

As Area Secretary, you are the Area's unpaid chief executive. This means in particular that it is your job to ensure, as far as you can, that the Area's governing body is serviced efficiently.

The composition of your Area's governing body will be defined in your Area's constitution.

Some Areas have both a broadly-based Area Council as their governing body, meeting perhaps two or three times a year and a smaller Executive Committee which meets more frequently.

Membership of the governing body must include key Area officers and should include Group representatives and members representing the Area membership at large.

Whatever the arrangement is in your Area, it is your responsibility to arrange for governing body meetings to be convened and held at convenient times and locations; to prepare and circulate agendas and other papers for meetings; and to prepare and circulate, as appropriate, minutes of each meeting.

It will be for you and your governing body to decide how detailed the minutes of meetings should be. However, the essential information to record concerns attendance at the meeting, decisions taken and who is to take follow-up action. If in doubt, record details of any vote taken. How much you record of the discussion which led to a decision is up to you.

Many Areas now have records of meetings, newsletters, etc, going back several decades. If you are happy to keep all these in your home, acting as the Area's archivist, that is fine. But you may wish to follow the example of some other Areas who have made arrangements with a local university, or with the county archivist, or with a similar institution, to accommodate the Area's older records in a more satisfactory, and still accessible, location.

You will probably be directly responsible for implementing many of the decisions taken by your Area's governing body and with regard to those decisions, which it is the responsibility of other Area officers to implement, you should ensure that the relevant officers are aware of what is required of them (perhaps by highlighting action points in the minutes of each meeting).

Acting as the link between the RA at national and Area levels

You will probably receive far more information about what is happening at national level in the RA than other Area officers and members of your governing body. So the RA Trustees and staff rely upon you to keep your Area governing body informed about key national developments and to encourage them to act upon requests for action, which are made to Areas by the national RA.

In particular, please encourage your governing body to ensure that your Area supports national RA campaigns and events (such as the summer and winter walking festivals). Encourage them also to respond to consultation papers issued by the RA Trustees.

The role of the Area Chairman

The Area Chairman and the Area Secretary both have leadership roles to play in their Area. It is important that they are able to work together harmoniously and constructively.

The respective roles of the Area Chairman and Secretary will vary in detail from Area to Area, according to the particular interests and talents of each individual. However, it should generally be the case that the Area Secretary is responsible for most administrative work, while the Area Chairman, as well as chairing meetings and fostering morale and consensus within the Area governing body, takes a lead in seeking and recruiting new volunteers for Area posts, and in liaising personally with the Area's Groups.

Both the Chairman and the Secretary may act as principal spokespersons for the Area.

Training

The RA recognises that effective training of volunteers and key officers is paramount to the continued success and development of the RA. Quality training leads to a strong, motivated and effective team that will act as one strong voice in working towards the RA's charitable aims.

Training courses on a variety of topics are organised by central office and by the offices in Scotland and Wales. As Area Secretary, you should encourage your governing body to take advantages of these training opportunities and also to consider providing locally-developed courses (see also Section 7).

Administrative/office services

Some services and facilities can often best be provided centrally for an Area and these would normally be the Area Secretary's responsibility. They might include:

- Design and ordering of headed stationery. Remember to quote the RA's charity number and registered company number.
- Photocopying (if the Area owns a copier).
- Bulk ordering of stationery (to reduce costs).

Groups

Some Groups will have been set up by their Area. Many Groups, once formed, quickly become active and self-sustaining and need little guidance from their Area. Just as the national RA tries to give Areas as much autonomy as possible, compatible with the fact that Areas are ultimately accountable to the national RA, so Areas should give their Groups as much autonomy as possible, compatible with the fact that Groups are ultimately accountable to their Areas.

But there should remain good communications and close and friendly ties between Groups and their Area and here again, the Area Secretary has a key role to play in ensuring that this is achieved.

Just as your Area constitution and changes to it have to be approved by the RA Trustees, so the constitutions of local Groups in your Area and changes to them, have to be approved by your Area. A model Group constitution can be obtained from Central Office.

As Area Secretary, you should ensure that Groups in your Area have proper constitutions, and that you have copies of them. Proposals by Groups for amendments to their constitutions should be sent to you for submission to and approval by your Area's governing body.

Groups in your Area should send you copies of their committee minutes, AGM minutes, annual reports and accounts, walks programmes and newsletters and encourage your Groups to copy their minutes and annual reports and accounts to Central Office for information.

It is also essential that Central Office receives accounts from all Groups. Advice on this and other financial matters is available from the Finance Director.

Keep your Area governing body informed about your Groups' activities and developments (although Group representatives on the governing body should also be able to do this).

Your local Groups will no doubt look to you as a source of advice and support on a wide range of matters. Try to keep them well-informed about and involved in, what is happening at Area level, so they feel part of the Area team.

Training of volunteers and key officers is paramount to the continued success and development of the RA. Encourage local Groups to take full advantage of opportunities provided by central office, or in Scotland and Wales, and to play a full part in the development and presentation of local courses and workshops.

5 THE WIDER PUBLIC AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

KEY ACTION POINTS

- If possible, act as a first point of contact with the RA for members of the public by making your name, address and telephone number available in telephone directories, public libraries etc.
- Supply callers with information about the RA and its work and about how they can take part in RA activities.
- Make sure that key local organisations, such as local authorities and allied local organisations, are aware of your appointment as Area Secretary.

The Area Secretary: a first point of contact with the RA for members of the public

It is important that the name, address and telephone number of at least one Area officer is available to the public in telephone directories, public libraries, on the website etc. In most Areas, this Area officer will be the Area Secretary, although it is a matter for you and your Area governing body to decide if this should be the case in your Area.

In any event, the name and address and (where their permission is given) the telephone number of each Area Secretary is listed in *Walk Britain*, which is sent to all RA members and which is sold to members of the public.

Encourage members of the Area's Committee to make and keep up contacts with those outside the organisation who can be useful to you in your work, including local Members of Parliament, Members of the Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly, local authority councillors and staff, officers and staff of other environmental, statutory and voluntary organisations and members of the press and media. Invite the most useful to speak from time to time at Area events and meetings. Work with RA Groups in your Area to build up information on newspapers that circulate locally.

On the assumption that your address, telephone number and email address *is* made generally available to the public, you will probably receive a substantial number of queries and requests for information about the RA, from many sources.

Many such queries may simply take the form of requests for details of how to join the RA and how to make contact with the nearest local Group. Keep a stock of recruitment leaflets and up to date lists of the Area's Group Secretaries'/Membership Secretaries' addresses and telephone numbers handy, so these can be sent out to such enquirers.

Members of the public may also ask you for details of local walks programmes. If, as Central Office recommends, your Area publishes a consolidated programme of Group walks in your Area, you will be able to keep a stock of these handy and send copies out whenever someone enquires about local RA walks. If, however, each Group publishes its own walks programme, you may need instead to refer the enquirer to the relevant Group Secretary.

You may also receive reports of local footpath problems and countryside issues. You will no doubt wish to take down the details and pass them on to the Area Footpath Secretary or Countryside Secretary as soon as possible.

Dealing with complaints

From time to time you may receive complaints from RA members, or members of the public, about the "service" which they have received from the RA, or even about the way they have been treated by other RA members. For example, members may complain that their local Group's walks are too fast, or that they are not suitable for people without public transport, or that they have been upset by other members while out on a walk, etc - please see appendix D for advice on this.

6 THE MEDIA IN YOUR AREA

KEY ACTION POINTS

- Unless you are the Area media contact, you should only be the “postbox” for media queries if the media does not know whom to contact in your Area. Don’t deal with the media unless you are the Area media contact. If in any doubt in need of guidance and support, contact the RA central office media office on 020 7339 8531/532 or press@ramblers.org.uk

7 TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOU AND YOUR AREA

The RA recognises that effective training of volunteers and key officers is paramount to the continued success and development of the RA. Quality training leads to a strong, motivated and effective team that will act as one strong voice in working towards the RA's charitable aims. For this reason the organisation commits substantial amounts to such training.

Training is organised by the staff in London, Wales and Scotland for volunteers on different topics. In the recent past or near future training has been/will be held on the following:-

- Footpath policy work
- Footpath campaigning work
- Freedom to roam work
- Countryside work
- Recruitment media and publicity work
- Walk leading (training of trainers course)
- First Aid

Without the valuable work that *you* do on the ground for the RA, the organisation simply would not function. We ask a lot of you and we want to ensure that you are as well prepared as possible. Do tell us what *you* need.

8 THE RAMBLERS' ASSOCIATION IN SCOTLAND (for Area Secretaries in Scotland only)

KEY ACTION POINTS

- Send a copy of the Area annual report to the RA Scottish Office.
- Invite a member of the Board of Trustees to address your Area annual general meeting and preferably also a member of the Scottish Council Executive Committee or a member of staff from RA Scotland office. (The RA Scotland office can advise which members of SCEC are also Trustees)
- Try to ensure that Groups in your Area hold their AGMs in the first quarter of the RA year and before the Area AGM. An extra benefit of this is that Group AGMs may, if they wish, approve motions for Scottish Council.
- Try to ensure that your Area sends a motion to Scottish Council on some topical issue.
- Try to ensure that your Area is represented at Scottish Council and General Council.
- Inform the RA Scotland Office and central office of changes to Area Officers and key volunteers in your Area.

Please read in conjunction with Section 2 in particular and the rest of the handbook.

Area Secretaries in Scotland work in addition with 3 structures which reflect a uniquely Scottish approach to RA objectives.

- 1 **Scottish Council** meets annually, and elects officers and the Scottish Council Executive Committee.

Scottish Council furthers the objectives of the Association in Scotland, co-ordinates and expands the activities of Areas and Groups of the Association in Scotland and advises the Trustees on appropriate policies and major initiatives as they affect Scotland.

Membership of Scottish Council consists of:-

- 2 members nominated by each Scottish Area,
- 1 member from each Scottish Group,
- 1 member from each organisation affiliated to Scottish Council,
- up to 5 members of the Board of Trustees
- the Honorary Officers of the Council,
- the retiring members of the Scottish Council Executive Committee,

In order to assess the views of the Scottish membership and to seek agreement on appropriate Scottish policies through discussion, a substantial part of Scottish Council business may be taken up in the debating of motions.

- 2** The **Scottish Council Executive Committee** carries on the work of the Council between its annual meetings. Seven members are elected annually, of whom no fewer than five are either delegates of Areas or Groups, or retiring members of the Council Executive Committee nominated by delegates of their own Areas or Groups.
- 3** The **RA Scottish Office** currently consists of five paid staff led by the RA Scotland Director. They cover all aspects of RA work, apart from membership and some administrative and financial matters. Some GB-led events, e.g. Festival of Winter Walks, are organised from Central Office.

The RA Scottish office sends out those RA Circulars which apply to Scotland only.

All requests for help or advice should be directed first to the RA Scottish office, except those concerning membership records, which should be directed to Central Office.

The Scottish Rambler newsletter is produced from the RA Scottish office with a volunteer editor.

Your role in relation to the Scottish Council, Scottish Council Executive Committee and RA Scotland office

Area Secretaries have an important liaison role in representing the membership, Groups and Area officers within their Area and keeping staff in the RA Scotland office and members of the Scottish Council Executive Committee aware of local issues.

By arranging that topics appear on the agenda for Area business at the appropriate time (and keeping track of deadlines), you can encourage the full participation of your Area in Scottish business as follows:

Delegates to Scottish Council

Your Area's delegates to Scottish Council may be chosen by your Area Council or Area Executive Committee, or may be elected at your AGM, but you should try to ensure that your Area sends two delegates to represent the Area's views and encourage Groups within your Area to use their entitlement also. Formal notice of the date of Scottish Council is normally sent out to you each December.

Motions to Scottish Council

Any motion which your Area may wish to put forward should be of interest to the rest of the Scottish membership. If it covers matters of interest to Great Britain as a whole, it may be better treated as a motion to General Council. It is good democratic practice for motions to be approved, even if only in general outline, at your Area AGM. Advice on the drafting of motions is available as a leaflet entitled *Advice to Areas and Groups in Scotland on Drafting Motions for Scottish Council*, available from the RA Scotland office.

Election to the Scottish Council Executive Committee

Encourage members of your Area who are lively and have shown enthusiasm for RA objectives to stand for election as members of the Scottish Council Executive Committee.

The Scottish Rambler

Liaise with your Chairman to ensure regular contributions to the Editor for the newsletter.

Guest Speakers at your AGM, etc

Members of the Scottish Council Executive Committee and members of RA Scotland staff will be delighted to receive invitations to attend Area AGMs or other meetings. Please give them an opportunity to speak at the meeting, either on a subject you may want to suggest, or on a current topic of their choice. They will be glad of the opportunity to meet members and to answer questions.

8 THE RAMBLERS' ASSOCIATION IN WALES

(for Area Secretaries in Wales only)

KEY ACTION POINTS

- Compiles and send to RA Wales, by not later than March 31st, two copies of an Area annual report summarizing the work of your Area and Groups in the year ending the previous September 30th. One copy will be sent on to the Director.
- Invite a member of the Board of Trustees, or Welsh Council Executive Committee to address your Area Annual General Meeting.
- See that your Area is represented at Welsh Council.
- Read and take action on circulars which you receive from Central Office and RA Wales.

Please read in conjunction with Section 2 in particular and the rest of the handbook.

The structure in Wales mirrors that in Great Britain with a Welsh Council meeting annually, which elects a Welsh Council Executive Committee, meeting quarterly.

The Welsh Council consists of, among its membership, two members nominated by Area and one member nominated by each Group and a footpath officer from each county. The Area Secretary should try to ensure that their Area is properly represented on the Council. The Welsh Council and its executive furthers the objectives of the parent body within Wales, acting on behalf of and exercising the functions of the Board of Trustees.

A staff of four led by the RA Wales Director, cover all aspects of RA work, apart from membership and some administrative and financial matters. Some Great Britain led events, for example, the Festival of Winter Walk are organised from central office. RA circulars are sourced from Central Office except for those relating to Wales only. The newsletter, Y Cerddwyr/Welsh Rambler is produced from the RA Wales Office.

Apart from membership your first call for help or advice should be from RA Wales office.

WCEC members and staff regularly visit Areas and Groups in Wales so that they can keep up to date on both local issues and members' views. At the same time they can pass on information to the membership on current RA activities. Area Secretaries have an important liaison role representing the membership, Groups and Area officers within their Area and informing staff at the RA Wales office and WCEC members of local issues.

INFORMATION AND RECORDS YOU WILL NEED AS AREA SECRETARY

A SUMMARY

You will no doubt be able to decide for yourself what information and records you need to enable you to do your job as Area Secretary. Your predecessor should have passed to you many of these records, such as minutes of past Area AGMs and committee meetings.

However, you will find it helpful to include the following among the records which you keep (and which, as appropriate, you update from time to time):

- This Handbook for Area Secretaries
- The Ramblers' Association Memorandum and Articles of Association
- Your Area constitution
- Constitutions of all the local Groups in your Area
- The constitution of the RA Scottish or Welsh Council (if your Area is in Scotland or Wales)
- The RA's current annual report and accounts
- A file of numbered circulars sent to you by central office, together with the quarterly lists of those circulars supplied by central office. These circulars will include minutes of RA General Council and Board of Trustee meetings and the current Area/Group discount form for RA sales and information items.
- The current *Walk Britain* (which is particularly useful as a source of information about Area and Group Secretaries in other Areas and about the RA's structure, finance, history and current activities).
- A set of recent editions of *Walk* magazine.
- Minutes of your Area's annual general meetings and Council and/or Committee meetings.
- Copies of past Area annual reports and accounts.

- A set of recent editions of your Area's newsletter (or the equivalent), plus recent editions of programmes and/or newsletters produced by local Groups in your Area.
- A list of the addresses, telephone numbers (and fax numbers and e-mail addresses if appropriate) of your Area's officers and other Council/Committee members; and of other key RA volunteers in the Area, notably local Group secretaries.

Files relating to:

- Next meeting of the RA's General Council.
- Next meeting of the RA's Scottish or Welsh Council (if your Area is in Scotland or Wales).
- Next annual general meeting of your Area.
- Next meeting of your Area's council and/or Committee.

A file of current correspondence:

- A diary or other notebook in which you keep brief records of the telephone calls, routine requests for information, etc, which you receive on a day-by-day basis and how you deal with each of them. This may seem a little laborious, but Area Secretaries who have used this technique in the past have said that it saves time in the long run, especially if a dispute subsequently arises over how you dealt with a particular query. The record which you made at the time should settle any disagreement about how you handled the original query.

Appendix B

Office Contact information

RA Central Office:

2nd Floor
87-90 Albert Embankment
London
SE1 7TW

Tel: 020 7339 8500/Fax 020 7339 8501

Email: ramblers@ramblers.org.uk

RA Scotland:

Kingfisher House
Auld Mart Business Park
Milnathort
Kinross
KY13 9DA

Tel: 01577 861222/Fax: 01577 861333

Email: enquiries@scotland.ramblers.org.uk

RA Wales:

3 Coopers Yard
Curran Road
Cardiff
CF10 5NB

Tel: 02920 644308 Fax: 02920 645187

Email: cerddwyr@ramblers.org.uk

To obtain a direct line for a particular member of staff at central office, please dial 020 7339 8 followed by the appropriate extension number.

To email a member of staff in Central Office or the Wales office, please put their name, followed by the first letter of their surname then @ramblers.org.uk (for example, for Joe Bloggs, it would be joeb@ramblers.org.uk). For staff in Scotland, you need to use the suffix @scotland.ramblers.org.uk

AREA AND GROUPS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETINGS

IDEAS TO HELP MAKE THEM SUCCESSFUL

Introduction

The aim of this note is to help your Area or Group get the most out of your annual general meeting. The advice which it contains is based on successful practices which have been adopted by Areas and Groups throughout Britain.

Areas and Groups vary enormously in character, especially in the sizes of their membership and the territory they cover. So no single detailed formula for running an AGM can be prescribed for all Areas and Groups. But the following ideas have been tried and tested by many different Areas and Groups and have worked well. They are well worth considering if your Area or Group hasn't adopted them before. They will help you make your AGM a lively event which many members will want to attend.

Aims of the annual general meeting

The advice below is directed at furthering the RA's work at the grassroots. In particular, it is directed at the successful achievement of your AGM's six main aims, which are:

- (i) to elect the Area officers and representatives of individual members and generally to encourage more members to volunteer to help with the work of your Area or Group;
- (ii) to bring together as many RA members as possible to meet each other, to discuss the affairs of your Area or Group and to gain strength in their belief that the RA is well worth belonging to and supporting;
- (iii) to give members an opportunity to influence RA policy by presenting and debating motions which may then be passed to the Area (by a Group) or to General Council (by an Area);
- (iv) to give members a chance to hear and direct questions and views to a representative of the RA national Executive Committee;
- (v) to conduct constitutional business, such as approving the annual report and accounts;
- (vi) to secure some publicity for the work of your Area or Group.

When to hold the meeting

Pick a time and venue aimed at maximising attendance at the meeting. Some Groups find that a weekday evening in the autumn is most popular with their members; other Areas and Groups prefer a Saturday as this allows time for a walk and a social event in addition to the meeting (see below). A midweek evening meeting in the middle of winter will probably not be popular.

Please avoid weekends when the Board of Trustees is meeting. Details of those dates are circulated to Areas and Groups in October each year.

To allow motions approved by members at annual meetings to be passed from Group to Area to national levels, it is highly desirable that, within a given Area, Group AGMs are held before the Area AGM and that the Area AGM is held before the final dates for submission of motions to General Council. Areas and Groups are urged to adopt this approach.

Where to hold the meeting

Choose a venue which;

- is easy to find;
- is ideally accessible by public transport;
- has reasonable parking space;
- is accessible for the disabled;
- is warm and well-lit;
- is large enough for the numbers expected to attend (plus some display space);
- has adequate toilet and kitchen facilities.

It is worth checking at an early stage whether the hirer of the room will require you to sign an indemnity form. If they do, remember that the RA's public liability insurance policy will cover you and your Area/Group against any claims for damage to the venue arising from the RA's negligence. Further details of this policy have already been circulated to all Areas and Groups and can be supplied again by central office on request.

This insurance should be sufficient to meet the requirements of most room hirers. However, if you are asked to sign an indemnity form that goes beyond circumstances covered by the RA's insurance, do not do so. Seek advice from Central Office first.

On the day of the AGM, put posters or banners outside the venue so that members will immediately see on arrival that they have come to the right place. If necessary, waymark the route from the entrance of the building to the room where the meeting is being held.

Entertainment

It is well worth organising something which will attract people, such as a walk, or series of walks, before or after the meeting. If you hold the walk before the meeting, encourage people not to disappear, by providing a simple lunch (tickets to be bought in advance) or suggesting that everyone goes to a nearby pub, or brings a picnic.

It is useful to have time when members can talk to each other and get to know your officers and committee members and lunch is a good time for this.

Consider also ending the meeting with tea or other refreshments of some kind.

Publicity for the meeting

In the Area/Group newsletter or programme which is sent to your members prior to the AGM, publish a prominent notice giving full details of the meeting and of any walks and other events associated with the AGM. Make it clear that the AGM is one of the big highlights of the year for your Area or Group - something not to be missed.

Tell members, in the notification to them of the AGM, how they can obtain a copy of the constitution of the Area or Group, if they want one. Copies of the RA's Memorandum & Articles of Association are available to members from central office.

Make it clear in the notice of the meeting and in all other advance publicity, that you want volunteers for certain posts, explaining briefly what each post entails and how anyone interested can obtain further information.

A few days before the meeting, issue a news release of what will be said at the AGM, by your president or chairman, or whoever opens the meeting, referring to matters of local or regional interest. Incorporate remarks that any national RA speaker who may attend proposes to make (see below).

In the news release, invite the press to attend the meeting. If they do not come, they will still be able to report the meeting using the release. If the AGM is reported in the local press, other members will realise it is an important event and attend next year. Further advice on drafting news releases and on securing media coverage generally, is offered in the RA's Campaign Guidance Notes, available from Central Office.

The meeting

Make the meeting interesting, lively, brisk and efficient. If the meeting is slow and ponderous people will be reluctant to volunteer for posts because they will fear that the committee meeting will be the same and they will be deterred from attending another AGM. (A word of caution, though; if the meeting is too slick, people will feel that everything has been sewn up beforehand and they will be unwilling to contribute.)

Most Area and Group AGMs are chaired by the Area/Group chairman. Some Areas and Groups invite their president to play this role, but care is sometimes needed here, especially if the president has not attended committee meetings during the year and if they were elected for qualities other than an ability to chair meetings. But by all means invite your president to give a keynote speech at the start of the proceedings - it is something which could well attract members and the press, to the meeting.

Whoever chairs the meeting should be thoroughly briefed in advance and should be conversant with basic rules of procedure at meetings of this kind. They should refresh their memory of the Area/Group constitution and standing orders (if any) before the meeting and can, if necessary, consult books on meeting procedure, eg Citrine's ABC of Chairmanship ISBN 7163 50173

The chairman of the meeting should continually try to get members to take part in the discussion. Do not let your AGM give the impression of a top table of people who are there forever and are above challenge.

The handling of elections at AGMs varies, but it is important to strike the right balance. Nothing is more tedious than the proposing and seconding of each nominee separately, with a eulogy about each. But if they are re-elected en bloc, the AGM appears to be a foregone conclusion.

Make it clear that you want volunteers for every post and that a contested election is healthy. But if no-one new volunteers, deal with elections swiftly.

If there are any posts not filled at the AGM, the vacancies should later be publicised in the Area newsletter and in any other way and volunteers invited. Your committee can co-opt someone to fill the vacancies without having to wait until the next AGM. Some people, especially if they are new, or just shy, may be reluctant to volunteer at meetings where they may not know many other people and where no one knows of their interest sufficiently well to nominate them.

Displays

Have your local RA exhibition material on display at the AGM. This will inform members of the range of things you do and will provide a backcloth for TV cameras if they turn up and wish to do an indoor interview. Failing this, pin up some leaflets, posters, maps and members' photos (eg, of walks, and blocked paths which have been unblocked by the

RA); and always have a spread of RA publications laid out.

Fundraising

Your AGM offers an opportunity to do some modest fund-raising for your Area or Group. Have a few badges, car stickers, books and other items for sale. Organise a raffle with plenty of prizes. And if you draw the raffle right at the end of the meeting, members will be encouraged to stay throughout the proceedings.

RA Speaker

The Board of Trustees is keen to encourage Areas and Groups to invite national RA speakers, from the Board of Trustees or from the staff, to address their annual general meetings. Do please bear this in mind when planning future annual meetings.

Many advantages can accrue to your Area/Group and to the RA generally, by having a national representative present at your Area/Group annual meeting and giving him or her an opportunity to address the meeting and answer questions. Some of these advantages are:

- (a) *Communication* - a national RA speaker can give you and your members up-to-date information about what the RA is doing and saying at national level. The national representative will be asked to report back to the Board of Trustees, so their presence at your meeting will give the Trustees a clearer understanding of your Area's/Group's views and activities.
- (b) *Dialogue* - as the RA is a democratic organisation, it is important that all members should have an opportunity to question in person a national representative of the RA at their local Area or Group annual meeting. By inviting a national speaker and giving members present an opportunity to put questions, your Area/Group will be strengthening the democratic tradition of the RA.
- (c) *Participation* - many Areas and Groups report that the presence of a national speaker at their annual meeting helps to encourage more members to attend the meeting - even if they do so in order to ask the national representative difficult questions!

- (d) *Publicity* - local newspapers and radio stations may be more interested in sending reporters to your annual meeting if they know that it is to be addressed by a national representative of the RA. This can secure valuable publicity for your Area or Group. In consultation beforehand with your speaker, your Area/Group could issue a news release covering some of the remarks that the speaker plans to make. This can be especially valuable if he/she talks about issues of local interest, such as footpath problems and successes.

To book a national speaker, write to the Chief Executive's team at Central Office giving as much notice in advance as possible of the time and venue of your annual meeting. If you would like a particular speaker, or someone to speak on a particular topic, please say so. We shall do everything we can to meet your request.

Please make it a regular feature on the agenda of your Area or Group annual meeting to have a national RA speaker and to give members an opportunity to ask him or her questions.

Open Forums

Some members find the formalities of annual meetings a little forbidding, or even downright boring. As a means of encouraging more members to attend and to participate in the discussion, you may wish to experiment with dividing the meeting into two parts:

- the formal AGM business (elections, motions, approval of the annual report and accounts, etc);
- an Open Forum.

The Open Forum part of the meeting could be treated more informally, with wide-ranging questions and discussions about the RA's work at national and local levels being encouraged. The Open Forum might best centre on the address of the national speaker. Alternatively, your Area or Group may wish to hold Open Forum meetings on days quite separate from that of the AGM.

Invitation to comment

This note will be updated and reissued from time to time. Suggestions for improvements and additions to the advice that is offered here would be welcomed - particularly if such suggestions are based on Areas' and Groups' experience of running successful AGMs.

Annual report and accounts

Do not spend a lot of money on a lavishly-produced annual report, but do ensure that it is lively, neat and concise.

The annual report and accounts should be for the year ending on September 30th and should contain a list of current officers and committee members. It should be written as a factual account of the year's work, its achievements (and disappointments), with minimal comment and personal reflection.

It is, however, a good idea for your chairman or president to write a short foreword to the annual report in which they express pertinent views on some of the main issues that have faced the Area or Group over the past year. This could be quoted in a news release issued to mark the publication of the annual report. Give details of your forthcoming AGM in any such release.

Please do not use your annual report for attacks on the Board of Trustees or for other internal criticism. Bear in mind that it is a public document. Of course, if your Area has disagreements with the Trustees, by all means tell them so, or consider expressing your concern in a motion to General Council.

The annual accounts should be comprehensible and should carry a certificate from an auditor or independent examiner. They should also conform to any guidance issued by Central Office, especially as all the RA's accounts now have to comply with new regulations on charities' accounts.

You can save expense on postage by circulating your annual report and accounts with programmes or newsletters.

COMPLAINTS:

GUIDELINES FOR HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

This note offers guidelines to Area officers, Group officers and to RA staff, on how to deal with any complaints about the Ramblers' Association which they may receive. The essence of the guidelines is that any officer of the RA who is dealing with a complaint about the RA should handle it in a commonsense way, as fairly as possible subject to resource limitations.

In any cases of doubt or complication, you should refer the complaint to the RA Chief Executive's office.

The Ramblers' Association is a large and growing organisation. Every year thousands of RA members and members of the public take part in RA walks and take advantage of other services offered by the RA. Long may this remain the case.

The following guidelines are offered to RA volunteers and staff to help ensure that the number of legitimate complaints made about the RA remains small in number and that when such complaints are made, are dealt with fairly.

These guidelines are issued in response to requests from RA volunteers for such advice. If you have any suggestions on how these guidelines might be improved, please let the RA Chief Executive's team know.

How to avoid complaints being made

"Never lose your cool" is perhaps the best advice. If someone is being unreasonable or rude never give them an excuse for saying that you were equally unpleasant in reply. If they become entirely unreasonable, simply stop talking to them and say that you are willing to resume the conversation when they become more reasonable.

When speaking, writing or acting on behalf of the RA, never express opinions that are purely personal, especially if those opinions are on matters which are outside the RA's remit. In particular, remember that the RA is neutral as between political parties and political philosophies.

In some recent cases that we are aware of, complainants have suggested that they felt "discriminated against" by someone acting on behalf of the RA. Usually such complaints are unjustified, or are based upon misinterpretations of what was said or done on behalf of the association.

Nevertheless, it is important to avoid saying or doing anything that a reasonable person might interpret as discriminatory on grounds of race, sex, ability, age or income.

Dealing with complaints

The essence of the following guidelines is that complaints to the RA should be dealt with on a commonsense basis and that in cases of doubt or complication, they should be referred to the RA Chief Executive's team.

If you receive a complaint about something that someone in the RA has done or not done, the first question to consider is, do you feel in a position to reply? If not, refer the complaint to someone else who might be able to reply. If in any doubt about this, refer the complaint to the Chief Executive's team at Central Office.

If you do feel able to deal with the complaint, consider first if the complaint is obviously frivolous or just a repetition of a complaint that has already been reasonably dealt with. In such cases it would be quite reasonable for you simply to acknowledge it and say that no further action will be taken.

Otherwise, complaints should be dealt with on the following basis:

- (a) the complaint should be acknowledged as soon as possible and the complainant told that their complaint is being looked into;
- (b) if necessary, seek further information from the complainant, including copies of any relevant correspondence. If you do not receive this information and feel that you are, therefore, unable to make a judgment about the complaint, the complaint should be referred to the RA Chief Executive's team;
- (c) the complaint should be given fair and careful consideration;
- (d) in considering the complaint, you should be mindful of the RA's limited resources of time and money;
- (e) the person complained against should be given a chance to reply before any response is sent to the complainant.

You should make a judgment as to whether anyone else in the RA should know about the complaint and whether they should be consulted before you reply. For example, if you are an Area Secretary and you receive a complaint about a local footpath secretary, it would be wise to consult the Area Footpath Secretary. On the other hand, do not broadcast the complaint further than is necessary.

Be aware of the possibility that the complainant may have complained to more than one person in the RA. Usually this will be obvious. It is best for just one person from the RA to reply.

If you feel that the balance of the argument lies with the person complained against and that the complaint should be wholly or largely rejected, write and say this to the complainant.

However, if you feel that the complaint has some substance, get a second opinion before upholding it wholly or partly. Remember that, if you uphold a complaint against someone, the person complained about might then submit a counter-complaint.

In particular, if you feel that the RA should do something in response to a complaint (for example, offer some recompense), only promise that action will be taken if it lies within your authority to take that action.

Otherwise, refer the complaint, with your recommendation for action, to someone in the RA whom you think can take that action. Again, if in any doubt, refer the matter to the Chief Executive's team.

If at any stage you feel that the RA may have acted wrongly in law, or if you feel that a legal opinion is necessary before a judgment about the merits of the case can be reached, refer the matter to the Chief Executive's team.