

Ramblers' Association, Northumbria Area
Minutes of Area Council Meeting : Monday 21 October 2019 at 7 pm
Held at St Nicholas Church hall, South Gosforth, NE31 1BJ

Present

Mike Webber, Area Chair, & Chair Chester-le-Street)	Julia Forster (Hexham Secretary)
Wendy Maxted (Area Secretary)	Vicky Ludbrook (Sec. Morpeth)
Steve Edwards (Area Treasurer & Ponteland)	Dorothy Watson Fenwick (Morpeth)
Pauline Hawdon (Area Mins. Sec., & Aff Group Sec.)	Bill Gallon (Independent)
Richard Fletcher (Area Vice Chair & Durham)	Julie Brown (Sec. Short Circuits)
Alison Emslie (Area Executive)	Gillian Darbyshire (Sunderland)
Tony Royston (Chair Derwentside)	Gill Dallow (Sec.Tyneside)
Suzy Vaughan (Durham City)	Rob Hutchinson (Aff. Group/S/ld Walking Group, & Ind. Mbr)
Blake Vaughan (Durham City)	

Apologies: Mike Webber welcomed everyone and then gave apologies for Irene Carmichael, David Crowe, Carol Sanderson, Neil Allender, and Nuala Wright.

1 **Minutes of last meeting:** Having been placed on the website, were taken as read; and agreed.

2 **Matters Arising:**

3.1 **Long-term plans** – These had been re-sent as some Groups had not received them.

3.2 **Lost Ways** – A training afternoon had been held on 12 October.

1. **Finance** (Steve Edwards)

Current (available balance = £4,299.47 (actual £4,547.47) with a cheque for £248 awaiting to be cashed.

A budget request for £4,500 had been submitted for 2019—29 against a predicted spend of £6,800 – not yet heard whether the request had been approved.

Year-end returns process was now underway.

Next Payment from Central Office was due at end October.

He continued to experience occasional attempts to scam money, generally in the form of someone posing as the Chair and requesting a money transfer to a specified account. It seemed to happen because a scammer can see details of both the Treasurer and Chair's email addresses, so it is unlikely to affect groups but asked that Treasurers be aware so that they could be on their guard.

2. **Business/Action Plans and Planning**

At the General Council meeting in April, there was great concern regarding falling membership over the last 17 years. There were various speakers (including one from the National Trust), much discussion and workshops regarding this topic. It was hoped to encourage non-members who walked in the countryside to realise that there would not be a footpath network without the work of the Ramblers. Landowners between Manchester and Hull were willing to be part of the Great North Forest, but did not want people walking on their land; the Ramblers were pursuing rightful access for the public. Rambler received £2.4m from the Postcode Lottery which they fear they would lose if membership fell below 100,000. They have employing a consultancy company carry out a detailed review of the development and organisation of the Ramblers, proposals would be submitted to the Board of Trustees in January. Every area has a representative – Mike is the North East representative.

We now have an Area Publicity Officer (Alexa Rainsford), and it is hoped eventually to find Publicity Officers for individual groups. In response to Mike's enquiry, Hexham group said they had a roll-up panel and a market stall where their group were promoted, and Morpeth had been promoting walking as a healthy exercise. Leaflets sent from Central Office had also been distributed by other groups.

Many groups were way-marking, replacing stiles with gates, litter-picking and general footpath maintenance. The Ramblers are in discussion with Ministers about the New U.K. Agricultural Policy, following our exit from the European Union Common Agricultural Policy, to give incentives to farmers to keep paths open and stiles and footpaths maintained.

2. **Heritage Way Update** A meeting has been arranged 29.10.19 at the Causey Arch Café, of all those involved in the project. All 9 sections were now covered for stewardship. Chester-le-Street had had particular problems with litter in areas under four roads over the Way, and Gateshead Council had agreed to try & keep these areas clear. Bill Gallon had display boards

(which folded to 5' x 4') with photographs and details of the 80 mile route which had proved to be good for publicity. They could be borrowed by Groups and displayed in any suitable area; he would be willing to drop these off north of the Tyne, and Mike Webber would be responsible south of the Tyne, if delivery was required. Anyone wishing to borrow the boards, should contact Mike Webber.. Bill had put up the display at the History Society, Sunnyside, and they were presently in Whickham Library meeting room.

Tyneside had had good liaison with Gateshead Group as their main steward was temporarily incapacitated. There had been some fly-tipping problems elsewhere. Generally there were no problem with the route, although Bill Gallon was involved in a footpath dispute near Winlaton owned by Clavering Estates. An Appeal was to be held in December. Bill would check with Zoe Jones, Gateshead Council, whether or not she required confirmation of historical use of the route.

Bill Gallon to contact Zoe Jones

3. **Coastal Path Progress Report** (Nuala Wright)

1. Sections of the England Coast Path, from Filey to Amble, were now open to the public. From Amble to Bamburgh, had been published for comment this summer and was currently with the Secretary of State for determination. He would consider all representations and objections before making a decision about the approval of Natural England's report.
2. The section from Bamburgh to the Scottish Border was in the development and proposals stage. Natural England would visit all the land likely to be affected by proposals and discuss the options in detail with people who own or manage the land, plus relevant local and national organisations who have an interest in this stretch.
3. After final discussions have been held with those who have a legal interest in the land, Natural England would refine and check their proposals to improve access. This may start sooner for some sections than others.
4. The proposals would be finalised and published in a report to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which was expected to take place in Autumn 2019. Once published, the report will be available on GOV.UK and advertised in the local press. Copies of the report would be placed in council offices and other appropriate locations in the local area for people to view. There would be 8 weeks to comment and anyone wishing to comment would be able to make a representation on the report, and owners or occupiers of affected land would be able to make an objection. There may be some problems around Lindisfarne where there were no rights-of-way and Lord Armstrong had shooting rights in the area.
5. When completed in 2020, this will be the longest coastal path in the world (2,795 miles).

4. **Lost Ways Update**

A Training Afternoon had been held on Saturday 12 October. with Jack Cornish. 16 area members attended. Jack Cornish had suggested that the next stage was for each Council area to have a Co-ordinator. (*Names of volunteers for Co-ordinators to be sent to Mike Webber*). It was hoped to have a shortened version of Jack's presentation for the website and a possible short presentation at the Area AGM. Footpaths must be registered by 2026 and Ramblers were trying to get this extended. Richard Fletcher said that the Horse Society had submitted 56 applications, and he worried that with depleted Council staff numbers, there may be competition with bridleways. There was also pressure of work from diversion of paths because of new building work and possibly Cycling Groups.

Mike Webber

5. **Reports from Area Officers**

5.1 **Chair (Mike Webber)**

- May – Seven area members took part in a Walk Leadership training day, which he organised.
- June – He attended the first meeting in London for those involved in the Development Organisation & Location (DOL) review. Central Office were recruiting an additional Support Officer for the North (in addition to Diane Simcoe).
- August – acted as intermediary for the Area AGM preparations, sending information to Central Office re location, possible speakers etc. Email sent out inviting all members to attend, as there was some doubt who could attend.
- Chester-Le-Street group are devising and naming some walks (Riverside Round, Cestria Seven, Causey Arch March etc.) as a first step towards a local then an Area Walks Festival. **Item for AGM**
- 6 October – Mark Crosby (Head of Ramblers Operations) and Diane Simcoe (Northern Area Support Officer) were invited to a walk and talk in Chester-le-Street on 6 October. This had to be cancelled due to severe weather. If any other group would like Mark to attend one of their walks, let Mike know.
- Mike would be re-submit our application to hold the 2021 General Council meeting in Newcastle, when "Expressions of Interest" were requested by Central Office in the next few weeks.
- October – Pilgrimage Footpaths: A Consortium had taken over Auckland Castle, and they were opening the

Pilgrimage route from Auckland Castle to Escomb church and were interested in other interlinking routes. An article "Camino Route through County Durham" had appeared in the Northern Echo. See www.britishpilgrimage.org.

- 12 members had attended the free St John's Ambulance First Aid course on 12 October, which had been specifically designed for walking groups. Details of 2020 courses were on the website.

6 Group Reports

6.1 Chester-le-Street

- New members for the last 5 years: 2014 – 57; 2015 – 54; 2016 – 50; 2017 – 38; 2018 – 30.
- Membership total at 1st October 2018 was 94 and at 1st October 2019 – 104, which was the highest it had ever been. This follows the printing and distribution of 6,000 leaflets in July for £320, and leaflets being handed out to people attending the Saturday morning Park Runs in Chester-le-Street Riverside Park on the last Saturday of each month. They had walked their adopted Section 7 of the Heritage Way, carried out a ‘Litter Pick’ in the worst areas under four bridges in Birtley and installed some additional way-markers following reports from members of the public.
- In May, 2 members attended the Walk Leadership Training Course at Blanchland; and 2 members attended the Lost Ways Training in Jesmond provided by Jack Cornish from Central Office on 12 October.
- The Group was also joining an additional walk started by Durham Group on the 3rd Thursday each month, and Durham joined Chester-le-Street walks on the first Thursday.
- They were planning celebrations for the 40th Anniversary in December 2019
- Some local walks were being named as initial steps towards a future Riverside Walking Festival. A sub-committee were investigating what had been done by other groups to formulate a plan (see also “Action plans”).
- They do not have a Group Publicity Officer but it was a high priority and requests to fill the role had been made to members.
- The Group AGM is to be held on 3rd November & all details have been finalised.
- They continue to “car-share” as both a contribution to a healthier environment and to allow non-car owners to take part o walks.

6.2 Durham City (Suzy Vaughan, Group Secretary)

Membership is on the increase: 2019 – 166; 2018 – 139; 2016 – 130.

They continued to provide walks on alternate Sundays, Wednesdays, alternate Thursdays (short walk) and Monday evenings during the Summer months. Average numbers for Wednesdays were 20-33.

This year, they introduced a split walk 8/12 miles on a Wednesday; 2-day walking event in Gargrave (x2), coach trip to High Cup Nick, and a summer picnic.

Members had attended First Aid in the Field, Basic Navigation, First Aid by St John's Ambulance, and Lost Pathways training. The group has purchased their own first aid kit and introduced emergency fobs. Suzy had introduced an emergency contact list through Google drive, shared with the Walks Secretary and Publicity Officer (Jim Birkett – jimbirkett.u@gmail.com) which was available through mobile phone, password protected.

Their facebook page continued to grow, especially with the introduction of photographs showing where they had walked. The FB page was vital to pass on messages to members regarding walk details, amendments and cancellations. They had also introduced an email update (with consent) providing the same information for those not on FB.

They had advised members of the available Apps – St John Ambulance, three words that can save your life, and Obtaining Help in an Emergency – mobile phone guidance.

Suzy had organised a litter-pick in her local area and three members had attended.

6.3 Hexham (Julia Forster, Group Secretary)

- They had a membership of 147, which was the same as 5 years ago; during that time it had dropped to 136 and then recovered. They had a steady trickle of new members, which was offset by members moving, dying, or not renewing which seemed to happen sometimes after membership had been bought as a gift.
- They paid for 400 leaflets to be printed, plus 30 posters, and these were distributed at 40 different locations in the Hexham area. They had an article appearing in Hex-press which was distributed to 500 homes, shops and cafes in Hexham, and a small advert in Tyne Valley Express which was distributed to 32,000 homes east of Hexham in the Tyne Valley. They had a charity stall in Hexham market place once a year.
- They did not have a publicity officer by title; publicity was shared between Julia Forster and Nick Markson, a new committee member who had taken on the webpage and leaflet production. They had a committee meeting the following week when they would consider appointing a Publicity Officer as they recognised that they needed to increase efforts if membership was to grow.
- They stewarded the section of the Heritage Way from Ponteland to Wylam by walking it a minimum of once a year and reporting any problems which were beyond their scope.
- Their walks programme offered walks between 5 and 12 miles, every Sunday, which were well supported. The path maintenance group was thriving and went out twice a month. Social events included meals out, speakers and annual weekend away to an HF house. Members were offering to come on the committee. Ed Wilson, Volunteering Manager, was coming to their AGM in November, by invitation. Six Hexham members attended the recent “Don't Lose Your Way” training day, and 3 members attended the First Aid training Day.

6.4 Morpeth (Vicky Ludbrook)

Current membership was 70; Numbers who joined in the last five years: 2015 – 1; 2016 – 6; 2017 – 9; 2018 – 5; 2019 - 4. In

2019 4 new members joined, but only 2 had walked with the group.

In March the group walked Section 2 of the Heritage Way as part of its annual inspection, There were a few waymarking issues which were reported, and a large amount of unsightly litter along the path behind the school at Burradon, which was also reported. The group had extra waymarking signs in case any were missing. It would be walked again in the spring.

In August the walk in the Rothbury area was cancelled due to flooding on the access road and start-point car-park.

Six members of the Morpeth Group completed the First Aid training which was offered by the Ramblers in Newcastle in August. Their Publicity Office was Jacqueline Armstrong (jaqarmstrong@btinternet.com)

6.5 Ponteland (Steve Edwards)

Their pattern of walks continued as before with shorter Wednesday walks being the better supported.

The trend for membership numbers was downward. Over the last year, number of members has fallen from 97 to 89, but during that period they recorded 10 new members, 7 of whom walk regularly with one of the groups. Eight years ago, their membership was over 120. Perversely, the number of people walking with the group is the highest it has been for some time.

They did not have a publicity officer, the task of sending copy to local publications currently rested with the Group Secretary. New members came from 3 main sources – printed copy, internet searches and friend recommendation.

One of their members had assumed responsibility for stewardship of section 3 of the Heritage Way.

Their major concern was the availability of leaders for Sunday walks although there were promising signs of improvements.

6.6 Short Circuits (Julie Brown)

They had 94 members with an average attendance of 30. Walks were held on alternate Saturdays and were about 5- 5½ miles.

They had had an “away day” at Berwick upon Tweed, followed by a guided history tour. 29 attended the weekend away in June.

Their AGM would be held on 2 November. They did not have a Publicity Officer but had included a small advert in the Golden Age leaflet. They used cars for their walks.

6.7 Sunderland (Gillian Darbyshire)

In September 2014 the number of members was recorded as 161 which decreased to 156 in November 2015, then in the following years as 126,123 and then 127 at present. The decrease in numbers from September 2014 may be due to “cleaning up” of the register following creation of a separate membership secretary.

The falling membership was a concern; however, the number of walkers each week varied between 20-30 on a Wednesday,-and 12-20 on a Sunday. The group walked every Wednesday and alternate Sundays

No direct publicity of the ramblers had been done apart from the distribution of some leaflets and the creation of the Facebook page which had proved to be very popular

In May, a number of members attended 2 of the courses held by Richard Holmes and found them very informative and useful

A very successful holiday to the Isle of Man took place in October which was organised by the Treasurer and included many of their members and a few from other Ramblers groups.

Several of the newer members, with encouragement of the group, had led walks and the programme was completed without too much difficulty.

April 2020 would be the 100th anniversary of formation of Sunderland Group, and they hoped to commemorate with a “donate a gate” scheme, replacing a stile with a kiss-gate. They hoped this would create some publicity and intended to invite Kate Ashbrooke and Harry Wilson.

6.8 Tyneside Group

Present membership was 652 with about half actively walking. They had had 22 new members in recent months but unfortunately overall numbers were declining due to people not renewing their membership or dying. Earlier in the year enquiries were coming in at a rate of about one a week but this has now considerably reduced. Initiatives to encourage new members had included promoting themselves through doctors’ surgeries and some church events. They were contacted by Active Newcastle to see if their walks were suitable for the more able walkers but unfortunately nothing long term was established. At present they had no Publicity Officer.

Tyneside was responsible for section 5 of the Heritage Way, Wylam to Thornley Woodland Centre. There was a good relationship with the councils involved, Zoë Jones at Gateshead and Tim Fish in Northumberland. Wayward foliage was cut back during the growing season but problems arose where farmers had not made provision for maintaining a path across their fields after sowing. Unfortunately fly-tipping and a vandalised stone stile needed to be reported to the relevant Authority. Feed-back to the website had been generally positive.

7 Annual Area Report to Central Office

Concern was expressed about the content of the proposed new A3 format of the Annual Area Report to Central Office. Groups were not happy that their reports might be censored so that only positive comments were included, as this would not be a true report to Central Office. On the other-hand using an article which included concerns about falling membership may have a negative impact on attempts to attract new members. Further discussion required.

Mike would discuss this with David Crowe.

8 Executive Committee members visiting Group AGM's

The Chairman wondered about the best way of group members getting an understanding of the work and purpose of the Area.

He asked whether Groups would like a visit from an Executive Committee member – perhaps on a walk & a coffee afterwards - rather than meeting once a year at the AGM. Please feedback your thoughts directly to Mike.

Group Secretary's

9 The next AGM was to be held in Berwick upon Tweed, at Holy Trinity Parish Hall (TD15 1DF), on Saturday 8th February 2020.

10 Date of Next Area Council meeting – Monday 20 April 2020.

There being no other business, the meeting closed at 9.10 pm.