



**Kent**

## **Minutes of Annual General Meeting held on 4 February 2023 at Headcorn Village Hall, Church Lane, Headcorn, Ashford, TN27 9NR**

### ***Present***

Colin Sefton (Chairman), Tony Bristow (Vice Chairman), Hilary Adams (Treasurer), Robert Peel (Secretary) and 53 other members.

### ***Welcomes and Introduction***

Colin Sefton welcomed everyone to the AGM, aspiring like the BBC to inform, educate and entertain. He mentioned specifically Richard May, attending as a member of the Board of Trustees, and asked to be informed afterwards of anyone not happy to appear in photographs of the event.

John Billings, Chairman of Medway Group, also welcomed everyone to the AGM promising a 2.5 mile walk in the afternoon, with some risk of mud. He advised that Medway Group last year hosted first aid training courses and would be doing so again in May this year. The Group also invited all members to join their holiday in Bromsgrove in September – details had been circulated but with an incorrect deadline for booking of 31 January which should have been 31 March; there are plenty of spaces. The Group will be organising its first walking festival from 11 to 17 June this year.

### ***Minutes of AGM held on 5 February 2022***

The minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 5 February 2022 online, were agreed to be a true record. No one wished to raise any matters arising from the minutes.

### ***Annual Report***

Colin Sefton presented some highlights from the Annual Report, noting what a busy year it had been with work on rights of way, publicity and trying to improve the effectiveness of Central Office.

### ***Annual Accounts and Treasurer's Report***

The meeting approved the accounts and report.

### ***Motion to General Council***

The following motion was presented to the meeting:

“This AGM approves the submission of a motion to General Council in broadly the following terms:

'This General Council is concerned that Areas and Groups do not always receive the quality of support they need and expect from members of staff. Council believes that this may be because staff:

- do not always have a good understanding of what volunteers in Areas and Groups do;
- do not fully appreciate how work is organised within Areas and Groups;
- underestimate the impact centrally proposed changes may have on efficient performance of Area and Group activities.

Council also considers that Area and Group Officer workloads are often already high, and in many cases excessive, and that additional requirements, especially those that use their time wastefully, may reduce Officers' willingness to continue in their roles.

Council therefore calls upon the Board of Trustees to ensure that, when members of staff take on roles that impact in any way on the work of Areas or Groups, they undertake an induction process which should:

- ensure that they have a thorough understanding of the work and processes in Areas and Groups that might be impacted;
- include a period spent shadowing or assisting with the work of relevant Area or Group Officers.'

The Area Officers are authorised to make such amendments as they deem desirable to render the motion more effective or more likely to be passed by General Council, after consulting Area Council as far as is reasonably practicable."

Colin Sefton explained the background to the motion as outlined in the draft background note which had been posted on the web site (Appendix 1). Robert Peel had been trying to take the matter forward in correspondence since July but it was only when they were alerted to this motion that Central Office began to respond meaningfully. The aim was to keep up the pressure to prevent the dialogue stalling again.

A wide-ranging debate took place. Several members had found Central Office staff helpful and some felt that the motion was too general and would have been better if more specific. Others expressed their deep frustration at the handling of the introduction of written risk assessments and IT systems such as Assemble and the new Walks Manager.

The motion was CARRIED<sup>1</sup> but the Officers promised bear all the comments in mind when managing the progress of the motion towards General Council.

A question was raised about the constitutionality of the motion as it had not been considered by individual Groups. Robert Peel assured the meeting that there was no requirement in either the Ramblers' memorandum and articles or the Kent Area constitution for motions to General Council to have been considered by Groups.<sup>2</sup>

## ***Election of Honorary Officers***

Colin Sefton was elected Chairman

Tony Bristow and Mark Lavenstein were elected Vice Chairmen

Robert Peel was elected Secretary

Hilary Adams was elected Treasurer

There were no nominations to serve as Area Council Representatives for Affiliated Clubs

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<sup>1</sup> 22 for, 19 against & 14 abstentions

<sup>2</sup> The Ramblers' Governance Manager has confirmed that the handling of the motion has been fully compliant with all constitutional requirements.

There were no nominations to serve as Area Council Representatives for Individual Members

### ***Appointment of Delegates to General Council***

The meeting agreed to send Colin Sefton and Robert Peel as its delegates to the 2023 General Council which would be held in Birmingham and authorised the Officers to appoint substitutes should either become unable to attend.

### ***Appointment of Auditor***

Faye Clarke was unanimously appointed.

### ***Topical Presentations***

#### ***Coastal Access***

Ian Wild, Coastal Access Officer, reported that apart from some small sections of the route on Sheppey and on the mainland between Iwade and Gillingham the England Coast Path in Kent was complete. He expected this would be his last address to an AGM on the subject. The meeting passed a vote of thanks to Ian for his hard work over many years to ensure the successful delivery of coastal access in Kent.

Robert Peel explained that the stretch of the coast path on Sheppey from Leysdown-on-Sea to Sheppey Bridge via Harty was 16 miles long with no easy access to convenient parking or public transport in between. He outlined investigatory work being undertaken to create access from Little Bells to either the bus stop at the prisons or to the main road near Eastchurch.

#### ***Public Rights of Way Work***

Colin Sefton noted the surge in applications for planning permission for solar farms in Kent and outlined the guidance on solar farms recently issued by Central Office. Several members felt that the guidance was in places meaningless and woolly, waffling on the key principle of protecting public rights of way. It was suggested that this failure should be specifically mentioned amongst the others supporting the motion passed earlier in the meeting.

Tony Bristow explained how, when face to face meetings became impossible during lockdown, he hosted a series of online seminars for footpath volunteers using Zoom. There were four in 2021 and three in 2022 in subjects such as the definition of path width, railway crossings and temporary path closures with Graham Rusling from Kent County Council leading the discussion. By October 2022 we were again able to hold a face to face in Lenham which was so well received that we have decided to hold another in May rather than waiting the usual year.

Robert Peel reported that in another effort to improve communications with footpath volunteers a new newsletter had been initiated with the first issue going out the previous week. He was keen for feedback as to how it could be improved and he would welcome contributions from volunteers.

Alan Smith read out a statement explaining the difficulty of measuring the benefits that the efforts of our footpath volunteers produce. Robert Peel presented a series of specific path improvements achieved by our volunteers.

#### ***Open Forum***

A member expressed concern that the advertised qualities sought in new Trustees in a recent email from the Ramblers' chair were too political, citing particularly a reference to skills in EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion).

Richard May, Trustee, reminded the meeting that we have a new Chief Executive from the Scouts and a newly formed Paths Team. He said that skills in EDI were not expected of all Trustees but remarked that Ramblers' members do not reflect the diversity of the walking community that the Association should be representing. He said that risk assessments were being reviewed but they would not be abolished, just improved. Richard offered a huge thank you from Central Office and the Board to all Kent's volunteers.

### ***Next Annual General Meeting***

The next AGM will be hosted by North West Kent Group in Church Hall, Bexley on 9 February 2024.

## **Appendix 1**

### *Draft Background Note to General Council Motion as published prior to the AGM*

There is a widely held view that many initiatives in the Ramblers in recent years would have been more successful or less damaging if the Central Office staff responsible had better understood the activities, working practices, support needs and motivation of volunteers in Areas and Groups. While the change that has caused most anguish in recent years was the poorly-communicated introduction of written risk assessments for walks, Assemble is probably the initiative that has been most wasteful and represents the greatest mismatch between expectation and reality. Areas and Groups do have real needs for recording their volunteers and their responsibilities, especially those who undertake public rights of way work, but Assemble doesn't yet meet them, requiring the maintenance of separate lists of volunteers in Areas and Groups. The long delay in introducing the new Walks Manager appears to result at least in part from a mismatch between what the developers think Groups want and what they actually want.

At the heart of these and many other issues in the Ramblers is the lack of meaningful dialogue between staff and volunteers and what appears to many volunteers to be a lack of interest from staff in understanding the work of volunteers. Such work actually delivers the vast majority of the charitable public benefits delivered by the Ramblers. We seek to see this deficiency remedied for the greater benefit of all.

