

How we got started

Sheila Talbot, Chair of Winchcombe Walkers are Welcome

I had followed Walkers are Welcome from the start in 2007, when Hebden Bridge announced that they were the first town and were inviting other towns to join a network. I knew it was the perfect thing for Winchcombe but I kept quiet for 18 months because I knew it would take over my life. Eventually so many shops and pubs were closing, I felt I had to do something. Here's what I did...

1. I made sure I had all the facts then I wrote to the Town Council, suggesting the idea.
2. I attended one of their meetings, presented the idea to them and answered questions. My enthusiasm won them over and they asked me to set up a Steering Group, agree a Constitution and open a Bank account. They agreed to pump prime the project with £500 and a local visitor attraction agreed to pay the Associate Member fee.
3. I knew that a good Steering Group was vital. I invited people from the following:
 - a. Town Council (I asked for 1 person and 4 volunteered!)
 - b. Borough Council Tourism Department
 - c. Local businesses that would benefit from more walkers in the town
 - d. Keen walkers
 - e. Ramblers members
 - f. Cotswolds Voluntary WardensI made sure that we had people with a range of skills including guiding walks, footpath maintenance, finance, fund raising, graphic design, marketing and administration. Most important of all, it shouldn't be Council led and everyone should be enthusiastic do-ers!
4. We adapted the general WaW petition to suit our needs and asked the Steering Group, local businesses and the TIC to collect signatures. We aimed for 250 and got over 500 in less than 3 weeks.
5. We contacted the local newspapers and radio stations to tell them what we were doing and gradually built up a network of contacts that could help us promote the town in the future.
6. We researched where we might obtain further funding, put together a business plan with costs, then wrote letters and submitted applications. By providing this information and detailing the anticipated benefits to the town, we had a good success rate.
7. We built a website with a catchy name www.winchcombewelcomeswalkers.com. The aim was to give walkers all the information they needed to visit the town and go for a walk. We incorporated key words such as 'Cotswolds' so that people searching *Google* would find it.
8. We spoke to our mentor regularly to get ideas and to check that we were going about things in the right way. We asked him to comment on our application before submitting it. We made sure we knew the deadline for submitting the application before the next meeting then crossed our fingers! We started the process in February 2009 and had gained WaW status by July 2009.
9. We told the world, and started distributing stickers, creating publicity material, working with other groups and businesses in the town and planning our first walking festival. We are always learning from others and if any of us visit another WaW town we always make ourselves known and exchange ideas. We get involved at a national level: we mentor other towns, we have a place on the national committee and we attend every conference.
We believe in the old saying **'The more you put into it, the more you get out of it'**
10. It seems to be working here, we have now delivered 3 successful 3-day walking festivals, we have launched our own 42 mile route, the Winchcombe Way, with a 5 page article in Country Walking magazine, the roads to the town have WaW signs, we have a new walking group, no empty shops and visitor numbers are up. And yes – it has taken over my life, but in a good way. I've just been invited to Japan to help them start up a similar scheme over there!