



Introduction

After an unusual year, it would be hardly surprising to have an unusual Annual Report, and in fact this report will cover 18 months, from our last Annual Get Together (remember those?) to the present time. Much of this report will be affected by the strange circumstances we have been forced to endure - but happily, much also reflects the determination to continue our work as best we could. Nonetheless, we are all hoping for better and easier times to come.

National Executive Committee

In October 2019, Randal Metzger was our Chair, and presented his Annual Report at the Annual Get Together (AGT) in Kirkby Stephen. At that time, he anticipated retiring from that position by the following AGT, and our Vice Chair, Baz Fewster, stood ready to take over. As a result of coronavirus, Baz soon found himself without employment, and arranged an earlier transition, taking over the Chair in May 2020. Fortunately, and unfortunately, Baz found himself a new job, but one which required unpredictable and demanding shift work; not being satisfied that he was giving the role of Chair all the attention he felt it deserved, he decided to resign that position, and revert once more to Vice Chair. So, in January 2021, I found myself in the Chair.

Before March 2020, the programme for the National Executive Committee (NEC) was to meet monthly by teleconference, and twice-yearly face to face - once in April, and again as part of the AGT. It quickly emerged that an April meeting was out of the question, and so we, like many of our members, turned to Zoom, which is not as friendly as face to face, but was an improvement on the teleconferencing - so we have continued with it, and expect to do so in the future.

Now, we have all got used to lockdowns and constraints on meetings, but a year ago, we, like the rest of the country, were full of uncertainty about what might or might not be possible 3 and 6 months down the line. Only after many weeks of this uncertainty did we conclude that a 2020 AGT was out of the question. This immediately raised another problem: as a CIC (Community Interest Company) we had no legal obligation to hold an Annual General Meeting, but our Articles of Association (our legal governing document) required us to hold one not less than once every 18 months, so by April 2021; such a timetable did not fit well with our planned AGT schedule, and as time went on, it was becoming more likely that any date within that 18 month period was not viable. After much investigation, and consultation with government guidelines and relaxations, we concluded that the best option was to amend the Articles to remove the need for an Annual General Meeting (but enable us to hold a General Meeting to serve the same purpose). We accordingly formulated proposals to do this, at the same time making some other relatively minor changes and bringing the Articles into line with the model Articles from Companies House. These proposals were duly accepted by the necessary 75%+ vote in February/March 2021.

Membership of both the NEC and the Board of Directors has remained fairly stable. The current make up of these two bodies is:

Kate Ashbrook	Director
Marshall Best	NEC, Director
Baz Fewster	NEC, Director (Vice Chair)
Andrew Frankland-Barber	NEC, Director (Treasurer)
Ken Hawkins	NEC, Director (Acting Chair)
Helen Kenneally	NEC
Ann Sandell	NEC (Secretary)
Naomi Wrighton	NEC, Director Changes

during this period are:



- Sam Phillips resigned
- Geoff Kitt resigned and was replaced as Treasurer by Andrew Frankland-Barber
- Randal Metzger left us when Baz Fewster took over as Chair
- Kate Ashbrook left the NEC, though remaining as a Director

We also sought to make more efficient use of our limited sources by setting up originally 6, now streamlined to 4 subgroups - Finance, Membership and Mentoring, Publicity, and Website. These have undoubtedly been beneficial, though we are still fine tuning their operation to get the optimal balance between decision making in the groups and at NEC level. Much of the work of these groups is obvious from their titles, but Finance did the groundwork for the revisions to the Articles, Publicity absorbed the work on events, Membership and Mentoring oversaw the revision of some of our Fact Sheets, guidance for our mentors and the documentation supporting the Annual Return process, while Website has been continually refining and updating our online presence. The Publicity group has also been responsible for the successful introduction of our quarterly external newsletter *Walk This Way*; although still building up its circulation and impact, it has made a good start in raising both our profile and some funds.

With a few exceptions, I have not named the people who have led our various initiatives during the year, not because individuals have not taken on and brilliantly discharged many responsibilities, but because most of our work is ultimately the result of a team effort. We are grateful to all NEC members and Directors for their continuing contributions to promoting the Walkers are Welcome message.

Events

A nationally co-ordinated litter pick had been planned for March 2020, and more than half of our members had confirmed participation when coronavirus intervened and caused the cancellation of the event. Plans to revive the event in March 2021 have also been nullified by the same cause.

During this period, plans for Regional Get Togethers also fell by the wayside.

As restrictions were lifted in the summer, we proposed that members arranged a walk to coincide with the Tree Council's National Tree Week in November and December, and many were able to do this. The result was a lot of lovely photos of autumn colours on our Facebook page.

Policy issues

Walkers are Welcome and its members do not operate in a vacuum - we are all subject to, and affected by, wider consideration and impacts on the environment in general and walking routes in particular.

We have therefore sought to monitor developments and proposals which might assist our activity or act to its detriment. During the period of this report, we have monitored and/or commented on



- the *Landscapes Review* (the Glover Report) and its 27 proposals to bring together and strengthen the management of our National Parks and AONBs (Areas of Natural Beauty) under a unified National Landscapes Service
- the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMS). As with Glover, we await final government decisions and action as trials go on in some areas
- Natural England's revisions to the Countryside Code In addition, we responded indirectly to the Welsh Government's work on improving access. This included proposals to widen the use of its public footpaths. We were unsuccessful in nominating a WaW representative to the expert groups, but our Patron, Kate Ashbrook, was on the access group and invited our input. The outcome is awaited after the May elections.

Members' issues

In the Annual Return for 2019, we asked 'Question 10' - *We are constantly reviewing our priorities; do you have any thoughts about what the National Committee should pursue in the year ahead that we might pursue?* It took quite a while before we analysed all the replies we received, but (we hope) we were eventually able to consider all the suggestions received, and to inform each member of how we had responded to their suggestion.

In 2020, we again asked 'Question 10', this time it was *We always welcome your feedback. Here is an opportunity.* Although almost a half of members had no particular comment to make, approaching a half of those that did comment expressed satisfaction with what we had tried to provide by way of support. 12 members had some specific questions or proposals, and we are currently replying to and dealing with these.

Our 2020 Annual Return also asked for a brief summary of how members had reacted to the impact of coronavirus - we are aware that this has affected English, Scottish and Welsh members in differing ways and to differing degrees. A summary of what we were told has recently been sent out - we continue to be delighted and amazed at the enthusiasm and inventiveness of our members.

There have been some membership changes. We have been pleased to welcome Lampeter/Llanbedr Pont Steffan and Wotton under Edge as new full members. Not surprisingly, other provisional members have had to suspend their application process because of coronavirus; we currently have 8 provisional members, and 3 more who have expressed serious interest. Coronavirus has no doubt also had a hand in the resignation of 9 members over the two-year ends covered in this report.

Our activity

We have sought to keep members informed and entertained through our monthly newsletter, often supplemented by our attempts to keep up with the ever-changing guidance and rules affecting arranging walks and other events (for 3 countries, all going their own way!). We always have to add the disclaimer that decisions must rest with our members - unlike The Ramblers' groups, all our members are independent bodies, responsible for their own activities; we can only provide information as best we can.

During 2020, we obtained formal registration of our logos (logos plural, as the English, Gaelic, Welsh, and Bilingual English/Welsh versions are all covered). Following on from this, we are looking more closely at logo use among members, first to ask that everyone uses the circular



logo, not the now obsolete square version, and second to ensure that no one is modifying it (any presentation differing from the standard logo should be referred to the NEC for review).

One area of activity which has been very strongly affected has been our international links. Although we were pleased to receive our Japanese visitors in October 2019, we have been unable to do anything since then, partly because of the disincentives to (or actual bans on) overseas travel, and partly as two of the main drivers of our international work (Sam and Randal) have both left the NEC.

A final note can be made about the all too easily overlooked Newsletter and website news - we are always looking for items from members to share their ideas, results, and joy.

Finances

Our accounts are presented elsewhere. Suffice to say that the positive financial position has arisen largely at the cost of increased strain in trying to maintain efficiency. Our mentors have not met up with members, we ourselves have not met in person for over 18 months, and of course our Annual Get Together with our members was cancelled. I am grateful to the efforts made by all Directors and NEC members in working so effectively in isolation - but not a comfortable solution for the future.

And the future

As with our members, we have had plenty of challenges during this last 18 months and will be pleased if the positive signs of increasing freedom - as long as it is in safety - to pursue our plans, do indeed come to fruition. We have yet to hear of a walk being held on Zoom, and fervently hope never to do so.

We continue to plan and work towards this better future and take heart in knowing that our members are doing the same. Do keep in touch - let us know what you are doing and let us know what you think we should be doing - and if you want to help us do it, tell us that too!

One concern for the immediate future is how to manage the result of large numbers of people visiting the countryside (good), but not knowing the right ways to behave there (not so good and sometimes downright bad). We are circulating a short and customisable leaflet, based on the recently revised Countryside Code, which may have a part to play in advising visitors who are well meaning but lacking in knowledge - sadly, there is little we can do about those who simply don't care.

We look forward to seeing you all (not on a screen!) during 2021.

Ken Hawkins, Acting Chair on behalf of the *Walkers are Welcome*

Directors and NEC members



April 2021 to October 2021 Update

As Ken suggested in his closing remarks above and back in April, increasing staycations throughout the summer months coupled with staff shortages in the hospitality industry have put severe strains on being able to offer our best visitor experience although, the increased business revenue went some way to make up for the losses earlier in the Pandemic. The Countryside Code was hurriedly refreshed with further publicity in the hope of mitigating the many problems we have been experiencing on Public Rights of Way and in rural areas.

The planned northern get-togethers at Brampton and informally at Bradfield, had to be cancelled because of a lack of support and it became obvious that people were not ready to travel and meet up. The next scheduled Northern Region Get-Together is at Meltham on 14 May 2022. If you are considering meeting up in your area regionally, let us know.

Responding to a suggestion by one of our members, we have made a new facebook group, Walkers are Welcome Members where you may wish to discuss best practice or problems for help from other members. Only 48 members have signed in so far but summer is not the time for sitting in with a facebook group. We hope it will be useful.

As we emerged from COVID-19/Pandemic lockdowns. We suggested walks to commemorate history and heritage fitting into the Heritage Open Days and Open Doors calendars. Many walks were arranged in your towns and some reached the What's On guide on the website. And next?

The new Walk This Way external newsletter is doing well in raising awareness for Walkers are Welcome and visiting member communities. The small ads are adding to our income and at the same time promoting businesses in your towns and villages in a unique way. The PR and marketing group would like you help with other subjects to cover which you will have realised should also include member locations or events. There will be a discussion group on this at the General Meeting but if you are not there, please send in your thoughts together with any other publicity ideas. We are looking to December and the Christmas/winter special for film locations that have been used in our towns plus a bit of sparkle. Don't forget to forward Walk This Way to all your contacts and friends far and wide.

Forestry England's policy requesting permits and all the bureaucracy that goes with it was raised by one of our members and we are delighted that there should be a successful outcome. There have also been so many issues around protecting the countryside and global warming in the past months with the State of Nature Report, the end of the Common Agriculture Policy leading to the Environmental Land Management Scheme and trial, Walking and Cycling Infrastructure, bus schemes and trespass, pesticides, and Ash Dieback, to name but a few. We are now on the eve of COP 26 which takes place in Glasgow, just as we leave the Annual Get-Together in Kington, 31 October – 12 November 2021. No doubt this will prompt many discussions.

Pewsey and The Vale and Coleford were accredited having achieved the criteria during the Pandemic. Many congratulations.

Marshall Best tendered his resignation from the NEC in August. He is working on some important plans in Loftus and needs to put his energies into his local area. Baz Fewster has continued in a reduced capacity stepping down from most NEC work. It was a shock to the NEC and Ken, let alone his family, that he was taken seriously ill at the end of August and is

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now on a slow road to full recovery. If you remember Sam Phillips, he sadly lost his wife recently, Thelma was always full of life and joy at WaW Get-Togethers over many years and will be so missed. This all leaves the NEC with some large gaps, and we are seriously in need of help from members. Volunteers please.

All in all, a very different year that we could never have imagined.

Ann Sandell, Secretary
October 2021