

## **THE RAMBLERS ASSOCIATION**

### **HERTFORDSHIRE AND NORTH MIDDLESEX AREA**

#### **Special Area Meeting with Robert Peel**

**15 October 2011**

In mid October, after a beautiful walk in glorious sunshine, around 60 members representing almost every Group and several affiliated societies took part in a lively discussion on the future of the Ramblers. It was led by Robert Peel who, after taking an active part in the "Concerned Ramblers" movement, received the highest vote in the election for trustees at the 2010 General Council. Part of his responsibilities is to provide a liaison between the Board of Trustees and our Area.

Robert started by reviewing the present situation. In the current year the Ramblers has achieved financial and organisational stability but in both cases with considerable uncertainty for the future. The major and most worrying feature has been our failure to halt the continuing decline in membership.

Turning to the financial situation he explained that in 2009 there were no accurate membership records and subscription income was lower than anticipated. The income from legacies was also lower than usual. The organisation came very close to being unable to pay its bills and was forced to make drastic cost savings including many staff redundancies. In subsequent years, thanks to very careful budgeting and cost control, there has been a small surplus but one consequence has been that some highly desirable IT initiatives had to be postponed.

There will be a small surplus in the current year but this is largely a result of legacies which are unpredictable and there is no guarantee that they will continue at the same level. In accordance with the recommendations of the "Kipling Report ", this surplus is available for defined projects in the following year. The Trustees have agreed that it should be used to fund selected upgrades to the website.

The budget for the coming year foresees a deficit in order to finance necessary upgrades to the central website. It will be covered by reserves which are normally held in a range of 30-40% of the annual expenditure on core activities. This policy is to be refined.

A Business Plan is being published for the third year in succession. This plan, for the year 2011-2012, is the second to have been issued in draft for consultation although the volume of comments was disappointingly low. The top priority is to increase the number of members. The targets are to recruit at least 21380 new members, to ensure that at least 50% of these new members are retained and that at least 86% of existing members renew their subscriptions.

A Central Office marketing team has been concentrating on research into the sort of people we can attract as members. People who regularly walk with friends and family, or who are members of other walking clubs, may be willing to join to support our campaigning. Another target group is "would be walkers", people who are actively retired or approaching retirement. They may be new to walking but are looking for a sociable hobby. Robert explained that it is superficially attractive to attempt to recruit younger people but research suggests that marketing is most successful with people in their 50s, 60s and 70s in better off areas.

One initiative is to introduce more flexible Group structures. Another could be a pilot scheme for a paid officer to provide marketing support for a region.

There is evidence that the majority of existing members do not walk with a Group but that the majority of new members join to walk with a Group. There are various possible explanations one of which is that we are not actively publicising our campaigning activity. The present quality of our footpath network has been achieved through Ramblers' efforts and it needs constant work to keep it as it is. In answer to the question why do we need Central Office Robert said that pressure from Central Office on central and local government is an important element. Without the Ramblers the network would deteriorate and within 10 to 15 years large parts would be unusable.

One problem is that we do not have good evidence of Ramblers achievements. We cannot demonstrate that we have made a difference. Unlike organisations such as the National and Woodland Trusts we cannot show tangible assets that have been bought through members' subscriptions and legacies. One member suggested that the Ramblers could remedy this by investing in the creation of some rights of way.

Robert explained the controversial relationship between the Ramblers Association, Ramblers Holidays and HF Holidays. For very many years Ramblers Holidays have provided grants to the Ramblers Association. We are very grateful for this support. Historically these grants were used to help fund our core activities such as protection of rights of way. More recently this funding has been channelled through the Ramblers Holidays Charitable Trust. Possibly because of the way they interpret advice from The Charities Commission, the Trust now only gives funds to specifically defined projects where there are documented planned outcomes. It has, for example, provided supporting funding for the Get Walking Keep Walking project, but it does not fund unspecified core activities. It can fund aspects of these activities on the basis of bids for specific projects

The Ramblers Association needs additional funds to support its core activities. The joint marketing deal with HF Holidays means that in return for promoting HF Holidays the Ramblers Association will get both funds to support its core activities and new members. It is hoped that these new members can be persuaded to renew their subscriptions at the end of the year. It appeared that Ramblers Holidays were not willing to contemplate a similar relationship.

A member suggested that the Charities Commission's advice may have been over strictly interpreted. Robert acknowledged that the initial publicity for the deal with HF Holidays had been very poor and that representatives of Ramblers Holidays have a different version of events. The deal with HF Holidays will last three years after which it will need to be reviewed.

This discussion led to a question about value for money. Where are our subscriptions going and do we get value for them? Robert accepted the need for greater visibility. Robert's vision is for an efficiently run Central Office with high standards of customer service and no waste of resources. There needs to be an improvement in communications between Central Office, Areas, Groups and members, more campaigning and most important better communications including publicity for our campaigning.

He turned to the proposal to create a new Area covering all of Greater London. He acknowledged that the Greater London Forum is not as effective as it could be but as yet no one has given any indication of the problem which would be solved by creating the new Area. He is personally against the change and he understands that the Herts and N Middlesex Area is also hostile to the proposal. He urged us to be well represented at the forthcoming meeting to discuss the proposal.

The Get Walking Keep Walking initiative had been widely misunderstood. It has been entirely funded from external sources with no contribution from members' subscriptions. More people have been introduced to walking and it has had political benefits but as expected it has not resulted in many new members. The finance for this initiative from Ramblers Holidays Charitable Trust and the Big Lottery is coming to an end although it continues on a much smaller scale with local grants in some areas.

What should we do next? The Ramblers has already expressed an interest in bidding to manage the Walking for Health programme which Natural England is planning to outsource. Should we bid for it? Robert confessed that he was undecided.

There was a short debate about the role of affiliated organisations. Some thought that they should be charged more. Others felt that if the subscription were to be increased many would terminate their affiliation as they receive little direct benefit in return.

Another brief discussion about membership subscriptions showed a polarisation of views between those who would pay more and those who think they are already too high.

Robert briefly discussed the possibility of creating new Groups. The organisation wants to encourage the development of more Groups but it is difficult to create new geographical groups as this can disrupt existing ones. It is easier to create speciality Groups.

Finally Robert spoke of the future. Internally we shall have a new Chief Executive and Chairman and the existing grants for Get Walking keep Walking will shortly expire. Externally there will be further cuts in local authority spending on footpaths. Can we grow our membership or will it continue to fall? This is an important moment in the story of the Ramblers.

In closing the meeting David Smith thanked Robert for giving so much time and for such a stimulating talk. He also thanked all those who had helped in the arrangements for the day which all agreed had been a great success.

Phil Escritt  
Area Minutes Secretary