

POST-BOARD COMMUNICATION FROM RODNEY WHITTAKER ON BEHALF OF THE TRUSTEES TO AREA CHAIRS AND SECRETARIES

21th September 2009

Dear Chair and Secretary,

The trustees have met this past weekend and have taken many important decisions:

- *The treasurer has completed an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the financial situation. In his preliminary report to trustees, he made a number of recommendations to improve financial management, which are being implemented. His substantive report will be made available as soon as possible.*
- *The Board approved a balanced budget for 2009/10, ensuring financial stability for the Ramblers, the first balanced budget for many years.*
- *The Board agreed that it is minded to relocate the central office out of London, and work will start now looking at options.*
- *A protocol for responding to enquiries from volunteers to staff within a ten day period will be put in place, so that volunteers can know the standards they can expect.*
- *The Board confirmed the organisation's commitment to traditional areas of campaigning, and noted a number of recent campaigning successes on access and public paths*

The last few months have been an unprecedented time for our organisation. We have faced a serious financial situation and have had to take difficult and unpopular decisions very quickly. We are aware of the unhappiness felt by some of our most active members and we have listened to the comments received from them. We are also grateful to those active members who have contacted us to show their understanding and support for the actions we have had to take. We have now set a balanced budget for 2009/10 and our cash flow is under control.

The Ramblers will, in due course, emerge from the current straitened times. Our collective task, to be undertaken by all of us who are committed to the Ramblers, is to build a stronger campaigning organisation and increase our membership, so that we are better able to play an active role at all levels, throughout the three nations.

As trustees, we are elected by the membership at General Council and are accountable to it. It is, however, the job of the trustees to give leadership to the Ramblers and to provide the vision we need for the future. We are aware of our role and will not avoid our responsibilities. We remain committed to the strategy adopted in 2008 by the organisation, which we believe is the right one to follow.

Campaigning continues, at the heart of our work. We have been told by several members that they are disappointed that we are turning away from our traditional work in protecting footpaths and campaigning for greater access to the countryside. This is a misunderstanding. There is no desire to de-prioritise this work. It is clearly set out as the first of our four key aims in our strategy *Fresh Air, Firm Ground*. In fact, there are a number of fantastic campaigning achievements recently under our belt:

Our coastal access campaign is on the verge of a significant milestone, with the Marine and Coastal Access Bill about to become law. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) section 3A Order (to amend CROW as it applies to coastal land) is now out for consultation, earlier than expected – thanks in part to our campaigning. A path has been added to the definitive map in Shiplake, Oxfordshire, with clear benefits for local people; this was a local campaign supported nationally. Our Rights of Way Improvement Campaign, focussing on funding, has got off to an excellent start, with support from Natural England, the Local Government Association and others, and with four local authorities signing up already. Our petition on the No 10 website to repeal the 2026 cut-off date for Rights of Way attracted 6,500 signatures, and we are hoping soon for recommendations from the Stakeholder Working Group, on which we sit. Somerset Ramblers, with help from central office, have held a useful meeting with the Cabinet Member for the Environment, who has made commitments to involve the Ramblers in discussions on budgets for rights of way and access.

The actions in our 2006 rights-of-way strategy are being taken forward. This coming year, we intend to help to get 500 public paths unblocked, opened, or marked on definitive maps. We look to our knowledgeable paid staff and our active volunteers, working together, to achieve our aims.

Particular priorities for the Ramblers for the next twelve months will be maintaining pressure for coastal access and in contributing to the review of access legislation (England and Wales).

Making walking accessible to all. We are aware that some people believe we have shifted our focus from the needs of committed walkers in countryside areas to those who have not previously gone walking, particularly people in urban areas. We believe that this too is a misunderstanding. We do not intend to reduce our focus on our core area of work.

Our work on accessible walking began several years ago, and long predates *Fresh Air, Firm Ground*. Nevertheless we are proud to endorse this. We need to overcome all barriers to walking, whether physical (blocked footpaths, etc), legal, social or cultural.

We have also received project funding to launch pioneering initiatives in some UK cities and we are excited by what these projects have already been able to achieve. Because the funding is project-based, it does not take resources from other work (indeed, it helps contribute to our general overheads). This work is fully in line with our charitable objectives.

An organisation which is well run. One of our strategic aims is to ensure that the Ramblers operates as effectively as possible to maximise its resources. There have been failures here. A new membership database was necessary, but its introduction has been enormously difficult. We apologise for the problems this has caused. The situation is now much improved, especially regarding financial backlogs. Currently, there are just 52 new member applications waiting to be processed, the oldest of which is one week. We have some way to go but are making progress and will continue to monitor things closely. In particular, we are now addressing the matters of particular concern to membership secretaries.

Area and group officers and members are, rightly, angry when their letters and emails to our London office do not bring about prompt replies. There may be good reasons why this happens, to do with staff workload and priorities. Nevertheless, lack of response is unacceptable and we propose to remedy the situation. We are - with the support of our senior staff - going to introduce a new protocol, which will require responses to members' communications within a 10 day period. We will be providing more details about this as quickly as we can.

Our work in Scotland and Wales. We know that the decision to close the physical offices of the Ramblers in Scotland and Wales has been deeply unpopular among members living in the two nations. The decision was taken as part of substantial cuts throughout the organisation.

The unanimous view of the Board is that it is in the best interests of walkers in Scotland, Wales and England for the Ramblers to operate across the whole of Great Britain as one organisation, and the Board pledges to work with members in Scotland, Wales and England to achieve this. However, the Board also recognises that members in Scotland and Wales have the right, were they to wish to move to separate sister organisations, to be able to do so. The board would in this event work amicably to make this possible.

The financial situation. Our hon treasurer, Jonathan Kipling, took office at General Council 2009. Jonathan was the founding Secretary in 1987 of the Charity Finance Directors Group and is Secretary (effectively the Chief Operating Officer) of the Institute of Cancer Research. As an 'outsider' prior to April 2009, he was asked by the trustees to look in detail at the financial situation of the organisation over the past two years and to identify what can be done to ensure that the Ramblers procedures for financial management are stronger in the future. In his preliminary report to trustees, he identified a number of improvements which we are now putting in place to safeguard the future. His substantive report will be made available to members as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the substantial changes we made in May have stopped the immediate financial crisis and put our finances onto a secure footing.

Location of central office. Over the years, many members have suggested that the organisation could save money by relocating away from London. This is not a straightforward matter, and a move would incur short-term costs (and also the possible loss of key specialist staff) but would reduce overheads in the longer term. Moving closer to the organisation's historic roots in the northern cities would be welcomed by some. In the short-term the trustees have

decided to maintain the London office, but an opportunity will arise in 2015 with a break clause in the Camelford House lease. The trustees have discussed this, and are at present minded to make such a move. However, this is a big step, which must be taken in possession of all the facts. The senior staff have been asked to look in detail at the implications and report back.

Electronic communications. Faced with a large financial shortfall, we took the decision to abolish paper-based communication with active members and to use electronic communications instead. This is much more efficient in staff time and in money, and we believe that this is the way forward. Nevertheless, the implementation has been controversial, and some people have felt excluded from information they used to receive. We propose to review whether arrangements can be introduced for members without email access. We will welcome a debate on this at next year's General Council.

Better communication. The trustees accept that communications with active members have to be improved. As one part of this, our Chair and Chief Executive are undertaking to organise special regional meetings, in order to be able to communicate the trustees' thinking directly and to listen to comments and concerns. These events will start shortly. This will be addition to the scheme set up in May whereby trustees are contacting individual Area chairs regularly to give updates and listen to views.

Looking to the future. We have come through difficult times in recent months. We have a great deal to celebrate from past successes but a great deal still to achieve. We have to stay true to our roots, but we must also ensure that new generations of walkers will want to join us. We have to make full use of our resources as well as possible. Central to this is acknowledging the contribution made by our active members (whether they offer their time and energy voluntarily in our groups and areas, in our Scottish and Welsh bodies, or indeed on the trustee board). We have to rebuild our strength together.

Yours sincerely



Rodney Whitaker
Chair

P.S. Please feel free to cascade this letter to other volunteers within your Area.