

Below is the text of a letter which Rodney has sent to Mike Church, following the meeting in Leeds on 26th September.

Tom Franklin  
Chief Executive

2nd November 2009

Dear Mike,

Thank you for your various items of correspondence following your meeting in Leeds on 26th September which have now been considered by the trustees.

The first point that I would like to emphasise is that the trustees and the Senior Management Team are committed to working in partnership with yourselves and other volunteers during this difficult period for the Ramblers. We understand that there is considerable unease, as well as anger, about the decisions which we have taken. In making the difficult decisions we have acted with the best interests of the Ramblers in mind, and have stopped the organisation running out of funds. Nevertheless, with decisions of such gravity and effect, there are of course lessons for us in how we might have handled the situation better. We hope that a small meeting with yourself and some of your colleagues, together with Tom Fisher (Vice Chair), Tom Franklin (Chief Executive), and myself can be arranged in the near future.

I will address each of the policy points in your notes from your meeting. In practice, I believe there is little between us on many of these.

1. Immediate review of the present Ramblers strategy document, "Fresh Air, Firm Ground"

The strategy document Fresh Air, Firm Ground is about us being Britain's walking charity – making walking available to everyone through improving places for walking, and encouraging people to walk. As Britain's walking charity, we're absolutely committed to ensuring access to all footpaths, the countryside and everywhere people go walking. That work is at the heart of what we do – it always has been, and always will be. But we need to evolve, building on our achievements from the past 75 years, to take the Ramblers into the 21st century and remain relevant in the future. That's why we're also doing new types of work – like promoting walking for families, and for people who don't walk at all.

As you know, the strategy document was approved unanimously by delegates at General Council in 2008. This vote followed extensive consultation with Areas and Groups, individual members, and outside organisations and partners. We received 794 responses to the draft version of the strategy (including 322 from individual members, 269 from individual non-members, 88 from Groups and 15 from Areas). The results from the consultation showed that:

- 77% said they were comfortable with our draft strategic vision of a walking Britain, with only 11% saying they were uncomfortable. Amongst Areas and Groups, 93% were comfortable.

- 82% were comfortable with our first Strategic Aim of a working for good quality walking environments (often seen as our 'traditional work' aim). Exactly the same proportion (82%) were comfortable with our second Strategic Aim of working to make walking more accessible to everyone (the so-called 'promoting walking' aim).

We took on board the main feedback from the consultation, and made changes to the final document presented to General Council:

- "Too long-winded and not clear enough" – we halved the length, listed the actions, and made them clearer.
- "Too much politically correct language" – we removed such language.
- "Language is too aggressive and off-putting – e.g. 'mobilising' and 'defending'" – we removed some of this language.
- "We should understand the needs of farmers" – we emphasised the need for partnership.

At our meeting on the weekend of 20th September, trustees reviewed Fresh Air, Firm Ground, one year into its five-year period. We went through each Aim in the strategy, considering the developments in the external world and whether the strategy was still appropriate. We concluded that it was. Indeed many of the difficulties which we are facing with regard to finances, membership, and communication, mean that the strategy is more, rather than less, relevant than before.

One of the criticisms of Fresh Air, Firm Ground was that it was not detailed enough. Although the previous Ramblers strategy Waymarking the Future included specific targets, it is generally unusual for strategy documents of this nature to contain detailed targets. Indeed, we stated in Fresh Air, Firm Ground, "We will prepare a more detailed operational plan which will set out how we're going to achieve this strategy, how much it will cost, and where we will find the resources we need." We have recently published our Business Plan for the coming year. This sets out in detail what we aim to achieve, and how we are going to do it – all of which is linked to achieving the strategic aims. It is available as a document (or the main highlights can be viewed in a video) on the volunteers section of the website: [www.ramblers.org.uk/volunteer](http://www.ramblers.org.uk/volunteer). The Welsh Council Executive Committee has been discussing a linked Wales Business Plan, which will be published shortly, and we are intending that a similar document be produced for our Scotland work once staff are fully in place.

In conclusion, it is the trustees' view that it would be wrong for us to scrap our strategy just 18 months after it was agreed unanimously by General Council delegates, and one year into its five year course, and that it is correct to continue with Fresh Air, Firm Ground through 2010. We will, however, keep it under constant review.

## 2. Rights of Way and Access to be major Ramblers focus

Trustees wholeheartedly agree that rights of way and access should be a major focus for the Ramblers. Our commitment to ensuring access to all rights of way and increasing access for walking is absolute. It always has been, and always will be. We are on the verge of celebrating a major victory that walkers have dreamed of for decades – the legal right to walk around the entire coast of Britain. The Marine and

Coastal Access Bill will receive Royal Assent in days. The Bill entered Parliament a year ago, and all of the lobbying work on the Bill was undertaken over the past year – demonstrating our commitment. Of course, that does not mean that we shouldn't evolve and do new types of work, such as encouraging people who don't walk to do so, and increasing our working with families. The two are complementary, not in conflict.

Not only is our commitment to rights of way and access spelled out in our strategy, Fresh Air, Firm Ground (Aim 1, paragraphs 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4 in particular), but it is also a major focus of our Business Plan for the year ahead. For example, in the coming twelve months we aim to:

- Ensure our readiness to influence the implementation of coastal access, and respond to Natural England's four national pilots

To achieve this, we will:

- Celebrate the success of the campaign, and thank our supporters
- Lobby for the right secondary legislation
- Ensure we are involved in the four Natural England pilots
- Recruit volunteers to help with the pilots, and train them

Ramblers Cymru is actively involved in the implementation of the All Wales Coastal Path, and in Ramblers Scotland is continuing to promote the separate access legislation which already exists in Scotland and covers coastal access.

- Develop our strategy for the CROW mapping review which delivers greater benefits for walkers

To achieve this, we will:

- Consult with Ramblers Areas and Groups on priorities in November, with final approval in April
- Meet with allied organisations by December
- Engage the public, to capture their views and influence and strategy, using our website

Specific work in Wales also continues with a meeting with the Countryside Council of Wales on 9th November to discuss the way forward in Wales for the review.

- Produce a Manifesto for the Walking Environment

To achieve this, we will:

- Engage with the public, using our website, to gather our top priorities for improvement, or best practice
- Develop and publish our manifesto by February, tied into our 75th anniversary and the General Election
- Develop three new policy areas, building on the work of the Manifesto

- Unblock, save, or newly-record 500 footpaths

To achieve this, we will:

- Provide casework support for local cases, in line with new prioritisation guidelines (to be published in November)
  - Pursue legal action where appropriate and within budget, particularly on cases of national relevance or to overturn precedence
  - Gain publicity for local casework and campaigns
- Ensure five highway authorities are delivering Ramblers-prioritised RoWIP projects by September 2010

To achieve this, we will:

- Develop RoWIP guidance for Areas and Groups and place it on the website
- Lobby government departments to achieve Ramblers-prioritised projects
- Engage constructively with Natural England through the definitive map stakeholder group
- Continue to improve our working relationship with IPRow and the Local Government Association

Ramblers Cymru is working with the bottom five performing local authorities on rights of way on a project called 'Making RoWIPs Work' which will help these authorities improve their rights of way networks.

Each of these is a significant target, involving major resource commitments. They demonstrate the weight that we attach to rights of way and access work.

### 3. Legal work to be resumed immediately

Legal work has never ceased. A demonstration of this is that members will have recently received an appeal for funds to help support the Bayham Abbey legal case. Our budget for legal and expert advice for the current year is £133k – that is higher than was spent in each of the past three years. Some of this budget is being held back until we find out the outcome of the Manchester case, and the extent (or otherwise) of our liabilities. This is prudent, particularly in the current economic climate. As Britain's walking charity, legal action is an important tool for us, but it should be our last resort option, as it is the most expensive and not always the most effective. So we continue to use other tools as well – for example, we've recently paid for advice from a civil engineer to help with a case. We're also campaigning for local authorities to take Rights of Way Improvement Plans seriously, and back them up with money. We should be measuring our success by the accessibility of Britain's footpath network, not by the number of legal cases or the total value of our legal bill.

### 4. Immediate review of all rights of way policy

The previous rights of way strategy was approved at the end of 2007. This was produced following extensive consultation with Areas and Groups. Whilst some of the context has changed (for example, the staffing structure), the great majority of the actions listed are being taken forward. The details of what we intend to achieve for rights of way are included in our Business Plan. It is our view that now is the time to deliver the changes we have agreed, not to start a wholesale review of strategy which would be counter-productive.

One example of an important action which is being progressed is our purchase and installation of the Countryside Access Management System to help with our rights of way work. This is the software system which is used by the majority of highways authorities in England and Wales to organise their rights of way work. The software mixes a database with a mapping system. It will replace our path order database, which is essentially a list, which links parishes to volunteers. The new system will allow us to:

- Have greater flexibility in linking volunteers to parishes – making it easier when volunteers change.
- Show in which parts of the country we are working, and track individual casework from start to finish.
- Send reports to anyone who has sent us a query that we are working on, updating them on the case.
- Track the number of problems that have been sorted (essential in monitoring whether we are achieving our target of 500 footpaths unblocked, opened or newly recorded this year).
- Produce a map of Britain showing where the problems are, detailed by the type of problems. This will make it a very powerful campaigning tool, highlighting where the problems are concentrated, backed up with data.
- Identify trends, so that we can be more proactive in campaigning rather than being solely reactive and firefighting.

The new system is being installed at the beginning of November, with key staff being trained at the end of November. It will be up and running in the new year.

This is a single example of how we are developing our rights of way work to take account of changing technology and times. There are many others. And we have a rights of way sounding board, made up of Area footpath secretaries who are advising staff on many of these issues.

In Wales, the Ramblers Cymru project called 'Communities on Foot' is linking volunteers with local communities, which is another example of taking forward rights of way work.

I have also mentioned that in our Business Plan this year, we intend to produce a Manifesto for the Walking Environment. The aim is for this to be launched in February, to tie in with a possible General Election and our 75th anniversary celebrations. This will clearly include policies connected to rights of way. We aim for three new specific policy areas to be generated this year, coming out of the Manifesto. These will be discussed at General Council.

## 5. Immediate review of promoting walking

Again, we do not believe that now is the time for a wholesale review of our promoting walking work. Many of the concerns of volunteers stem from an incorrect perception that we are turning away from our traditional work in protecting footpaths and campaigning for greater access to the countryside. This belief is wrong. We're spending twice as much core funding on work to safeguard the places where we walk as we're spending on promoting walking. There is no way that we will abandon our

traditional work of safeguarding footpaths – how could we be Britain's walking charity if we did so?

Our extension into new activities like promoting walking to non-walkers is essential and does not mean we are abandoning our traditional work. The activities complement each other. Both are vital. By demonstrating our commitment to getting people walking, we increase our authority in arguing for improved walking access and footpaths. We need to take on new challenges, and attract new sources of funding. For example, the Big Lottery and Ramblers Holidays Charitable Trust is paying over £1m for our Get Walking, Keep Walking programme in the coming year. Over £200,000 of this is contributing towards the charity's overheads (as part of the 'full cost recovery' which we expect from project work). As Britain's walking charity, we have a duty to encourage people to walk - we should be doing more, not less, of this. This applies in all three countries in which the Ramblers works. In Scotland, excellent links have been made with the Scottish Government and delivery agencies for the 2014 Commonwealth Games, with strong prospects for us to build on our walking promotion work in Scotland, including potential sources of new funding.

In our Business Plan for the coming year, we have a series of targets connected to promoting walking – some of which involve our traditional led walks programme, and some of which involve working with those who have not been involved with the Ramblers at all in the past. We believe this balance is right.

6. Details of substantial financial transactions over the last two years to be made available

We provide detailed accounts, which are independently audited. We do not believe that it will give greater clarity to provide a plethora of financial data on individual transactions, leading to a further plethora of questions about details. The effect of that would be to tie up limited staff time in answering points of detail about the past – whereas we need them to be focusing all of their efforts on bringing in income, and controlling expenditure, now and into the future. It is important for us to remember that we need to bring in income of £5 million this year in order to avoid further reductions in expenditure. This is what staff must be focusing on. It is important that General Council, in particular, properly reviews and questions the financial accounts that are presented.

We acknowledge that there has been substantial criticism of financial management. As stated in my letter to Area Chairs and Secretaries of 21st September, our hon treasurer, Jonathan Kipling, who took office at General Council 2009, was asked by the trustees to look 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. His substantive report will be made available to members by the end of November.

Meanwhile, it is important to restate that the difficult decisions which we took in May stopped the immediate financial crisis, and put our finances onto a secure footing.

## 7. Open democratic style of government

The Ramblers has a very open style of government/governance. Major policy issues are consulted on – for example, the strategy Fresh Air, Firm Ground, countryside policy, and rights of way policy are three examples from the past two years. A summary of key points from Board meetings are circulated to volunteers shortly after meetings. Any member can get involved in their group, and attend their Area AGM. Any member can propose a motion at the Area AGM which, if approved by the Area, can be submitted to General Council. Motions agreed at General Council are taken seriously by the Board, with updates on the actions taken as a result.

Whilst on paper the Ramblers is democratic, in practice improvements could be made. Contested elections for posts are very rare. Indeed, they tend to be limited to elections for the Board of Trustees (where there were a healthy 10 candidates for 4 positions last year). Contested elections for General Council delegates are also rare, and the Board has suggested to Areas that additional efforts are made to ensure that at least one of their delegates are new to General Council.

In the future, the Board will want to consult on alternative ways to engage many more members in our democracy – for example, through widening the election of trustees to all members, and through greater involvement in policy making. This is included in the strategy, Fresh Air, Firm Ground.

It is important that democracy and engagement support, rather than detract from, strong leadership and the pursuance of our charitable objectives. We do not believe that it is possible for everybody to be involved in every decision. There are times – such as during the recent financial crisis – when the Board needed to take quick and decisive action. We accept that this has left people feeling excluded, and it would have been better to have been able to consult more widely on those issues.

We also accept the need to improve communications, and we are taking various steps to do so. For example, the "pairing" of Trustees with all Areas has been generally welcomed by Area chairs. Tom Franklin and myself will be visiting different parts of Britain over the next two months to meet with, and listen to, as many volunteers as possible.

## 8. Review of the Ramblers' interpretation of its requirements as a charity

Like all charities, the Ramblers must now pass a public benefit test. Traditionally charities were simply assumed to do good. However, this now needs to be justified. The element which is specifically relevant to membership-based charities such as ourselves, is that any requirement to pay should not unreasonably exclude any individuals, and that the beneficiaries should not be so close to the donors that the organisation resembles a club more than a membership charity. This is a test which we pass including through our work, funded externally, to encourage people who don't currently walk to do so.

We are Britain's walking charity, making walking available to everyone. It is this sense of public good which motivates many of our members to join and give of their

time – the majority of whom do not walk with our groups.

#### 9. General Council extension to three days

In a separate note, you asked that General Council be extended to three days in 2010. Trustees have considered this, and do not believe that this would be a good idea for the following reasons:

- The time to debate motions at last year's GC, which was over two days, was as much as previously when the event was for three days.
- The Board does not intend to put forward changes to the Memorandum and Articles of Association at this GC – allowing more time to debate other motions. Indeed, we intend to make other changes to enable additional time for motion debate than has previously been the case when the event was for three days.
- Feedback from GC 2009 showed that whilst some delegates felt that the event was more rushed than normal, others approved of the new format which they saw as much 'tighter' and more 'business-like', with virtually all of the business being completed. Only one motion was not discussed.
- The format of GC taking place over a Saturday and Sunday will be of assistance to those who work full-time and do not want to take the Friday as annual leave. We hope that this may encourage more people to take part in GC.

As stated, for next year we are experimenting with the event taking place over Saturday and Sunday, allowing for an earlier start-time on the Saturday, we hope extending the time on this year by three to four hours. We are also proposing that for those Areas who wish to attend, a 'best practice' session is organised on Saturday morning, so that good ideas and practice are shared. We recognise that the reduction from two nights to one reduces time for networking, but feel that the compromise we shall test next year provides a fair balance between time and all of the costs in terms of finances and staff input. As an aside, the reduction from three to two days will reduce the costs of the venue by £13,000.

#### In conclusion

The Ramblers financial situation remains more precarious than we would like. The balanced budget we have set requires us to retain most of our existing members and recruit new ones. That is the overriding priority for the Ramblers right now. We would very much welcome your support and ideas in helping us to achieve that objective.

We recognise that this letter does not cover all of the points raised in your wider document. There is much to discuss, which we hope we can do at the meeting we have suggested. We look forward to a discussion with you there, as well as at the national and regional meetings in November and December which Tom Franklin and I are attending.

Yours sincerely,

Rodney Whitaker  
Chair