

Chair's Report 2021-2022

It is a relief to say that the last year has been easier than the preceding two because Covid has receded. Unfortunately, it has not disappeared entirely and sadly we have lost at least one member, Geoff Bell, due to complications of its infection.

Although more people walked during the lock-downs, this has not resulted in the surge in membership that we had hoped for, with membership remaining around the pre-Covid levels at 371. The use of apps may be giving people the confidence to walk on their own following online routes rather than in large groups. They obtain the physical benefits of walking, but miss out on social interaction.

We have tried to attract new members by having some slightly shorter walks on Saturdays and have almost doubled the number of those walks. In addition, we have put on a few short evening walks in the summer. Unfortunately, one of these coincided with the extreme weather and as a result didn't take place. Despite these efforts we still have a lack of diversity in our group.

On a positive note, the number of walks in our programme is, with the possible exception of the Public Transport Walks, back to pre-Covid numbers. There have been reductions in the bus services and now there are problems due to the rail strikes, leading to logistical problems in organising public transport walks. Our programme relies on the keenness of members to walk, the willingness of members to lead walks and the hard work of walks organisers and the walks co-ordinator. In spite of putting information about how our walks are structured and the equipment needed on them on our website we have had issues with new walkers attending walks without food, water and waterproofs. There also seems to be reluctance amongst new members, even experienced walkers, to lead walks.

There remain problems with the condition of our footpaths. The temporary Head of Footpaths at Derbyshire County Council has been made permanent. He has more footpath officers working for him and has drawn up a list of priorities but as yet this has had little impact on the ground. In order to publicise the problem some of the committee met Toby Perkins MP who suggested that we organise a walk illustrating some of the issues and inviting the press. The walk took place and an illustrated article was published in the Derbyshire Times. The article attracted supportive comments from other Ramblers groups and the former Ramblers' President, Kate Ashbrook.

The Derbyshire Footpaths group on which we are represented has written to the new Head of Derbyshire County Council about the problems with footpaths and the difficulties with reporting them. It is now several months since the letter was sent and disappointingly, other than an acknowledgement, there has been no response to it.

The Chesterfield Walking Festival returned to its usual date and our Group contributed four walks, including the usual Chesterfield Round. It is hoped that now life appears to be returning to normal more people will attend the Festival and more walks will be offered.

Comments about Risk Assessments have reduced but there is still a feeling that Central Office are not representing the views of the grass-roots. There continue to be difficulties accessing Assemble and seeming contradictions in policy whereby non members can lead walks.

I am standing down from the position of Chair at this meeting. If the post is unfilled the group cannot continue in its present form. This would be a shame after it has continued to offer a varied walking programme and survived Covid. If no one steps forward, then there are various options.

These include dissolution of the group with members being reallocated to adjacent groups, merger of the group, changing the group to a flexi-group under the Ramblers brand, or possibly becoming an independent group like Dronfield Footpaths Group affiliated to Ramblers. A flexi-group has to be approved by the relevant area (in our case SYNED) as it would support the group financially. It allows the group to continue in modified form without a committee and without independent finances.

There are various advantages and disadvantages to these options which would need to be discussed and voted on at a further meeting. I am listing these options because although it now seems likely that someone will offer to Chair the group, members need to be aware of the risks of not volunteering and hoping that someone else will step forward. We are not alone in having these problems. Derbyshire Area does not have a full committee and the secretary of SYNED area is stepping down in January with no obvious replacement on the horizon.

I will wind up now as I have exceeded the one side of A4 which the area Treasurer allows me.

Finally thank you for attending this meeting and for supporting Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire Ramblers. I should like to thank the walk leaders, walk organisers and co-ordinators and the committee for supporting me and keeping the group going. The committee still needs additional members to generate new ideas for improving the group and to help with publicity.

Mel has done an amazing job managing to keep up to date with the planning applications despite having surgery to his knee this year, but it would be a help if someone would come forward to assist him.

We are hosting the SYNED Area AGM next month at Coal Aston village hall. Gavin is leading a walk in the morning at 10:00 am and the business part of the meeting is in the afternoon at 2:00 pm. It would be good to have some members present to support the Area.

In today's meeting we need to appoint a new Chair, and confirm the posts of Secretary and Treasurer.

Isobel McCormick
(Group Chair)