

Southam Ramblers

The Structure of the Ramblers as an Organisation and Proposed Changes

It is a couple of years since the Newsletter included an article about the structure of the Ramblers' organisation and since then we have a lot of new members, so would be updating them now. However, the main reason for this article is that some fairly substantial changes to the structure of the organisation of Ramblers are being proposed. These have been consulted on, over the last two years, through General Council meetings, Trustee meetings, focus groups and working groups and feedback has been sought from experts, as well as local and area groups. Further feedback sessions are planned for July and August and consultation for September and October, before the implementation of the agreed changes.

The Current Structure of the Ramblers' Organisation

The Ramblers is Great Britain's largest walking charity, founded in January 1935 from a collection of regional groups, which were campaigning for the public's right to access the countryside. The organisation is dedicated to protecting the path network and promoting the health benefits of walking. The Ramblers is a charitable company, limited by guarantee, incorporated in June 2002 and registered as a charity in August 2002.

The President of the Ramblers

This is an honorary position, an ambassadorial role, usually given to someone with a high profile nationally and connections with rambling, or outdoor activities. The role of the President is to promote the Ramblers' mission and work with the public and potential Ramblers supporters. The current president is Amar Latif, known from television appearances as 'the blind adventurer.' He is keen to promote walking as accessible to all. Vice Presidents deputise and, currently, with the President, have a governance role on the General Council.

Governance – The Trustees

The Ramblers, as a charity, is governed by a Board of Trustees, currently comprising of up to fifteen members. The Trustees are volunteers but also function as directors under company law. The Trustees are elected at General Council meetings. The Board of Trustees has the role of ensuring that Ramblers pursues its charitable objectives and complies with relevant legislation, regulation, guidance and best practice, as well as its own constitution. It must also ensure that the charity applies its resources towards its objectives and safeguards and in the interest of walkers throughout Great Britain. The board organises sub-committees to work on particular tasks. The current chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Ramblers is Lucy Robinson, who was elected in April 2024.

Ramblers Central Office and Staff Team

The Ramblers has a salaried staff team of about eighty people, some of whom work in offices in London, Edinburgh and Barry, some of whom work from home and are based across Great Britain. Ross Malony is the Chief Executive Officer of this team, since July 2022. The London office is at Dirty Lane, London southeast. The Ramblers Board of Trustees hires the Chief Executive to implement policies and lead the organisation in line with the strategic direction set by the board.

The General Council, the Scottish Council and the Welsh Council

Currently the General Council of the Ramblers is about 150 people, who are defined as company members, for the Companies Act and other legal purposes. The members include the trustees, the President, the Vice Presidents and members appointed by Ramblers Area Groups and national organisations affiliated to Ramblers. As a local group, we take part in electing area representatives and they in turn take part in electing the trustees and voting on policy changes. An Annual General Meeting (AGM) is usually held in April. Council members elect trustees for a term of three years, with a maximum of six, if re-elected. Motions are debated and guidance on policy is provided to the organisation and any changes to the constitution are approved or not.

Ramblers Scotland has a Scottish Council which provides an opportunity for members to influence Ramblers Scotland's policy on specific Scottish matters and to have a representative on the General Council. Ramblers Scotland has fifty-five groups.

Ramblers Cymru also has a council dealing with issues specifically linked to Wales, which acts in a comparable way. Ramblers Wales has forty groups.

Volunteers such as Walk Leaders and Committee Members

The Ramblers has over 22,000 volunteers. These volunteers are registered and take on roles like walk leading, helping to run local groups and regional groups by committee, helping to clear paths and install signage, as well as researching paths and lobbying for better paths and access to the countryside. Volunteers can access on-line training for roles such as walk leadership.

Local Groups such as Southam Ramblers

There are over 100,000 members of Ramblers, in five hundred local Ramblers' groups, organised by volunteers. Activities include organising walks and activities, publicising them, inspecting and maintaining paths and running local campaigns.

Area Groups such as Warwickshire Area Group

The local groups also report to and receive information and support from regional area groups and there are fifty-nine of these in England. The area groups have elected committees of volunteers. Area volunteers help co-ordinate the work of the local groups and organise area meetings, with representatives from each of their local groups. They act as contact points for local government officers and other local charities and local offices of national bodies. Area groups convey information from national Ramblers to local groups and from local groups to the Trustees and national Ramblers' officials. Southam Ramblers has close links to the Warwickshire Area Group, attending quarterly meetings, including AGMs and regularly exchanging information.

Proposed Changes to the Structure and Organisation of the Ramblers

This summary of the proposed changes to the current structure and organisation, as described above, is based on a series of detailed documents our group received from the Trustees and is focused on the changes which affect us all as individual members and as Southam Ramblers.

The stated reasons for making the changes are to modernise and strengthen the governance model, to simplify bureaucracy and reduce the role requirements of the volunteers, to improve communications to and from members and volunteers and to change the composition of the board, to include a broader range of skills and experience. The intention is to change the framework then develop and evolve the model over time.

Editor's note you may or may not agree that these changes will achieve the aims as stated above.

Company Members and the AGM

One change being proposed, that affects almost all of us, is that **all fully paid-up Ramblers' members, of at least one year's standing, are to be given company member status.** This would give every such member **voting rights on key strategic decisions and the election of trustees** onto the board. Company members would **all have the right to attend the AGM**, which would focus on the required formal company law issues and will, for logistical reasons, be held on-line. Also, as company members, they **could stand for election as a trustee, propose resolutions for the AGM, or call for an Extraordinary General Meeting on a key issue (EGM).** The **company liability for the Ramblers' members in their new status would be limited to a maximum of £1 on dissolution of the Ramblers.** Elections for trustees would be held online in advance of the AGM, with postal vote options. The results would be confirmed and take effect from the AGM.

Editor's note this would arguably create a more democratic voting system and the liability is very limited. However, there will be governance problems in getting out a lot of information to about 100,000 individual members in order for them to be able to understand the issues and make informed choices. It will also be more difficult for the trustees to corral such a mass electorate to ensure that Ramblers goes in the direction that they wish it to. Whilst the move to voting electronically in advance may be a good one, there needs to be careful consideration of equality of opportunity in alternative methods of voting. An external provider of hybrid, on-line and hard copy, electoral services will manage the election process.

Areas, such as Warwickshire Area and Groups, such as Southam Ramblers

Areas and Groups are seen as the core of Ramblers delivery structure and engagement with volunteers and members. The current situation is that **there will be no changes to Areas and Groups in terms of how they currently operate and, for the time being, there will be no change to the model constitutions, produced centrally for the Areas and Groups to work to. However, work will continue to build on the working group and focus groups' work to date, to agree a robust and practical way forward, with reforms which would best allow Areas and Groups to function efficiently and effectively in future and preserve what is working well and change what is not.**

Editor's note During the consultation period so far, it was felt that not all Areas were functional, with some arbitrary geographical divides creating barriers, for example, for work on footpaths. It was also recognised that there were difficulties in recruiting volunteers and a need to simplify bureaucracy for Areas and Groups and have a more flexible approach to suit local circumstances. It was also seen as important to create more direct links between members and volunteers with trustees and staff. Throughout the consultation period there have been proposals for some quite significant changes to the area committees and local group structure. These have met with some mixed responses from areas and groups, especially where the current structure works well.

Areas Groups such as Warwickshire Area Group now known as Areas

Editor's note There will be no change in the next year or so, but it is likely that there will be significant changes in the future. Focus groups looked at changing Area Groups into networks or hubs, as organisational models, rather than a committee that conveyed information and finance between the trustees and staff and the groups, such as Southam Ramblers. Networks would be task oriented, such as Warwickshire Area network for footpaths and not have a governance role led by a committee. The current structure locally works well for Southam Ramblers. Warwickshire Area is organised by a committee whose members act as contact points for us and for local council officials. Quarterly meetings allow for good exchange of information. If this became individual networks for walks, footpaths and rights of way, finance, websites and IT, membership, publicity and so on, it raises the question of who would organise each network and who would be the point of contact for local council officials. Also, they may be informal, for example online contact groups not reporting to anyone. The issue then is where would groups like Southam Ramblers be able to raise an issue that affects them and compare it to other local groups' experience. Ramblers nationally would have to deal with hundreds of local groups, not the much lower number of area groups.

Local Groups, such as Southam Ramblers now known as Groups

Editor's note There will be no significant changes this year but there may be some changes in the future. Earlier documents were focusing on ways to make local groups, like Southam Ramblers the main unit for Ramblers, with better direct contact with Trustees, Staff and funding.

Southam Ramblers have taken an active role in reviewing and commenting on the documents.

Ramblers Scotland and Ramblers Cymru would remain with their own national organisations.

Editor's note There has not been proposed a similar national level organisation for England.

Board of Trustees

It is proposed to have now **a maximum of twelve members of the board and a minimum of eight.**

The Chair and Honorary Treasurer would be selected by formal process of assessment of capabilities, experience and requirements of the post, selected by the Board of Trustees, confirmed by the AGM.

Six trustees would be elected by members, four on a Great Britain wide basis and one would be elected by Scotland and one by Wales. Members do not need proposers to stand for election. Up to four members could be appointed by the board after formal skill and experience assessment, following advertising of the role, in order to deliver an effective and diverse board. Two more may

be selected by the Board of Trustees, then confirmed at the AGM. The elections of trustees would be on a rolling programme, so that the whole board is not replaced at any one time.

The President and Vice Presidents will no longer have a governance role on the Board of Trustees. Staff members are Associate Members of the Ramblers. Trustees can appoint non members of the Ramblers as Trustees, but they must then join. All trustees will have a three - year term and can be re-elected for a further three years. It is proposed that, in exceptional cases, a third term may be possible, for example, if the person was elected to a key role at the end of their first term.

Editor's note the number of trustees and cap of nine years on the board is in line with good practice, as set out in the Charity Governance Code. The move to twelve trustees, from the current fifteen, seems workable, but should not fall much below this for such a large, diverse organisation. Nine years would seem too long a tenure for a trustee, but it is only in exceptional circumstances.

Member and Volunteer Gatherings

Gatherings of members and volunteers, each for one day, would be held annually and attended by trustees and by key staff, to enable discussion and debate with the board. This was in response to requests for more opportunities for volunteers and members to interact with the voluntary trustees and employed staff members. The current proposal is one gathering annually in each of four English regions, one in Scotland and one in Wales. These meeting dates would be near each other in a 'gathering season.' This would not be about making formal resolutions on the way forward, as in the current AGM, but be an exchange of views in formalised discussions. This aims to enable better exchange of ideas and sharing of experience between volunteers and members in different areas, as well as much better access to trustees and staff. A gathering on a Great Britain wide basis is proposed for every three years. Gatherings would be free to attend and have funded travel for a certain number from each group and area group.

Editor's note the move away from an in-person AGM needs to be managed carefully. If the more informal gatherings are to be effective, then there needs to be a clear mechanism to ensure that key messages are sent to the board. Otherwise, instigating Member and Volunteer Gatherings, with no real power to express views and influence change, is not meeting the aim of improving individual members and groups access to and communication with the trustees and employed staff. The regions they are to be held in has not been defined.

Support Systems and Training

It is felt that volunteers need better support systems and training, as well as access to peer learning and experts. Some of the working groups in the consultation process reported that central systems are seen as hard to use or outdated. Staff supported on - line networking meetings and topic-based Webinars, as well as in - person meetings are proposed, with digital platforms enabling sharing of knowledge experience and resources.

Editor's note Walks Manager is included as an example of a difficult, or outdated system here, but this fairly new system, is used regularly and effectively, across the Warwickshire groups. Moving to an emphasis on on-line support may lead to equality of opportunity issues.

The new objects (objectives)

Editor's note the revised objects for the Ramblers has no mention of the Ramblers' role in advising and promoting good practice on Health and Safety issues associated with walking. Ramblers groups participate in this in a range of ways, for example helping to ensure that stiles and paths are safe, by collaborating with landowners and local councils and publicising problems, as well as forming groups to make repairs and changes. Another example is advising on appropriate clothing and footwear for walking. The issue of Health and Safety, as well as health, needs to be an objective for Ramblers.

Ann Forgan