# Minutes

## of the Area Annual General Meeting

**Held on:** Saturday 25 January 2025

**At:** Village Hall, Woolmer Green, Knebworth SG3 6XA

**Commenced:** 1.30 pm

**Present:** 39 members and representatives of affiliated organisations

**Guest speakers:** Joerg Kasprowski; Richard Cuthbert

*Notes:*

- Paragraph numbers correspond to the numbered agenda items in the AGM supplement in *Stile*, December 2024 issue. ***NB** The numbering of agenda items is incorrect, jumping from 9 to 11; to avoid confusion this has not been corrected in these minutes.*
- All references to *Stile* are to the December 2024 issue unless otherwise stated.

### 1. Welcome by the Chair

Claire Wainwright welcomed all attendees. She thanked the committee members individually for their work during the past year; all the volunteers who made "the Area what it is"; Marion Adams (West Herts) for organising the catering; and David Lauder for leading the pre-AGM walk.

### 2. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Quentin Keeling.

### 3. Approval of minutes of the 2024 AGM

The minutes were accepted as correct.

### 4. Matters arising

(a) *Para 5(a):* It was confirmed that a statement re receiving *Stile* in electronic form had been included in the June 2024 issue.

(b) *Para 5(c):* The figure for North Herts in the group accounts comparison table had been corrected from 212 to 425.

(c) *Para 8:* It was confirmed that Claire Hillier would not be standing again as independent accounts examiner.

### 5. Consideration of officers' reports

(a) Claire stated that no queries had been raised by proxy voters.

(b) *Membership Secretary:* Libby Martin raised the matter of a number of members affiliated to the long defunct North West London Group who were dependent on other Groups for walks and other activities. Dave Ashby explained that these members had not been reallocated but had been sent a note giving the options for joining a particular Group, but details of the members had not been given to geographically adjacent Groups such as North London & South Herts or

Finchley & Hornsey. There was some discussion of whether "floating" members should simply be given all the options or be approached by existing Groups. Claire thought some members might be happy not to be affiliated to any Group. It was agreed that Area Council should consider the matter in the coming months.

**6. Approval of Treasurer's annual report and statement of accounts**

The report and statement were approved.

**7. Appointment of independent examiner for the accounts**

Claire thanked Claire Hillier (who had left her Group) for her work as examiner. Noreen Dawes had approached Steve Carroll (Finchley & Hornsey) who had agreed to carry out the auditing duty. There being no candidates from the floor, Steve was proposed by Patricia Segui, seconded by Rebecca Dawson and elected nem. con.

**8. Questions and observations on Group reports**

(a) Noreen thanked the Group Treasurers for their cooperation during the year.

(b) Claire expressed satisfaction that all Group committee posts were being filled, a fortunate position compared to Groups in some Areas. Sarah Lea (East Herts) pointed out that one or two Groups were struggling to fill posts.

**9. Election of officers and committee members**

(a) Al Maceachern had offered to be Vice-Chair, a post that had been vacant for a few years. There were no candidates from the floor. Al was proposed by Dave Ashby, seconded by Gabriela Lovelace and elected to the post nem. con.

(b) The remaining postholders were re-elected by block vote and nem. con.

**10.** –

**11. Election of Individual Members**

Libby Martin, Mark Brumwell, Gemma Sweeney and Frank Warnock had all agreed to continue as Individual Members. Claire explained the role and asked whether a fifth candidate could be found. Patricia Segui was elected as an Individual Member nem. con.

**12. Note of Group Representatives and representatives of affiliated groups**

## ***[Awaiting list from Claire]***

**13. Nomination of representatives to General Council, 5 April 2025**

Al Maceachern had expressed willingness to attend General Council but Elise Cornwell-Groves had had to withdraw. Al and Dan Cornwell-Groves were both nominated.

**14. Any other business**

(a) John Cartledge notified the meeting of a new book of walks in the St Albans area and offered copies at £1 each to attendees.

(b) Claire thanked David Lauder for leading the pre-AGM walk.

**15. Trustee update and questions**

Joerg Kasprowski, Ramblers Trustee, updated the meeting on developments at Central Office (see appendix 1 below).

**16. Guest speaker: Richard Cuthbert, Team Leader Definitive Map & Enforcement, Herts CC Countryside & Rights of Way Service**

Richard Cuthbert gave a talk on recent progress with cases taken on by his department (see summary in appendix 2 below).

**Meeting closed at:** 3.56 pm

**Appendix 1: Trustee update by Joerg Kasprowski**

Joerg gave his background. German-born, he had joined Ramblers two-and-a-half years ago and was leading walks after six weeks for the Uttlesford Group. He later became Walks Coordinator, taking on the challenge of keeping to the target of three walks per week, and was also acting Chair for a time. He became a Trustee in April 2024.

Joerg stated that Ramblers was looking for new Trustees and that nominations were open now. He emphasised how rewarding the work was and that people with knowledge in particular fields were sought, including safeguarding.

In early 2024 a new strategy had been published, to be implemented over several years. The aims were:

- To safeguard footpaths and keep them accessible
- To promote walking and all its benefits
- To broaden the demographic to include minorities
- To make walking accessible to the public as well as to members

These aims were already being achieved by:

- Lobbying, and working with government and non-government organisations. The new government was listening more than the previous one and rights of way were slowly being ratcheted up the list of priorities. Local MPs were being invited on walks.
- Campaigns to make paths accessible to all. Most well-kept paths were in wealthy areas. Some were not accessible to e.g. the disabled even in areas where one would expect them to be. More people were being encouraged to walk and there were special schemes to encourage teenagers, and walk leaders from minorities.
- Putting Ramblers on a more stable financial footing, nationally. There had been losses in the wake of the Covid pandemic and that of 2024 had been larger than expected and the same was expected for 2025. A three-year plan was in place to get finances on an even keel. There had been restructuring and reductions in staff, but the aim was still to improve service to the membership.
- Reform of the governance structure was one project for 2025. At present there were 15 members of the Board of Trustees, but this number was being questioned, as was the role of General Council. It was hoped to attract more candidates with a mix of skills that would obviate the need for paid consultants.

*Questions*

Dave Ashby asked whether size mattered, what the membership currently contributed and how important this was. Joerg replied that Ramblers was a non-governmental organisation, the largest in its field; the facts on unregistered rights of way had been supplied by it. Members' work mattered very much; they were good value; their subscriptions provided a stable income.

Libby Martin asked what proportions of staff worked at the office and at home respectively. Joerg replied that most worked from home most of the time. Central Office occupied a shared workspace, quite a change from a few years before.

Sarah Lea asked whether Ramblers was working towards a "one member, one vote" system. Joerg thought this might happen at some point but not in less than a year's time.

Phil Escritt asked whether paid staff represented good value. Joerg believed they did, pointing to their role in the lobbying process that had brought about the lifting of the 2031 deadline for registration of rights of way. Ian Hardy agreed.

John Cartledge (who had worked in the field of public transport policy) asked whether level crossings, being rights of way, could legitimately be closed? Joerg replied that the immediate solution for ways over railway tracks was a flow bridge, but this was expensive. However, the railways were under pressure to roll out a solution. He believed Ramblers would try to be more cooperative on the issue.

**Appendix 2: Talk by Richard Cuthbert, Team Leader Definitive Map & Enforcement, Herts CC Countryside & Rights of Way Service**

Richard outlined the present policy on a number of issues, citing examples of the Service's recent work. He stressed the importance of reporting faults and lobbying local authorities as necessary.

Issues to consider when installing new structures included:

- Location, path alignment and the status of the right of way (checked using the Definitive Map)
- Dimensions – these must conform to the current British Standard (checked by access officers)
- Herts CC policy
- Authorisations

In one case, fencing had been moved and a kissing gate had been installed. Kissing gates must conform to BS 5709. They would in principle be replaced by maximum mobility gates. Gaps were not favoured as they might cause livestock to escape.

In another case (Little Berkhamsted 11) a structure was found to be redundant: a stile was in place when the adjacent field was not being used by livestock. Here a gap would have been the first choice.

Richard contrasted compliance with enforcement, on issues such as:

- Structures
- Barbed wire, which could constitute an obstruction
- Fencing, both along and across a right of way
- Encroachments
- Building works and developments
- Signs – misleading notices, which can deter footpath users and under recent case law may constitute an obstruction
- Surface damage, which may also amount to an obstruction

On Great Munden 58 the path had been diverted along the bottom of a garden to prevent it crossing the middle. A good view was lost in the process, making the route technically less convenient.

Other cases in progress included:

- Wheathampstead 42 – diversion applications
- Aldenham 8 at Elstree Aerodrome – a long-running case involving paths across a runway, for which a sensible solution was sought
- Ardeley 22 and 23 – a diversion order had been drafted but might be unusable as an alternative route had been in use for more than 20 years
- North of Buntingford – involving a 3 m high pile of soil on the path, a case being pursued by more than one body

Richard spoke about planning and development, which he described as "a massive time hit". He stressed the importance of engaging with the relevant bodies at an early stage, or rights of way could be at risk. The stages were:

- Section 106 negotiations
- Enhancement/improvement

- Conditions to planning – basically locked in but could be varied
- Planning consultation
- Outline planning permission
- Final details
- Full planning permission, at which stage Herts CC is still involved
- Discharge of conditions

He listed major sites that were currently occupying the entire team:

- Harlow & Gilston Garden Town
- Strategic Rail Freight Interchange
- Hemel Garden Communities
- Birchall Garden Suburb
- West of Stevenage
- North of Baldock

Richard took a number of questions from the floor during and after the talk.