Agendum 5(a)

Chair's Report to Essex Area AGM – 11 March 2023

1. Emerging from the pandemic: As in all things, it is difficult to know whether we can confidently talk yet about the Covid pandemic being "over", but at any rate most aspects of daily life seem to be reverting to something like their 2019 routines. In the Ramblers - across the country as well as here in the Essex Area – there has been some relief that regular walkers have started undertaking group walks once again and – at just under 4000 members for Essex in January – our membership seemed to have survived the threat of atrophy while the nation was locked down.

2. However, there are some causes for concern, which have come into sharper focus as the pandemic fog lifts. I met with some Group Chairs back in July – attended by staff from Ramblers Head Office – at which serious concerns were raised about the difficulty of finding volunteers to lead walks and even to serve on committees. One of our 21 Groups in Essex Area converted itself to a "flexigroup" during 2022-23, which effectively means streamlining the admin roles of the Group committee quite drastically, and concentrating on the organisation and leading of group walks. While this sounds quite attractive in principle, inevitably it means the admin work no longer undertaken at Group level needs to be picked up at Area level or centrally by Ramblers Head Office. The initial response from Head Office has been that they do not have spare capacity for this, while we in the Area team are still struggling without an Area Secretary, and I have alerted Head Office that we cannot undertake extra admin while this situation prevails.

3. An opportunity to review how we work: This has the makings of an impasse, and I am anxious to avoid the complete erosion of any Area co-ordination of the kind which has already occurred in several county areas elsewhere in England. Traditionally, the role of the Area in Ramblers is to act as a middle tier, linking the Head Office with its national resources and policies, steering the front-line Groups in supporting these, while reporting back on challenges encountered locally. Formal Ramblers guidance suggests that,

> "Areas are uniquely placed to connect different parts of the organisation together. They are a prime conduit for information sharing between staff and volunteers, can provide a forum for discussion, and are the route to our democracy for any volunteer who wants to get involved in the running of the organisation. Areas are also the local link representing the Ramblers to external people and organisations."

Without an Area Secretary, we shall no longer be able to carry out this aspect of our role, and we will be discontinuing it if no volunteer has come forward by the close of the AGM on 11 March. We do, however, have dates in the diary – originally intended for three-times yearly Area Council meetings - and what I propose is that we retain these dates for informal meetings at which the Area Team and any Groups so inclined can compare notes and arrange co-operation. The Area Team will continue its self-contained role of monitoring the state of the Essex footpath network, liaising regularly with Essex Highways about repairs, seasonal cutting, and volunteer maintenance teams (see para **5**, below).

4. Membership information handling: Whether or not we can find a successor to the retired Area Secretary, we are in dialogue with Ramblers Head Office to find ways of simplifying the handling of membership data. A significant part of the volunteer energy across both Groups and the Area is currently earmarked for keeping track of the overall membership and, within that, of volunteers. The introduction of GDPR legislation from 2018 onwards has made the collection, storage and sharing of on-line personal information, such as the contact details of individual Ramblers members and volunteers, more complex than it was previously. In the absence of much case-law, the requirements of GDPR have been interpreted by Ramblers centrally, and have placed a heavier burden on membership secretaries across the organisation. Some have declined to continue in post as these requirements have become more demanding. We believe that these burdens on volunteers need to be reduced, to avoid membership communication becoming so convoluted as to make communication and the recruitment of new volunteers dauntingly difficult.

5. Along with Stuart Tanner and Lucy Robinson, I met with Ramblers' new Chief Executive, Ross Maloney, on 23 February to discuss how we might work in future. He is still, as a new arrival in Ramblers, taking stock of the organisation, but he was supportive of the idea that our Area Team should move away from acting primarily as a "middle tier" between the Groups and the Head Office, so that it can focus more heavily on the strategic role of surveying, promoting, maintaining and where necessary protecting the rights of way network. He is also sympathetic to the idea that the way the organisation responds to the constraints of GDPR needs to be revisited, and if possible relaxed.

6. Public Rights of Way (PRoW) management: An increasing part of the Area Team's work consists of monitoring, protecting from blockage or diversion and helping to maintain the PRoW network in Essex, the adjoining parts of NE London and the unitary authorities of Southend and Thurrock. In the next 2 or possibly 3 years, sections of the England Coast Path will be opened along the coasts of Essex and Thurrock, and we shall be working with those highways

authorities to facilitate and publicise this. In addition, we are participating in the national campaign "Don't Lose Your Way", intended to resurrect paths or bridleways which once had public access but have fallen into disuse. Finally, we field and respond to the continual requests for a walkers' view on major road, solar farm or other infrastructure projects. The involvement where appropriate of local Ramblers Groups in all of these activities will obviously enrich the contributions we can make.

6. Our relationship with Essex Highways, while occasionally tense, has improved to the point where we now attend quarterly User Group meetings for the Essex County part of the Area, at which we can track the progress of those defects which we have reported, and focus on a subset of the most urgent problems. The efforts of the several PRoW maintenance volunteer groups are also being informed by these meetings. As part of Essex County Council, Essex Highways has experienced a significant cut in resources – both staff and financial – and under these circumstances it is more important than ever that the Ramblers in this Area works to monitor the state of the PRoW network. The Parish Path Adopter (PPA) scheme is working well to survey the network on a systematic basis, although there are parts of the Area where walkers are not systematically reporting the defects they encounter, and our continuing aim is to round this aspect of the Ramblers' work up to best practice.

David Radford

Area Chair