

Minutes of LDWA London Group 2024 Annual General Meeting

18:37 Wednesday 21st February 2024

At the Crown Court Church of Scotland, Russell Street, London, WC2B 5EZ

Present : Gavin Fuller (Chair), Jim Robinson (Treasurer), Minna Graeber (Secretary), Jean O'Reilly (Walks secretary), Marie Heracleous (Capital Challenger organiser), Deborah Evans (Webmaster), Steve Radley (Liaison Officer with other like-minded organisations), Ron Williamson (independent examiner of London Group Accounts), Pete Aylmer, Marcus Duyzend, Ken Fancett, Keith Lane, Paul Lawrence, Peter Lockyer, Keith Mills, Gordon Parker, Cathy Phillips, Charlotte Minchell, Colin Saunders, Rod Smith, Lonica Vanclay, Jeff Golland, John Davies, Ken Main, Pete Colley, John Elrick, Abigail Elrick.

Apologies: Susann Waldschmidt, Paul Tilley, John Pestle.

The Chair opened the meeting by thanking those who had come to the meeting.

Special Business. Consideration of the proposed amendments to the LDWA London Group Constitution. It was explained that the National Executive Committee of the LDWA had circulated a draft model constitution for local groups to consider and comment on. The London Group Committee had gone through this carefully and have imported those changes they considered appropriate, into their existing constitution. The resulting draft has been approved by the NEC.

Minna read through the proposed changes to the Constitution. The following points were raised:

Section 5.5: Pete Colley requested we clarify whether the nomination Proposer and Second refers to Primary or Associate members. The document will be amended to specify Primary members.

Section 5.12: Peter Aylmer suggested that an email meeting may not be feasible. The document will be amended to add 'email or other electronic means'.

Section 5.12: Ken Fancett asked for clarification on the meaning of the word 'mutual' in 'mutual consent'. It was confirmed that the meaning was everyone, so the wording will be changed from 'mutual' to 'unanimous'.

Section 6.5: Pete Colley asked for the removal of the erroneous 'to' in the following sentence '...those Primary Members present may, by a majority vote, to agree to allow...'

Section 7.3: Kemi asked if the Committee has considered paying for a business bank account in order to get a better level of service. Jim said that he doesn't feel the service will be improved with a business account.

Colin Saunders suggested that we consider making the Treasurer role a 4-year term, instead of 3, due to the time lag in changing signatories.

Peter Lockyer recommended we look at Metrobank as an alternative to our current provider.

Pete Colley proposed that we consult with the national team and other local groups as to recommendations over banking providers. John Elrick, as NEC Treasurer, confirmed that this was a good way forward and commended the committee on the inclusion of our clause re finances in the constitution.

All changes were accepted unanimously.

Those present were asked to indicate whether they approved the draft document, subject to the amendments suggested in the meeting. This was passed unanimously. No abstentions.

Since the new constitution was now in place, it was unanimously voted under the terms of clause 6.5 that the only associate member present, Peter Aylmer, should be allowed to take a full part in the subsequent discussions and votes.

B. Ordinary Business.

1. Minutes and Matters Arising from AGM of 2023. These were unanimously approved. Any matters arising are dealt with elsewhere in these current minutes.

2. Treasurer's Report. An annual account had been circulated earlier to members. Jim had now produced a slightly fuller version which had been provided for members present at the meeting and which will also be posted on the website. This second version incorporates details suggested by our independent examiner and which deal with Challenge Events. These accounts have now been approved by the examiner. We would all like to thank Ron for his work and advice as independent examiner.

The difficulties negotiating the changeover of Treasurer and signatories at the bank had already been described when going through the new constitution. Much thanks is due to Kemi Yusuph, the previous treasurer and to Pete Colley for their help in sorting out these practical difficulties which have now been largely resolved.

Our income and assets are significantly higher than at the end of 2022. Challenge events income has dropped largely due to increased costs. The main issue has been the newly imposed licence fees required from the Capital Challenge organisers for a licence to cross the Royal Parks. The Founders' Challenge was, in addition, badly affected by poor weather. Nevertheless, we have still made a healthy surplus. This year, we are pausing running the Founders' Challenge so the mounting costs in that regard are in abeyance.

Pete Colley asked if the members would be allowed an opportunity to discuss what to do with the surplus? The Chair agreed that now was as good a time as any. Pete suggested that we should be supporting the preservation of long-distance paths within the London area. This would also allow us to advertise the LDWA. Colin Saunders pointed out that the custodians of long-distance trails in the capital is the inner London Ramblers Association who also produce route descriptions. Colin is meeting with their Rangers in March. It was agreed he should mention to them our interest in supporting their work.

It was further suggested that we could pay for a Meetup subscription at least on a month-to-month experimental basis. This might be a way of attracting new members including younger people. Some negative feedback from other groups experience with Meetup was reported, notably people signing up and then not turning up (it was suggested that non-attendees would be banned from future events)– too many people arriving (a cap can be imposed). It was agreed that we could experiment with a Meetup subscription to be used to advertise walks by leaders who are interested in exploring this possibility. Pete Lockyer is leading a walk in April and would definitely like to advertise it on Meetup.

Kemi asked if we were going to contribute to the National IT fund. It was generally agreed that we would not make further contributions until we saw definite signs of work being done on the IT system.

Environmental charities were the next up for consideration. Gordon Parker suggested support for the area that the Founders' Challenge passes through – Hurtwood, also Tanners Hatch. Pete Colley suggested that we go back through the records and consider charities we used to donate to, notably, the Woodland Trust.

3. Secretary's Report. A paper had been circulated along with the agenda and the Secretary went through this, looking principally at the comparative membership figures since last year.

It was asked whether we did research on why people give up their memberships. Gavin said this was not possible as no records are maintained as to the names of people who fail to renew their membership. Finding this out is complicated especially given that SiEntries have taken over maintaining subscriptions from members.

It was commented that it took us 20 years to convince the LDWA NEC to open a London branch. Their position was that there was no interest in walking in London. Our group now comprises 10% of total membership. Pre covid, we were the largest group, and we are still in the top three.

Minna retired from the post of secretary at this meeting and was thanked for her work.

4. Walk Secretary's Report. A paper had been circulated along with the agenda. Jean ran through the statistics and pointed out that we seem to be back to the way we were before covid. The number of walks per year has once again reached 90 and average weekly attendance and total annual attendance are back to where we were. Jean has tried to take the heat off the London group walk leaders by asking other groups such as Surrey and Kent if we can cross-list some of their (appropriate) walks on our walk list and offering appropriate London group walks for cross-listing in return. That seems to be working out well.

Jean reported that the walk leaders we have are fantastic. They constantly volunteer themselves for slots. She hasn't had to recruit to fill empty spaces for a couple of months. She would particularly like to mention the great contributions of Jerome Ripp, Gavin Fuller and Ron Williamson. It's Jean's final year in this post and Keith Mills will be taking over.

Jean was thanked for her work on behalf of the Group.

5. Capital Challenge Report. A paper had previously been circulated to which Marie referred.

The costs of running this event are increasing. Royal Parks did not previously charge. Now they charge a lot of money for each section of the Parks that we use. Marie has tried to impress on them that we merely walk through, without stopping and not in one great mass. This makes no difference and neither does our not-for-profit status. The transit fee is £650. Otherwise, fees are roughly £200 apiece. St John's Church used to take a donation but now charge a healthy fee by the hour. Cafes are requiring a reservation fee per head. However, we are still looking at a decent surplus. Paddington Station requires a Health and Safety Certificate. Next year, she will probably reroute the walk to avoid hitting too many parks. The pity is that the event is designed to advertise the beauties of London and cost considerations are now causing us to avoid the best attractions.

This year's event was sold out by end of December '23. She has increased the number of participants and there are still 40 people on the waiting list.

We have nearly enough walk Marshals, but she would love to pull in a few more.

The final recce will be undertaken over the next few weeks and the event is otherwise, good to go.

Colin Saunders commented that it seems extraordinary for public parks to charge over routes to which the public normally has free access. Marie replied that she had raised this point, and it made no difference.

6. Founders Challenge Report. Much thanks is due to Chris Blackwell for putting on two Challenge events in tough circumstances. Last year, no doubt due to the bad weather, only 85 participants arrived to take part. Chris has not been well recently and resigned his role as Founders' Challenge Organiser some months ago. We have been unable to find a replacement. The Committee has regretfully decided that it is now too late to arrange a Challenge event for this year. We wait to see how much disappointment is expressed. If the event is to take place in 2025, we will need someone in role by September 2024 at the latest.

What are the thoughts of members present as to the event's future? Pete Aylmer suggested we might ask the Surrey group if one of their members would like to work with London Group to revive it.

7. Webmaster's report. A paper had been circulated along with the AGM agenda. Deborah pointed out that the usual statistics on website usage are, sadly, no longer available as there are no background analytics. We were using Google analytics but this programme has expired. The NEC was hoping to pick up gathering similar analytics but the website not sufficiently developed as yet.

The website operates as a useful back up to newsletter.

Our Facebook page. Around 282 members (23%) use the Facebook group. The numbers are slightly up but levels of engagement are down by about 50%. In the last 2 months of last year there does seem to have been an uptick.

In general, the system has been very stable. There was one outage lasting about 24 hours. This was not a security issue. However, there are longstanding security issues as regards the association's task ids. This is being worked on.

The main bulk of the webmaster's work is posting walk reports and gpx files. Of the 90 walks run this year, only one leader didn't provide the necessary information. When a walk is run by a leader from one of the neighbouring groups, she more frequently doesn't receive these details.

Deborah particularly wanted to thank all the walk leaders, and also, to thank Gavin in his role of advisor and for looking after the website when she was away. He has given her great support

Gavin's Guff, the branch newsletter, is not displaying well on the website. The presentation when sent by email is far better.

She is going to refresh the Home Page of the website with some new photos. Some 900 have been uploaded so there is a good choice.

Deborah was thanked for her assiduous work as custodian of the website.

8. Appointment of Committee Members.

All those proposed were unanimously approved. Since no volunteers could be found to take on the jobs of Newsletter Editor, Social Secretary or Founders' Challenge Organiser, these posts will remain vacant for the time being. Gavin Fuller will kindly continue producing the newsletter in the meantime. Ron Williamson was approved as our independent examiner.

9. Motions submitted by members. There were none.

AOB. A) Marshalling at the Speyside 100. Colin Saunders is getting together a group of London members to help with this in addition to the 5 that have already volunteered. Melissa Butcher and Dan Selman will be working as sweeper uppers. John and Gail Elrick and Susanne Waldschmidt, John Sparshatt and Dave Williams will be marshalling. The Marshals will be based at HQ and free transport will be provided to accommodation and they will also receive free meals. There are good train and coach services to Aviemore from London. Volunteers will be eagerly welcomed.

B) Norfolk and Suffolk 100 2025. Gavin Fuller reported that Susanne Waldschmidt is organising a group of volunteers for this. The checkpoint originally allocated to us is without public transport access so we will instead be based at HQ (near Ipswich). Once again, anyone who would like to volunteer will be very much welcomed.

C) 30th anniversary of the founding of the LDWA London Group. This occurs in 2025. Surrey Group have created a Founders' anytime Challenge route and it was suggested that we walk this in celebration of our founding. Gavin and Jim had already come up with a similar idea using a Founders' Walk Gavin had in store, and which he could adapt to take in our Founders' tree, which he would be happy to go ahead with. For those who would appreciate a shorter walk, the circular walk from St Katherine's Dock up through Wapping could be used. This was the original route of the first walk organised by the London Group. These suggestions were approved.

D) West of Weald 50-mile route (WoW) Rod Smith who has devised this spoke to us. There are not so many 50-mile Challenge events. This is a West of Weald route wholly within the SoDNaP (south downs national park). HQ will be at Petersfield Rugby Football Club, which is easily accessible by train or road. Checkpoints at Selborne, East Meon, Rowlands Castle, and (open air) at Chilgrove. GPX files for the 50 and a 28-mile route available from Rod rix38@btinternet.com 22-24 hours would be allowed to complete it. Note, it does not go over Beacon Hill but does cover a large chunk of the South Downs Way. There are some 5000 feet of ascent. The Petersfield Rugby club is enthusiastic to host it. Rod thinks that the last week of July or first week of August would be a suitable time to hold it. Essex group and Sussex group have expressed some interest. Rod was asked to send the committee a gpx file.

E) Volunteer Awards. The NEC has asked for nominations for volunteer awards. The committee nominated Ron Williamson for an Eager Beaver award and this nomination has been accepted. Our thanks to Ron for all his work.

The meeting closed at 8.05.