

Chair's Annual Statement and Report - 2025

The Committee

First of all, I would like to thank all our committee members for all their time and effort to make this the best LDWA local group in the UK! It goes without saying that our group could not function without the dedication and hard work of the committee and especially our office bearers Alison, Lorna, Bea and Julie.

10th Anniversary

This year we celebrate our tenth anniversary, so it is perhaps a good time to reflect how we have developed and to look forward how we might develop in the coming years. Before 2015 the North of Scotland was the only area in mainland Britain not to be covered by a local group, so perhaps it was only a matter of time before some of the LDWA members in this northern outpost would get together and create a new local group.

So, what triggered this?

It all started with the Moray Outdoor and Walking Festival and an event that would attract long distance walkers to the area. The Moray Way had only recently been created when the Dava Way linked together the Speyside Way and Coastal Trail to make a 100 mile circular route possible. It was the perfect route for a supported 5 day challenge to entice more walkers to the area and show off what Moray had to offer. BINGO, some LDWA members from down south took the bait and the first event took off with enough participants to fill a minibus and cover the costs. One of the participants was Steph Carter, the LDWA Membership Secretary at the time, and when asked how we could get more members to take part, he simply said, "Why don't you start a new LDWA group up here, I'll help you to get it started!" and as they say, the rest is history!

We started off as the North West Grampian LDWA group with about 36 existing LDWA members and we were soon committing ourselves to putting on at least one walk a month and an easy walk challenge event for the following Easter, that would encourage new members. It was called the 5 Harbours Walk, but what a shock that turned out to be, with nearly 200 folks wanting to take part. Yes, it was a steep learning curve, but we were so lucky to have the experience of John Henderson and Julie Cribb to guide us through it.

Today we have 116 members, put on more than 24 walks annually and have created several challenge walks. If you compared that with other LDWA Local Groups, we do punch well above our weight and have also recently had the honour of hosting the annual 100 mile challenge on Speyside. We have also expanded our area to become the North of Scotland LDWA group and are now the largest group (in land area), and to put it into perspective, we are larger than the whole of Wales!

Our future looks promising and it is very encouraging to see more walk leaders coming forward and to see a better spread of membership outside of Moray.

I'd now like to dive into how we have been doing over the past year and the direction we might consider taking in 2026.

2025 Walk Stats so far

Compared with last year's stats there are some interesting trends:

- Female participation ratio has increased to 65%
- Female walk leader ratio is increasing
- The number of active walk leaders is increasing
- Membership participation remains at 40% (There are 116 NofS members)
- There is a better distribution of members with an encouraging increase in participation from our Highland members.

Challenge Events

This year we had the very successful Highland Coast to Coast and were the only Scottish group putting on a long challenge walk event. A notable achievement for a group with a relatively small membership. I see that South of Scotland are planning a short challenge walk of about 25 miles for next year, which is encouraging.

Unfortunately, before our group can contemplate organising a challenge walk next year, we will need to fill the post of Challenge Walk Coordinator, however, if nobody comes forward to do this, I'm willing to take this role on myself, providing somebody takes over as Chair.

Monthly Social Walks

Many thanks to Bea for taking on the role of Social Walks Secretary from me earlier in the year and continuing to fill our walks calendar. We have provided a great range of walks so far this year and considering the vast size of our area we cover. It would be nice to do more walks in the far-flung outposts of our area like the Western Isles, Orkney, Shetland and Knoydart, but without members in those areas engaging, it will be difficult. I would like to see at least one visit to one of these areas each year. Perhaps this could be a walking weekend, or week, that would be open to all LDWA members? We will need to reach out to our members in these areas for help with this.

Cafe Social Walks

I started the Cafe social walks on the first weekend of every month a few years ago and have tried to encourage other walk leaders to join in with mixed results. I have pretty much exhausted route variations using the Community Cafe at Rafford VH, so I've decided to reduce these in the hope that others will fill the gaps to keep the cafe walks going. It would be great to have a cafe walk in a different area every month instead of the Moray area dominating this monthly walk. Ultimately, we should aim to have multiple cafe walks in different areas on the same weekend as a social introduction to new members? What do you think?

Walk Through the Mountains

Next year I intend to focus on leading linear and loop walks through mountainous areas instead of doing the cafe walks. I will plan these to slot in-between the cafe walks and our regular end of the month walks. What do you think?

Walk Start Times

There was a discussion regarding walk start times to consider later starts. It was decided that where practicable start time could start later, but this would be at the discretion of the walk leader. In my view there are many factors to take in consideration before deciding what time to start' so here are a few off the top of my head.

- The distance from the core membership. (How far from Inverness or Moray)
- Daylight hours available and length of walk
- Where the planned refreshment stops are and opening times of cafes and shops.
- Public transport times
- Getting back home early enough on a Sunday for work on Monday
- The season of year

I did have a look at start times of other groups and found that a lot of groups start earlier than our average start times and rarely do they start after 9.30am, but most other group areas are either much smaller, or include large population centres, so is it fair to compare them?

Monthly Newsletter

Graham did a fantastic job with the newsletter when he was on the NofS committee, but since his departure nobody has come forward to continue it. It was always going to be a difficult position to fill considering the journalistic skill that only Graham could bring to his creation. Despite this, Alison has done an equally fantastic job communicating group news and events through the LDWA mailing system. I'm happy to continue using the LDWA mailing system, if nobody comes forward to resurrect the newsletter. The only disadvantages/advantages I can see is that:

- There won't be newsletters to view on our web pages
- Although the volume of written material will be shorter, it will still convey the necessary information to our members
- There will be no photographs to complement the monthly email, but we can hyperlink the Facebook walk reports if necessary.

Farewell to Julie

Julie Cribb has been the bedrock of this group from the start and was until very recently, the Chair of the LDWA. After a very busy few years, she is taking a well deserved break from leadership roles, so I would like to take this opportunity to thank her and wish her the very best for the future. We are very grateful for her starring role in setting up our group and I know she will always be there when we need an experienced hand to guide us.

I would also like to thank all our members for taking part and supporting our group over the past year.

Peter Mitchell
Chair, North of Scotland LDWA