

## **BEDS AREA RAMBLERS CHAIRS REPORT (Nov20)**

There is no doubt that that this year has been a strange year. Who this time last year had heard of Zoom or Coronavirus (COVID).

Before I start with my report of the year I have to say A BIG THANK YOU to you all, without your ideas and forward thinking none of our innovative ideas and new ways of working in the last six months would have been possible.

Twelve months ago, we will have been running group walks on five or six days a week, with somewhere up to eighty or ninety people socialising out on these walks. We were looking forward to our Christmas walks and social events. The group holidays, training courses and walking festivals were being planned for this year. We were even enjoying walking across muddy Bedfordshire clay fields in January and February.

Things all changed in March, the government locked almost everything down in mid-March, the Ramblers had to cancel all group activities. However exercise outdoors was still allowed for many, what then happened was that more people went out, walking became more popular. The Government and NHS publicised how good it was for our mental wellbeing. Yet the downside was that landowners and press labelled us walkers as a nuisance.

Yes everything was initially cancelled, but as time went by new ideas came to the front. Area and group meetings moved online, we were looking at a new way of working. As lockdown eased booking rules and systems were developed so group walks could restart. Friends and walking colleagues joined forces and using social media started walking in small groups. In fact, All our groups were back out walking by the end of July in one way or another. The majority of people were even enjoying this new way of walking. There was not the hassle of where to find parking for 30 cars, or do we have a pub stop at lunchtime. We found ways of adapting, things became easier in some ways and more difficult in others (how to social distance and how to pass fellow walkers for example). All you really need was an idea and somebody who can read a map and lead a walk.

The secret now was how to adapt, our training courses and Bedfordshire Walking Festival were cancelled. New ideas came forward and "Pop Out To Bedfordshire" was born with a series of Pop-Up Walks over 9 days in mid-September and our weekly on-line Pop Along to Apps & Maps training courses over the whole of the month proved quite an unexpected success. In fact, the training courses were such a success that the decision has now been made to repeat them again early next year.

Looking at our Ramblers membership in England at the end October there were 87,205 members with an average age of 66. If we bring this down to local level we have 805 members in Bedfordshire (just below 1% of the total) with an average age of 67.

Looking into this in more detail we know that approximately 2/3rds of our members (530 people) do not walk regularly, the question therefore is how will Coronavirus, both locally and nationally, impact on our numbers?

### **MEMBERSHIP AS AT 31-10-20**

	<b><u>2016</u></b>	<b><u>2017</u></b>	<b><u>2018</u></b>	<b><u>2019</u></b>	<b><u>2020</u></b>
<b><u>North Beds</u></b>	159	155	159	164	160
<b><u>Leighton Buzzard</u></b>	150	135	129	130	132
<b><u>Ivel Valley</u></b>	316	318	345	361	355
<b><u>Lea &amp; Icknield (Luton) Area</u></b>	143	130	127	138	127
<b><u>Total</u></b>	792	763	792	832	805

I can't finish last year without acknowledging the sad loss to the Area of three key members of our groups David Slark (of Ivel Valley) and Tony Holton (Lea & Icknield) both whom I walked and talked with on many occasions and Derek Vickery one of the founder members of Leighton Buzzard Ramblers. They will all be sadly missed.

Looking ahead to 2021, yes, there will probably be some kind of restrictions, but all along we have been allowed out for exercise. We all probably know somebody who would like to get out walking and is not sure where and who to walk with. Or was out walking in the summer and has hibernated back indoors for the winter. One idea we have is to entice them out with a short winter walk, a sort of taster session or "Introduction to Walking in Bedfordshire". So please if you have any new ideas or thoughts please let either your group Chair or me know.

The real secret is to think positive and try something, if you do nothing, nothing will happen and you never know what might come of it.

**Nick Markham  
Area Chair  
Bedfordshire Area**