

BRITISH MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL

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Question Time: 21st National Open Forum Saturday 22 April 2017 – Plas y Brenin, Capel Curig

The following notes summarise the 21st National Open Forum meeting, which was held immediately prior to the 2017 AGM and was well attended by around 100 members.

Dave Turnbull welcomed everyone to the gathering, which this year had been billed as Question Time, to reflect the panel / audience question and answer format of the meeting. Last year's Open Forum had been well attended and generated a good debate, and the purpose of the meeting remained the same; to enable members to raise any issue about the organisation for discussion.

He introduced those at the front table: BMC president Rehan Siddiqui, vice-presidents were Rupert Davies and Nick Kurth, and access & conservation officer for Wales Elfyn Jones. He also introduced Matthew Bradbury, who chairs the BMC Access & Conservation Trust, and Richard Doubleday from Perkins Slade, the BMC's insurers.

DT suggested discussion and queries concerning the motion of no confidence might perhaps be left until Item 9 on the AGM agenda to avoid repetition. Charles Gameson said many people had come specifically to discuss this issue and that they should be able to do so in the Open Forum. Rehan Siddiqui and Rupert Davies concurred that members should be able to ask questions about whatever they wanted to.

David Prior asked why the Open Forum preceded the AGM as opposed to following it. DT replied that this was how it had been conducted since it was set up in the mid-1990s and that no one had questioned the scheduling before.

Eddie Birch asked about the timings for the discussion of agenda Item 9. Rik Payne (London & SE area chair and National Council member), who would be chairing that agenda item, explained that Bob Pettigrew and Rupert Davies would each have 15 minutes to speak for and against the motion, after which the debate would be open to the floor. Members would be allowed to speak for up to two minutes each; everyone who wished to speak would have the opportunity provided it was relevant to the item; repetition would not be permitted.

Clair Wilson asked how the Climb Britain re-brand and the subsequent reversal of the decision had come about. DT explained the rationale and process, including discussions with external consultants about the BMC's brand identity and commercial potential, the thinking behind the re-brand, the timing of decisions and actions, and the eventual reversal of the decision following consultation with members and agreement by National Council.

Nick Kurth offered apologies on behalf of the Executive. In mitigation, he said feedback in advance of the announcement had been positive, and from the Executive's perspective, it had always been the intention to take the re-brand proposal to National Council. The reaction from members had been unexpected, hence the decision to consult and ultimately reverse the decision.

John Booth asked why the area meetings were not used as focus groups before the decision to re-brand. Rehan Siddiqui accepted this had been an error, and the BMC had responded to criticism by consulting at the September area meetings. Nick Kurth added that a positive aspect which came out of the re-brand was the question of how to engage with more of the membership, given that relatively few members attend area meetings.

Rupert Davies agreed there had been a failure to step back from the process and consider greater consultation before proceeding with the announcement. He felt this was partly due to the BMC's organisational structure, combined with generally positive feedback during the process, which meant that by the time of National Council's approval in June 2016, the process had gathered momentum.

Rab Carrington queried whether it was unusual for area reps on National Council not to ask for broader consultation with members on important issues discussed at National Council?

Phil Simister (Midlands area chair and National Council member) said National Council had not been able to consult with the areas due to confidentiality issues concerning the trading marking process. Martin Wragg (honorary legal advisor and Land Management Group chair) noted that it had been agreed at the June 2016 National Council meeting to keep the re-brand decision confidential until trademarking had been completed, so as not to jeopardise the process.

Steve Scott said during his time on the BMC Lakes area, they had had difficulty communicating with members; the only way members could be alerted about meetings was by registering with the BMC Community site. Tony Ryan, whose role includes helping promote area meetings said the BMC now uses lots of channels to communicate with areas, including area-specific email invitations and dedicated area Facebook pages. Colin Knowles (former Executive Committee member with responsibility for IT) agreed communications have improved over the last 3-4 years; Simon McCalla (current Executive member with responsibility for IT) said the BMC is looking to further improve communications through options such as online forums.

Peter Salieneks welcomed the acknowledgement of error, and added that the BMC's membership is its conscience.

Charles Gameson felt the BMC should look after its current members before seeking new members. In response, Lynn Robinson said in her experience as a Peak area volunteer, the BMC office did an excellent job of supporting volunteers and helping them to reach out to the membership.

David Prior asked why the BMC had changed from being a representative body to a governing body. DT explained this was not the case and that the BMC remains very much a representative body as stated in the Memorandum & Articles of Association. Sport England does however classify the BMC as a 'governing body' for its own internal funding purposes. Furthermore, the BMC is effectively the national governing body for competition climbing. Mountaineering Scotland already describes itself as the national governing body for competition climbing. Ian Smith suggested the BMC became the de facto national governing body for competition climbing in 1989 when Simon Nadin won the world cup event in Leeds.

Neil Hartley wondered whether the 'rolling ball' of the re-brand started with the funding provided by Sport England, and asked whether it was a case of the tail wagging the dog. Rehan Siddiqui replied that the re-brand was not imposed on the BMC, but came out of a wider commercial consultancy exercise as a recommendation.

Jonathan White noted that amongst other things the independent review will examine the BMC's structure. He asked whether people felt the current structure is in fact already sound, more that it is not being properly followed? He also said the 2016 AGM minutes do not record whether attendees were club or individual members, so it is unclear if those attending the AGM are representative of the broader BMC membership. *(Post meeting note: the 2016 AGM minutes do record whether attendees are club or individual members. The summary of the 2016 National Open Forum does not indicate membership type).*

In response RS said it will be up to the independent review to examine the BMC's structure and make recommendations. He then introduced Ray Wigglesworth QC, the prospective chair of the review, subject to agreement by National Council. Ray is a retired crown court judge, a climber of many years, and has never been a BMC member.

Frank Cannings felt it very important for the BMC to understand its members, which he referred to as 'customers', and he wasn't sure the BMC does in fact understand them. He asked if we had information about why people join the organisation, and what we know about their outdoor activities? Alex Messenger (head of marketing & communications) explained recent and ongoing improvements to the BMC membership database, which will enable better understanding of the motivations and activities of members.

Freddie Naish asked if the BMC had a strategy to attract climbing wall users as members. Nick Kurth accepted there are two groups in particular which the BMC does not currently serve as well as it could: indoor climbers and people undertaking mountain training awards. Alex Messenger agreed indoor climbers and hill walkers (which include many people undertaking mountain training awards) are two key areas for recruiting new members. He said the name 'BMC' speaks to current members but is not so well-known amongst non-members.

RS asked honorary treasurer John Simpson to outline the BMC's current financial position. John said that bank deposits currently sit at £1.8m, with assets showing on the balance sheet at £1.4m, so the organisation has no immediate financial problems. Rehan added that Sport England funding for 2017-21 is in the balance, and that if funding were to be discontinued some BMC activities would be affected, but the organisation's future would not be in jeopardy.

Matt Cooper asked what assurances could be given that situations such as the re-brand, namely the lack of consultation, would not happen again. Rupert Davies responded by saying the independent review will undertake a complete top-down examination of the organisation's structures and decision-making processes. The review will be independent and at arm's length, so that the Executive is seen not to direct the review. DT stated that lessons had definitely been learnt and it was very clear that members want to be consulted and involved with big organisational decisions.

Carl Spencer (North West area chair) felt there was a presumption of how the governance review might pan out. There had been no mention of the prospective chair at the February National Council meeting, and the way the review had been presented was wrong.

Paul Exley asked whether BMC areas could expect to receive all governance review information, such as chair appointment and terms of reference, as well as regular updates, and also be able to influence the process, and questioned whether work could start before the areas had approved the chair and terms of reference. Nick Kurth explained the proposed timeline for the review group to undertake its work, present its findings and consult membership.

John Booth asked about a deadline set by Sport England for the BMC to meet its new code for sport governance. DT explained the BMC would be working towards meeting as many of the code's requirements as possible by an October 2017 deadline, to demonstrate good governance in support of continued funding, but that the independent review timeline would run to the 2018 BMC AGM, where any suggested amendments to the M&AA would be put to a vote.

Mark Vallance said many of the larger BMC affiliated clubs, such as the Alpine Club and the Climbers' Club, do not have a forum for discussing BMC business; smaller clubs, because they typically draw their membership from smaller areas probably discuss BMC-related business more. The Open Forum provides such an opportunity. He also said that he didn't want to be a member of a national governing body.

Colin Knowles felt the BMC was spending too much time worrying about its relationship with Sport England and that many members would favour a move towards independence from such government funding; others in the room expressed their agreement with this point.

Jason Rawles suggested that rather than focusing on technological developments to improve communications and engagement, why not consider a change of attitude to hill walkers, who make up the biggest proportion of members and also the largest potential market for membership growth.

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Inigo Atkin suggested the Executive has a mandate to represent all BMC members and not just those in the meeting.

Rehan Siddiqui thanked everyone for their contributions to the discussions.

The meeting finished at approximately 10.40am.