



PNFS Five-Year Strategy

2024-2029

Peak & Northern Footpaths Society
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Foreword

One-hundred-and-thirty years since the Peak and Northern Footpaths Society (PNFS) was formed, it feels as if we are at a key stage in our history. Long-term success for any organisation merits a strategic approach, with consideration of the adaptations required to thrive in a world very different from 1894, recognising increasingly rapid changes in society, technology and public expectations.

I am delighted to introduce this initial five-year strategy, which will become a rolling five-year document as we continue to build on the important work of PNFS. The strategy has been developed by volunteers over many months and shared in outline at our Annual General Meeting in May 2024. I would like to thank David Gosling, Vice Chair, for his determined work in drafting the words, following discussions of key areas for inclusion amongst trustees and other volunteers.



Image 1 | Kathy McLean - Chair

Agreeing to words in a document is the starting point, as we will now commit to bringing the actions alive through the work of trustees and other volunteers. Regular updates will be shared with members, who should hold us to account for delivering what we have set out to do.

Some of the aims of the strategy relate to the sustainability of the Society through ensuring we have the right skills and number of volunteers, structures to enable people to contribute and the appropriate governance. However, some aspects will prove more controversial and will require wider discussion and the weighing up of benefits and risks. I look forward to these debates and discussions as we strengthen our financial resilience and achievement of our objects.

I hope you enjoy reading the strategy and feel it will help us all develop your Society and maintain public rights of way for all.

Kathy Mclean

Chair, PNFS

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Introduction – The Society in 2024

Peak and Northern Footpaths Society (PNFS) is long established (1894) and the oldest surviving regional footpath society in the UK. The Society has objects specified in its constitution, namely ‘Creating, preserving and improving open spaces, public access rights and rights of way’¹. It is a charity run entirely by volunteers. It is their commitment and enthusiasm which has ensured success for 130 years.

The Society is led and governed by trustees and officers, who make up the two key leadership committees: the Management Committee and the Courts and Inquiries Committee. Key leadership roles in the Society are chair, vice chair, treasurer, secretary, and membership secretary. Other key roles in the Society are the courts and inquiries officers, footpath inspections coordinator, magazine editor, footpath improvements and bridges officer, archivist, website officer, and office manager.

Most, but not all, volunteers are organised into four teams, which focus on key areas of activity: (1) courts and inquiries officers and area officers (legal actions); (2) the consultations and orders team (who handle much of the correspondence with highway authorities, including path orders); (3) footpath inspectors and path checkers, who look out for and report footpath faults; (4) the signpost team, responsible for the erection and maintenance of signposts. Whilst the key objects of the Society relate to preservation and improvement of public rights of way, it also supports guided walks, organised by three walks coordinators.

Membership numbers have varied. Over the last five years they rose from 1,152 (in 2018) to 1,377 (in 2023). Receipts from membership fees were £15,771 in 2023.

The Society has sound finances, with £436,332 in assets in 2023. The Society funds itself through membership subscriptions, investment income, and donations (total receipts in 2023 were £47,303). Recent concerns about increasing costs and the possible depletion of funds have led to budget-setting for the first time. A recommendation to increase membership fees for the first time in over ten years was accepted at the 2024 AGM.

Understanding the condition of the huge network of public rights of way in our region is the basis of the work of the Society. ‘Our region’ is defined in our constitution as Cheshire (now Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester); Derbyshire; Lancashire; Staffordshire; the former metropolitan counties of Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire; Blackburn with Darwen; Blackpool; Derby; Halton; Stoke-on-Trent, and Warrington.

A substantial team of footpath inspectors, spread across the region, provide the backbone of the voluntary effort which leads to the capturing of information and reporting of faults. Their numbers have doubled over the last ten years, from 96 in 2013 to around 170 now. Inspectors

¹ View the constitution at <https://peakandnorthern.org.uk/constitution.php>

enter reports for footpath inspections on the Footpath Inspection Database and report faults to the highway authorities. Area officers, where they exist, oversee the work of inspectors in their areas.

However, it is salutary to note that of 52 areas overseen by PNFS, 12 have no inspectors at all and only 11 have a full complement covering all parishes in an area. Some highway authorities' areas are more difficult to recruit to than others, for example Staffordshire.

Several years ago, a mobile application (Path Checker) was developed, which allows any PROW-user to report faults. The Path Checker scheme has successfully created engagement with the Society for many more members and non-members in the region. We now receive nearly 500 reports of footpath faults per annum. We also provide advice on rights of way.

PNFS is a statutory consultee for the 35 highway authorities (i.e. local councils) in the region we cover, and they must therefore contact us about legal proposals which affect public rights of way. The consultations and orders team, courts and inquiries officers, and area officers look at these proposals and comment on them to ensure that walkers' rights are protected.

Agenda for Change

As set out in the introduction, the Society has stood the test of time and continues to expand and develop. A new strategy is intended to provide a clear set of signals for the ways in which the Society will develop over the next five years. The context in 2024 is very different, not just from 1894 but post pandemic, in a society where diversity is ever increasing, reliance on the internet and technology has been transformational, and expectations for health and wellbeing and environmental sustainability are different.

While the Society has many strengths, is functioning well and has adapted over the years, we recognise that there are opportunities that are not yet maximised, and weaknesses and threats which are not yet mitigated. These may reduce the effectiveness of the Society and could jeopardise its future survival. They may be grouped under the following headings: outcomes, people and finances.



Image 2 | Footpaths Officer David Morton and Vice-Chair David Gosling stand with signpost No. 656

Outcomes

Measuring outcomes of the work done by the Society would enable the trustees to understand and explain the impact of the work done. It is a feature of the Society that its volunteers are dispersed over a wide geographical area and work relatively autonomously. Although we have some mechanisms to oversee the activity of our volunteers, much of the activity undertaken on behalf of the Society is not visible. This means that the impact of that work is also little known. There is considerable scope for improving the support given to volunteers and for better understanding the impact of their activity. Improvements to oversight and decision making have the potential to improve the impact of the Society on the rights of way network.

Case Study | Ramsden Road



Image 3 | Ramsden Road before and after PNFS intervention

After repeated failures of the highway authority (Kirklees Council) to maintain or repair the surface of this popular route, PNFS served notice under Section 56 of the Highways Act. This notice requested that a magistrate require the authority to fulfil their obligations and make good the surface of the way.

Cost to PNFS: £700. Value of repair: £300,000

People

The main limitations to the Society's work are the number, skills and geographic distribution of its volunteers. Whilst we benefit from the knowledge and experience of a small number of experts, the Society's dependence on this group of people is a weakness that needs to be addressed. This is partly about succession planning for key posts, but also about recruitment, which in turn depends on raising the profile of the Society among the walking public. Both our membership and our volunteers reflect a relatively narrow demographic and a geographical concentration in a relatively limited area which we would like to expand.

Finances

The range of activities the Society can undertake is limited by the budget available, and even the modest expenditure at the current level is not sustainable for more than a few years. The

Society has been fortunate in having received some generous legacies and donations in recent years, but this source of income is unpredictable and is not a sound basis for planning the future of the Society's finances. Notably, the Society does not have a funding strategy and receives income from a limited number of sources – membership fees, donations and investment income.

The wider social and political environment in which the Society operates has been increasingly difficult in recent years. The following factors are all relevant: reduction in funding of local authorities; changes to the guidance from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on path orders; impact of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) Act deadline for submitting DMMO applications based on historical evidence (currently postponed to 2031); changing attitudes towards volunteering; impact of social media.

This brief overview of the challenges facing the Society underline the need for a strategy to address the known weaknesses and to build stronger resilience as an organisation to face unknown difficulties that may lie ahead.

Vision, Mission, and Values

Vision

All lawful users of public rights of way can exercise their rights without hindrance throughout our region.

Mission

- To be a recognised advocate for access to the outdoors across our region
- To monitor, on behalf of walkers, all public rights of way within the PNFS region and report faults to the relevant highway authority
- To protect public rights of way and areas with access within the PNFS region
- To encourage and, where appropriate, to require highway authorities to remove illegal obstructions and to remedy other faults affecting public rights of way
- To fund improvements, including footbridges, to public rights of way
- To erect and maintain PNFS signposts

Values

- To be encouraging of those wishing to enjoy the outdoors (including people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds and interests who want to walk, cycle, ride or run)
- To be open and welcoming to people of all backgrounds and personal characteristics
- To work on behalf of users of public rights of way within our region
- To be respectful of all and to value the contribution of each volunteer
- To allow all volunteers to express concerns; to listen to their views; and to be willing to make changes to address concerns
- To collaborate with all organisations and people who share our goals and values

Strategy Development

This strategy builds on earlier strategy documents drafted in 2018, 2022 and 2023. This is, however, the first published strategy. Members were consulted on earlier drafts of the strategy at the 2024 AGM and via email and post in September/October 2024. This final version has been agreed by the Trustees of the Society.

The Culture of the Society

There are a number of important areas which will enable the successful delivery of this strategy. They cannot be isolated as separate actions but should be integral to everything we do. If we make progress in these areas, they will affect what might be called the ‘culture’ of the Society or ‘the way we do things round here’.

A culture of respect and inclusion

The Society is a volunteer-led charity and has a duty to safeguard all volunteers from harm, neglect, abuse or the risk of such arising.



Image 4 | PNFS members rest on a footbridge during the Buxton Ring of Trees walk in February 2024

The Society is committed to inclusion but recognises there is a great deal to do to make this a reality. We will treat all individuals with dignity and respect, and will not discriminate on the basis of age, disability, ethnicity, sex or gender, sexual orientation, religion or belief system, marital or parental status, or any other personal characteristic.

The Guidance on Good Practice in Communications spells out that the Society expects all written

communications (including emails) will be respectful, collegial and courteous between members and with all others with whom we communicate.

We have a code of conduct, based on the Nolan Principles², which makes it clear that respectful behaviour is to be expected.

In this strategy it is expected that all the work undertaken by officers and members of the Society will conform to the culture of respect for all and will actively pursue inclusivity.

² [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life—](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life)
2

A culture that places a high priority on environmental considerations

The Society will take account of the environmental impact of its activities and aim to achieve sustainability, reduce our carbon footprint and protect the natural environment.

Sustainability means that our actions will meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

We recognise that human activity, including walking, can have a damaging impact on the environment and that we should aim to minimise this impact wherever possible.

We will encourage the use of public transport while undertaking the business of the Society.

As part of the strategy, the Society will need to take a view on the investments it holds. There is a strong view held by some members that the Society should, where possible, avoid companies which damage the environment or produce or sell tobacco products or armaments, and should invest only in ethical products.

We will need to develop a full policy to spell out our environmental and ethical commitments.



Image 5 | Walkers on Mam Tor in Derbyshire. Photo courtesy of Andy Leader

Strategic Priorities

1. Impact

The Society exists to achieve public benefits which relate to protecting, preserving and improving rights of way and public access rights within our region. It is essential that this central goal of the Society remains the principal focus of any strategy. Trustees may also consider and campaign for ways in which public access rights can be extended beyond the current network of public rights of way.

Areas for improvement include:

- Work to extend public access rights
- Develop and share better data on the impact of the Society's activities
- Increase active inspector numbers in areas where we currently have few or none
- Improve the effectiveness of footpath inspections through training and supervision
- Ensure that consultations and orders are being reviewed effectively
- Expand the number of area officers and courts and inquiries officers in areas where the Society currently has none
- Improve the monitoring of planning applications which affect rights of way
- Improve our collaboration with other groups and organisations that share our goals

2. Succession Planning

The Society will not function effectively if there are insufficient officers and trustees in key areas of activity. Concerns include unfilled roles (currently the role of secretary is unfilled), the age profile of trustees, resignation of trustees, large geographical areas without area officers, and the limited number of courts and inquiries officers.

Actions to improve succession planning include:

- Actively recruit officers, trustees, and footpath inspectors
- Use suitable websites to advertise posts
- Provide training for prospective office holders
- Identify and support potential office holders

3. Growth

Having grown significantly over the first hundred years of its existence, the Society has been stable in its size for some years now. Size may be defined in a number of ways – the geographical area in which the Society operates, the number of members, the number of volunteers who are active and the impact of the Society's work. These 'size' factors are inter-related.

Trustees and members will need to decide whether the current size, as defined above, is satisfactory or whether to actively seek growth and to develop a strategy for achieving growth:

- Growth in membership through an active recruitment policy
- Growth in the geographical area covered by the Society e.g. by including adjacent highway authorities such as Nottinghamshire or North Yorkshire
- Growth in volunteer numbers – particularly in under-represented areas and by introducing new volunteer activities

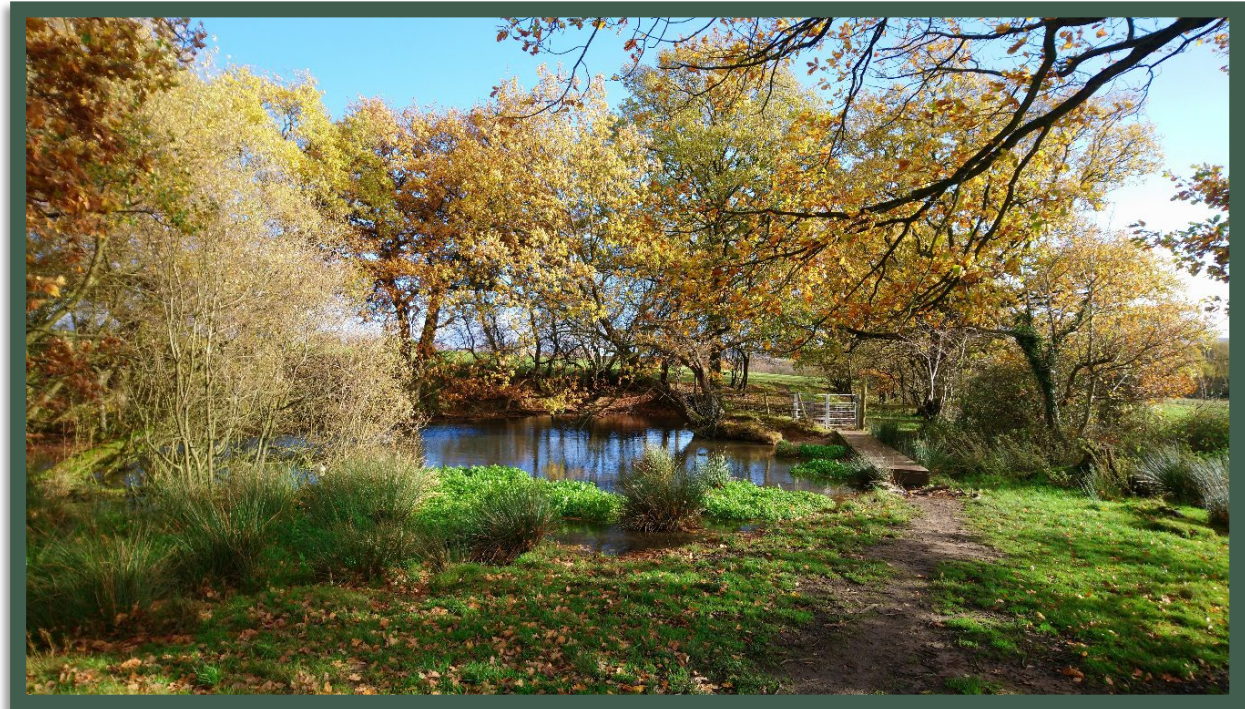


Image 6 | Poynton FP9 with newly-installed gate

4. Funding

While the Society has healthy reserves and a stable income, it is significantly limited in some of its activities by the lack of a funding strategy. The Society is committed to improving rights of way, principally by erecting footbridges and signposts. These are the areas of activity which have the most direct impact on improving the rights of way network, and they are severely limited by a lack of income, particularly during a period of rising costs.

Furthermore, running costs are increasing and putting pressure on the Society's cash flow.

This suggests that our strategy should include:

- A funding strategy which will identify new sources of income including possible grant funding from sources such as the National Lottery and other local funds
- Improved mechanisms for planning expenditure and monitoring investments and reserves, including budget setting
- An increase in the number of fee-paying members
- Regular review of membership fees
- Fundraising by members

5. Governance and Operating Model

The Society has continued to operate with a structure that was defined over ten years ago when it was a significantly smaller organisation, more centralised, financially less secure and more limited in its concerns and operations.

For the future, the Society needs to improve governance oversight of its activities and have a structure that allows for more effective decision making, including responding to issues which come into the public domain. Compliance with modern Charity Commission guidance also requires attention.

Areas for strategic development include:

- Review the governance of the Society and structures for decision-making and for considering issues in the public domain on which PNFS may wish to take a position
- Create formal sub-committees of the Management Committee of trustees (for example, a finance subcommittee and courts and inquiries subcommittee)
- Establish working groups, for example: IT, website, social media; capital (bridges, FP projects, signposts, Taylor House); engagement (publicity, members, and volunteers)
- Create a role for members in subcommittees and working groups
- Revise the constitution to allow agreed changes to governance to be implemented

6. Public Profile

The work of the Society is not as well known, even among walkers, as it should be. The profile of the Society's work needs to be raised in the press and among councillors, politicians and the walking public. Social media posts reach users of social media platforms but have limited impact on policy and miss large numbers of the public.

Our strategy for the future could include:

- More use of press releases
- Increase lobbying of and liaison with political representatives both local and national
- More active use of professional videos and advertising
- More active liaison with affiliate members
- Active use of campaigns that are of relevance to the Society's goals and issues in the public domain
- Continued development of the website

7. Volunteers

We have approximately 170 volunteer footpath inspectors. Other volunteer roles include the Society's officers, the consultations and orders team and signposts team. The level of activity of volunteers is necessarily very varied. Most are engaged and active but, for a variety of reasons, in some cases, the volunteer activity level is low.

Actions to include in the strategy for the future include:

- Improve volunteer engagement
- Improve volunteer retention
- Monitor volunteer activity more effectively
- Review current role descriptions
- Identify new volunteer roles
- Actively recognise and encourage volunteers
- Consult volunteers more regularly

8. Signposts

The PNFS signposts, some of which date back to 1905, remain the most visible and well-known symbol of the work of the Society. The current signposts officer has expanded the number of signposts considerably – currently standing at 580 signposts. The success of the signpost officer in increasing the number of signposts also creates a significant problem of maintenance. Most of the signposts are in our central area, with relatively few in our more peripheral areas. The cost of new signposts has risen very significantly in the recent past.



Image 7 | PNFS Signpost No. 1 erected in 1905 opposite Carr Meadow Farm in Little Hayfield

The Society's strategy for signposts needs to be determined, potentially including:

- A greater focus on maintenance rather than erecting new signs
- Locating signposts in peripheral areas of the Society's region
- Identifying new sources of funding for new signposts
- Deciding if a maximum number is desirable
- Consider new roles for signposts for the current digital age

9. Communication

The Society publishes Signpost magazine four times a year and an annual report both in hard copy and online. An online newsletter was tried and then withdrawn. Inspectors receive irregular communications from the inspections coordinator. Communication with members relies on the website being updated and on face-to-face meetings.

Any strategy should take account of the communications with members and volunteers.

Areas to consider include:

- Review the role and frequency of Signpost magazine
- Review the role and location of face-to-face meetings
- Consider other forms of communication e.g. digital and social media
- Review communication with volunteers

10. Bridges & Improvements

The current level of activity on footpaths improvements and footbridges is likely to come under pressure unless new funding can be found.

Our strategy development needs to:

- Identify the target level of funding of footpath improvements and footbridges that the Society wishes to sustain long-term
- Identify the level of activity that can be afforded
- Plan the location and distribution of projects
- Explore alternative forms of funding



Image 8 | Rick Hill (Countryside Officer, Bradford Council), Nigel Howe (Bridges Officer, PNFS), Max Kopasz (Countryside Supervisor, Bradford Council) on a newly erected bridge across Slippery Ford Beck, Keighley FP29. (Image: Bradford Council)

11. Demographics, Diversity, and Equality

In common with other charities concerned with walking and public access, our membership has been predominantly white, middle class, and middle-aged or older. Although some success has been achieved regarding gender and age, the Society's values oblige us to improve diversity within our membership.

The Society could also do more to make walking safer and more attractive for women and more accessible for those with disabilities.

To improve our diversity, we could:

- Focus on geographical areas within our region where there is greatest diversity
- Review our practices and publications
- Set targets to be regularly reviewed
- Increase the diversity amongst the leadership of the Society
- Promote safety for women walkers
- Promote more accessible trails

Case Study | Stockport 119



Image 9 | Stockport path 119 before and after PNFS intervention

This path (Stockport 119) is the first leg of the Cown Edge Way – created by PNFS and the Ramblers 20 years ago. The first reports of it being flooded go back to the 1980's. In 2023, after threatening to take Stockport MBC to the magistrates' court, work was undertaken to prevent the path being inundated and allow walkers to access the Cown Edge Way

12. Data Management

The Society holds data in a variety of forms. Much of this historic and current data is at the heart of our mission. This applies both to our parish archives and the Footpaths Inspections Database (FID). Recently, the Society has made strong moves towards greater sharing of files and electronic storage.

Strategic actions could include:

- Development of the FID to achieve greater effectiveness
- Resolve ownership of the FID intellectual property for the long term
- Continue scanning of historic paper archives
- Review the use of SharePoint and encourage take-up
- Ensure our data storage and usage are compliant with UK GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation)
- Ensure data is held securely

13. Assets

Taylor House is the major physical asset held by the Society. It is the location for meetings, storage of archives, and the signpost workshop. Since the pandemic, usage of Taylor House has changed, with considerably fewer volunteers attending in person.

The Society's strategy needs to review:

- The role and future functions of Taylor House
- Alternative futures for the building
- The current portfolio of investments



Image 10 | Taylor House, headquarters of PNFS in Stockport

Measuring Impact

An essential aspect of strategy development is being able to identify outcomes of PNFS activity which can be measured. Quantitative measures are important for funding applications and for assessing the level of success being achieved in each activity area.

Table 1 | Indicators of impact

Activity Areas in PNFS	Benefits Delivered	Measure
Inspections	Faults resolved	Number of faults resolved
Courts and inquiries	The removal of faults from public rights of way	Number of faults removed Number of legal notices served
Courts and inquiries, area officers, and assessors	Public path orders improved to protect walkers' rights	Number of consultation responses Number of responses resulting in protection of walkers' rights
Signposts	Signposts erected and maintained	Number maintained Number erected
Improvements	Paths improved	Number of paths improved
Footbridges funded	New footbridges built	Number new footbridges funded or partly funded
Unrecorded paths claimed	Rights of way newly recorded	Number and length of newly-recorded PROW
Communications and campaigning	Influence on political decisions in favour of walkers and other PROW users	Number of consultations (local and regional) Number of campaigns Number of successes

Resilience

Strategy planning must pay particular attention to key areas which are essential to maintain health of the Society over the next five years:

- Succession planning
- Finance/income generation
- Recruitment and retention of members and volunteers

Implementation and Review

This five-year strategy will only be of value if it is implemented.

Implementation

Individual trustees will be identified as responsible officers for specific aspects of the strategy in future and will be required to provide regular updates to meetings of the trustees.

Strategy Reviews

Progress on achieving the goals of the strategy will be measured quarterly at strategy review meetings of the trustees. At the Review Meetings, the Strategy may be revised and new targets may be introduced. Elements in it may be changed with the agreement of a majority of trustees, although significant changes will be proposed to the AGM.

Annual General Meeting

Progress on achieving the goals of the strategy will be reported to the AGM and will also be publicised via Signpost magazine and on the website.



Image 11 | Youngate bridge and ford across the river Noe at the foot of Jacob's Ladder, Edale BR19

