



<https://colefordwelcomeswalkers.co.uk/>

Chairs Annual Report – 2023

Who are Walkers are Welcome and Coleford Welcomes Walkers?

Walkers are Welcome (WaW) is a nationwide initiative launched in 2007 to be “welcoming to walkers”. It enabled the development of over 100 accredited Towns and Villages to assist member towns with their communities’ economic, physical health and mental well-being through walking.

Following support from 5% of residents and business owners, from the Parish of Coleford and with promises made on the application in 2019 to the [National Walkers are Welcome Network](#), Coleford Welcomes Walkers (CWW) was born in August 2021.

CWW is a voluntary community led group, supported by, and led by local volunteer residents / business owners to promote Coleford as a walker’s destination.

Who makes up CWW

Since the COVID pandemic many volunteer organisations have seen a significant drop in local volunteers and CWW has been affected by this downward trend too.

From the onset of the inaugural meeting in October 2021, when just 14 people turned up to form the initial Steering Group, volunteers making up the Steering Group quickly stood down, due to poor health, work / family commitments and a reluctance to work within the ethos of WAW and the agreed framework of CWW.

This, as you can imagine was a real headache for me as the new chair, having not been a part of the accreditation process and knowing nothing about WaW.

Amidst the noise of those challenging the role of CWW within the town and the use of WaW branding, I hit the floor running; with the support of our WaW mentor from the successful WaW town of Winchcombe and the steadying arm of the National WaW Executive Committee we put in the foundations for the group, ensuring that the appropriate [Policies](#) were in place to protect all those that worked with / for CWW and putting the cornerstones in place to enable grant applications to be applied for at the appropriate time. Our new website and social media were born in 2022 and continues to thrive. A nod to the Chairs of the WaW towns of Chepstow and Ross on Wye for your continued invaluable input.

It was very important that our volunteers, who give up their time freely, were able to work in a safe, friendly, and inclusive environment. Something that is very close to my heart and to which I am passionate about.

As Chair of the group, I felt that CWW really needed to be seen to be a respectable and forward-thinking group.

CWW is only the 3rd town in the county and the 1st in the Forest of Dean to have applied for and been given the accreditation. So, it was very important to me that CWW conducted its self above

reproach, meeting the standard by which other towns operated and by which others in the district would hopefully one day follow.

This did not sit well with some individuals in our community and this is still unfortunately evident to this day. Having to take time out to deal with volunteers who chose not to work within the ethos of WaW and CWW and our agreements was exhausting, time consuming and very stressful. Their ongoing behaviour and reluctance to be actively supportive says more about their character than the high standard that CWW has set itself.

I stand by all the policies in place, the agreements we work within, including our insurance, Forest of Dean District Council Licence, Forestry England Memorandum of Understanding, and the Gloucestershire Public Rights of Way parameters.

You will shortly hear of the achievements of CWW this last year, managed by just one person with the support of family, friends and a small cohort of loyal volunteers. Intent on not letting the town down, nor the many local businesses that had agreed to support the work of the group and fulfilling grant obligations.

At one point this last year, just two people were holding three officer roles, with dwindling Steering Group members only turning up for meetings.

The WaW criteria is for six people to be actively working on the Steering group. During this period, I was always in communication with the National Executive Committee and with their support we have pulled through. With a new strong Secretary in Maureen and a new Steering Group Member, Paula, who have both already aided with the work load. Thank you both.

We have invited local groups to join us and with their invaluable local knowledge in their field I am sure they will significantly aid the writing up of walks and other projects in the pipeline. The Steering Group however is still short on members and I hope that at our AGM new people will come forward to work to promote all the good that comes from CWW.

Looking at our social media pages the work this small group undertakes is greatly appreciated by the wider community.

In our walks around the town and nearby area, and thanks to Eleanor's amazing contribution in raising funds for our group from the local community, it was noted that members of the public were concerned that the group was run by the Town Council. To address this issue, we worked with the [Coleford Community Fire and Rescue Station](#) and a new neutral home for our meetings was secured.

I have to say their facilities are incredible and open to all groups within the community to use. Check them out!

CWW is not run nor influenced by any local authority, this would be in direct conflict with the ethos of WaW.

My dogs and I have walked miles, checking the 33 PRow within our parish boundaries, logged and photographed issues, engaged with a variety of local authorities, businesses, and local groups to work on projects, applied for grants, organised, and implemented projects to ensure the aims of WaW were met and that CWW did not miss out on any of its aims needed to complete the Annual Return to WaW to maintain the accreditation.

Myself and the CWW volunteers have worked quietly in the background, because we want to make a difference to your community. By the end of this report, you will, I am sure, agree that a lot has been achieved, despite a lack of a mature Steering Group, ill health, operations, inclement weather and so many brambles that have turned into trifids this year!

It might all look polished, but Stuff doesn't just happen.....

Economic contribution

Earlier in the year as an individual I was welcomed onto [The Walkers are Welcome National Committee](#). This has afforded a fascinating insight into the running of WaW and I am proud to be a part of this close-knit group, who work tirelessly to ensure the smooth running of the network and who ensure that the ethos of WaW is maintained across the country.

I was unable to represent Coleford at this year's [Walkers are Welcome Annual Get-Togethers](#) but did have a sneak preview into one of the workshops that was to take place.

This was about capturing the financial economic contribution of a WaW town. One of the significant core reasons for Coleford applying for the accreditation.

At first, I confess to being very sceptical in how CWW as a group could quantify its economic contribution to the town, given the small number of volunteers, the lack of written walks provided, let alone led on behalf of CWW.

Having viewed the presentation, which will be made available for all to see soon, I began to see how we could start to calculate this.

I looked at what funding CWW had applied for:

1. Additional funding coming into our town for PROW improvements, via Gloucestershire County Council Local Highways fund. Over the last two years Coleford has seen an additional £11K being allocated to the town itself.
2. Income from the local businesses and authorities that support our work via advertising, donations, and grants.

Income		2021/2022
Sales Invoices	£	500.00
Donations	£	35.00
BBB	£	1,200.00
Total	£	1,735.00

Income		2022/2023
b/c 21/22	£	1,600.00
Sales Invoices	£	585.00
Donations	£	125.00
FVAF	£	500.00
BBB	£	-
PayPal	£	0.01
CTC	£	894.50
FoDDC - CG 2023	£	698.92
Forest Lottery	£	1.00
FoDDC - CSP		2194.14
Total	£	6,598.57

FVAF - Forest Volunteer Action Forum – Warm Safe Grant / BBB - Build Back Better Grant – Gloucestershire County Council / CTC – Coleford Town Council / FoDDC – Forest of Dean Community Grant / FoDDC – CSP Forest of Dean Community Safety Partnership

These added up, over the last two years, to roughly £19K.

If you then look at the knock-on effect of this, increased publicity for the town and local businesses through the affiliation with WaW, local news articles, on-line news on a national level, increased sales in local businesses, wages paid to staff who then spend that money in the local town you start to see a bigger picture of the value of the accreditation for the town and this despite a lack of written and led walks provided by CWW.

Still an impressive contribution from a small group of volunteers and just goes to show what could be achieved going forwards with a mature Steering Group, the support of more volunteers, enabling collaborations with likeminded groups.

Projects

As a group we have continued to work with Mr Jeff Wheeler, Public Rights of Way Officer for the Forest of Dean. Mr Wheeler has been very supportive of our initiatives, though he will be the first to tell you that CWW's work has inspired other local towns in the forest and his work load has increased – sorry Jeff!

To work on PRoW, you need to be registered with Gloucester County Council PRoW as a volunteer and attend a training event. Currently there are surprisingly only two volunteers in Coleford that are trained. They volunteer their time to work with Mr Wheeler to identify work required including the project to replace as many stiles as we can with either gates or kissing gates.

So far 14 of the 32 identified sites have had new kissing gates or a gate installed. At two locations the local land owners declined the installations which meant a potential 5 installations could not take place.

These 14 installations have improved the access benefitting many people especially those four that were replaced on Bells Golf Course with many saying they had not been able to use those PRoW due to being unable to navigate the stiles due to health or having a dog they could not lift over the stile. A great example of a job well done!

The Way Markers were also repaired and new ones installed to ensure people walked on the designated PRoW and did not wonder off on the private land, much to the thanks of the land owners. If land owners and the PRoW Officer can work together it benefits both parties and ultimately the public.

On our website [Coleford Welcomes Walkers](#) there is a new tab [PROW Completed Works](#). These are reports from Mr Wheeler showing his completed works for the month on his patch. (There are a few months missing since we started our work which will go up in due course). This gives a clear insight into the sheer volume of work carried out in not just Coleford but the surrounding towns within the FoD. Mr Wheeler is a very busy man.

The installations of any new gates / kissing gates are dependent on the land owner's permission and the type of land that the path covers, dictating whether a gate or kissing gate can be installed.

Mr Wheeler and his fellow colleagues routinely attend inclusion events and they are very mindful of making access to the PRoW as accessible as possible. Something CWW is keen to see promote.

This year, the focus was on installing six kissing gates, leading up to and through Forest Hills Golf Course, replacing the high and frankly wobbly stiles! This has now been completed and in due course new Way Marker posts will be installed.

New yellow caps will soon be installed on all the way marker posts too making them visible in a sea of green / autumnal colours across the golf course.

Mr Wheeler has continued to ensure that grants allowing, the PRoW are kept clear. Installed, replaced, and repaired finger post signs, and installed way markers.

With the two volunteers and members of the wider public logging issues a clear picture emerges on the paths used regularly and the work required.

Much of the work on the PRoW is weather dependant and sometimes it seems that some work takes a while to take place. If you factor in that different work is scheduled around the year and the weather, with the legal parameters being adhered to you start to understand why there might be a delay.

Five brown information signs indicating the way into town were purchased with 3 being installed at Buchanan Park. The remaining two will be installed soon by Mr Wheeler.

These simple additions now ensure people know where our town is and they will hopefully spend money in our town, aiding its economic growth.

Many a conversation takes place with local land owners to ensure there is a clear path across their planted fields, this is an ongoing discussion which is proving fruitful despite it being frustrating for walkers at times. Remember work is going on in the back ground, just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not being addressed.

Volunteers have now replaced nearly all of the larger old finger post signs with new PRoW sticker. It took a bit of working out the best way to cut and stick them on but we got there. The smaller finger post signs are on the radar for some much needed TLC.



When walking the Coleford PRoW we are now installing WaW round stickers on all the way marker posts coming into town. See if you can spot one! This was in collaboration with WaW and GCC, PRoW.

This is one of the initiatives to indicate to walkers that if they follow the way markers into town, they will be given a warm welcome by the ever-increasing number local businesses that support our accreditation.

Brambles and stinging nettles continue to be cleared by volunteers but it must be acknowledged that due to health not as much was cut back this year.

With the promise of power tool training in the new year, clearance work will be much easier next year which has lifted the spirits of the two volunteers – wait to see what can be cleared next year!

The more we do as a volunteer the more grant money can be spent on other items as opposed to paying contractors to do the work. Mind the heavy-duty clearance will always go to the contractors!

A special shout out to Dave and Peter who regularly walk the PRoW and the Milkwall to Coleford Cycle Track collecting litter, bags and bags of litter!

This autumn saw our volunteers given permission to remove graffiti from PRoW furniture, this will continue until it is all removed. It is incredibly satisfying to see the difference, giving pride back into our town.

Discussions are afoot with the Deputy Police Commissioner for ASB to look at ways to prevent the Anti-Social Behaviour that results in the graffiti and damage. A productive meeting where photographs covering 18 months were shared and a map highlighting where the ASB was taking place proved fruitful. It should be noted that the Police Commissioner was surprised at the level of ASB, with Mr Wheeler noting that this is an issue isolated to Coleford and nearby area only. A sad reflection.

On a positive note, as we had highlighted the issues, resources were made available to interact with people and address their issues in particular the drug use.

By recording the graffiti, prior to cleaning it off, a picture can be painted, excuse the pun, as to the tags (signatures of the graffiti user) and the offender can be identified and dealt with. If graffiti is removed without it being recorded it hinders the work of local authorities who are working to address this issue in the back ground. People might think they are helping by cleaning the graffiti but they are hindering the work and do not have permission to do so anyway.

Last winter a core gang of just five volunteers met every Sunday for two hours at a time for five weekends clearing the towns two car parks of sludge that had accumulated in the parking bays and covering the man hole covers. The car park signs were cleaned and the difference was incredible, giving the town a sense of pride once again. Many a local resident applauded our work!

In May, CWW was the only local volunteer group in Coleford to hold an event on the day for the Kings **Big Help Out**. We had a lot of fun and we achieved amazing results down by the Coleford entrance to the Milkwall to Coleford Cycle track.

Well done to all who joined in and a special mention to Anthony, (who was awarded a Pride of Coleford award for his contribution to the community), Stan and Jack for your hard work and to Jewson, Texaco, Proper Job, Light Fantastic, and WP Services who contributed in goods and their time. Thank you. I love it when local people come together!

At the time of our AGM, a project will be underway working towards reducing the [Violence and Intimidation Against Women and Girls | Gloucestershire Constabulary](#), by replacing the old fencing by the five bar gate leading up to Old Station Way, and also planting hundreds of defensive plants to make the area safer for all and to deter anti-social behaviour at this point.

I think you will agree that this is a very worthwhile project with more work that could be done in our community making it safer for women and girls to walk freely and safely.

This project has been funded by the [Community Safety Partnership](#); it should be noted we are the only local volunteer group to have been awarded this grant. We are delighted that [UBICO](#) will be aiding us with this project on 30th November by installing the fencing, no digging holes for us this time!

We will be looking for volunteers to help plant the nearly 500 plants on 3rd December 2023, meeting at 14:00 hrs. Please bring gardening gloves, a spade, trowel and a sense of humour and laughter – it goes a long way into making a hard project fun!

This project has seen GCC, FoDDC, UBICO, Jewson and our community coming together to ensure this project will be completed. It again shows what can be achieved, away from the red tape, benefiting the community.

FoDDC will then clear the overgrown canopy making this area visible and aid in making users of the Milkwall to Coleford Cycle Track feel safer. There are further discussions afoot to add lighting to this area, more to come on this.

An ongoing new and exciting project, we have named **“Tails Trails”**, is the result of a bid from the [Forest of Dean Community Grants](#).

CWW was delighted to have been chosen from many other worthy causes to purchase GoPro equipment to capture the varying views around Coleford's PRow, with the volunteers' dogs playing whilst out on their walks too.

The filming will capture the outside, bringing it indoors for all those who are unable to get out doors. This potentially has many ways in which the film can be used; one we are proud to be working with is the FoD Dementia Action Alliance, providing film for those with dementia to aid their memory. Thanks to Andrew from Wilde Earth Journeys who will edit our raw footage.

This project was started from my own personal experience of helping a dear friend who had COVID and nearly passed away. I would capture sights and sounds and send them to him. I was very humbled to receive a card nearly a year later stating how the film had given him hope and aided his recovery. In addition, as a Renal Therapy Nurse he had shared the clips with his patients and staff and they had in turn done the same, reaching more people than just my friend Barry. And so, the idea was born to scale this up and help more people.

We also aim to produce interactive walks and to distribute to local groups, care homes, and posting to YouTube. This not only helps the local community but raises the profile of Coleford as a walking destination too. This is an on-going project that will hopefully run for many years, capturing the great outdoors we live in and bringing it indoors for those that can no longer venture out.

We were delighted to be a part of the Angus Buchanan Centenary event this year and produced a printed walk leaflet from the town centre to his resting place, pointing out several interesting facts along the walk. Thanks to a grant from Coleford Town Council we were able to show off our new marketing material, which was very well received.

I volunteer for the [Forest of Dean Community Walks](#) and lead a walk every Friday from the Clock Tower at 10:30 for an hour. Out of all the work I have done and which CWW supports, this is, without doubt, my most treasured contribution to the community.

The difference it has made to those that attend is un-quantifiable. Fitness levels have increased, even though at best we stroll along; friendships have been made, confidences have grown and support given via conversation. It is not the walk people come for it is the social interaction. The impact of this should not be underestimated. A big shout out to Sally at Café 16 and her team for always greeting us with a smile after our walk providing hot drinks thanks to the Warm Safe Grant.

It is with regret that due to a lack of volunteers CWW has not been able to provide lead walks itself which would benefit many, many people who live in our area and to visitors to showcase the area. It is such a worthwhile activity to do and one of the aims to meet to keep our WaW accreditation.

There is a plethora of books in the Tourist Information Centre and in Forest Books and Crafts in town, on walks in the area but not necessarily about the PRoW in our area capturing the impressive historical impact of our town, which many know little if anything about.

Work is underway with a 3rd party to put on a Men's walk which is loosely based on the incredible success of a group in Wales called "You're not Alone". More to come on this important venture.

CWW had hoped to put on a regular series of interesting and fun walks throughout the year, but due to a lack of volunteers, this was postponed. I hope that going forwards this will be realised and the community will work as one to provide a series of walks.

Throughout all our projects Coleford Town Council has been amazing in offering its rooms free of charge to the group and for printing off literature, often at short notice, supporting my ad hoc inability to get things done one time!

Grants

One of the aims of CWW is to be self-funding. A large proportion of WaW towns hold walking festivals to generate an income and this has proven incredibly financially successful for our neighbouring WaW towns of Chepstow and Ross-on-Wye.

This income enables their work to continue and to give grants to other local initiatives, such is the income generated. They and other towns, produce a comprehensive report each year on the walking festival, giving great insight into who attended, where attendees came from, how many walks they did, where they stayed, how far they had travelled, were they repeat attendees, which walks worked

best, income generated and lessons learnt. These reports afford a wealth of information enabling their festivals to improve each year.

Despite CWW's repeated attempts to align the Coleford Area Walking Festival with CWW, the amalgamation has been refused by their organisers. It should be noted that this is in direct conflict to the statement on the CWW's WaW accreditation application. On requesting a copy of their report on the festival we were advised that no information had been collated.

CWW therefore finds its self in a difficult situation and it is only from the very generous support of local businesses who purchase advertising space on our website and who are then able to display the WaW window badge that we can cover our running costs.

In addition, a lot of time is tied up in applying for grants to enable projects to improve the area making it welcoming for not just walkers but residents and visitors alike.

It can be argued that it is a choice to apply for these grants and undertake such projects, but my personal view has always been to promote CWW as much as possible for the benefit of all the town. As an independent group not constrained by red tape (well most of the time) we can achieve this as has been shown, highlighting new avenues to other WaW towns on what can be achieved.

This last year has seen grants being given by Coleford Town Council (for marketing items), FoDDC - Community Projects, Forest Voluntary Action Forum (Warm Space fund) and FoDDC – Community Safety Project (Reducing Violence Against Women and Girls). We were also able to spend the grant from GCC's Build Back Better fund, awarded in the last financial year.

We signed up for the Forest Lottery, however due to time constraints this has not yet been actively promoted and we hope to address this going forwards as it has already produced an income.

Our projects could not proceed without the kind contributions from local businesses ([Eat Shop Stay](#)) who fund this groups existence and our partners ([Partners](#)) who support our work. Please check them out.

Conclusion

As an individual with a chronic medical condition ([M.E.](#)), I have struggled for many years to come to terms with the fact that the one thing I had always relied upon, my body, has failed me and life has become a way of coping and compromising with the loss of autonomy difficult to accept. I share this with you as it has taught me a valuable lesson in humility and given me an insight into people's physical and mental health struggles, which I personally manage by walking.

Having incredulously found myself in the position of Chair of CWW it has, without doubt, been incredibly humbling and the humility people have demonstrated has been just, well wow! My medical condition can result in me being socially challenged and uncomfortable. I also struggle with confrontation and dislike of groups of or crowds of people, so you can see it's been a bit of a task in being Chair!

The people I have met and worked with have made a significant, positive, impact on my life and I really want to thank everyone in the community who stepped up and worked with me. The local press has been amazing, thank you to Jake from the Forester for turning my rumbling words into beautifully crafted articles and to Jules at Dean Radio for managing my enthusiasm during interviews. In addition, the staff of Coleford Town Council, FoDDC, GCC and Forestry England have been so very helpful with all my questions and requests. I know you all work incredibly hard and I am thankful for your time, understanding and assistance. I know I can be a bit persistent at the best of times!

Due to the impact on my health, and with the lack of Steering Group member support in administering this group, I have no choice but to step down as Chair, which I am very torn about, as there is so much more to achieve with so many wonderful people wanting to work with the group. I

hope to continue as a member of the Steering Group and see through the projects that are still running.

I would especially like to thank all the Steering Group members that did believe in me and to the core group of outstanding volunteers who have never declined a call to arms. You are amazing. Thank you so very much.

Finally, given the dissent directed at me in my position as Chair; when I see the Town Mayor publicly stating how proud he is of the work of CWW, seeing our literature and images used in presentations promoting CWW as a successful local group, (without permission I might add) it proves, that I cannot have got it that wrong.

As I walk around the town and local area and see the difference this group has made, when I stop and talk to residents and business owners, engaging with local groups who are asking how they can work with us, it is truly rewarding.

The benefit of Coleford being a WaW town should not be underestimated, it continues to raise the profile of the town, putting it on the map, showing what can be achieved with a bit of an imagination from a small team of local volunteers and one tenacious Chair, with a passion for walking and their town. Importantly it has shown that **#colefordworkingtogethergetsresults!**

Who knew that a desire to get out and walk with a pair of secateurs could have such a powerful, positive impact!

Work in the pipeline

A lot goes on in the back ground, networking, meeting people, quiet discussions on “what if we did this”, putting people in touch to realise ideas. Out of this the following is in the pipeline:

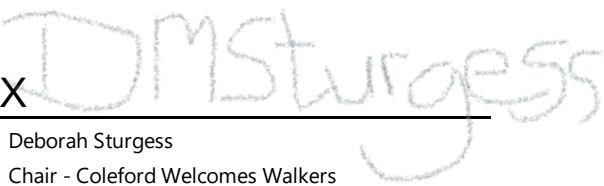
- To create a circular walk between [Coleford Welcomes Walkers](#), [Chepstow Walkers are Welcome](#), [Ross-on-Wye - Walkers are Welcome](#) The project has been discussed by all three towns, we just need walkers to route a new and interesting route between the towns, picking up on interesting points along the way and enabling the walk to be done in either direction or starting at any point. It would be great if the walk could at some point be recognised as a nation trail bringing walkers from across the globe!
- To walk and validate all the [Slow Ways walks to and from Coleford](#), Slow Ways is a fantastic national project linking up hamlets, towns, cities by foot. This would greatly benefit Coleford.
- To provide a series of walks throughout the year
- To write up many more walks to be made available via our website and to contribute to a local walking guide book
- Working to identify walks and access points for those with mobility constraints, to make Coleford welcoming to all, having relevant information in one place. This work is already underway.
- Poem in a Tin. [Brexit poems and dirty limericks: poetry left in boxes across Exmoor to be compiled for book | Poetry | The Guardian](#) Work has been initiated with [Create Gloucestershire](#) to get a similar project up and running locally. The idea is you place a small book in a tin at various locations around the area and invite people to draw, write what they feel or see. This is a great way to get people out walking to find the tins and then to hopefully get funding to put them in a book to sell to raise funds for those involved and the community.

- To document each PRoW, length, views, history, terrain, access, refreshment points, to enable a booklet to be compiled for people to view and discover local walks.
- To continue working with the [Forest of Dean Local History Society](#) to promote the history of the Coleford Area via walking
- To produce an interactive walking map, inserting historical / current points of interest / anecdotes around the town.
- To produce a map listing all the Murals by Tom Cousins, we have his permission and part of the work has already been done.
- To produce a kid's fun / quiz walk around town, again part completed.
- To continue to produce walks into town from local accommodation providers, campsites, holiday lets etc, this has proven very successful in those already completed.
- To continue to improve the walking route along the Milkwall to Coleford Cycle Track
- To work to support a Men's walking group, work is already underway with this project with Wilde Earth Journeys and Coleford Grows, taking up the reins, being men and all.
- To identify other walking groups that would benefit the group, women only, nature, mums and dad and young kids, youth walks, historical walks, the list is endless and having visited the town of Alton and seen how their walks are oversubscribed there is much that can be provided for our community.
- To work with the local health providers to get people outside
- To work with the Angus Buchanan Trust to install a hard-core path around the top fields to make the access available all year round for all, including the installation of a Sensory walk.
- In the not-too-distant future Coleford would be a great location to hold the WaW Annual Get Together, showcasing all that the town has to offer. I would add caution to holding off a few years until such time as a strong Steering Group is in place and plenty of volunteers can be realised, with the group maturing. The last few AGT's have incurred a lot of time and expense for a very small turnout from the wider WaW family.

So there is a lot to be going on with!

Let's make Coleford a walking destination where you stay and walk from, not just pass by.

You just need a bit of imagination and a good crowd of volunteers.

X 
 Deborah Sturgess
 Chair - Coleford Welcomes Walkers

27th November 2023