

Chairperson's address to Mountaineering Ireland AGM, 28th May 2024

Good evening everyone and thank you for attending. It is my pleasure on behalf of the Board, to present you with a summary of some of the key activities and outcomes of our organisation over that last year.

I am firstly going to discuss some broader organisational issues before getting into the specific operational areas of hillwalking and club support, high performance and governance.

I would like to start by reflecting on two events, which took place in the latter part of the year. During the Covid years our inability to bring like-minded people together was, I believe, a real loss to the organisation and so it is fantastic to see events such as the Autumn Gathering and the Lynam lecture reach new levels of success in the post-Covid years.

Particular thanks are due to the Kenmare Walking Club for hosting a very special Autumn Gathering in an absolutely stunning location with a really super range of activities. It was great also to see such a strong turnout for the event - I know additional walks were added at the last minute and these too were fully subscribed. The Lynam lecture continues to grow from strength to strength with over 400 people attending the event last December in Chartered Accountants' House on Pearse Street, Dublin. It was special to see the award going to Calvin Torrans, who is not only an outstanding mountaineer but has been a trailblazer in outdoor education for second level students.

The steady year on year growth in membership numbers continued in 2023 with our total membership exceeding 16,000 for the first time at the end of October. Participation in our sport is strong across both gender and demographics. 53% of our membership is female and we have very strong rates of participation across a very wide age range. This steady membership growth would not happen without the trojan work of our clubs the length and breadth of the country.

Hillwalking and club support

Our Hillwalking Committee is actively working to identify opportunities to develop hillwalking, to support our clubs, and to increase our relevance and value to individual and club members. In response, the Board approved the creation of a second Hillwalking Officer and the process of filling that post has started. We expect to see the impact of that as the year progresses.

For the past three years, Mountaineering Ireland has been running a Club Leadership Programme, offering free training to clubs in order to develop new walk leaders and upskill those already leading walks. In 2023, one or more leaders from approximately 50% of our clubs availed of this programme (a total of 550 club leaders were trained). The programme will be running again in 2024.

For those who are getting started in hillwalking, the Happy Hiking programme has continued to build momentum by providing skills training to new and less experienced hikers in more than 30 locations around the country.

Mountaineering Ireland hosts the Get Ireland Walking programme, which aims to promote a culture of walking throughout the country. The programme is now in its 10th year and launched a new strategy in 2023. During the autumn Get Ireland Walking partnered with the Hillwalking Committee and a Wicklow club to develop the Summit Steps Programme, which sets out a structured and graduated approach to integrate new and younger members into clubs.

Mountaineering Ireland is the national body for mountain training and is responsible for accreditation and validation of training courses and providers. In 2023 a total of 1846 candidates undertook formal training, producing 326 new award holders. Additionally, Mountaineering Ireland provided 12 skills workshops and two international meets during 2023.

Access and Conservation

2023 was the first year of the 5-year National Outdoor Recreation Strategy. Mountaineering Ireland played a very active role in shaping and influencing the development of this ambitious strategy, which holds great potential for improvements to all outdoor sports. We will continue to support and monitor its implementation and where necessary we will hold others to account should they fail to deliver.

We have been actively engaged in several projects around the country focussed on improving the condition of upland paths. The Croagh Patrick path is one such project, where Mountaineering Ireland advocacy has been critical in achieving such a successful outcome. The pathway sets a very high benchmark for future projects of this nature. We organised a successful two-day showcase event at Croagh Patrick in May to promote this approach in other mountain areas.

We held our first Mountain Environment weekend post-Covid in Donegal in June and this was followed by four regional environmental awareness days in the autumn.

Mountaineering Ireland lobbied successfully for revisions to the Occupiers' Liability Act. The amended legislation, which came into effect last July reduce the exposure of farmers and other landowners to potential claims. It also incorporates in law for the first time the principle of voluntary assumption of risk that has long been central to hillwalking and climbing activities.

We are constantly involved in a long list of initiatives to develop increased access and to ensure continuity of existing access through formal and informal channels and by keeping strong relationships with farmers, landowners and other stakeholders and partner organisations. We participated in the Ploughing Championships in September, which provided a really positive opportunity to network with key stakeholders.

High Performance

During 2023 Mountaineering Ireland established a High-Performance working group to identify the optimum next steps in supporting high-performance in Irish climbing. In addition to Mountaineering Ireland staff and volunteers, the Working Group included Jon Mackey the Canoeing Ireland High Performance Coordinator, Zoe Spriggins the BMC Competitions Programme Manager and Eimir McSwiggan a World Champion Ice Climber and representative of the UIAA. The

working group agreed that establishing, resourcing and developing an effective High-Performance programme and support structure is now an essential step for Mountaineering Ireland.

Mountaineering Ireland's Climbing Team had notable achievements in 2023, in both British and European Championships. The Irish Bouldering Championships and the Irish Lead Championships had a high turnout of competitors from all across Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales. Many thanks to Awesome Walls for hosting and supporting the events.

Governance

In January 2023 we appointed our first professional Safeguarding Officer on a part-time basis. (Previously this had been done on a voluntary basis but given the increasing complexity in this area this was no longer considered a sustainable approach.) I think it is fair to say that as an organisation we have made very significant progress over the year with the development of a best-in-class suite of procedures and supports for clubs.

In 2023 new auditors OSK were appointed. A very successful audit was carried out ahead of this AGM and OSK were very complimentary of the Mountaineering Ireland staff engagement in the audit process.

In addition, we were subject to a follow-up governance audit by KOSI during 2023 looking at the implementation of the governance recommendations from their earlier audit. Again, the outcome of this was very positive.

Our committees continue to play a very active role in supporting the work of the organisation. There are currently 6 committees covering:

- Finance and Audit
- Access and Conservation
- Mountain Training Board Ireland
- Hillwalking
- Climbing
- Governance

During 2023 we had some changes at CEO level. Our former CEO was on extended sick leave earlier in the year and subsequently left us at the end of November. The Board is extremely thankful to Helen Lawless who stood in as acting CEO on both occasions. I am very happy to tell you that we have now appointed a new permanent CEO Liam Feeley who will take up the post on the 24th of June.

Finally, I would like to thank our staff, our committee members and my fellow Board members for their outstanding dedication and commitment throughout 2023.

David Pollard