

## National Chairman's Report to NAGM on Saturday 19th January 2022

Dear Plus friends, It is great to see so many of you here today in person. Two years on since the COVID pandemic emerged and changed the lives of billions of people around the world. For the people of the UK, we have faced lockdowns and instructions that have disrupted our lives and social interactions. As I write (24/01/2022) 175,256 people have lost their lives in the UK due to COVID. This is an extremely sad moment in time. I hope you would agree this needs to be recognised by the government. Along with the NHS who have at times have struggled to maintain a health service and fight the pandemic. Earlier this month the government outlined the lifting of restrictions and the other devolved nations have followed suit. My advice to everyone is to remain cautious. Where possible wearing a mask when in large groups of people indoors. Using hand gel frequently and using a lateral flow test when feeling unwell or before attending a large gathering inside or outside. Have you done your lateral flow test today? I did mine before breakfast!

In the September 2021 meeting it was agreed by the NEC to reinstate membership fee from the 15th of March 2022. In doing so we recognised the need for our members to meet up as normal which I know has taken its toll on some of you. It is two years since I was first elected by the delegates of the 2020 NAGM as National Chairman. A vastly different time from the 18th of February 1981 when I first attended a plus group night. It was in the upstairs room of the Dolphin Pub in Newbury. There was just the three of us. I was told that if we could not get a treasurer tonight then the group would close. I agreed to be the treasurer and the rest as they say is history. Within 18 months there was thirty members of the group meeting regularly on weekdays and many on weekends. For me this was my high point as group chairman and showed that even a group near to closing could be saved. A few years on and Wokingham and Bracknell group set a record of one hundred members on a single night. I know I was there too, and it was quite a night.

The fortunes of 18 Plus / Plus have waned over the last 40 years. During the pandemic, some groups have fared better than others. Those groups that have adjusted to using virtual meetings, blogs and electronic communications have grown or managed to keep their membership together. As the government announced the return to normal social interactions. I accept that after two years we do need to move forward. I equally acknowledge that there will be some of you still have concerns about meeting face to face. We need to consider this when planning our events. By keeping this point in mind then we can have a balance option for all. However, as history has shown us that caution does need to be applied. To ensure that the pandemic does not return in a way that forces us back to lockdowns again. No-one I believe really wants that option. Equally

some people do not enjoy virtual meetings too. It is going to be a challenging tightrope we all walk along. One of my main objectives has been to get Plus to acknowledge that we are no longer the social activities group that we were once. And that the only way we can revive our fortunes is to start promoting to the wider audience. No longer can we sit on our laurels and expect people to walk through the door.

We need to be cleverer in using social media across the three main platforms. Yes, traditional methods such as posters, press releases do still have their place to complement our publicity. Even within a smaller organisation there is talent that we are not using to its best advantage for groups, areas, and the whole of the organisation. The key to this was a new website to be used to promote Plus, interact with the other areas. Giving potential new members a straightforward way to join and connect with their local group. The project appears to have been delayed by various issues. Like you I too share the frustration in seeing extraordinarily little result of any work being done on the project in the past three years. I would like to bring to the conference attention that when Southern Area which is the smallest area. Decided that it needed a new website that it was built and published in three weeks. [www.southern-area-plusgroups.club](http://www.southern-area-plusgroups.club) After several updates over the following months, we believe it is a major improvement and at a fraction of the cost of the previous website.

In no way does this distract from the older website run by Mark Hewson, indeed even I find it a useful resource for which I am incredibly grateful for Mark in keeping it updated. Over the past 12 months it has been wonderful that some events have been able to be run. For me it is noticeable that as we reach the summer and early autumn the governments restrictions always seem to ease. Southern Area held its beach barbecue at Sand Banks and Centre Parcs weekend in Longleat. Kings Lynn group ran its popular camping weekend and Weekend at Sunny Hunstanton (WASH) which returned to its original venue at Searles. I must admit it for me was touch and go with the numbers attending and restrictions. With the later date in November, it did take the edge of the event for me too. I was glad I attended, and it was great to see so many of you there.

Not forgetting all those groups that have survive by holding virtual meetings mainly via zoom. Thank you for those groups that have invited me to your meetings. There are some that I have not been able to attend so please invite me as I would love to join you. You may remember that last year I announced that this would be my last year as National Chairman. A year they say, "Is a long time in politics" and a lot has changed over the year. I have reduced my working time and with the support of my employer been given the opportunity to explore my role within a Trades Union. This has given me new opportunities to improve my work life balance. So, I am pleased to tell you that I will be re-

standing as National Chair this year. Should I be successful then I call on everyone here today to consider this as an opportunity to shadow anyone in the NEC including myself. Seriously if you would like to stand for a post on the NEC in the future but want to find out more before committing yourself. Then please come forward to see if it is the role for you. I would like to thank the National Executive Committee for their continuing support over the past two years. Not forgetting the Vice Presidents whose unconditional advice and support makes all the difference. During what has been an unprecedented time that no National Chairman could have ever been prepared for let alone could have predicted it happening.

Finally, I am now asking everyone to make one big effort to restart Plus. We need to reorganise, promote, and bring Plus into the 21st Century. As you will have seen in the agenda that a motion being put forward to adopt a single membership system across all four areas. It maybe that we need to take this idea and go one step forward. It has been discussed in some quarters that the Plus model of a national tier and four area tiers are no longer sustainable. Just recently one group thought that just because virtual meetings are not in the National constitution. Then they could not be held for a group AGM. I cannot understand why when they know the NEC meetings are held online. Even their own group nights are online. I do believe that our own constitution is holding us back from growing our total membership. The one thing that no-one can dismiss is that the world has changed a lot over 80 years but plus has not. Some have described it to me as a comfortable shoe that they will continue wearing long after the heel or sole are worn out. So, before we get there, I am asking every member of Plus no matter which area you are from. Is Plus running the way you want? And if not why and what are you going to do today to regenerate Plus? If everyone here today just took a small piece of the Linda Street ethos. Looked after it and tender it like their own pet. Then we would I believe have a stronger organisation for the future.

Steve

Steve Rolfe National Chairman