

**Minutes of the South Snowdonia Local Access Forum Meeting held
on Tuesday October 29th, 2024, at 5.45 p.m
Plas Coch Hotel, Y Bala**

Present – Members:

Mr Hedd Pugh (Cadeirydd)	Cyng Dewi Owen
Mrs Gaynor Davies	Mr Alun Edwards
Mr Emlyn Roberts	Mr Aled Thomas
Mr David Coleman	Mr Huw Roberts
Mr Geraint Rowlands	Mrs Janette Holmes
Mr Tim Faire	

Officers / Observers:

Peter Rutherford (SNPA)	David P Jones (SNPA)
Rhian P Williams (SNPA)	Simon Rhys Jones(SN
Arwel Morris (SNP)	Rhys Roberts (GC)
Julian Brierley (Bala Lake Railway)	Robat Davies (SNP)
Rhydian Roberts (SNP)	

HP welcomed all to the meeting this evening.

1. **Apologies**

Mr Alun Evans	Cllr Eryl Jones Williams
Mrs Lesley Amison	

2. **Declaration of Interest**

None

3. **Previous Minutes**

Approved.

4. **Matters Arising**

i) **Trawsfynydd Lake foot bridge.**

PR stated that there was still no information available from Magnox on this issue and the footbridge remained closed to the public. This was unfortunate as it formed a vital part of the Llyn Traws circular and was a vital link between both ends and an important link to the village which avoided a detour next to the A470

They would continue to press Magnox for information.

He explained that the bridge section was not a formal Public Right of Way (PRoW) but only a permissive path which was allowed by Magnox.

It is his understanding that there was substantial structural work required to bring this up to a useable condition.

To date they neither GC nor the NP had been invited to any meetings that had taken place so far.

If they received any further news then he would bring this back to members.

DPJ added that it was his understanding that Liz Saville Roberts MP was planning to meet with Magnox representatives in the near future to discuss this. There are concerns whether they may plan to demolish this.

PR would make inquiries about this.

ii) p10 DWO asked if the work on the Rhyd Yr Onnen UCR had been completed. It was rumoured to have been finished.

PR thanked DWO for this update as he was not aware of this and would inquire with Gwynedd Highways and arrange a visit to the site itself.

DWO added that it was disappointing that no additional drainage works had been done on any other sections.

PR added that they had estimated (and originally agreed) that around 100t of mass fill was required for the main section together with a side drain and that should have been flown in. He would visit the site and report back. Although this was formally closed by a Traffic Regulation Order he had seen for himself 4 X 4 on this route only recently and struggling to negotiate that section. It was a pity that the original plans fell apart when everything had been agreed.

iii) GD thanked PR for the link to Naomi Jones of the NP. This was concerning the recording of local Welsh Place names in their area. There will now be an opportunity to study a map and populate it with local place names and submit this as part of NP's project.

PR commented that he had recently received a draft copy of the latest Harvey Map for the northern area. These had been circulated to Wardens and other staff. Harvey Maps were an alternative to OS maps which appeared in a different format to OS maps and were popular especially as they could make bespoke maps for events such as orienteering or others on request. They had identified a small number of spelling mistakes in the Welsh place names which HM would revise when they received responses from staff. This was always a useful exercise.

DPJ added that NJ had arranged sessions in the Llanywchlyn and Trawsfynydd areas with a view to recording Welsh place names.

5. Correspondence

- i) Letter from local group based in Rhyd concerning access into the National Parks' property at Plas Tan Y Bwlch. Item under AOB.

6. Update on the All Wales Coastal Path

RR thanked the members for the opportunity to update them on the All Wales Coastal Path project and hoped that new members would find it informative.

He explained that he was the Gwynedd All Wales Coastal Path Officer and was responsible for the entire length in the county. The route runs from Chepstow to Flintshire. The whole path length is divided into 5 sections with the Gwynedd section being the longest at 180 miles (this is longer than Offa's Dyke National Trail). Within Gwynedd this stretched from Machynlleth to Aberdovey and up and around the coast round the Llyn Peninsula and onwards and ends in Llanfairfechan where it borders the next section onwards running along the coast within Conwy.

The original idea of having a complete Welsh coastline path came from Jane Davidson AM and Rhodri Morgan AM (First Minister at the time) of the WG.

AWCP works are financed by WG via Natural Resources Wales (NRW) who administer the budget allocation through approved work plans.

Since becoming the Coastal Path Officer in 2003 they had faced many challenges since that time and they had been tasked by WG to complete this by 2012 to coincide with the Olympics and Golden Jubilee. Given the amount of work required this was challenging. Whilst most sections were complete there are still lengths that required connecting as some were not strictly coastal in nature. They were currently looking at the Dinas Dinlle to Trefor area as this section currently followed the A road which was not strictly coastal.

In that time they had created 21 miles of new Public Rights of Way and also completed various upgrades and improvement to many miles of the existing Public Rights of Way.

The route also required constant maintenance and now at 2024 renewal of furniture such as gates, fencing or stiles was required and this was not an easy task both in terms of cost and resources.

He showed various examples of improvements where furniture had been upgraded to modern standards. Changing furniture always required discussion with landowners – typically when stiles were replaced with gates or kissing gates to make the route more amenable to less abled users. New sections of path were undertaken by using provisions of the Highways Act – Sect 25. In his experience most landowners were positive about the route. Discussions in the Port Penrhyn area had taken a great deal of discussion

and substantial site work up to this year which saw its completion and the new section had recently opened for public use.

This section also required additional work such as additional screening to avoid disturbance to the high density of wintering bird populations on the adjacent Traeth Laffan site.

He showed slides of the installation of the new bridge at Tonfannau which was a significant development on the route west of Tywyn.

The project was facing some major threats such as coastal erosion and sea level rises. Winter storms always gave rise to the loss of paths where they had succumbed to collapsed cliffs and coastal erosion.

The whole route has also been 'Google trekked' and is available online similar to a 'street view' format.

In terms of finance For the 2024 -2025 budget is in the region of £90k with £52k allocated for basic cutting and strimming.

They were also piloting some additional biodiversity corridors and WG plan to expand this successful work.

In terms of marketing the team at the NRW is responsible for this aspect and were working closely with local businesses on this aspect. There were various estimates on how much this route contributed to the local and national economies

They had also assisted their Highways Department and made substantial repairs to the Unclassified Road (UCR) from Aberdovey to Cwm Maethlon which was also part of the coastal path which ran onwards towards Machynlleth.

HP mentioned that in some parts of the Aran the NP had trialled wool as a floating base for a wet sections. It was working so far.

DPJ confirmed this and added that they are monitoring the site.

RR mentioned that initially they had installed a considerable number of oak gates at the beginning but unfortunately this was not a good grade of timber and they were having to be replaced by metal ones which lasted a great deal longer. They were also using more plastic sections and non-slip surfaces which hopefully would last a great deal longer.

AE asked if they had any formal agreement with the National Trust as they had many properties along the coast.

RR stated that in the beginning the WG did mention that they may need an agreement but it was found that they are a sort of sleeping partner and they were always keen to maintain public access along their coastal sections and their Rights of Way.

HP asked about liability and if GC installed furniture then who was responsible.

RR stated that landowners were responsible for any furniture on Public Rights of Way even when this was provided by them and they were also responsible for any vegetation that grew into the path. The surface was the responsibility of the local authority (i.e. Gwynedd).

AM asked if they discussed furniture issues with landowners to ensure that they were happy.

RR stated that this was their preferred option and they always worked closely with landowners if furniture required maintenance or replacement.

DWO mentioned that some boardwalks he had seen were slippery and sometimes difficult to negotiate.

RR stated that in most cases they have non-slip resin treads but there may be some older ones that needed to be replaced including those on bridges. They tried to plan and budget for these.

The Tonfannau bridge (2011) cost was in the region of £600k which was substantial but it was worthwhile and added an important new section to the path.

He explained that a great deal of his time was taken up in trying to create new or better sections of the path that brought it closer to the coast. This took time and a great deal of discussion with landowners and agents. They now have some 87 agreements in place and 21 new sections of Public Rights of Way have been created. Incurred legitimate costs for landowners are paid for by the project.

One agreement took only three weeks and the longest (to date) has taken 9 years. Whilst some are simple some can be complex where there is a number of stakeholders or partners in land ownership. And complications also arise when there is designated land such as SSSI or SAC¹ which requires another level of discussion and the involvement of the NRW.

In the south they were planning 25/26 walks programme, arranging some additional school path site visits, some biodiversity corridor projects including tree planting. And the coastal snap project where people could send in their photos from fixed points along the route. This has prompted a great deal of interest.

¹ **SSSI** – Sites of Special Scientific Interest – areas denoted for their high ecological (flora and fauna) or geomorphological or geological value.

SAC - Special Areas of Conservation – Areas that are internationally recognised for conservation of habitats and species (formally an EU designation – Habitats Directive) and now adopted by the UK Government.

GD mentioned that one route in Llwyngwrlil may need to be re-routed and suggested another option.

RR mentioned that they were looking at this section and were in discussion with the landowners to see what could be done. Certainly, some of the original routing needs to be closer to the coast.

DWO added that in some places signage was missing.

RR stated that they are always monitoring this issue and they would be replaced when time allowed.

HP thanked RR for his detailed update and for his attendance this evening.

PR mentioned (through the Chair) that the LAF's had, in their response to the last review by Hugh Iwan Davies the Minister, had mentioned that the roll back issue (due to erosion) should be automatic rather than be done again each time under the Rights of Way legislation, which was bureaucratic, lengthy and costly. It was disappointing that this had not been actioned in some way.

6a *non agenda item.*

Update of the Bala Railway Development.

Julian Birley thanked the members for the opportunity to update them on the Bala Railway project and to extend the railway from its present position and have its start and finish point within Bala town. This process first began over 10 years ago.

Planning permission has now been granted and the project development thus far had cost somewhere in the region of £360k which included land purchases as well as other costs. They had also raised £1.5m in donations to the project.

The railway is some 4.5 miles in length running alongside Llyn Tegid and they had been here 50 years. They were keen to keep alive the unique slate railway heritage and rolling stock. The station site has been acquired and was helped by some significant individual donations which has enabled them to move forward.

They have a heritage museum which is highly popular and staffed by volunteer enthusiasts and many people have donated items.

The existing railway sees in excess of some 30,000 visitors per year and peaked at 34,000 post Covid albeit it is slightly down this year.

It is important to make this development more sustainable by encouraging people to leave their cars in Bala and use the train for journeys back and forth to explore the lake and Llanywchlyn and Llangower.

There are 170 heritage railways in the UK and they are significant parts of the visitor economies in many areas. Between them they attract 10.8m visitors per annum, employ 2246 people and have 19,500 volunteers and carry 7.7m passengers. It is estimated that heritage railways inject some £286m into their respective local economies. Market research indicates that for every £1 spent on the railway £2.70 is spent in the local community.

With an estimated 50,000 passengers per year the Bala figures (downscaled) indicate that spend values will be in the region of £1.90. This equates to some £1.25 - £1.5m being spent in the town which are significant figures for the local area. Having the railway being in the town will hopefully be encouraged to stay longer and spend more to everyone's benefit.

The extension of the railway will be in the region of 1200m into the town. This has taken 5 years to date but there were and still are significant bureaucratic, legislative and also engineering hurdles to overcome including listed structures. The NRW have been very supportive of the project and the new flood defences were designed to aid the designed requirements.

PR commented mentioned that the accessible ramp near the Warden centre had not been built to the standard that was requested as a replacement for the non-compliant ramp. However they would have to make the best it.

JB showed slides of the new station building. He explained that the design is based on the old (Victorian) headquarters of the original Cambrian Railway company. These can be found in Oswestry and Llanidloes and the only company to have its headquarters located in Wales. They have also recently acquired some carriage rolling stock generously donated by a railway enthusiast.

They will also plan to have special events focused on the railway which will include the town and such events always attract considerable numbers of visitors who will hopefully bring additional benefits and attractions to the town. It may be argued that this part of the NP is not as good as drawing economic spending or investment and they hope to change this.

GD asked why the new station is brick and not stone.

JB stated that they did look at this in some detail and they had decided that it was more in keeping with the original Victorian design of the Cambrian Railway buildings.

RR asked JB when the work would begin and finish.

JB stated that hopefully they can out spades in the ground within the next two years but fundamentally this was down to finances and how much can be raised. At the end of the day they are still a charity who relied on donations.

AE commented that whilst this was an interesting development he did wonder where these additional visitors would stay as there was a shortage of

accommodation in and around the town. This has resulted in an increase of camper vans and they contribute little to local economy. He added that if a new National Park came to fruition adjacent to Eryri (and not very far) there may be others who may be interested in the process they had gone through to develop the railway.

JB commented that this may well be very much a community mode of transport and they certainly need to help reduce the traffic issues in the town.

HP thank JB for his interesting update and hoped that they would be able to complete this project.

7. Update on the South Wardens work programme

DPJ stated that this had been another busy years for the department and they had also had some staff changes. He introduced Simon Rhys Jones as Warden for the Bala area and Robat Davies newly appointed as Warden for the Mawddach and part of Dyffryn Ardudwy and working out of Dolgellau depot.

They also have two estate workers in the south of the NP – Meirion Edwards and Meirion Jones.

Much of this year included a great deal of footpath work and furniture replacement and there was a work plan agreed in advance of the season. They also respond to issues when they occur were their resources allowed. They worked closely with Gwynedd Council Rights of Way section on various footpath improvements.

The section also undertakes other activities such as schools and environmental projects.

It has been quieter this year in terms of visitors but they still had a substantial amount of work to do and Llyn Tegid continued to attract many visitors.

Work continues on Mynydd Moel path works and more stone has been flown in to enable another section to be completed to what is an exceptional standard.

In Tal y Llyn – Dol Idris more work has been carried out on the surface of all ability trail.

A new bridge has been planned for Ty Nant to replace the old concrete culvert.

Some furniture will require changing in some areas of open country as they are coming to the end of their lifespan.

Some ecological project works such as wildflower meadows have been undertaken by Wardens in Dol Idris and Farch Ynys.

They still had a vacancy for a part time Assistant Warden which would be advertised on the National Park's website. This was a replacement for Myfyr Thomos.

HP wished to take the opportunity to formally thank Myfyr Thomos on behalf of the LAF members for his outstanding contribution to the work of the National Park over so many years.

DPJ would certainly pass that message on to MT.

Some voluntary Wardens had been out and about on the main routes and collecting litter and speaking to walkers.

HJ asked if the LAF would support the notion of having an improved access point on the bridge at Llwybr Cei. This would enable people cross the bridge in safety on the A494 – currently they must walk over the bridge when they should be able to access the adjacent cycleway.

PR stated that he was aware of this long standing situation and would look at this again and assess what they should include in any correspondence with the North and Mid Wales Trunk Road in relation to this matter.

HP suggested that we write to north and mid Wales Trunk Road to ask that this access point on the bridge linking the PRow be considered.

Agreed that PR would draft a letter to them and also visit the site.

DWO made the point about dogs off leads in the vicinity of livestock.

AM stated that they spent a considerable amount of time in the spring putting up signs and assisting farmers with this issue.

PR mentioned that it was unfortunate that the Westminster Government has dropped the Private Members Bill on Animal Welfare and this had contained some useful draft recommendations for additional dog control in the countryside.

AM mentioned that Llyn Tegid got off to a slow start at the beginning of the season and this could be attributed to the poor weather and that people can now also travel overseas.

However, they continued to endure the usual issues such as camping, fires, litter and anti-social behaviour. This year they had been fortunate in having a Police Liaison Officer attached to the NP from the North Wales Police and he has been out with the Wardens to see from himself what our issues are.

When PCSO's or Officers are present then this is reflected in peoples attitude and behaviour and certainly makes a difference.

They were also ongoing works to continue to clear invasive species. He stressed that it was important to let the NP know if landowners knew of any hidden patches that may not have recorded and may not have been picked up during the mapping process.

HJ asked why the car park had been closed due to an event – Bala Triathlon. This had caused some problems.

AM relied that this was unfortunate but necessary and was a one off for that particular event – he was aware that this did cause some displacement from time to time. In Llyn Tegid fluctuations in visitors was closely tied to the prevailing weather.

HP thanked DPJ and AM for their time, all the Wardens for their work over the year and for their contributions this evening.

8. Introduction to Eryri National Parks Tree and Woodland Strategy.

RR stated that he was the Woodand Officer for the NP and that the new Woodland Strategy was part of a bigger picture including the carbon equation.

Trees are plainly an important element and encompassed many facets of the NP's natural environment.

The beginning they realised that some form of tree cover assessment was required for the whole of the NP and they commissioned a survey company to map this.

The results were interesting and showed that 19% of the NP was tree covered which was more than original estimates. Some 50% of that 19% were coniferous woodland. The rest being broadleaf woodland.

HJ asked they had used archived photo material for comparison.

RR stated that that has been part of the exercise using old maps and ariel photos.

Over the years the NP had been very active in tree planting with landowners - some where enthusiastic but attitudes did vary.

The timing of this strategy is unfortunate given the problems that have arisen from the proposed WG's Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) and in particular its woodland requirements which had clouded their efforts.

HJ mentioned that in the past farm woodland elements were more important to the farm by way of products – fencing, stakes, hurdles, fuel and this element has been lost.

RR agreed and typically grazing under trees was much reduced.

Within the strategy hedgerows were included and they saw the value of these. There may be scope for additional tree cover by simply extending current stands of woodland. This would vary from farm to farm and dictated by their land type and locations.

They are planning to have some drop in sessions at various locations across the NP in the New Year.

AE mentioned that planting of trees within already designated areas such as a SSSI may end up being problematic from many perspectives. There was some areas that he had seen where an entire hill had been planted.

RR fully appreciated this valid point that AE had made and added that 30% of the NP landmass was denoted in some way and some farms within the NP had a great deal of their land classed as such. So they would find it difficult to plant more.

PR commented that he had seen a number of schemes where trees had been planted across Rights of Way and this must be a consideration when formulating long term farm plans for trees.

AE added that he had planted many trees for hedgerows (26k) and most are thriving. But he wondered what the NP capacity was and where will this stock come from given all the problems associated with imported tree stock and ash die back and other diseases.

RR conceded that tree supply was problematic and are finding it difficult to cope. But local provenance was crucial to this equation but this was a question of balance in terms of species and would vary from place to place.

They were always ready to come out to offer advice to landowners. They must work with landowners to explore the potential for more tree cover and they appreciate that this will vary considerably. They also understand that these are very long term outcomes that one generation may not see come to fruition.

PR added that the carbon bank measure varied from one system to another and somewhere along the process one system would have to be adopted and be used by everyone to maintain some form of consistency.

AE commented that each Carbon bank measure did give differing values. It was expected that when the next Sustainable Farming Scheme came to fruition then it was likely that WG would dictate which one was the preferred option and must use in Wales to maintain consistency. It was his

understanding that this is a different approach to England where they may adopt some form of panel assessment.

RR added that the document and its survey findings may help individual landowners or groups to assess their woodlands for any future farming development they may consider. The NP was always ready to give their advice.

HP thanked RR for his informative update on this project.

9. Written Statement: Government Response; Taking Wales Forward` Sustainable Management of Natural Resources Consultation – Access Proposals.

PR explained that in 2019 the WG had issued this written statement.

Since that time and after all the input from various sector stakeholders including the Access Reform Groups (ARAG) lengthy discussions, submissions by the LAF's across Wales and the subsequent NRW report to WG then nothing has emerged since that time.

It was clear to all that the legislation, in particular associated with PRow, needed to be streamlined and updated – and WG are fully aware of this. That is to make the system less bureaucratic and more cost effective to make changes to the network far easier when required.

HP asked if any changes had emerged since that time.

PR stated that had been no updates or any proposed changes and for officers and stakeholders this was deeply frustrating. He read the original bullet points from the paper.

AT asked if the long term access land restrictions such as Traws were also included as a potential change in the legislation such as the CRow Act

PR stated that they had written to the Minister about this as a separate issue but AT had made a valid point as it could be included in any legislative changes.

He asked if the LAF would support the notion of writing to the Minister and ask the question as to what the current situation was and were we to expect legislation.

AE asked if this included access to water.

PR stated that they as Officers would prefer if this was kept as a separate item but if WG included it then that would be advantageous. The NP had the upper Conwy model that had been in place since 2013 - more or less without incident and this was an access to water model that he was keen to show to

the WG as this worked well. This included water level gauges and formal access and egress points. *The NP did not favour unfettered access along any rivers or lakes as that would be unreasonable, unmanageable and create more issues for landowners. They also favoured a reduction in liability for landowners for access to water bodies in a similar way to CRow but should encompass man made features such as weirs, leats, spillways, fords, fences, bridges and abutments.*

Agreed that PR write to the Minister (Huw Iranca Davies) and ask what the latest situation was in terms of future legislative changes and copy in LAF Chairs representative.

10 Recommended Items of the next meeting

- i) Introduction from Jonathon Cawley the NP new CEO
- ii) Tan Y Bwlch Update

11. Any other business

- i) **Letter from local group based in Rhyd concerning access into the National Parks' property at Plas Tan Y Bwlch. Item under AOB.**

PR explained that the original sale of the NP property at Plan Tan Y Bwlch included Llyn Mair and the surrounding PTyB woodland. These areas were highly popular with both local users and visitors alike and those groups wished to express their concerns about the potential loss of public amenity if those areas, currently within NP ownership, may be lost under new ownership and they wished to bring the matter to the attention of the LAF members. They had also written to the Authority.

It was important to consider that the area had no Public Rights of Way and was not CRow access land. Access had been allowed on a *de facto* basis. I.e. allowed through permission but not by any legal right.

PR further explained that since that time he had been asked to review the access provision and they were asked to explore the potential for dedicating parts of the woodland and lake to ensure public access.

After reviewing the various options the Authority had decided to place PTyB on the open market. Some estimates for upgrading and maintain the buildings were in the region of £3m. BUT there has been considerable interest in the site.

He added that the NP Authority fully appreciated the concerns expressed by the local community groups and individuals and that these will be taken into account but at the end of the day this was a matter of public finances.

The site was not only a major place for recreation but also one of the NP's largest woodlands in terms of its potential as a carbon banking.

Officers had presented a number of options to the Authority and they favoured a combination of outcomes. One is where the NP retained ownership of the lake and woodland and also to dedicate these as CRoW access land and also to create around 3 PRoW – north to south through its length connecting Plas Drive to Oakley and bus stop, a line to the railway halt from the central PRoW and a line from the central line under the weir to connect with the A road and onwards to Tan Y Grisiau (which was a popular route).

AE asked how those PRoW could be created.

PR commented that they would ask GC to consider these (as the Highways Authority). GC had already indicated that they will assist with this. In terms of the access land – the NP is the Authority so they would have to make the application (PR). This was a prescribed process which they had not undertaken before. Hopefully, it will be straightforward.

AE asked that if the land was dedicated then were additional PRoW's required.

PR thought that it would be advantageous, without at least the PRoW along its central spine (running north to south) then there would be no onwards access onto and down/up the Oakley drive. Any new owners could not expect part of the driveway road dedicated as 'open country.'

He had written a summary of the options for the Authority to consider then it would fall back to an internal team for consideration then agree to move forward on their final recommendations once the Authority had ratified this. He would also bring this to the LAF.

AE commented that the outcome was that the NP should exclude the lake and woodland from the original sale and then denote that land as access land and create whatever RoW were required. If this was the case then he would support this if the status quo was maintained as it was.

HP recommended that we consider the letters contents and if agreed then write to the Authority expressing our concerns at the potential lack of access in the area if ownership was changed. And to propose and support those options that ensured that public access.

Agreed that PR draft a letter to the Authority Chair and CEO.

JH added that in the past then had been to the lakeside with horses.

PR asked if this was the nearby Llyn Hafod Y Llyn and not Llyn Mair. Llyn Hafod Y Llyn is in the ownership of Tilhill Forestry and not the NP.

JH confirmed that it was.

ii) AE mentioned that recently had some DoE groups using the Public Rights of Way on his property and leaving gates open. This was both disappointing and obviously problematic when sheep end up on someone else's property. There was also clear felling operations in the forest section

with clear signage by the NRW and they should be sticking to the alternative routing provided as it was clearly dangerous.

He asked what briefing DoE candidates received before setting off on their respective treks.

HP asked if it was possible to have someone from the DoE to attend or give us some information.

PR stated that he would discuss this with the DoE in Brecon and ascertain what their preparatory work or induction recommended. The DoE representative has attended the LAF's in the past. The forestry operations mentioned by AE added something else that may need flagging up with DoE.

iii) AE mentioned that there was an issue along Taith Mary Jones within the forestry section and there was a distinct lack of signage.

PR stated that he would discuss this with the Warden Service to look at this particular issue.

12. Dates of Meeting for 2025

18th February, 17th June & 21st October.

HP thanked all for their attendance and members, Officers and staff contributions to this evenings meeting and wished everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New year. (much laughter!)