

Whither the BMC?

Introduction

Climbers and upland hillwalkers are very fortunate to have a strong and single national representative body to champion and promote our interests in the BMC. Obviously, that doesn't stop us moaning about it from time to time but overall the good very much outweighs the less good.

I thought it might be timely before our next AGM to take stock of where our National Body is currently and the direction it may be heading. I should add that the views expressed are very much my own.

Over the last eight years I have gained a few different perspectives on the organisation. At first, I was as an attender of Peak Area meetings. I then become one of the Area's National Council Representatives involved in policy making. Then from January 2017 until June 2018 I was employed by the BMC Office as Commercial Manager looking at new ways to make or save money for the BMC against a background of declining grant money from Sport England.

Two years of upheaval

My employment as Commercial Manager coincided with a period of significant upheaval starting with the tabling of a Motion of No Confidence by a group of members in April 2017 which although defeated led to the resignation of the then President Rehan Siddiqui. This was followed by the formation of the independent Organisational Review Group (ORG) which undertook a root and branch review of the organisation and published 41 recommendations for constitutional, operational and cultural change in March 2018. These recommendations are now being followed through internally in a systematic way by the Organisational Development Group (ODG) primarily comprised of dedicated volunteers. The changes may not be happening quickly, but the indications are good that the resulting improvements will be comprehensive and enduring.

What is the purpose of the BMC?

Before diving into the detail let's step back a second and consider the more basic question of the purpose of an organisation and how can you evaluate how good it is. For some this would include such things as how inclusive and representative it is, but these are means rather than ends. More fundamentally an organisation can be evaluated on how well it gathers and deploys resources (i.e. people and money) to meet its objectives and goals. However, the goals and objectives are not very clear at the BMC. For most organisations I previously dealt with the goal was predominantly profit which makes things more straightforward. In the BMC's case the overarching goal is somewhat harder to pin down as it is to protect and furthering the interests of all those engaged in climbing and upland hillwalking – both members and non-members. This goal can manifest itself in many and diverse ways and so is hard to measure unless the objectives are more precisely determined. Everyone will have their own opinion on where priorities should lie.

A complicated organisation

The initial hook for me joining the BMC was to support the Access and Environment agenda. Continued access to our many playgrounds is an obvious and tangible benefit to Climbers and Hillwalkers and unsurprisingly this is highlighted at every turn by the BMC's industrious Marketing department. Local access issues are the mainstay of the Peak Area local meetings and long may that continue. However, it is only one part of what the BMC does.

When I started my employment at the BMC Office I considered myself reasonably well informed having served on National Council. However, I was taken aback by how many activities I was entirely unaware of. The BMC is interconnected with the climbing sector in more ways than you can imagine. Furthermore, many of the staff's activities represented just the tip of an iceberg with a supporting (and supported) network of committees, allied organisations, government bodies, participating climbing centres and commercial organisations all working with and through the BMC Office.

And what of the outputs? A phantasmagoria of reports, brochures, online content, a magazine, insurance services, support to climbing clubs, quality assurance of training awards, festivals, competitions, lectures, international representation, technical advice and standards, guidebooks, parliamentary lobbying and more. Individually all worthy stuff and certainly in the interests of Climbers and Hillwalkers but in my view somewhat disjointed and lacking a common vision and accountability not to mention value for money assessment. Without an overarching strategy it is hard to tie things together in a cohesive way and determine priorities for resources. The ODG work should help progress towards achieving a meaningful strategy that the organisation buys into - but we are some off this yet.

Politics and the BMC

When I first joined as Commercial Manager I had an thought provoking exchange with Ed Douglas (author, journalist and former BMC Vice President). I was grappling with trying to understand the organisation. He described the BMC primarily as a political organisation which puzzled me at the time. At a management meeting a few weeks later we debated how to liven up the AGM in April to ensure there was a quorum of members attending - little guessing that this would soon be solved by a Motion of No Confidence being tabled against the Board. The extent of how political the BMC was revealed to me as the organisation lurched into a constitutional crisis from which it is now starting to emerge. However, as time went on I began to understand what I think Ed meant. Being described as political is normally pejorative for good reasons but political power and influence can also be a force for good.. The BMC is the de facto national representative body through which other less well-resourced organisations such as the Mountain Training England want to work with by, for example, presenting a 'whole industry' combined bid for Sport England money. Another example is the Mend Our Mountains campaign which improves our relationships with National Park authorities by campaigning against cuts in government funding to National Parks as well as directly funding projects that they can no longer afford out and simultaneously improves our playgrounds. Hopefully I have illustrated how the BMC can be externally political in a beneficial way as the more powerful and influential the BMC is, the more potential it possesses to further the interests of climbers and hillwalkers. The dexterous management of relationships with other bodies and organisations is a key function of the BMC in its gathering and management of resources to good ends.

The broad church

Apart from being externally political the organisation is also internally political as well. The BMC is often described as a broad church implying this is a wholly good thing. However, to continue the religious metaphor it is a mixed blessing. There are many types of divisions within the BMC pulling the organisation in different directions with boundaries being tested and the question arising of whether we are better apart or together. The Alpine Club was very specifically put to the test on this question when a motion to disaffiliate from the BMC was tabled in December. The answer was that AC members resoundingly believed that the club was better together with the vote being over 90% to remain part of the BMC.

One area where some form of partial split is likely to occur is competition climbing. Indoor competition climbing is still a fledgling sport that may be transformed by the Olympics in terms of gaining mainstream appeal. The BMC is the recognised longstanding national governing body of indoor competition climbing. However, arguably, for it to flourish it may be better for supporters of competition climbing (and its opponents!) if it is managed at arms- length as a subsidiary body which independently seeks government or commercial sponsorship to support it. Cycling for example has two wholly separate bodies namely Cycling UK which covers recreational cycling and British Cycling which is the competition governing body.

There are other areas of contention that were identified and addressed in the Organisational Review report. These form projects which the BMC's Organisational Development Group is beaver away on behind the scenes to address.

A changing landscape

Another factor to consider is how much the outdoor sector 'landscape' has changed. Whilst I am not qualified to talk about hillwalking (geo-caching anyone?) climbing has changed vastly since I led my first route in 1983. Back then there was just Mountaineering, Ice Climbing and outcrop climbing. Bouldering was just messing about and sport climbing, competition climbing and dedicated indoor centres were in their infancy. Alongside the development of different branches of the sport there has been a generational shift from amateur adventurism towards the Sport becoming increasingly professional, commercial and mainstream. Top climbers are now 'athletes' and 'influencers' Climbing will feature in the Olympics next year. and "Free Solo" has won an Oscar. Indoor climbing has become mainstream and as an activity is viewed as little different from going to the gym; 60% of dedicated indoor wall users never climb outside.

Remaining relevant

Whilst the BMC has generally sought to move with the times, not all its members have and some of the kickback at the BMC is linked to the wider changes in the sport. From an organisational standpoint whether these developments are good or bad is irrelevant as it is vital that a National representative body represents how the sport is now, not how you would wish it to be. To do otherwise means failing in the purpose of being representative and with increasingly irrelevance to new generations of climbers comes an inevitable decline in membership and influence.

The way forward

The ORG recommendations which led to a new constitution for the BMC has improved the problematic governance framework for decision-making that has in my opinion hamstrung the organisation over the years. However, that framework is just the basis for decision-making. Good leadership is also now needed to use that framework to transform the BMC from a broadly good but muddled organisation to a better and more focussed one with clear goals and objectives that have widespread support and are followed through.

I am cautiously optimistic that the processes and momentum in train will modernise the culture, operations and practices of the BMC. However, it is not a given. The BMC has not been an organisation that is inherently dynamic or strategic to say the least. I experienced at close quarters how new initiatives become bogged down and meet resistance. After a few such setbacks the temptation at all levels can become to continue to muddle along and say yes to everything and everyone for an easy life and that culture becomes entrenched.

The constitutional changes that took place at the AGM last June have provided mechanisms for decision making to be ultimately made by the Board (on behalf of the Membership). There are some big issues facing the organisation and our Sport which require tricky decisions on priorities, goals and direction. Will the Board step up to the plate and use their power to make those decisions and furthermore deal with the criticism effectively and bring the Membership with them? This is down to the quality and confidence of the individuals on the Board and their dynamic as a team.

We (the membership) can also do our bit by participating in the debates and generally be supportive and take a bigger picture view especially when decisions don't always go the way we might personally choose.