

I am pleased that we are able to report continued growth in the number of people involved in shooting activities, both at Bisley and across the country, as well as continued capital investment in facilities for shooting.

Our Annual Report was published before Easter and outlines our financial position. Our new treasurer, Andrew Reynolds - welcome, Andrew, to your first AGM as our Treasurer - will follow me to review this, and then Andrew will present the Chief Executive's report.

But before we do that, there are a number of items that I am pleased to share with you. Our membership continues to grow; it rose from 8,505 to 9,209 in calendar 2018, which is an increase of 704. 1,027 people applied for membership in 2018 and we have received, according to Georgina as of yesterday, 452 applications for new membership so far this year, which is an average of around 100 a month.

This level of membership applications is the result of a lot of hard work from many people, and is of course essential to the growth of shooting activities in the country. It has obviously put pressure on the system, both on our membership team and our training team as the number of probationary members grows in step. 1,145 members completed a probationary course in 2018; which is more than 5 times what it was 5 years ago. In addition, the membership team have issued 12,926 Shooter Certification cards since taking on this task. 11,546 of those cards have been issued to non-NRA members who are members of NRA affiliated clubs. So together with the 9,200 or so full NRA members, it means there are well over 20,000 shooters around the country actively involved in fullbore shooting at Bisley and MoD Ranges, in addition to those of course who shoot on ranges where no Shooter Certification card is required.

So I would like to pay particular tribute to the Membership Team, led by Georgina Thatcher, and the Training Team, led by David Camp, for successfully managing that growth.

Range use at Bisley by members and by corporate users also continues to grow. Range use by individuals and clubs is up 17% this year alone. And this is where the rubber meets the road so to speak, but this increasing demand means that we must continue to look to new solutions to increase capacity on the ranges.

One answer clearly lies with electronic targets; and these are proving to be very popular for range bookings. We continue to expand our use of these and introduced a further butt on Century Range last year, but more will have to be done. The current echelon shooting arrangement on Century Range means that many targets go unused in order to provide the necessary safe separation of shooters. So, in 2020, on busy days shooting on Century Range will take place at a single distance, or with everybody falling back at the same time, so that all targets can be used. These new procedures will greatly increase the range capacity and mean that more people than ever can enjoy the facilities at Bisley.

Cost and management of our ranges will become increasingly important as we seek to maximise the capacity that we have for the benefit of everybody. This is a big part of our decision that the National Shooting Centre Ltd, the NRA's trading subsidiary, should take over the sporting clays facilities on Cottesloe Heath and Long Siberia following the end of the licence of the current operator. It is undeniable that sporting clays can be a lucrative business and that income will help the NRA pursue its charitable objectives. But the operational flexibility of having this land under the control and management of the NSC will help ensure that the use of our ranges is maximised, again contributing to our charitable objectives.

We are committed to continuing our existing investment and maintenance programmes throughout the current 3-year plan. And all the while we will aim to keep prices for membership, training and shooting flat in real terms wherever possible, and continue to provide subsidies to encourage younger shooters.

Not everything is positive however – it hardly ever is. The social and political backdrop for shooting remains very challenging; mass shootings such as in Christchurch, New Zealand earlier in the year add to already negative perceptions. We have yet to hear whether shooting, and particularly full-bore shooting, will be part of the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in 2022. The Offensive Weapons Bill that gained Royal Assent earlier this month introduces new prohibitions on self-unloading rifles. The NRA has been closely involved throughout on these two issues, and were successful in removing the prohibition on .50 cal shooting. But whilst seeking to protect the breadth of shooting activities available in this country, we must sometimes choose to come across as sensible and pragmatic, rather than strident and entrenched.

It is therefore all the more disappointing that much of what I and the other Trustees have had to deal with has been generated, not by the regulators or other third parties, but by our own members. The most obvious of these is Rents, where those who think we have been unfair have complained to the Charity Commission. The Charity Commission have yet to conclude their investigation, but they did write to me on the 7th February on this particular issue and said:

“We have previously advised that the support of non-charitable shooting clubs is not in itself charitable. NRA tenants and affiliated clubs are not themselves established for charitable purposes so we expect tenants to be charged at full rent. It does not fall within the purposes of NRA to support and subsidise its tenants.”

I hope, once and for all, that this puts this particular issue to bed.

Before I hand over to our new Treasurer, I would like to end by thanking my fellow Trustees, some of whom are here in the room, and Andrew Mercer and his staff for all their energy, enthusiasm and hard work over the past 12 months. I would particularly like to mention the contributions of three Trustees who retired in 2018; Richard Baillie, who made a very significant contribution to addressing real estate policy issues, Mik Maksimovic, whose brainchild, the F Class European Championships, now attracts almost 300 competitors each September, and Derek Lowe, who took on the Treasurer role in 2013 when it was something of a poisoned chalice. The results since speak for themselves.

John Webster
NRA Chairman