

The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales

Minutes of the 22nd Annual General Meeting held on Thursday 21st November 2024 at 6.30 pm on Zoom

There were 36 Trust members in attendance, including Trustees and staff members.

Chair Paul Culyer welcomed everyone to the meeting. To assist with the online meeting, he requested that everyone should mute their microphone when not speaking, and asked that members put up their hand up, either virtually or in person, if they wanted to speak or ask a question.

He handed over to Sarah Kessell, Chief Executive for a presentation on the work achieved during the year.

Sarah gave a flavour of the year and mentioned key highlights. These included the successful progress of the Water Vole reintroduction at Ffrwd Farm Mire. NRW had confirmed that Water Voles have been added as a supporting feature of the protected site, signifying that there is a sustainable population. This will enable the Trust to acquire more funds to help this species on the reserve.

The reserves received funding which enabled a great deal of management work to take place and the replacement of bird hides, boardwalks, fencing and purchase of equipment. Many reserves were benefitting from conservation grazing; at Cors Goch there are traditional breeds, but in some areas goats are trialled as are 'No-fence' collars for cattle. On Gower, reserves management is helping species including the rare Silky Wave moth. In total across the reserves, 577 working days were spent on habitat management by staff and volunteers. Sarah gave thanks to everyone who had contributed to this work.

Research and monitoring had taken place for numerous species and habitats, including brown hairstreak butterfly, a beaver feasibility study at the Teifi Marshes and Llangloffan Fen, and heather sampling from Dowrog Common as part of the Great Fuel Moisture Survey. Working with partner organisations, four new Marsh Fritillary sites were identified in Ceredigion. Volunteers from the North Ceredigion Local Group ran a Swift Project which installed 60 boxes across the county. Red squirrel work continued and a deep analysis of the work from historical data has been carried out. Large scale projects were developed, which Conservation Officer Adam Dawson would give a presentation about next.

Sarah said that riverside restoration work had been carried out on the Thaw and Kenson catchments benefitting a range of species including Water Vole.

The Team Wilder staff have been working on people engagement projects and empowering youth forum members. Eighty-four young people from across Wales attended the youth summit in Llangrannog. The Youth Forum also helped organise a Senedd event to talk about the Wales pesticide campaign. Sarah said she had been impressed by the enthusiasm of the young people

over the year. There had also been some good community engagement with adults in Swansea as part of the Nextdoor Nature project.

Sarah noted that the Trust works with 12 Local Groups including Aberystwyth Botanical Society and Friends of Skomer and Skokholm, and the others based on areas around the Trust. Information on the Local Groups is on the Trust website. Sarah added that they extend the Trust's reach by leading guided walks and running talks.

The Trust's marine work includes excellent research with a dolphin acoustic monitoring project that records their individual signature whistle.

On the islands, Skomer continues to be important for seabird research and they have also been running a series of events there which have been successful. There was a recorded 19,572 hours of volunteer involvement this year on Skomer. Sadly NRW are withdrawing funding for grey seal monitoring – this important monitoring has been ongoing since 1980. This year there were 213 grey seals pups born on Skomer.

On Skokholm, there is also a huge amount of volunteer input. At the new Skokholm hide it had been exciting to see through the one-way glass wall into a puffin burrow, observing a tiny puffling being fed by the adult. There is a red filter on the glass so the birds are undisturbed.

Media coverage of the Trust was very successful. There were 4000 sign-ups for the 30 Days Wild campaign. There was huge interest in the Waxwings at Teifi Marshes. There was a very well received verbal social media post by Steven Bangs on his visit to Skomer as part of Deaf Awareness month, with 15,000 views.

Sarah gave thanks to Mike Alexander who has stepped down as Chair of the Trust. He continues to be involved and is training staff on management planning, Chair of the Islands Committee and he is on the Conservation Committee.

Looking ahead, there is a capital works improvement project at WWC and Sarah is working with consultants to broaden the Trust's reach. A lovely design has been developed which will make the building far more accessible for all. There are lots of exciting changes. Some works have been started via the Shared Prosperity Fund and others it is hoped will be carried out via NLHF. Sarah is writing the application and a match funding appeal has recently been launched about which there are details on the website.

Sarah asked members to read the Trustees report on the website for fuller details of work that has been done across the Trust this year.

Paul thanked Sarah for her report. As there were no questions for Sarah, Paul handed over to Conservation Officer, Adam Dawson for a talk on Trellwyn Fach and the Celtic Rainforest.

Adam said that Trellwyn Fach had been purchased by the Trust through the Aviva Temperate Rainforest Restoration project. Aviva have £38m to give the Wildlife Trusts across the UK,

helping Trusts purchase land and restore this to temperate rainforest, and the Trusts in Wales have set up a delivery team to help select sites to fit in with the objectives.

Adam's presentation will be available on the Trust website.

Members asked Adam questions on his presentation.

Ian Scott asked about Ghost Woodlands and how they could be identified. Adam said that the area would contain indicator species. The team are looking to see if there is opportunity to restore these. Clues are also in place names eg Coed or Derw.

Raoul Bhambral asked for a top tip for regenerating through bracken. Adam said that there is not just one top tip but a simple way is to plant larger 80 cms whips and make sure to use a hook or scythe to clear the area around so that the bracken is not shading out the whip. He added that Birch, Oak and Hawthorn are most resilient. Info can be found on 'Stump Up for Trees'.

Sash Tusa asked about woodland connectivity and whether this needs to be 'leaf to leaf'. Adam responded by saying that it depends on the species, eg dormice need leaf to leaf. Bats will use trees as navigation but generally it is the thicker the better for most species. Even a 3-5m width hedgerow will help species to travel.

Adam closed his presentation by asking members to get in touch if they had any queries about the project.

Paul thanked Adam for his talk which had brought the project and woodlands to life.

Sheena Wakefield asked Sarah about Caermalwas Farm. Sarah said the land has been well looked over for its biodiversity interest. Sarah said that the Trust looked hard to find funding to carry out the necessary repairs the farmhouse but this had not been possible so the house was sold but the money will help fund new fencing and the land managed as a traditional nature reserve. The vision for regenerative farming will hopefully come to fruition if another site becomes available.

There was a short break before the formal part of the AGM.

Paul welcomed everyone to the AGM

1) To receive the apologies for absence

Clive Summers

Jess Moore

Gill Lewis

Fiona Corke

2) To approve the minutes of the AGM held on 16-11-23

These were available to download from the Trust website or on request.

Paul went through these page by page. These were proposed as correct by Sash Tusa and seconded by Shirley Matthews, and approved by all as an accurate account of the meeting.

3) Chairperson's report

Paul said that Mike Alexander had stepped down as Chair but was still involved with the Trust. He thanked Mike for his work. RSWT had helped with the process of selecting a new Chair and Paul was delighted to take on the role. Rosey Grandage would be Vice Chair. He thanked the Board members, and they had made the transition possible and had been very helpful.

Trustee Catrin Evans had stepped down during the year and she had been an active member of the Board and had been the Trustee lead on the Welsh Language group. Good wishes were sent to Catrin and her family.

Trustee Shirley Matthews had completed her three terms of three years as a Trustee so was standing down. Paul said that the Trust appreciated her work as Trustee and her work leading the Local Groups Forum, and she continues her involvement with the islands as a volunteer and as Chair of the Friends of Skomer and Skokholm. She was thanked for all her work.

Vice Chair Rosey Grandage is the Trustee leading on the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) work. This is an area of work that the Trust is keen to develop.

Paul said that there are 46 Wildlife Trusts across the UK and the Trust works to build connections with these and has developed interesting and inspirational projects, including the Aviva Rainforest project.

Paul was impressed at the way that staff stepped up to deliver the projects. He noted that the Trust works particularly closely with the four other regional Trusts in Wales, working on aligning systems and processes to help each other. Staff employed on behalf of the Trusts in Wales work on lobbying and help to take shared work forwards.

The Trust Strategy 2020-2030 was drawn up by Mike Alexander and the Trust is making progress towards this.

He gave thanks to the Trust staff who he said are the greatest asset. The Board is alert regarding remuneration and recognise it is good to develop this. He also thanked the volunteers and members – he noted that across the UK Wildlife Trust movement there are 900,000 members and that it would be good to get to a million to take the Trusts forward for wildlife and the climate.

There were no questions for Paul so he handed over to Stuart Bain, Treasurer.

4) Finance Report and presentation

Stuart said that the Trustees Report and accounts are on the Trust's website and are available to download.

The financial presentation is available on the Trust's website.

Stuart gave some headline figures, there was an overall surplus of £497k and the trading company made £179K of profit which was gifted to the charity for its charitable aims.

He added that the Finance Committee meets quarterly to oversee the finances and budget. It is good to hear about the projects but these need to be done in a financially sustainable way. He noted that there are existential threats like Avian Flu, and Ash Dieback which the Trust has to deal with.

Investments are handled carefully to reduce exposure and to maximise income from cash deposits. Stuart showed a pie chart to illustrate where the Trust income comes from; the Finance Committee are happy with the balance of income streams.

Grant income remains 'lumpy' – there are indications that grants are materially lower with some that were received in 2023 but not recurring in 2024.

Stuart commented that amazing work has been done by Sarah and her Senior Management Team (SMT) putting grant bids together, (Sarah had commented that the amount of work required for the NLHF WWC grant was the equivalent of nine dissertations).

In addition there are a number of private foundations who have donated. There are a variety of National Lottery and Peoples Postcode Lottery funded projects – supported by people playing these lotteries and subsequently benefitting the Trust's work.

Trading income took a dip in 2021 due to Covid but the figures are recovering. He noted challenges with inflation and rising costs and that profits are not increasing with income being received. Sales of merchandise is helping and thanks were given to the team at Lockley Lodge who have generated good income from the sale of island and puffin related items.

A graph showing how the Trust spends its money was shown. Admin, legal, audit and governance costs are low and most of the money is spent on conservation, with two thirds of net charitable income over the last two years spent on charitable aims.

Conclusions and Looking forward to 2025 – Stuart again praised Sarah and her SMT for stabilising the Trust's finances. Rising costs need to be considered and the Board of Trustees needs to ensure that they adequately reward staff for their work, to help retain staff and to help with recruitment. The Trust has to manage buildings and land, and deliver 30 by 30 as in the strategy.

Stuart asked the members to receive the audited accounts, this was proposed by Sash Tusa and seconded by Peter Hunter with all in favour.

Raoul Bhambral asked about the green line in the graph showing a reduction in support costs since 2003 and wondered why. Sarah would take this question away to provide an accurate answer for him.

Lynda Hickling queried the income from reserves and trading activities. Sarah responded by noting that trading includes overnight stays on Skomer and Skokholm, income from sales at Lockley Lodge, WWC shop, and cafés. The reserves figure includes income from Skomer day visits. Lynda said she was impressed with the way the finances were going.

Paul thanked Stuart for his presentation. He was pleased that the Trust had received a clean audit report. He particularly thanked the small finance team of Margaret Drury (Finance Manager) and Marie Lindley (Finance Officer) for their hard work over the year and especially during the audit.

5) To confirm the re-appointment of the following to the Board of Trustees: Rosey Grandage, Stuart Bain, Mike Davies

Personal profiles had been circulated with the agenda.

It was suggested the re-appointment, which were recommended by the Board, be taken *en-bloc*. The re-appointments were proposed by Lucy Griffiths and seconded by Lynda Hickling, with all in favour.

6) To confirm the appointment of the following to the Board of Trustees; Raoul Bhambral, Madeline De Marchis, Sash Tusa

Person profiles had been circulated with the agenda.

The appointments, which were recommended by the Board, were taken *en-bloc*.

The appointments were proposed by Stuart Bain, seconded by Peter Hunter, with all in favour.

All were duly re-appointed and appointed to the Board. Paul welcomed the new Trustees and said they would be contacted regarding their induction.

7) To confirm the Board recommendation to review the appointment of the current auditors

As is good practice, Trustees recommended that the Trust would go out to test the market to investigate new auditors. This recommendation was proposed by Stuart Bain and seconded by Sash Tusa, with all in favour.

8) Questions from Members

John Finney asked about avian flu on the islands. Sarah reported that this current year had been quieter and that there is still good bio-security measures in place. She noted that there are gaps in the gannet colony on Grassholm, but no big reports on avian flu around the islands. Paul noted that on the Pembrokeshire coast there did not appear to be a big impact.

Paul introduced guest speaker Mike Alexander, former Trust chair, conservationist, photographer and author, who gave talk on the Flowers of the West Wales coast.

Mike said that he had also written a book on the topic and he hopes to have this published soon with the help of a Welsh Book Council grant. He gave a light-hearted presentation about the

human relationships with plants. The presentation was a delightful blend of beautiful photography, interesting facts and folklore, interspersed with poetry.

Paul thanked Mike for his amazing talk, which everyone had enjoyed. (*There had been multiple positive comments received via the Zoom chat function*)

Paul thanked everyone for attending the AGM and he brought the meeting to a close.

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm