



Minutes of the 76th Annual General Meeting of WWT

Held at the Royal Institution, 21 Albemarle St, London W1S 4BS, and online, on Thursday 23 November 2023, at 11:30am

The following members of the Council were present:

Barnaby Briggs (Chair), Philip Wilson (Hon Treasurer), Sarah Pearson (SP) at London and Alan Law (AL) and Fraser Montgomery (FM) online.

In attendance: Sarah Fowler (Chief Executive), Kevin Peberdy (KP), Deputy Chief Executive, Alex Lane (ALn), Director of Operations, Martin Dawson (MD), Director of Finance & Support Services, Tim McGrath (TMcG), Interim Director of Conservation and Corinne Pluchino (CP), Director of Fundraising, Marketing & Communications.

1. Welcome

The Chair gave a warm welcome to the Trust's 76th AGM and remarked that it was fantastic to have so many people attending in person and online. It was an important year for WWT as it launched its new strategy for the next seven years, and the amazing venue was a reflection of that. He summarised the agenda and handed over to the Chief Executive to introduce WWT's exciting new strategy.

2. Chief Executive address

The Chief Executive welcomed everyone, introduced WWT's Management Board, and presented the future direction of WWT's new strategy to help change the world to make it a better place for nature, people and the planet, and the crucial role wetlands can play in a story of hope. WWT needed to make wetlands and their value to wildlife and people understood, and to tell its story in a way that resonated so people could benefit from wetlands and their superpowers.

She highlighted that 40% of the world's wildlife depends on wetlands and people's lives do, but wetlands and their natural powers were being lost at a terrifying rate, and three times faster than forests. 87% of the world's wetlands had been lost in the last 300 years and habitat loss remained one of the main reasons for disappearing wildlife. Wetlands were needed more than ever and needed help.

The Chief Executive went on to share WWT's new vision of a world where healthy wetland nature thrives and enriches lives, its mission to restore wetlands and unlock their power, and three ambitions to restore, inspire and thrive. WWT wanted to be bolder, more confident, stronger and fresher in order to be more relevant across more audiences, and speak with optimism, humour and fun to help people fall in love with nature and the wetland world again.

A short film was played sharing a message from WWT's President Kate Humble.

The Chief Executive then introduced WWT's new brand, which had a bolder voice, and was based on considered and detailed research. She explained the need to raise profile and public awareness to deliver the ambitions and to ensure the name and logo reflected the work of the organisation. The name WWT really mattered, and the logo of a Bewick's Swan reflected a single mindedness and clear direction of travel.

The new strategy demanded change and fluid thinking and WWT would remain a beacon of optimism for wetlands and unwavering champions for the world in order to rise to the challenges faced, and she hoped members felt a sense of hope, jeopardy and optimism to help drive the change.

On behalf of everyone at WWT, the Chief Executive closed by saying a huge thank you to everyone for their support and asked everyone to help realise the dream together of a world where healthy wetland nature thrives and enriches lives.

A short film of WWT's future mission was then played.

3. **Q&A Session**

The Chair conveyed that a number of questions were received in advance about establishing new wetlands or new WWT reserves in different parts of the UK, and confirmed there were no plans for new centres.

KP explained that the 'restore' ambition in the strategy period up to 2030 targets 20,000 hectares of new wetlands and an additional 2,000 hectares of restored wetland, including in and around the waterscapes around existing WWT sites. Some of it would be achieved by forging new partnerships, and the Aviva project would result in new wetland reserves for WWT to manage in perpetuity. Opportunity maps had been developed to identify where in the UK wetlands could be restored, both inland and coastal, but there were constraints in achieving that on the ground and part of the Aviva project was to try and help overcome some of those. Finance, ability to acquire land, existing planning systems, avoiding infrastructure and sites of high wildlife value, as well as working closely with local communities, were all things that WWT would develop. He believed it was possible to overcome some of these and he had never seen so many positive opportunities of this scale. Although it was unlikely for a new centre to be built, there would be multiple sites of new wetland reserves more aligned with the Steart model.

The Chair conveyed questions received in advance about whether removing a specific focus on wildfowl from the charity objectives meant WWT would no longer give those birds the same conservation focus, and whether through changing the charity objects, WWT was moving away from its previous focus around scientific research and species conservation and replacing with new priorities around public engagement and storytelling.

The Chief Executive stressed the importance of science and species restoration which had shown that habitat restoration is important to make a difference for species restoration. Scientific research was still important to help us make the case for, and understand what was need to achieve wetland restoration and there would be a particular focus on species that could help drive wetland restoration. The Charitable Objects needed to better reflect WWT's focus on wetlands, and all wetland species, including wildfowl. The Charity Commission for England and Wales and Scottish Charity Regulator had given prior approval to bring the new objects to members and it was felt they reflected both the heritage of WWT and also the future.

The Chair opened questions to the room, and those online, and the following questions were asked:

From the floor:

- 1. The new strategy is fantastic and clear and gives a sense of desire for change to get more people involved, so how are you looking at and researching and testing truly disruptive ideas e.g. giving free access to reserves for a year, and how can members help?**

The Chief Executive responded that WWT had already stepped into a more disruptive space with a fresher and bolder strategy, and would be thinking about different ways to inspire change. ALn explained that a sites future planning project would be considering things like free access, content on site and digital

experiences, and would run for the next twelve months. CP added that it was important to do the thinking and to test new things as they are introduced to ensure they make an impact which is valuable. KP was eager to work more closely within partnerships to make a difference, by influencing and moving them forward in the right direction rather than sitting on the side-lines.

2. Does the reintroduction of beaver in this country play a part in the strategy?

KP responded that WWT would be looking at every opportunity and would continue to have conversations about monitoring and working with beavers as part of a broader release programme in the UK.

3. Do you have any thoughts, appreciating finance is potentially prohibitive, to capture the interest of a much younger generation and is it possible for this to be included somewhere in the plan?

The Chief Executive answered that the whole idea of the brand is about being more impactful with a younger audience which starts with a fresher feel and look, and thought is being given to what future careers in WWT conservation look like.

4. What actions are you taking to engage those who have no intention of ever visiting a site?

CP clarified it was the intention to increase financial supporters to 250,000 by 2030, and lots of exciting ideas were being discussed, but the first step was to assess and prioritise effectively to see where the initial actions could be taken to generate change. Ultimately, the long term direction of travel was for people to support WWT regardless of where they lived, and the sites would remain important windows to the WWT world.

4. Guest Speaker: Henrietta Stock, Aviva's Senior Sustainability Manager

The Chair explained that in June, WWT announced a ground breaking partnership with Aviva to restore and manage coastal saltmarsh in the UK, and he was delighted to welcome Henrietta Stock, Senior Sustainability Manager at Aviva, who explained more about Aviva's motivations for the remarkable donation of £21m, and why WWT was an organisation that Aviva wanted to work with.

5. Q&A Session

The following questions were directed to Henrietta:

1. What about collaboration with likeminded charities and institutions other than WWT, and what plans are there to advance education?

Henrietta responded that it was all about collaboration with different bodies working together to achieve what is needed at scale, which included businesses, conservation organisations, government and many other stakeholders and communities, and the partnership would hopefully be a demonstration of how that could work and inspires others to do the same kind of thing.

A big part of the partnership for Aviva was that it would help customers and employees to engage and understand the importance of nature, and how they could connect with nature, which has many benefits for wellbeing as well as for nature. WWT had already held talks to share their knowledge with Aviva employees who were excited and engaged. Aviva employees would have the opportunity to volunteer and support in other ways to create connections and expand collectively knowledge around wetlands and the importance of wetlands.

KP added that collaboration was really important and WWT was working with a range of organisations to unlock the blue carbon market. Wetland creation targets

could not be reached without partnership working and that included NGO's and particularly government bodies who all had a part to play.

2. When is the saltmarsh carbon code going to be ready? How as an insurance company do you help give the message that wetlands can help with flooding and that wetlands are important for flood prevention?

Henrietta responded that this was a really important point and one of the broader benefits of the partnership is to give the opportunity to engage with people to help them understand the role of wetlands and nature in reducing the risk of flooding, particularly with increased flooding due to the changing climate. There was a fantastic opportunity to restore wetlands to where they were centuries before and they had a critical role as an insurer to engage people with that message.

TMcG added that a carbon code was needed as soon as possible and the first target was for a beta version in March 2024, to test the process and also the market in order to attract funding. He expected to be closer to a final version by March 2025.

3. Why are AGM's held in the day and not the evening?

The Chair invited attendees to discuss this question whilst breaking for lunch. He encouraged those attending to explore the Royal Institution, and asked that any further questions be put to the Management Board located on the first floor.

6. Vote and Resolution on the amendment of WWT's governing documents

Martin Dawson, WWT Company Secretary, chaired a separate meeting of Ordinary Members, presenting three resolutions for approval; to change the charity objects; to extend the tenure of the current Chair; and to give Council the power to make decisions outside of meetings. Each resolution was passed by a majority of Ordinary Members attending the meeting, and the Articles will be amended accordingly. Minutes of the meeting can be found on WWT's website.

7. AGM Welcome

The Chair opened the AGM by remarking how fitting it was for the AGM to be held in the winter, and highlighted the wetland species that could be seen at Slimbridge, Welney and Steart in the winter. He hoped that members found the new strategy as inspiring and as exciting as he did, and remarked how fantastic it was to see so many people in attendance to talk about the future of WWT. The update to follow would focus on news from across the charity and share some of the projects that the membership had been supporting over the last year.

8. Apologies for absence

It was the Chair's pleasure to thank the Trustees for their time and valuable participation, and he noted apologies from Andrew Beer, Alexander Mawer, Luminita Holban and David Tudor. Alan Law and Fraser Montgomery joined online, and Sarah Pearson and Philip Wilson were present in the room.

9. Minutes of the 75th Annual General Meeting held 17 November 2022

No comments were received on the minutes. Receipt of the minutes was acknowledged by the members. There were no matters arising from the minutes.

10. Changes to Council

The Chair noted that Hester Liakos stood down as a Trustee in October, having served three extremely helpful years, and gave thanks for her time and commitment.

The Chair conveyed that three Trustees Andrew Beer, Alan Law and Alexander Mawer were coming to the end of their terms and eligible for re-election to Council. As Chair of Council, he had been appointed as proxy by all other Trustees eligible to vote on the matter and confirmed that the votes cast, including his own, were all in favour of the re-election of Andrew Beer for a further one-year term and Alan Law and Alexander Mawer for further three-year terms.

11. Presentation of the Annual Report and Accounts of the Council for the year ending 31 March 2023

a) Chair's comments on Report

The Chair referred to the Annual Report and Accounts of the Council for the year 31st March 2023 as an opportunity to say a few words about the work of WWT.

He started by saying that WWT's message that wetlands offer real solutions was being heard in a way that it hadn't before. The new strategy and bold new look, meant that WWT was perfectly poised to create a movement for wetlands and build on the success of the last seventy seven years, working to restore wetlands and unlock their power.

The Chair welcomed new ambassadors Ollie Olanipekun and Nadeem Perera, the founders of the birdwatching and nature collective Flock Together, and Sir Mark Rylance and naturalist and influencer Lucy Lapwing to the WWT family.

He highlighted the key successes of the year, including the Wetlands Can! campaign, Waterlands podcast, Generation Wild, legislation to include sustainable drainage systems in new developments, Aviva partnership, new laws making it illegal to use lead shot in and around wetlands in 27 countries and the star wetland centre awards.

There had still been some unwanted familiar challenges with Avian Influenza and the cost of living crisis which continued to have a significant impact on everyone, but the response of employees had been extraordinary, and he was proud to be part of an organisation, that without exception, showed passion and resilience to take whatever action is needed to support WWT and its vital conservation work.

He was grateful for volunteers, who continued to give so much of their time and energy and wealth of skills, knowledge and experience, to help achieve so much more wetland conservation, and indebted to supporters who had continued with their generous donations. He gave a heartfelt thank you to the members for maintaining their membership when access to reserves had been restricted.

The Chair closed by stating that WWT was making a difference, and he was proud to be part of an organisation that was achieving so much and had the drive and ambition to do so much more. Looking to the future he was excited to see an organisation turning challenges into solutions and concerns into actions.

b) Treasurer's comments on Accounts

The Hon Treasurer provided a review of WWT's finances for the year taken from the 2023 Annual Report and Accounts approved by the Council of Trustees in October. The full audited accounts and report were available via WWT's website and will soon be available at the Charity Commission and Companies House.

Income in 2022/23 was £0.9million lower than the previous year, membership remained the largest source of income at £7.1m, and legacies grew and formed an increasingly significant part of the Charity's funding. Income from admissions at

£3.4million was £0.5million down from the previous year and there was a near 10% growth in funding from grants and contracts to £3.5million.

Expenditure significantly increased by £4.6million over the prior year and an additional £0.7million was spent on driving fundraising and supporting membership growth and retention. Expenditure at WWT's ten wetland reserves increased by £1.8million over the prior year and an additional £1.8million was spent on UK and International wetland conservation and restoration programmes.

In 2022/23 WWT operated with a £3.5million deficit in its unrestricted funding compared to a £1million surplus generated in the prior year. In a year of an unrestricted deficit, the Charity had to draw down on its free unrestricted reserves, and in 2022/23 the Charity ended the year with a balance of £10.1million in free reserves.

The Hon Treasurer reflected on more up-to-date financial performance, noting that visitation at sites had not grown at the rate hoped, and trading activity remained difficult as costs continued to rise. He was pleased to say that membership numbers had stabilised, and legacies were significantly outperforming expectations.

The single largest donation ever received by WWT, of £21million from Aviva and the new brand and strategy, were all designed to engage and grow support, and if WWT continued to do the right things and make the right investments to speak up for and demonstrate the power of wetlands, Council was convinced that the funding needed to grow delivery and impact would follow.

12. Long Service Awards

The Chair was delighted to recognise the following individuals for 25 years long service:

- **Adam Salmon**, Reserve Manager at London, start date 12 March 1998, and
- **Andrew Watts**, Warden at Washington, start date 1 April 1998.

The Chair acknowledged the immense contribution they had made to WWT over the years, and invited members to give thanks for their work. Members celebrated their achievements with a round of applause.

13. Questions

The Chair summarised questions received in advance of the meeting, requesting information about development plans for new hides and exhibits, funding at specific sites, and how WWT encouraged travel to its sites.

ALn explained that about £12m was spent on sites in 2022/23, which included operating them and investment budgets. Arundel accounted for 9% of the operating budget out of the ten sites, and the rest varied, with Steart, Welney and Caerlaverock accounting for about 5% each, and mid-sized sites like Arundel, Llanelli and Castle Espie somewhere between 6-9%. The larger sites at Slimbridge, Martin Mere and London, were between 14 - 28%. Each site had a rolling capital expenditure plan which varied significantly year by year, and the last significant expenditure at Arundel was in 2021 on the pelican cove and walk through aviary, which amounted to £460k and would not happen every year as capital money was spread across all ten sites. With regard to public transport, most sites were in remote locations, and with cuts in public funding, many of the public transport options were no longer available. WWT was very supportive of public transport, and the Head of Sustainability was working in collaboration to trial some great initiatives for funded bus services to places like Slimbridge and Welney.

The Chair conveyed that the AGM was the biggest yet, it was brilliant to see such interest and engagement, and a couple of questions had been received about the cost of the AGM compared to the year before.

CP explained that an extra £13.5k had been spent on the AGM, which was almost exclusively due to the choice of venue. The AGM had outgrown the capacity available to host at sites, and given it was a special year with the launch of the new strategy and there was a desire to introduce members to Aviva, it was decided to go to an external venue. The Royal Institution was chosen partly because of its location and partly because of its scientific heritage, which sat nicely with WWT's, and holding a longer meeting with a morning and afternoon session was also a factor in costs. She reassured members that all options for next year would be considered with the Chair before deciding on the best format.

The Chair invited questions from the floor, and to those online, and the following questions were asked:

From the floor:

- 1. Has any modelling been done on reducing the admissions price with a view to encouraging more people to visit, and has any thought been given to providing access to the shops and cafés without having to pay the admission fee to enter the site?**

ALn responded that the sites future planning project would look at everything, including membership pricing, admissions pricing, and opening hours. All the options would be considered to optimise visitation and ensure the experience is value for money, and a pre-pay line option would be thought about for all sites.

From the floor:

- 2. Why can we not show our membership card to enter, and that be used to provide a discount for people we take to site? The price of food and drink at WWT sites is reasonable, so why not advertise what's available on the website to encourage everyone to go along?**

ALn welcomed the suggestion to promote food and drink on the website and didn't know why a discount for friends and family could not be given on presentation of a membership card at the till, but would find out.

The Chief Executive added that free entry for young people had increased from age 16 to 17, and a discounted rate was introduced for people aged 18 - 24 to encourage a younger generation to visit. She urged members to continue bringing people along with them to visit sites, which was a brilliant way to help support WWT's work.

From online:

- 3. How is WWT going to use its voice to hold the Government to account where it falls short in tackling the biodiversity and climate crisis?**

The Chief Executive responded that she and a number of WWT staff and volunteers attended a Restore Nature Now rally hosted by Chris Packham on 28 September. It was a brilliant coalition of environmental eNGO's coming together to deliver a clear and simple message about the importance of restoring nature, and more thought would be given to doing more to ensure WWT's voice is heard and counts.

WWT also supported the overturn of a motion in the House of Lords to change the Levelling Up bill which would have removed nutrient neutrality laws and regulations, which are so important for wetlands. CP added that colleagues were constantly engaging with Government, and in order to inspire more people to take action, more thought would be given to how the membership could join with WWT to create a louder, bolder voice going forward.

From the floor:

4. How do we keep young people engaged and interested beyond the age of 11? Is there a sense of what can be done to keep that interest and give them opportunities?

The Chief Executive agreed it was a serious challenge to maintain momentum and one faced by a number of conservation organisations. Mary Colwell, who WWT worked closely with on curlew action, had been important in achieving the introduction of a GCSE in Natural History, which was a good start. WWT wanted to create global wetland conservationists of the future and thought was being given to early careers with WWT, but any ideas would be gratefully received.

From the floor:

5. Why don't we have a youth membership?

ALn explained that the review would look at different types of membership, including youth membership, and young person's membership for 18-24 year age group. Work needed to be done on onsite experiences for the 8 year plus and 12 year plus groups, including creation of more digital experiences beyond sites, and also on youth volunteering and youth membership.

The Chief Executive added this consideration of a younger voice also extends to staff and Trustees. She added that our current Trustees are brilliant, and thanked everyone for voting for the Chair's term to be extended. It was important to consider the future scope for younger Trustees, and to note that the strategy could not be achieved in one year, and a foundation needed to be built on to be in a really good place.

From the floor:

6. How are we going to get the messages across to people for whom wildlife is not their primary consideration?

The Chief Executive responded that WWT talked a lot about the nature boosting power of wetlands, but also their ability to improve flood resilience and water quality, which benefits community's lives and livelihoods as well as nature. Some of the narrative in recent months had been about a choice between nature and the economy, which was not the case, and in the longer term the risks were becoming increasingly too expensive to not take action.

TMcG added that from an agricultural point of view, wetlands were places of refuge and resilience to enable crops to grow, and it was about helping land managers to feel that wetlands are valuable places for agriculture and provide a positive contribution to their business.

From the floor:

7. Washington visitor numbers have fallen, and is there a regional disparity in falling visitor numbers and do we need to concentrate on levelling up?

ALn responded that there was not a consistent regional disparity in trends, and Washington had sustained on paying visitation better than other sites this year.

From the floor:

8. How can you bring wetlands into local schools which would bring children to sites?

TMcG answered that it was very important to take wetlands to people where they could become more directly engaged about the values, and was being done in a number of places already, which included a community project in Bridgwater, and a SuD's for schools project in Newcastle involving retrofitting of wetlands into

places where schools were already built. A lot of this work is led by project initiatives, but it was a fantastic demonstration of what can be done, and it was important to find a way to sustain school input and help teachers by training, empowering and supporting.

From online:

9. Would it be possible to have a Q&A session online in-between AGM's? Members are keen to help and can we have committees to reach out to?

The Chief Executive welcomed the suggestion to hold a Q&A session in-between the AGM's and would consider this.

KP added that he had spoken to a number of people over lunch who were looking for local community support for wetlands, and he explained that an advisory service is a really positive aspiration to come out of the strategy.

From the floor:

10. Brian Bertram introduced himself as the first Director General of the Trust, who took over from Sir Peter Scott, and noted that it was with Sir Peter's support and blessing that the words 'and wetlands' were put into the Trusts title. He was sure that Sir Peter would be as delighted and as impressed as he was with the vision, vigour and expertise of the whole team, and suggested resuming a lovely tradition of Sir Peter's to end all trust meetings with proposing a vote of thanks to the Chair for his obliging conduct in the chair. A round of applause was given to the Chair.

14. Staff Presentation: Chris Rostron, WWT's International Engagement Manager

Chris Rostron, WWT's International Engagement Manager, delivered a presentation about a new Wetland Learning Hub.

15. Q&A session for staff presentation

Questions were raised as follows:

From the floor:

1. Can it be expanded or developed to financial directors of companies, politicians and wider business professionals to help make decisions now?

Chris agreed this was exactly what the hub should deliver, to give people the ability to watch lectures, training and Q&A's, at all sorts of different levels, and he hoped it would become the go to place for wetland training and capacity building.

From the floor:

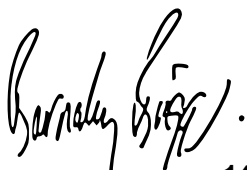
2. How do you find working within a difficult political environment?

Chris responded that WWT had done a lot of work with some great partners but it had been necessary to put work on hold in some circumstances, and decisions needed to be taken based on conservation need, the political situation and safety of staff wherever they were working in the world.

16. Chair closes the AGM

The Chair thanked everyone for joining the 76th AGM and invited members to share their feedback of the event by completing a survey to be issued the next day.

The Chair officially closed the meeting at 15:32pm.



14 December 2023