

The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales



Minutes of the 21st Annual General Meeting held on Thursday 16th November 2023 at 6.30 pm on Zoom

There were 34 Trust members in attendance including Trustees and staff members.

Vice Chair Paul Culyer welcomed everyone to the meeting. He explained that he was standing in for Chair Mike Alexander who was unwell. Good wishes were sent to Mike for a speedy recovery.

Paul requested that microphones were kept on mute during the talks but to raise a hand (digital or actual) to comment or ask questions, or to use the chat function.

Paul handed over to CEO Sarah Kessell for her presentation on the work achieved during the year 2022/23.

Sarah spoke about David Saunders who had passed away the previous month. He moved to Pembrokeshire in 1960 and became the first Warden of Skomer. He was Director of the West Wales Naturalist Trust from 1976 to 1994 and was well known for his writing and lectures. His full obituary can be read here <https://www.welshwildlife.org/blog/remembering-david-saunders-mbe>

To learn about the wide range of work achieved during the year, Sarah recommended members also read the Achievements and Performance section of the Trustees Report.

She gave some highlights:

Conservation staff have been working with ADAS on a pilot habitat scheme; this is a results based project that may feed into the Sustainable Farming Scheme in years to come.

Reserves staff delivered Nature Networks funded work on SSSIs getting these into favourable condition – desilting ponds, way-marking, grassland and woodland management (including using No-Fence collars on conservation grazing cattle on some sites). Other reserves work has been completed including ongoing Ash Dieback tree safety monitoring and felling.

New Skokholm hide was installed and this was designed to be built into the ground with a one-way window so that the puffins could be seen underground.

Sarah gave grateful thanks to all the volunteers who have given their skills and time to help with the work on the reserves – adding that the Trust could not manage without these dedicated volunteers.

Approved for circulation by PC 31-7-24

Staff and volunteers at Cardigan Bay Marine Wildlife Centre (CBMWC) have carried out dolphin acoustic and visual surveys – 30 days of boat surveys, 14,026 ID photos, and 1221 land based marine mammal surveys (from the harbour wall).

Community engagement projects have been happening – Team Wilder in Cardiff and Next door Nature in Swansea. Sarah thanked volunteers from the Swansea and Cardiff Local Groups for their support with these projects.

The Healthy Hillside is a partnership project creating habitat improvements to prevent wild fires. Unfortunately, this project will finish this year as follow on funding cannot be sourced.

The Trust is involved with other organisations on water vole reintroduction and mink monitoring in the area from Porthkerry to Aberthaw, with support from National Grid and NRW. Relationships are being established with other land-owners in the area.

Erebus, the floating off-shore wind farm project off the Pembrokeshire coast, has involved staff in responding to the planning application. The Trust is working with North Wales Wildlife Trust to employ a marine planning officer to support existing Trust staff helping with marine planning applications around the Skomer and Skokholm MPA. The Trust supports green energy technology, but this project has a lack of ornithological evidence regarding the impact.

Media and Communications – the highlight this year was filming on Skomer for Wild Isles with Sir David Attenborough, and the series was watched by around 6 million viewers. AutumnWatch had used Teifi Marshes as one of their bases and they had also visited CBMWC.

The Trust's 10-year strategy was launched in May – this is available to read on the Trust website.

Sarah thanked all the staff for an excellent year, and gave thanks to the Trustees for their work and for enabling the Trust to benefit from their knowledge. She asked members if they had any questions.

Lynda Hickling asked if the extra media coverage generated extra funding. Sarah said that it did as a result of more day landings and extra income via accommodation bookings (direct and secondary income).

John Finney asked if there had been any progress on Erebus since the last year. Sarah said that her presentation was reporting on the previous year. No contractors put in a bid for the contract so Erebus was on hold at the moment. WG and UK Government are making efforts to improve the project for contractors and unfortunately they want to develop right up to the edge of the MPA. Paul added that the Trust is blessed with great academic understanding of seabirds and long-term data sets. He said that it cannot be underestimated the amount of work that the Trusts and Lisa Morgan (Head of Islands and Marine Conservation) have done on the response to Erebus.

Sarah added that the Trust has been inundated with onshore wind farm applications this year.

Paul thanked Sarah and said her presentation shows the breadth of work that is carried out.

The formal part of the AGM commenced.

1) Apologies for Absence

Mike Alexander, Margaret Drury, Paul Thornton

2) To approve the minutes of the last AGM 17th Nov 2022

PC went through the minutes and asked if there were any questions. There were none.

It was proposed by Jenny Hughes that the minutes be accepted as a true and accurate record of the AGM, this was seconded by Lynda Hickling and passed unanimously.

3) Chairperson's report

Paul read out Mike Alexander's report which was in the Trustees Report. He thanked Trustees for being really engaged with the charity and pushing the Trust forward, bringing staff, volunteers and members along with them.

Paul handed over to Stuart Bain, Treasurer.

4) Finance Report and presentation

Stuart said the annual audited accounts were on the Trust website to download.

Governance -the Finance Committee meets quarterly, working with the Chief Executive and Senior Management Team. He said the Trust is still in a phase of recovery following Covid but people are returning to visit nature reserves and centres.

Stuart gave an overview of where the Trust income came from and key areas of expenditure and showed graphs to illustrate this.

Income from nature reserves is up by 15% to £455,808.

Trading activities – visits to Skomer and Skokholm are up by 25% showing a year on year increase in income, which is a big achievement by the team who manage this.

Membership subscriptions have dropped to £242K.

Grants are up 40% and there is a big increase in grants from Welsh Government. He noted that grants do not reverse the longer-term trend of a loss of funding from NRW. The Trust has 75 SSSIs and needs a stable level of assistance to manage these effectively.

Trading income for the cafes, visitor centres and islands showed a drop in 2021 as a result of Covid restrictions. The Trust is getting back to pre-Covid figures and profits from trading is put into direct conservation work.

Stuart said that Trust support and governance costs are kept low and 60% of income is used for Trust conservation and education work. Stuart noted that this could be detrimental to staffing and the Trust is losing valuable colleagues to other organisations who are paying more, and it is also a struggle to recruit. He added that it is wrong to ask Trust staff to *be* the charity so Trustees are trying to improve staff pay and conditions.

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Stuart presented the accounts to members. These were received and acknowledged by a show of hands. He asked if there were any observations or questions on the accounts or presentation. Rob Pickford said that the presentation was helpful and clear and the graphs show that things are going in the right direction. He noted that a high proportion of income comes from grants which is a lot of work for staff. There has been a redirection in NRW and WG are expecting the Trust to get more grants. Sarah said that NRW influence grant funds eg HLF, and NRW gives money via S16 agreements. Sarah said there is less money in the grant givers' coffers and that staff have to be on the ball and that there is often a short turnaround for grant applications.

Lynda Hickling said that she was delighted to see how DWT profits had increased.

John Finney noted that there was £600K more in grants this year and asked what the WG grants were used for, how did the Trust fund the Ash Dieback work, and why the membership income was down?

Sarah responded that the WG grant was the Nature Networks funding which covered the direct conservation work on cetacean monitoring and reserves work on 32 terrestrial nature reserves. Ash Dieback work is mostly done via grants as part of woodland management, noting that £100K per year is spent on Ash Dieback especially in high risk areas and that that £50K would be spent on this in the next 6 months. Some money from legacies had been spent on woodland management. Membership income is down due to attrition and impact of cost of living increases. The Trust is not actively recruiting and the membership team has been focussing on the installation and implementation of a new data base and has reduced capacity due to the time spent on islands bookings which they also deal with – Sarah noted as islands booking income goes up, membership goes down.

There were no more questions.

7) To confirm the re-appointment of the auditors – Azets

This was proposed by Lucy Griffiths and seconded by Mike Davies

There was a short break which was followed by a video presentation by Alex Griffiths, Stand for Nature Officer Cardiff on the community project work being delivered.

The talk was enjoyed by all and thanks given to Alex. As Chair of the Cardiff Local Group, Rob Pickford said he would pass on the thanks to Alex and Meg.

Paul rounded up the meeting, noting with regret that Mike Alexander was not able to give the presentation on Pengelli Forest NNR but this would be given another time.

Paul thanked members for attending and for their support of the Trust.

The meeting closed at 8.15 pm