

Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust

Minutes of the 67th Annual General Meeting held by Webinar

On 22nd November 2023

Present Ann Tomlinson (Chair), Bob Bearne (Vice-chair), Andy Thorpe (Hon Treasurer), Peter Williams, (Hon Sec) and 146 member households online.

In Attendance Mat Carter (Chief Executive), Jo Taylor (Support Development Manager), Roxsan Kielty (Communications and Marketing Officer), Maddy Gage (Management Support Officer).

1. **Welcome** The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, introduced the panel made up of the Trust's honorary officers and explained the webinar procedures and voting arrangements.

2. **Notice of the Meeting.** Approval that the Notice of the Meeting had been called correctly was taken as read.

3. **Minutes of the 66th Annual General Meeting** held online on Tuesday 22nd November 2022 were proposed to be approved by Linda Biddle, seconded by Pat Lower and approved by 84%, against by 0% and abstained by 16%.

4. **Report of the Council 2022 - 2023**

a) The Chair **expanded on the Annual Report of Council**, summarised in the Annual Review that had been sent to all members. She reported as follows:

i) The Trust formally adopted its new Strategy at the beginning of the reporting year. This charts our work to 2030, and reflects the common strategy across the whole Wildlife Trust movement. The three main goals of that Strategy, where we want to get to by 2030 are:

Bringing Nature Back;

Empowering People to take Action for Nature; and

Creating a Society where Nature Matters.

A lot of work to do, but so vital as both wildlife and people are facing existential threat from the two great crises of our generation, the loss of biodiversity and increased climate instability. These agreed goals aim to repair the damage that's been done and provide a sustainable future for the protection of wildlife.

ii) In relation to Nature's Recovery there are a number of facets to this.

Our nature reserves are of huge importance to this goal, preserving a rich tapestry of biodiversity against a background of a sadly-depleted landscape. But our work with Living

Landscapes across the two counties will receive even more emphasis under our new Strategy, as it seeks to create more room for wildlife outside reserves, and allow species to spread. For that we need to understand where we are now – so we work at monitoring and recording species locally. We advise landowners on how they can help make their land more nature-friendly and we stand up for nature against poorly- conceived national and local government policies, by advocacy and campaigning.

iii) The Charnwood Forest Landscape Partnership Scheme is a really good example of how we are working with partners and landowners to protect and restore sites across the area. Our contribution to this programme is in grassland management and in species monitoring, and advising landowners so that their own land management can be as sympathetic as possible to nature. Our surveys are showing that the Charnwood area is one of the most biodiverse places we have in the region.

iv) Our nature reserves remain equally important as our work in the wider countryside. A nature reserve acts as a hub for biodiversity, a haven for species which can then move out into land that's being managed with nature in mind. Rutland Water Nature Reserve (RWNR) is a great example of this, as the first major Wildlife Report prepared for the Reserve shows. One of the most striking features of the survey work is in demonstrating how important the area is for invertebrates. As we all know, without invertebrates, we all don't stand much chance. So I think something to be hopeful about, and it is really good to see our conservation work translating into scientific research.

v) I can't talk about RWNR without mentioning the Osprey Project, and what a great year 22/23 has been for the birds. The total number of chicks raised over the life of the project is now 253, with 22 being fledged from 10 nests in the summer of 2022. I think the major legacy of this project is the way it has assisted this species to spread to other areas of the UK, west, south and east, with Rutland birds the pioneers of new colonies. This was the major aim of the project when we started it in the 90s, and it's great to see its continuing success.

vi) Empowering People to take Action for Nature. This is an increasingly important part of our role as a wildlife charity. The Wildlife Trust movement is regarded nationally as an important source of expertise and advice. So when local or national policy takes a wrong turn, it's important that we use the weight of our reputation to put people right and to advocate for a better solution. Over 22/23 we have spoken up in TWT national #DefendNature campaign, against the Repeal of European Legislation Bill (REUL). Trust members played a great part in this campaign and I am convinced that it was the lobbying we have done at all levels that improved the result for wildlife. We know, because they tell us so, that it is direct letters from constituents that really strike home with local MPs, so thank you for the letters and postcards that you sent. We'll be asking you to help us take up the charge again in 2024 when we will really need to ensure wildlife and biodiversity have a leading part in the General Election, for all political parties.

vii) Our work with people and communities has picked up momentum again this year with a full programme of events and activities. Our education work has continued its emphasis on

Forest Schools, giving youngsters a great experience of the natural world. The People's Postcode Lottery funding is now coming to an end but we are delighted that other partners including the Melton Mowbray Building Society have provided funding to allow us to extend these activities into other parts of Leicestershire.

We've also been moving forward with our exciting new work on "Next Door Nature" (NDN), which is a UK-wide initiative funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. All Wildlife Trusts have been given funding to use, to bring people closer to nature, and vice versa. We have chosen to use our part of the funding to help local communities in the city of Leicester achieve their plans for community green spaces and improving the nature-friendliness of their area. They are projects that bring various groups together, so they are helping wildlife and people, too.

The team has produced a great video to showcase one of the projects that we are involved with, the Belgrave Housing Association Community Garden. The full version of this video is available on our website.

NDN funding is for a set period only and it ends in the spring of next year. We're delighted with its success and we want to continue with the work, so we are right now searching for additional funding. If you can think of a good source of funding, let us know!

viii) Staying with the theme of people and nature, I need to give a shout-out once again to our amazing band of volunteers who help the Trust in so many ways. And who give so much of their time. Volunteers help with their effort and expertise, and that help also saves the Trust money that can then be used in other ways. We are so grateful, but I think every volunteer would say that they all get a big kick out of their volunteering work. Working in nature, and volunteering generally, is proven to be of huge benefit for our own health and well-being, so if you've never given volunteering a try, give us a call. Our volunteer family is a great one to be in.

ix) And when it comes to thanks, once again I have to extend our heartfelt gratitude to you, the membership. We say it every year, but it's always true - we really couldn't manage without your support. There are so many of you now - up to 19,000 from the year end figure of 18,400! and you support us in so many ways – through campaigning and spreading the word, through your constant moral support as part of our membership base, and through the financial assistance you provide with subscriptions, donations and other individual giving. You are remarkably generous in giving time after time. And once again we need to say thank you to those kind members who have now passed on but who have left gifts in their Wills. All these resources go to strengthening the Trust and ensuring we can do even more for wildlife locally. However you choose to support us, all your help is of enormous value, so thank you once again, from all of us at the Trust. We hope that you will continue to support the work we are doing, because we all know how crucial it is to protect our biodiversity.

b) The Chief Executive **provided an update on progress in the year to date** since the end of March 2023.

i) He highlighted the positive delivery of the Trust's strategy this year, following a period of some disruption, through:

- Nature recovery 30 x 30 - 30% of land managed for nature by 2030. In order to achieve this it is clear we need to work beyond our own landholdings.
- Managing our nature reserves as effectively as we can.
- Growing income - key to us being able to do more for nature and focus on income streams so that we are linked in better to funding bids and partnership schemes.
- Support to our supporters - a key focus.
- Building on engagement activities for example with NDN and the education projects we are doing.
- Advocate more strongly for nature - really important as we need to persuade decision makers and the public on the importance of nature.
- Updating some policies and processes - being a modern and professional organisation.

ii) We've completed the staff restructure this year, we consulted on the approach and implications with staff and externally. That involved some external recruitment and we took some vacant posts out but didn't make any compulsory redundancies. The Senior Management Team is now in place and consists of Mat Carter, CEO; Ben Devine, Head of Nature Recovery; Joe Davis, Head of Nature Reserves; Jo Brailsford-Finnis, Head of Fund Raising; Laura Brady, Engagement Manager; Georgia Boonham, Finance and Support Services Manager; and Roxsan Kielty, Communications and Marketing Officer.

iii) New training and development for staff and additional support has been undertaken for volunteers including the completion of our Volunteer Handbook. We meet regularly now with our Local Groups to ensure we are supporting them. We have also updated some management systems such as Health and Safety and brought in an external contractor to help with this. Human Resources policies and safeguarding policies and practices have been improved and we have developed our asset management systems and management approach to IT to ensure we improve our efficiency and communications with members and partners. We have also reconnected with partners which has been a very positive process.

iv) Building our reserve network. Forthcoming announcements can be expected on a potential new reserve in the Market Harborough area (this also answered a question from Mary about whether there was any chance of a new reserve in this part of the two counties). Land has been acquired from David Wilson Homes which will provide an extension to the Syston Lakes Reserve. This will be given publicity soon. Other new sites in the Ketton and South Leicestershire area are being worked on and can hopefully also be anticipated. The Trust is a key partner in the preparation of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and has received funding for improvement of habitats for Water Voles, has undertaken a feasibility study in the Wreake catchment and is a partner in two large multi-year Species Survival Fund bids for supporting Wetlands and Woodlands

The Report of Council was proposed to be approved by David Duckett, seconded by Jenny Harris and approved by 96%, against by 0% and abstained by 4%.

5. The Trust Accounts for the year ending 31st March 2023

a) The Hon Treasurer highlighted that the financial picture looks much better than the equivalent time in 2022.

b) Income. In general, most categories saw an increase in income with unrestricted income rising by £190,000 and membership income growing by over 5% in a very challenging year with a reasonable number of members leaving because of cost of living issues; so we had to recruit even more members to more than compensate for this loss. In addition, donations is the category where we saw the biggest increase in income and most of this also comes from our membership and he therefore gave a heart-felt thanks to the membership for everything that they do.

c) Expenditure. The largest part (£715,948) is spent on our Nature Reserves managing these wonderful sites for the nature within them. Education and Engagement (£606,324), is invested in inspiring people in nature. Champions for Wildlife (£368,066) covers work on the broader landscape, frequently in partnership with others helping to achieve a greater part of our counties being managed for nature. Finally, Fundraising (£349,228) we do have to spend money servicing and managing our membership, recruiting new members and seeking funds from other sources. Hopefully, as we increase funding from other sources such as grants, this will lead to this cost reducing as a proportion of our expenditure.

In summary, expenditure in the year to March 2023 was slightly higher than income but at only 1% above income this was marginal. This is a far better picture than we had budgeted for in the year and compared to the previous year when the deficit was over 10% of income. Therefore we do believe we are moving in the right direction and this will continue in future.

d) We are very grateful for all that our members do to fund a large proportion of our work, which the Trust simply could not do without that support. We will continue to manage Trust resources prudently while ensuring we deliver on our charitable objects.

The Chair thanked the Honorary Treasurer and the Finance Team and commented that the Trust has benefitted considerably from their hard work and expertise.

The Honorary Treasurer's report was proposed for approval by John Mitchell, seconded by Becky Ward and approved by 99%, against by 0% and abstained by 1%.

6. Re-election of Members to Council to serve a three year term.

The Chairman thanked Matt Youngs, who is stepping down, for his service on Council since 2021. The following members of Council had completed their three-year term of office:

Anthony Biddle

Helen Nott

Ann Tomlinson

and all had expressed their wish to stand for re-election:

Their re-election was proposed for approval by Dave Needham, seconded by Jacky Morrell and approved by 95% against by 1% and abstained by 5%.

7. Appointment of PKF Smith Cooper Audit Limited as Auditors to the Trust was proposed for approval by Andy Thorpe, seconded by Roy Lemmon and was approved by 93% against by 0% and abstained by 7%.

8. Questions from members

a) *Kathy asked a question relating to the ecological importance of hedgerows. Is there anything more we can do to prevent excessive cutting and removal?* The Chief Executive commented that there is a limited amount of legislation that protects some hedgerows from removal and limits when they can be cut such as the requirement to avoid disturbing nesting birds. He referred to the excellent advice notes prepared by FWAG on the benefits of rotational cutting. The Allerton project in Leicestershire has also demonstrated the benefits that hedgerows give to nature and to agricultural productivity. He doubted that there would be any additional legislation in the near future but commented that there are things we can do to give guidance and assistance to land managers.

b) *Jane asked: i) whether, given Local Councils, will have responsibility for applying Net Biodiversity Gain (NBG), we can be confident that they will apply this properly?* The Chief Executive commented that there has been some delay in applying the Net Biodiversity Gain requirements but that as this is a very complicated process this was not altogether surprising. Local Authorities are well aware of this new responsibility and the Trust will endeavour to support and help the development of expertise within Local Authorities.

ii) *Will local councils wanting to manage their own land differently in line with good biodiversity practice be able to come to the Trust for advice?* The Chief Executive commented that the Trust is not looking for this form of consultancy work at the moment but we are able to direct Local Authorities to suitable advice and expertise.

c) *Hazel asked what the roles of the Conservation Committee are?* The Chief Executive commented that it is an advisory committee of expert individuals which gives advice to Council on subjects such as potential new reserves and policies. The Trust will be undertaking a governance review next year and this may lead to some changes to the Conservation Committee and its roles.

d) *Stephen Finn asked whether online AGMs discriminate against members who don't have online access? In addition, do online AGMs contribute to the lack of social skills and alienation from society due to the phasing out of face to face meetings? Do cost savings justify the downsides?* The Chair responded that this has never been a cost issue but has been about maximising access and in practice this has been the case as attendance at our last few AGMs which were face to face attracted about 80 or so members whereas today's meeting

had 146 member households. However, she does have sympathy for the thrust of Stephen's question and hopefully we will be moving back to face to face meetings but with the opportunity for those who would like it to join the meeting via zoom.

e) *Patrick asked What role will the Trust have with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Leicestershire and Rutland? He sees that Staffs Wildlife Trust have already mapped their County opportunities and got involved with BNGs and Nature Recovery Opportunities.* The Chief Executive commented that we are on a similar trajectory and making good progress with the LNRS. The County Council has responsibility for preparation of the LNRS and we are signed up to the process and to making the most of BNG when it is confirmed by the Government.

f) *Why are all the Trust's courses held at Rutland Water?* The Chief Executive commented that our Volunteer Training Centre is located at Rutland Water and has all the necessary dedicated facilities for the range of courses we offer. However, we do also offer a wide range of walks and talks at our other reserves.

The Chair thanked the Trustees, Staff and volunteers for all their hard work throughout the year, and especially the membership for their continued support, stressing that the Trust could not do all the work it does without it.

9. Meeting closed at 20.13

*Peter Williams
Honorary Secretary
29th Nov 2023*