

## **Minutes from Essex Wildlife Trust Annual General Meeting**

### **Saturday 28 September 2024, 10.00am**

#### **Online meeting**

#### **Introduction – Rich Yates, CEO**

Rich Yates welcomed members to the meeting. Rich explained that he had worked for Essex Wildlife Trust since 2019 and had taken on the position of CEO from Andrew Impey, initially on an interim basis and then as permanent CEO. He noted that 2024 was a special year for the Trust: having been incorporated at County Hall on 2 October 1959, the charity is now 65 years old, and the AGM provided an opportunity to celebrate the Trust's anniversary. We owe a lot to the pioneering men and women who had the foresight to establish a county-based Trust to protect wildlife in Essex, and we still share the same ambitions and motivations as those men and women in the late 50s and early 60s.

Members were told that the new [Conservation Strategy](#) was due to be launched, which sets out how the Trust intends to reach the target of 30% of land and sea in Essex actively managed for wildlife by 2030, setting out the contributions that could and should be made, and where the Trust's priorities fall within the next five years.

Members were also invited to submit memories for a virtual [Memory Wall](#) over the next year to help capture some of the best moments from the past 65 years, and to attend guided walks at our Nature Discovery Centres to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the Trust.

#### **How rapid changes in public opinion are creating new hope for positive nature and climate action – Professor Jules Pretty, President**

Professor Jules Pretty, the Trust's President, gave the opening address and spoke of how rapid changes in public opinion are creating new hope for climate action. Prof Pretty reflected on the power of recovery, regeneration and renewal, and the part that the Trust has played over the last 65 years, focusing on the acquisition of Fingringhoe as the Trust's first reserve, and the restoration journey that has occurred since then, improving habitat for key species including large numbers of nightingales.

Prof Pretty told a story of when he travelled in Armenia in the early 2000s when it was clear that industrial farms had been failing for a long time. There was devastation everywhere. Eventually he arrived at a farm where there were orchards, corn and wheat, and vegetable crops, with willow trees and poplar, and irrigation from channels and ponds. A simple meal was presented from the basic supplies available. It felt like a paradise, watching foxes tease trout out of nearby ponds. From recovery surprising things happen; creatures can make us see things differently. Prof Pretty had recently reviewed the changes in public opinion over the past 5-10 years across UK and Europe in relation to nature, climate and environment – and there has been a dramatic change.

Professor Pretty spoke about the 80/20 rule: when there is a significant divergence in public opinion and behaviour, we don't have to concern ourselves with the 20% that is made up of extreme views, as change generally comes from within the 80% majority. In the last five years, opinions have changed to 70-80% of people in the UK, Europe and North America, believing that climate change is caused by human action. People support the change, but do not know what to do. Prof Pretty gave hope that 20% of people have already started to change opinion and behaviour (which would include people that are part of the Wildlife Trust movement), 20% of people are opposed to the view but can be ignored, while the other 60% of people are the 'nature majority' who understand but don't yet know what to do – and need guidance to make the shift. Prof Pretty gave a call to

action: talk to people, make them feel welcome and valued, and focus on our collective targets of 30% of land and sea actively managed for nature's recovery and 1 in 4 people taking action for nature and climate by 2030.

### **State of Nature in Essex Report – Dr Jez Dagley, Director of Conservation**

Dr Jez Dagley gave his annual talk on the State of Nature in Essex, focusing in particular on dormouse distribution, the Lost Ponds project, the Trust's nature reserves monitoring programme, butterfly recording, and wetland grass condition assessments. He also spoke about the success of wading birds over the past three years and the Share our Shores project to protect beach nesting birds. Dr Dagley encouraged members to contribute to the new Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

### **Welcome – Professor Jules Pretty, President**

Professor Pretty welcomed members to the 65<sup>th</sup> Annual General meeting of Essex Wildlife Trust and thanked members for attending. Prof Pretty confirmed that the Trust's independent scrutineer, Penny Carter, had verified the proxy votes received prior to the event. The voting results during the AGM would be independently verified and passed to the Chair by the meeting hosts, Mi-Voice.

### **Apologies**

Apologies were received from trustees Bob Holmes and Charles Joynson.

### **Ordinary Business**

#### **1. Consideration of the Minutes of the 64<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting held on 7 October 2023**

Members were asked to accept the minutes as a fair representation of the meeting.

Automated polling was added to proxy votes and the following votes were counted:

**252 votes For, 26 Abstentions, and 0 Against**

The motion was carried, and the 2023 minutes were accepted as a true record.

#### **2. Matters arising**

There were no matters arising.

#### **3. Consideration of the Impact Report of the Board of Trustees for 2023**

The Impact Report focused on some of the big projects that were achieved during the year including:

- Restoring many hectares of wetland habitat;
- Some amazing citizen science projects, including partnerships with the University of Essex;
- Some significant work on blue carbon and the marine environment, including creating new seagrass meadows and saltmarsh habitats; and
- Working with over 40,000 children and families to give the next generation great wildlife experiences.

This was all in addition to the core business of managing nature reserves and working with partners.

Members were reminded that all the Trust's achievements for wildlife are achieved because of people and that includes members.

#### **4. Consideration of the Financial Statements for 2023, incorporating the Auditors Report by Chair Keeley Hazelhurst**

Keeley Hazelhurst gave an overview of the Trust finances for 2023 and reminded everyone that a full report is available on the Trust website.

In summary, the Trust and its subsidiaries incurred a total deficit of £1.2 million in 2023, the same as in 2022. Operating deficits were planned for the Trust to spend money to achieve its Strategic Plan.

As a result of the deficit, the Group's net assets dropped to just less than £30 million, and cash reserves also decreased to stand at £1 million at the end of the year.

Income and costs increase by £800,000, meaning operating costs were unchanged at a deficit of £1.3m in 2023 compared to £1.4 million in 2022. Total income increased to £9.2 million with an increase in grants and donations from £1 million to £1.3 million, and legacy income doubled from £900,000 to £1.8 million. Both income sources can vary significantly from year to year as can income for supporting the management of the Trust's reserves, which at £400,000 was £0.5 million less in 2023 than in 2022, although there was some change in categorisation due to the installation of a new finance system in the year. Membership income grew slightly to £1.5 million. Income from trading activities at the Trust's 11 Nature Discovery Centres (NDCs) also increased from £2.4 million to £2.8 million.

The Group's expenditure rose by £800,000 to a total of £10.6 million, which included £700,00 of expenditure on core activities, delivering more for wildlife as detailed in the Impact Report. As sales in NDCs increased so did the direct costs of making those sales, which were up by £200,000. But it was less than the increase in income, meaning that the sales company saw an increase in its profit last year. The Trust's ecological consultancy had a poor year, slipping from a small profit in 2022 to a loss of £100,000 in 2023.

Investment markets had a better year in 2023 than in 2022 and investments increased in value by £700,000, recovering some of the losses in 2022. Provisions had to be made for additional costs expected to incur for the RSWT pension scheme and to record the value of a legacy property acquired 3 years ago, totalling £500,000.

The reduction in cash balances was similar to the operating deficits, due to:

- Certain items of the year's income and expenditure were not cash items. The unrealised profits or losses recorded when the value of long-term investments changes was one example, as well as the depreciation charge which writes off against this year's results some of the amounts spent on fixed assets in previous year.
- Some items go through the bank accounts that were not on the income and expenditure statement, for funds spent on buying new fixed assets and cash drawn down from long-term investments

The cash outflow of £1.3 million in the year depleted balances with a further deficit expected in 2024. £2.5 million was drawn down from long-term investments at the start of 2024 to top up cash holdings so they did not exceed the minimum of £1.5 million that is set out in the reserves policy.

The general and designated funds totalling £6.7 million are unrestricted, meaning they can be used for anything that is consistent with achieving the Trust's charitable objectives. Within that total, designated funds are funds earmarked by Trustees for specific projects. Restricted and endowment funds totalled £23 million. These have to be used for the specific purpose for which they were given to the Trust.

The big change in the figures in 2023 compared with 2022 was the decrease in general funds, due to the deficit incurred. The figure remained twice the level of free reserves of £3 million that Board of Trustees had set as the minimum it wishes to see held by the Trust and its subsidiaries. Further decreases are anticipated in the next 2-3 years due to the strategy of running deficit budgets to deliver the organisational strategy while growing income and returning to a balanced budget in due course.

Keeley thanked those that had worked on the 2023 report and accounts: Sue Boswell, Director of Finance and Systems, who left in August; Scott Parkin, Head of Finance; Simon Bass, Finance Consultant; and the finance team, as well as Price Bailey, who, in their first year as auditors, conducted a very thorough review. The report that the auditors issued was an unqualified report on the financial statements, which the Board of Trustees approved.

**It was proposed that members receive the Impact Report and audited Financial Statements for the year ending 31 December 2023.**

Automated polling was added to proxy votes and the following votes were counted:

**267 votes For, 15 Abstentions, and 2 Against**

The motion was carried, and the members agreed to receive the Impact Report and the Financial Statements for the year ending 31 December 2023

**a. Recommendation to re-appoint Price Bailey LLP as Auditors of the Trust for the year ending 31 December 2024. Authorise Trustees to agree Auditors Remuneration.**

Automated polling was added to proxy votes and the following votes were counted:

**263 votes For, 20 Abstentions, and 0 Against**

The motion was carried, and members agreed to appoint Price Bailey as auditors and authorise the Board of Trustees to determine their remuneration.

## **5. Election of Trustees**

Autobiographies were posted on the website. Automated polling was added to proxy votes and the following total votes were counted:

Members were asked to approve the re-appointment of **Bob Holmes** as trustee.

**257 votes For, 21 Abstentions, and 4 Against**

The motion was carried, and it was agreed to re-appoint Bob Holmes as trustee.

Members were asked to approve the re-appointment of **Elin Simonsson** as trustee.

**256 votes For, 19 Abstentions, and 7 Against**

The motion was carried, and it was agreed to re-appoint Elin Simonsson as trustee.

Members were asked to approve the re-appointment of **Michelle Wall** as trustee.

**265 votes For, 15 Abstentions, and 2 Against**

The motion was carried, and it was agreed to re-appoint Michelle Wall as trustee.

Members were asked to approve the re-appointment of **James Wren** as trustee.

**256 votes For, 21 Abstentions, and 5 Against**

The motion was carried, and it was agreed to re-appoint James Wren as trustee.

## **Special Business**

### **6. Appointment of Scrutineer**

It was proposed that Essex Wildlife Trust re-appoint Penny Carter as scrutineer for the forthcoming year and for her to count and oversee the voting for the 2025 AGM.

Automated polling was added to proxy votes and the following votes were counted:

**270 votes For, 11 Abstentions, and 4 Against**

The motion was carried, and Penny Carter was accepted as scrutineer for a further year.

## **End of formal AGM Business**

## **Informal business**

## **Questions received from members**

Professor Pretty posed several questions received from members to the CEO, Rich Yates. All questions were answered and posted on the Trust's website, following the meeting.

Rich Yates thanked Professor Pretty for chairing another AGM meeting so effectively, and shared how much it was appreciated by staff and members.

**The Wilder Essex Awards**

The Wilder Essex Awards were presented to individuals and groups who helped to bring the vision of a Wilder Essex to life.

The winners were as follows:

**Wilder Communities Award**

Clayburn Community Gardens

**Green Leader Award**

Alex Holliman

**Wilder Business Award**

Essex and Suffolk Water

**Ray Marsh Award**

Steve Spicer

Commendations to Bob Reed and Sylvia Jiggins were also noted.

Rich Yates closed the meeting by thanking the presenters – Prof Pretty, Dr Dagley, and the Chair of Trustees Keeley Hazelhurst – and all the staff behind the scenes for making the event possible, as well as Mi-Voice for hosting.

Volunteers, Trustees, Local Groups, members, and donors were all thanked for their contributions.