

Durham Wildlife Trust
2024 Annual General Meeting Minutes
Monday 21st October 2024 (6pm) Online

Welcome by Sarah Lister, Chair of the Trust.

Agenda

1. **Apologies for absence**
2. **Minutes for the 2023 AGM** – vote by members confirmed that these are accepted as a true record.
3. **Adoption of Annual Report and Consolidated Accounts** – Tony Pensom (Treasurer) – report was circulated prior to the meeting.

Highlights

2024 income £5.3 million (2023 £6.9 million)
Major land purchases equate to £2.9 million
We are making good progress on 30 by 30 ambitions
Fixed Asset addition shows in Balance Sheet, not P&L (not profit)
2020 - £736k
2021 - £818k
2022 - £1,657k
2023 - £5,823k
2024 - £8,741k

Unrestricted activities

£490k donations & legacies
£275k visitor centres and conservation
£245k Durham Wildlife Services – consultancy services to open market which profits are fed back into the Trust.

Unrestricted reserve carried forward £701k - 7.6 months

Designated fund – money which needs to be separated from pure unrestricted as it has certain conditions attached to use.

- assets capable of generating unrestricted income
- maintenance/volunteer fund

Unrestricted income is ours which we are free to spend entirely at our discretion,
Restricted funds are received for a particular purpose, predominantly from National Lottery or local authorities who will specify what the funds can be spent on.

Restricted activities

£1.4 million funding – specific projects (Links with Nature, SeaScapes, etc.)

£2.9 million land purchases

Great North Fen – legacy management of Brightwater achievements

Brightwater – largest ever project delivered at cost

Expenditure

Stability – unrestricted expenditure – raising £5 on every £1 raised

Restricted Expenditure – 75% or more is spent on conservation

Surplus/Deficit – this is not showing profit

The Trust financially is in a very robust state and there is great resilience in our finances with strong current assets and strong unrestricted reserves.

Tony Pensom confirmed he is stepping down as Treasurer and Trustee. Our finances are extremely healthy, and will continue with leadership from Jim Cokill, and the passionate commitment from the SMT, the staff and dedicated volunteers and under care and guidance of the Chair and Board of Trustees.

Adoption of Annual Report and Consolidated Accounts

Proposed by Faye Butler and seconded by the Chair. Vote by members present confirmed the adoption of the annual report and consolidated accounts.

4. Chair's remarks

We acquired Eldon Moor – 88.36 hectares. Bold new targets – through Nutrient Neutrality Scheme Natural England – lot of income and therefore expenditure on this specific type of spend.

We have entered into a one-year lease for Boldon Flats – 24 hectares of wetland and grassland site hope to develop a longer-term management for this site – hoping to continue.

Increase size of Rainton Meadows by 13 hectares – new land is currently improved pasture, and we manage this to improve floral diversity to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain and one of first areas.

At end of March, 2024 we had 53 sites. Managing Moors project – Cuthbert's Moor and this enabled baseline data on habitats and species to be gathered to allow a detailed management plan to be developed – great work happening there.

Project successes: Link Together - development phase completed during the year, and we received confirmation that the delivery phase was approved – this is a first for DWT as it makes use of social prescribing by Sunderland GP Alliance and Links for Life Sunderland to engage volunteers.

Stronger Shores - commenced in 2023 and this project explores how to restore marine habitats and species and create more sustainable coastal communities.

SeaScapes - is another coastal project which encourages people and groups of all ages to enjoy coastal and marine wildlife – highlights of this have volunteer monitoring shore birds and cetacea – beach-based school activities and snorkelling for school age children. Durham & Hartlepool coast – Terns have bred, with 125 chicks fledged.

Naturally Native – water vole conservation project - completed Dec 2023 it was a project delivered in partnership with Northumbria & Tees Valley WTs working together and addressed two most significant. We are hopeful that Naturally Native 2 will be funded. Improvements to our volunteer engagement – volunteer co-ordinator appointed as well as volunteer support assistant and made further improvements to the volunteer management system. Further improvement in engagement and in 23/24 gave more than 27,000 hours to the trust and number grew from 125 to 157 – we can only do the work we do with the active volunteers that we have.

Membership slightly impacted by outside factors, cost of living crisis, reflects a longer-term trend. Membership retention remains strong at 92%

Increase in online engagement – reached over 1.2m people online, increased by 25% on last year. Social media and website. Members and other supports have been instrumental in providing information and images we use. Please continue sharing these.

23/24 – National Citizen Service (NCS) Enrichment Pilot Project – Enrichment Manager to be employed by the Trust.

5. Election of members to the board.

All those standing have been proposed and seconded by members and have undergone a selection and interview process. All those standing have been recommended to the membership by the Trust Board. All those standing have been proposed by Faye Butler and Seconded by Vivien Kent.

The Chair thanked Chris Gorman, Tony Pensom, Michael Coates and Peter Bell for the many years of dedication given to the Trust as valued members of the board and their contribution to the ongoing development and strategic development of the Trust. Five new trustees are standing this year, and we are excited to see what they can bring.

Seeking re-election

Paul Davidson – live vote by members confirmed re-election to the Board for another four years.

Seeking election

Richard Arrowsmith
Simon Bell
Ian Cole
Brenda (Bee) Davison
Bill Oxbury

There are sufficient places available to elect all candidates. Live vote by members confirmed election of the five new Trustees to the Board. The Chair welcomed them to the Board of Trustees.

Question - Chair - to answer a question from Suzanna – the Board must have no less than 10 and not more than 15 members. We will be up to 12 Trustees if all elected.

6. Appointment and confirmation of Auditors

It is proposed that Robson Laidler are confirmed as auditors. Motion proposed by the Chair and Seconded by Faye Butler. Live vote by members confirmed the appointment of Robson Laidler as auditors.

Presentation by Jim Cokill – Trust Director

2024 and beyond

Current year – 30% of land managed for nature by 2030

DWT estate area –

1500 ha by April 2026

1600 ha by April 2028

2000 ha by end 2030

30 by 30 (United Nations target) conference in Columbia also adopted by UK government and across the Wildlife Trust movement. Direct contribution so decided to double the amount of land we manage. We currently have 1384 hectares 616 left to go so making good progress.

Area of land where DWT has influenced management – incremental targets

2000 ha by March 2026

4000 ha by March 2027

6000 ha by March 2028

8000 ha by March 2029

10,000 ha by end 2030

We currently have 2342 hectares so we are ahead of schedule by working with local authorities, farmers and some institutional land owners and work is going really well.

Celebrate Success

Bright Water - Ricknall Carrs and Bishop's Fen – largest ever project. Work continues to create scrapes and channels on the land to mimic the wetlands which would have been in this area. It is part of the wider Durham Carrs. It is on the flood plan of River Skerne. Area has been drained for the last two hundred years, and the River Skerne has been canalised with a deepened and straightened channel which led to the loss of wetland habitat and the species which used to live there. We are trying to put some of that back creating areas which will retain water in winter and stay wetter into the summer months.

Bishop's Fen video – by the confluence of Mainsforth Stell and the River Skerne. Former carr land situated to the south of Bishop Middleham. Work began in July to restore wetland habitats. Surface soils were carefully removed to protect peat layers laid down when the land was fen and carr. Nearly 10,000 cubic metres of material were excavated. Scrapes will ensure there are more areas of open water in winter and wetter areas in summer – habitats for waders such as curlew and lapwing. Over time the vegetation will change complementing the existing wetland areas at Bishop's Fen the first phase of our journey to create the Great North Fen. Bishop's Fen and the Great North Fen were opened on 9th October by the Venerable Rick Simpson, Archdeacon of Auckland.

Strategy – Development

Main target is to get 1 in 4 people engaged through membership by 2030. Membership is moving in the right direction we always need to pay a lot of attention, and this is always a challenge.

Donations

Rainton Meadows Land Appeal launched 27th June. Target of £54,000 reached within one week. £80,000 raised do date. 1160 donations, 89% were from members. Thank you for your contribution and for making this happen. Update on the land at Rainton Meadows is that we are able to work with another charitable organisation called the Esmee Fairburn Foundation and they have purchased the land to secure it from development. We now have a period of time to raise the funds for them to acquire the land from Esme Fairburn. The appeal gave us the money for the match funding for a bid for BIFA Award and we get the news on that bid in November and if that is successful, we will have sufficient funds to be able to buy the land and deliver some of the initial works.

Engagement

looking at working in a different way by looking at community organising – all about giving people the skills and knowledge they need to do the work themselves and to influence other members of their local community so you can have a much bigger impact rather than going out and directly working – doing the work and then leaving the area. You are relying on the local people themselves to adopt it, take it forward and grow and expand it. To do that you really need to concentrate your effort in a particular area and within the strategy we have said we will work in different locations and try and create hubs of activity so at the moment we are really focussing on Sunderland. Therefore, over the next year or so you should hear more about what we are trying to achieve in that part of the world.

A video was played to members to show the real value of the community organising approach and the Next Door Nature methodology we have been using.

Ruth - "We had nothing outdoors, so they got permission to grow things and dig, starting off with one raised bed. People decided they would like to come and that's how it started out. Due to level of interest, we realised we needed money to get things started as we needed tools. With the help, support and advice from Tom Parkin, Community Organiser".

Tom - *"The changes that have resulted from Ruth's first initial ideas are again, wholly hers and the rest of the community that have been involved here. My inclusion has been any support, advice or guidance on elements that they wanted to see here and where they have learned from me through asking the questions about how they can support it. It has been completely their ideas. I hope that the people who come here have learned more about wildlife, and that they will go on to pass things on to other people and perhaps go home and do things themselves you know like, make green spaces in their own area and pass the message on. With it being Washington Mind who we're working in partnership with there are a lot of different needs within the group and I think that ensuring that all access and abilities were covered for in that time has been really crucial but also making sure the weekly sessions that were on here everyone who came had a job to do and weren't felt left out and that was a real challenge because of the access to site and we've overcome that with some of the funding money".*

Ruth – *"I watch people come and join this group and come in like tight little buds and they open up into beautiful flowers because they start to connect with each other and they get such satisfaction and the thrill from planting the seeds and growing and that really helps them – they've done something and they go away feeling good about themselves and they make friends as well".*

Strategy Challenges

Resources – Biodiversity Net Gain

We need to fund the upsurge in activities that we are trying to do, and we are hoping that Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is really going to provide that additional income. This is a new piece of legislation which means that developments must deliver an increase in biodiversity and that is done by a calculation and survey. We have been successful in developing some BNG schemes on some of the new land we have acquired. However, even if we are successful, it can still take several years before the income is realised. A developer may get a planning permission for a site but not actually begin work for up to three years so we will still have to wait for that income to come in so there is quite a frustrating delay in being able to make things happen more quickly.

Data and Monitoring

How do you measure 1 in 4 and 30 by 30? There is also an issue around data and monitoring and there is a frustration there as we need to have a national approach that is done across all the Wildlife Trusts, and it is taking a while to work out how we can do that, so we have consistent reporting. We have our own measures, and we think we know where we are, but we do not want to go public with any numbers until we are confident that the national methodology will work across Durham as well as across the rest of the UK.

Great North Fen – future

We will be focussing a lot of attention on this in the coming years. To enable us to look into the future we need to have a look into a window into the past. This was presented by Robert

Surtees (1779-13 February 1834) who was a celebrated English historian and antiquary of his native County Durham. He spent a lot of his time collecting history, folklore and tradition. He lived in Mainsforth, the area right on the edge of the Durham Carrs – the marshes and fens which used to be present before the drainage of the River Skerne. His view of these marshes and fens was that they were a “dreary morass”, but he did provide some useful information in that he told us what they were; there was marsh and peatland, and it was large in size and extended along the whole upper course of the Skerne. He told us what happened to those areas in that the river was cut deeper and wider to lower the water level, that drained the peat which changed the vegetation from aquatic plants to grasses and that changed the unprofitable swamps (as he described them) into pasture that had agricultural value. It was marshland and fen, and it was also a more specialist type of habitat called Carr, which is a scrubby woodland that you would find growing through a marsh and fen area. The Carrs – wooded fen – dominated by shrubs rather than trees. We know where those carrs were because in the first edition of the OS maps in the 1850s there were still areas of carr illustrated on the map along the flood plain and the course of the River Skerne.

An Eye to the Future

When we developed the Bright Water project which delivered the work at Ricknall and Bishop’s Fen we knew about the carrs and the long-term ambition from nature conservation people in County Durham to restore habitats there and working with environment agency, county council and lots of other partners. We decided to have an ambition to create a Great North Fen after Bright Water electing for 500ha of land. We have got off to a good start and outside of Bright Water we could acquire more land from different initiatives at Ricknall and Morden, so we have quite an expanse of land across this potential Great North Fen area. The Great North Fen – our ambition is that our own restoration of 50ha of fenland habitat will inspire local partners, including public bodies, landowners and developers, to come together with the aim of creating a total of 500ha of restored farmland by 2030.

It is not just about the land; it is also about doing the work. To date we have got hold of 218 hectares of land (540 acres) so tremendous progress has been made in a short period of time. What we are going to do is up that ambition and we think that the Great North Fen can be up to 850 hectares and not just wetland habitats but also more nature rich farmland and other areas surrounding that core wetland. We think this is a realisable ambition. We have physically bought over 190 hectares and that took several million pounds, so we are now confident that the partners are out there who are willing to fund and resource a scheme of this scale and ambition. We have also secured funding from the Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund (NEIRF) which is basically government funding which is enabling us to work with landowners in that area and between them the landowners that we are working with have 1500 hectares of agricultural land in that core potential Great North Fen area. It shows that there is interest not only from nature conservationists but also from other farmers and landowners to make something happen. The estimated cost of delivering the Great North Fen across 850 hectares is £38 million. From looking at our own work and potential income we have already begun to generate from things like Biodiversity Net Gain we can say that there is the potential to generate significant income from that land and from nature recovery – Potential income from grant funding, agri-environment funding and sale of environmental benefits - over £130 million.

They are not unprofitable swamps – there is potential income there which can make this type of project happen. Great for people as it can deliver benefits around flood risk, access to nature, tourism benefits to attract visitors from across the country, and because it is on a big scale it will also have significant water quality benefits. This helps us towards influencing people and getting that 1 in 4 engagement in what we do. Great for nature – wading birds and original wetland plant communities which we can take from there to restore and repopulate.

Jim thanked members for what they have done for the Trust and for their continued support in the future to make the Great North Fen a reality.

The Chair thanked Jim for his presentation on the interesting work the Trust are doing and to see particularly the work that we are doing at the Great North Fen. If anyone has any questions after end of meeting, please send them through to the Trust and we will respond and get information back to you.

Thank you for participating in the AGM this evening and I hope you have enjoyed hearing about what has happened in Durham Wildlife Trust in the past, but equally about what we are carrying out in the future particularly the ambitious plans that we have for the Great North Fen.

Thank you for your continued support for Durham Wildlife Trust.

Meeting closed at 7.06pm

Minutes prepared by Dawn Tiernan (Administration Support Officer)