



## **Minutes of the 73rd Annual General Meeting of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust**

**Held virtually, on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2020, at 10:00am**

**166 WWT members and staff were present, including the following members of the Council:**

Barnaby Briggs (Chair), Martin Birch (Hon Treasurer), Hester Liakos (HL), Alan Law (AL), Simon Tonge (ST), Alastair Driver (AD), Andy Beer (AB) and Alex Mawer (AM).

In attendance: Kevin Peberdy (Chief Operating Officer).

### **1. Welcome**

The Chair gave a warm welcome to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Annual General Meeting of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. It was a huge privilege and honour to have been elected Chair of the Council of Trustees in August, and to be host for the meeting. He was delighted to see so many people in attendance; about three times the number normally expected; and there were advantages to an electronic format.

He introduced WWT's Management Board: Kevin Peberdy (KP), James Robinson (JR), Corinne Pluchino (CP), John Rew (JRew) and Mat Carter (MC).

### **2. Welcome from Kate Humble, WWT's President**

Attendees watched a pre-recorded welcome message from WWT's President, Kate Humble, and the Chair noted his thanks for her kind words and strong support.

### **3. Apologies for absence**

Apologies were received from the Trust's Patron, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales KG, KT, GCB, OM, AK, CD, QSO, PC; and President, Kate Humble.

### **4. Minutes of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Annual General Meeting held Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2019**

Comments were invited on the minutes of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Annual General Meeting held Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2019 and none were received. The minutes were proposed by Robert Falkner and seconded by Elizabeth Conder.

### **5. Matters Arising from the Minutes**

There were no matters arising.

### **6. Elections to Council**

The Chair announced that two Trustees were standing down, Pamela Castle OBE and Prof. Alastair Driver and he thanked them for their support.

Under Article 43a, three new Trustees were elected for their first three-year term: Hester Liakos, Alex Mawer and Alan Law; and Andy Beer was re-elected for his second three-year term. The Chair thanked them for taking time away from very busy lives to help the Trust.

Barnaby Briggs was elected as Chair under Article 50a, and Simon Tonge re-elected for his second three-year term as Vice Chair under Article 50.

## **7. To receive and consider the Report and Accounts of the Council for the year ending 31st March 2020 and the Report of the Auditors thereon**

### **1 Chair's Comments on the Report**

The Chair paid tribute to his predecessor, Dr Peter Day, who passed away suddenly in July. WWT lost one of its most passionate and devoted supporters. His widow Kay had told him she had lost her perfect soulmate and that WWT was a very important part of Peter's life and he was delighted to play a part in contributing in any way he could.

Peter joined WWT as a volunteer at the London Wetland Centre when it opened in 2000, where he inspired visitors with his knowledge of wildlife as it returned to the site. He became an expert guide and ambassador for WWT, travelling to societies and clubs all over the southern counties of England to promote wetlands and our work.

His passion for the charity led him to apply to join WWT's Council, quickly earning the respect of his fellow Trustees and being elected as Chair in 2015.

Peter made huge efforts to really understand WWT, visiting sites and wider conservation projects not just for organised events but in an informal capacity, which was appreciated by WWT staff, volunteers and supporters.

He held a strong vision for a better environment and loved the academic challenge that he set himself only recently to get his PhD. He could always be relied on as a source of sound and reliable advice and conveyed enthusiasm and encouragement to everyone he met.

WWT remembers Peter with affection and friendship and sends all the very best to Kay and to all of Peter's family.

The Chair continued by recognising the contribution made by Martin Spray, CEO, who stepped down earlier in the year after 16 years with the Trust.

Martin joined WWT at a time when the Charity was struggling financially and made the necessary changes to steady the ship. He went on to build strong teams around him and to develop WWT's standing, reach and support. His role in creating this robustness has proved particularly essential over the last year.

He was a great ambassador for WWT and cemented WWT's place in international conservation through his work with Ramsar and in the East Asia flyway partnership. He helped generate interest in wetland centre development along international flyways, with over 1000 centres now being built or developed in China alone.

During Martin's watch, WWT achieved a huge amount – from the many new experiences at sites, the development of Steart Marshes, to international wetland and species projects in Madagascar, Cambodia and China. The work to save the spoon-billed sandpiper, drawing attention to loss of East Asian coastal wetlands that he was so passionate about, will remain as a great legacy for years to come.

In his final period with the Trust, Martin worked closely with the Management Board – in particular Kevin Peberdy, Chief Operating Officer and James Robinson, Director of Conservation – and all of Council, assessing the Trust in detail and prioritising where the charity can have its greatest impact in the future.

A successor for Martin will be sought in the New Year, and in the meantime, Kevin Peberdy has done a fantastic job of implementing the Trusts strategy, refocusing on priorities and steering WWT through one of the most difficult years in its history. Management Board and Council believe priorities are now right to see WWT playing the strongest role it can for wetlands and all the species they support.

The Covid pandemic had huge impacts on WWT, and supporters will be more than aware of the site closures and reduced access over the year. Throughout numerous and changing Covid regulations WWT had tried to keep as many sites and facilities open as possible. It was important to keep a connection to nature for visitors' and staff enjoyment and wellbeing, but visitors, members, staff and volunteers needed to be kept as safe as possible. Most of the wider conservation projects were halted initially, and WWT were trying to keep momentum for their recovery during a second lockdown.

Although changes due to the pandemic were only just being felt at the end of the 2019/2020 year, inevitably finances had been hit, but loyal members continued to support despite everything. The team worked hard to keep members informed of what was happening and he hoped those who faced the additional burden of home-schooling responsibilities were able to take advantage of online guides.

The WWT team had worked hard to secure emergency Covid 19 funding across all work, and many staff agreed to be furloughed which was incredibly helpful. Overall, the Trust was coping as well, but remained seriously concerned about the future uncertainties, impacts and financial projections. The WWT team have developed and implemented work to ensure medium term financial sustainability as well as the prioritisation of ongoing work.

The impact of the year on staff and volunteers had been huge. Large numbers of supporters want to visit and WWT was determined to make sure it could provide safe access to sites whenever guidelines allowed. Staff worked exceptionally hard to look after sites and their wildlife, keep communications going with supporters, secure additional funding to keep conservation work going, and to constantly adapt sites to changing rules. Others had spent many months in furlough, unable to work and on reduced income. Without this support, the financial hit would have been too severe. Many volunteers have been unable to return to sites because of restrictions and safety issues. The ongoing and future support of our volunteers was more important than at any other time and it was hoped to invite all volunteers back as soon as possible.

On behalf of Council, the Chair gave heartfelt thanks and appreciation.

Although delayed and under restrictions, work continued on one of WWT's largest site developments; Slimbridge 2020. We never forget the inspiration and leadership of Peter Scott, and this is never clearer than at Slimbridge.

Funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund but with support from numerous other supporters, the project celebrates WWT's approach to wetlands and wetland species conservation that is inspired by Peter Scott and points to the future. Work extends from restoration of the Scott House, with Peter's studio open for the first time, through new walkways out to the estuary, a new tower hide with stunning views, and interactive and immersive exhibits bringing wider conservation work alive. It includes a new open-air theatre and large aviary celebrating UK wetlands and their species, including many of the harder to spot waterbirds, and he encouraged members to visit. Whilst walking the Severn Estuary over the summer, three cranes flew back from the estuary to the reserve; a properly inspiring sight and sound.

The reserves continued to improve management for a host of wetland species, and a major project was done to understand more about eels on the Slimbridge

reserve and surrounding wetlands. Changes to sluices had hugely improved access for eels, and changes had been made across all sites to improve wetlands, particularly for migratory waterbirds.

WWT played key role in developing and authoring the Emergency Recovery Plan, which aims to reverse decline in global freshwater biodiversity. WWT scientists worked alongside others from WWF, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Conservation International, the University of Cardiff and others. This was the first comprehensive plan at a global scale to protect and restore freshwater habitats, much of it based on what WWT already knew worked from its own experience.

The Swan Champions team were working with communities and hunters across the North West European flyway to help raise awareness of endangered Bewick's swans, and more could be heard from Julia Newth and the Swan Champions team later that morning.

Lobbying with partners had helped bring a ban on lead shot across Europe a step closer, and the proposal was due go to the full European Parliament for ratification before becoming law within the EU.

Stunning new wetlands had been created at Salt Hill Park in Slough in the middle of a large urban community and the 'Two Rivers – Slow the Flow' Natural Flood Management project in Somerset is coming along brilliantly. Ten new wetlands have been created, 91 'leaky dams' installed and over 1,200 trees planted over the year. This, along with work in the Cotswolds, is providing evidence on the benefits of Natural Flood Management, which is vital for influencing policy and encouraging wider uptake of this approach. More could be heard on the 'Two Rivers – Slow the Flow' project later in the morning.

Council's role was to ensure the Charity was as effective as possible, saving wetland nature, both the individual species that rely on wetlands, and the distinctive and rich habitats that provide them the food and the protection that they depend on. The concept of bigger, better, wetlands was at the heart of everything. They needed to be rich in wildlife and better connected, and a vision of a vast network of wetlands, with all the benefits that would come both to people and wildlife, was a compelling one. This means better flood management, more carbon storage, the robustness to cope with climate change and wet places with real meaning and support to people. Sites and any new ones that we develop will play a crucial role, and it will also mean working with many new partners and collaborators to make it happen. This vision can help make the crucial connections with wetlands and their wildlife in urban areas, as well as ensuring that the funding and legislation needed is put in place.

WWT's Council believe that wetlands have some amazing, iconic and sometimes rare and declining wetland species. These can be vital ambassadors for wetlands and as well as new ideas, WWT will continue to work with wetland birds and other species to tell the extraordinary stories behind their lives and build support for more of their wetland home.

The Chair finished by saying thank you to all loyal members who support WWT's work, come rain or shine, and to all staff and volunteers who work tirelessly in that rain and shine. He thanked his colleagues on Council whose support was extraordinary and filled him with hope that WWT can go forwards into the future with confidence and the chance to make a real difference.

## **2 Hon Treasurer's comments on the Accounts**

Martin Birch introduced himself as WWT's Honorary Treasurer and a member of Council for WWT. It was his pleasure to share some financial highlights from the

last year, and in a year of the Covid-19 pandemic, to explain what WWT had been doing to ensure that conservation work could continue into the future.

Total income increased yet again to £25.7m from £24.4m the year before, an increase of 5%. Unrestricted income (ie. free to be used for any of the charity's objectives) fell by 4%, while restricted income increased by 81%, a large part being from the Heritage Lottery Fund's grants towards the Slimbridge 2020 project, for which WWT was extremely grateful.

The Hon Treasurer went on to highlight three of the most significant components of unrestricted income. Membership subscriptions were the most important source of unrestricted income, supporting both wetland centres and wider conservation programmes, and income from memberships had fell by 3% in the year to £7.1m.

Income from trading, from shops and restaurants, was the next biggest source and this income decreased by 7% to £4.9m. The retail and catering operations at centres produce a gross profit of just over £1m which helps the wider conservation objectives of the trust.

That said, margins in both shops and restaurants had been falling for a few years in a row and part of the changes introduced since March had been aimed at improving the profitability of the trading activities, by reducing costs and increasing commercial income opportunities. He encouraged members to look at the new online shop which featured a new optics range, eco-friendly Christmas decorations and presents and many other items that would otherwise have been able to browse in physical shops.

Legacies were also a key element of the charity's finances and the Trust was grateful to receive £2.2m in the year, in line with the previous year's £2.3m.

Visitor numbers were down by 10% year on year. 2019/20 was a bad year for being outdoors, with there being lots of rain; 167 rainy days compared with 141 in the year before. Work was ongoing on providing more indoor attractions but the weather was clearly a key risk to visitor numbers.

Income from admissions fell by 11% to £3.6m.

The number of memberships fell from just under 94k to just under 90k over the year which equated to a reduction of 6% to 196,000 members. Members were the Trust's bedrock, from funding on-the-ground conservation work to giving volume to its campaigning voice, and protecting wetlands and wetland species depended on member support.

Expenditure increased from £24.8m to £26.9m, an increase of 8%. This allowed for expansion of conservation programmes worldwide and investments in WWT's 10 wetland sites in the UK.

Approximately one quarter of expenditure was for the cost of running the shops and restaurants, as well as fundraising activities. Approximately three-quarters of expenditure was focused on charitable purpose, aimed at enhancing centres and reserves as well as wider conservation programmes.

As part of Slimbridge 2020, WWT were building an open air theatre to share stories of wildlife and engage visitors in conservation work, e.g. pelicans and geese, cranes and egrets and how they have adapted to wetland. The theatre cost £2.4m and he paid tribute to the team and the contracts who had worked through floods and disease with contingency planning of biblical proportions. It would offer visitors a chance to learn what they could do for wetlands e.g. building home ponds.

Work to return black tailed godwits to the UK continued and 49 breeding pairs were recorded and the population had quadrupled in size.

Over the last 9 months, the need for financial reserves had been brought into focus through the challenges of the global pandemic, and its effects on the UK. The financial year ended 10 days after sites were closed due to the first lockdown. Reserves remained strong at the end of the last year and he was pleased to be able to share that they remained strong despite the turmoil caused by the pandemic.

The 19/20 year saw a reduction in reserves however, as result of a number of factors:

- equity investments lost value at the end of the year due to the stock market falls in relation to Coronavirus
- We took the opportunity to leave the Universities Superannuation pension scheme in Dec 19. This cost a one-off payment of £1.1m but enabled WWT to completely remove any risk to the charity in the future, by clearing any obligation that the charity had to the scheme. Fortuitously, it was organised at a time when equity valuations were in our favour and therefore we did not need the full reserve put aside for this purpose.
- unrestricted income reduced in the year, partly due to the weather causing less visitors.

The Contingency Fund remained intact despite the events of the last year causing issues that might only be expected once in a 100 years. The fund was set to cover six months of essential expenditure at just over £7m. He explained that the five-year plan has been to draw down on some designated funds as WWT invests in its mission to save more wetlands, hence the trend of some reductions in reserves.

The Hon Treasurer updated on the situation since the year end, and having had to close sites for three months, then capping visitor numbers over the summer before the second lock down affected again, WWT finances stood well and he was grateful to members for the support shown.

This had been partly due to the use of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, or furlough scheme, which had been used as much as possible to protect the charity's reserves and WWT had received in the region of £2m so far. WWT was grateful to staff who had cooperated fully with the scheme by being furloughed, which had made a critical difference in protecting the charity's finances.

Sadly, the lockdowns and other restrictions, had meant that some of the direct conservation work had to be placed on hold whilst in lockdown.

WWT had applied to other government support schemes, to local authorities and grant-making organisations for emergency funding and had been successful in a number of those bids.

The emergency appeal to supporters had been a great success, and WWT were most thankful for those that had made gifts to WWT.

The future remained uncertain and if there were future outbreaks then the financial foundations would be tested again. Therefore, WWT remained cautious in planning for next year and were aware that if it had not had the broad range of support from members, visitors, donors, trusts and government, then it could have been a different story this year. WWT were well-placed to face the challenges ahead, not least due to the support of its members, donors and other governments.

The Hon Treasurer finished by commending the 2019-20 financial statements to the members, on behalf of Council.

The receipt of the Report and Accounts was proposed by John Bryant and seconded by Alex Mawer.

**8. To re-appoint Messrs. Mazars of 90 Victoria Street, Bristol BS1 6DP, as auditors and to authorise Council to agree their remuneration**

**a) Auditor's comments**

The auditors were not in attendance and no comments were received.

**b) Re-appointment of auditors**

Receipt of the re-appointment of the auditors was proposed by Sue Cresswell and seconded by Tony Richardson.

**9. Long Service Awards**

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

- Sue Payne, Facilities Manager at Arundel, started on 1st April 1995, and
- Richard Bullock, Biodiversity Officer at London, started on 20th November 1995.

He was also delighted to recognise the following individuals with long service and retirement:

- Rita Bodman, Membership Officer at Slimbridge, started on 21st March 1977 and retired on 30th September 2020 having completed 43 years' service,
- Richard Edwards, Grounds Manager at Llanelli, started on 17th July 1989 and retired on 14th October 2020 after 31 years' service, and,
- Kevin Pomroy, Grounds Warden at Slimbridge, started on 1st June 1995 and retired on 31st October 2020 after 25 years' service.

The Chair thanked them hugely, noting they were amazing statistics.

**10. Chief Operating Officers address**

The Chief Operating Office reflected on his first day as a young graduate arriving at Slimbridge, with a heavy mix of first day excitement and trepidation, which suddenly multiplied when he was told that he was to meet Peter Scott himself. It didn't get any easier being shown into the famous studio and sitting in the window on the Rushy opposite a person whose work and foresight had figured in more than one lecture in his university studies. He need not have worried; Peter immediately put him at ease, despite his tongue tied answers, and within no time, was asking his thoughts on some new ideas for making the house lake at Caerlaverock much larger to attract more whooper swans and widgeon closer to the farmhouse.

This was a moment that had stuck with him ever since and what he learnt that day and in the following all too short months, was a mere glimpse of Peter developing ideas, responding to the world and driving change.

Next year, WWT would be celebrating, maybe even in person, the 75th anniversary of WWT and the vital work it had been doing since 1946 for wetlands, the waterbirds and the other wildlife they support, as well as connecting people to wet places they love and cherish. Next year was also the 50th anniversary of the Ramsar convention that Peter Scott helped instigate to protect wetland habitats globally and use them sustainably.

He hoped it would mean a return to a more stable situation after the most unprecedented year he could remember. A year where WWT had worked tirelessly to minimise the impact of the global pandemic on its people, supporters, sites, wider

conservation work, and on income. A year when valuing staff and supporters, and embracing change had never been so relevant.

With ongoing care and planning, WWT had to believe that it was over the worst and being able to emerge from the crisis at all was largely down to the hard work, understanding and commitment of everyone. He added his thanks to all staff, volunteers and supporters for what they had done to help WWT through this unprecedented time. Every member of staff and volunteer in their own way had gone the extra distance to help WWT and he remained constantly overwhelmed by so many examples of resilience and commitment to WWT's cause in such difficult circumstances.

The Chief Operating Officer went on to highlight WWT's focus for the coming year. Just before the pandemic and after listening carefully to staff and advisors, and working with Martin Spray, the Chair and Council, WWT embarked on a wider review of its work. The reason for this was to make sure that WWT's conservation priorities were clear and focussed. Work needed to deliver what wetlands and wetland species needed today which meant taking into account today's environmental issues, attitudes and particularly opportunities. Still in the grip of a coronavirus crisis, it was very easy to forget the other crisis facing the UK and globally; the nature crisis, climate crisis and, in the UK, a crisis in health and wellbeing; now compounded by the extended impacts of a pandemic.

One of the most worrying statistics from the last year came from Ramsar's Global wetland outlook. 87% of the global wetland resource has been lost and we are losing wetlands three times faster than forests. In the UK the situation is worse with 90% of our ancient wetlands now gone. Climate change is like driving a car at speed towards a cliff edge except not knowing where the cliff edge is and where the breaks are.

However, WWT genuinely believed there was hope. The UK Government's agricultural Bill and the 25 Year Environment Plan, launched at London Wetland Centre, together with the Nature Recovery Network and Biodiversity net gain for developers all present opportunities. There was now a much wider recognition of nature based solutions in policy making, something which WWT had been campaigning for many years, but didn't actually expect to see.

And fortunately, WWT work with an ecosystem that offers real hope, real solutions. As well as being home to diverse and amazing wildlife, wetlands provide multiple ways of dealing with some of our most pressing environmental issues. These nature based solutions bring huge benefits like storing carbon, reducing the risk of flooding, improving our water quality, and spending time in wetlands and connecting to wetland wildlife, has been shown to hugely benefit health and wellbeing, and it seems that blue spaces are even better than green spaces in this respect.

The opportunities for new thinking at scale and delivery had never been as realistic. The Chair said working at scale brings untold benefits to all wetland species, including many of the waterbirds that we have worked with for decades, and it was time for WWT to step up and take ownership of these solutions.

Having seen WWT grow and achieve so much for wetlands and the species they support, the increasing problem was trying to do too much which was difficult to a lack of clear focus and purpose. Such a wide breadth of work was certainly putting a strain on finances, with ongoing annual deficits in the budgets, however the bigger risk was not having the resources and staff to respond to new opportunities.

However, before WWT could launch its new focus, a global pandemic hit. On top of the impact on staff and volunteers, the pandemic hit the financial reserves, the ability to carry on some areas of work because of restrictions or reduced demand and predicted income streams, which all had to be taken into account.



The result of all this work and thinking was WWT's Refocus for the Future plan which would be introduced to all supporters as part of WWT's 75th birthday early next year, but he wanted to share a little about where WWT had got to.

Firstly, the plan was a refocus. The Trusts vision, mission, strategy and broader work programmes still stand, but the plan identifies those conservation programmes and projects that WWT intend to approach in a different way in the future. Although WWT's mission is the conservation of wetland habitats and their species, WWT recognises, just like Peter Scott, that this cannot be achieved without making wetlands relevant to people.

If WWT's work was to result in larger, more connected and better managed nature-rich wetlands, it was essential to show that wetlands are relevant to wildlife and people, policy and decision-makers, the economy and all of us in our daily lives.

It will also ensure that WWT expand the different ways that people can support and develop and maintain that support as effectively as possible. It was not just about money, although that of course remained critical, it was also about engaging and inspiring people to join WWT longer term in its mission to save and restore the world's wetlands and their wildlife, not just at sites, but also where they live and work.

The plan would mean critical change to create a strong, sustainable future for WWT.

The Chief Operating officer summarised the wider conservation work WWT would be focusing on both in the UK and internationally as follows.

Work programmes will deliver four outcomes:

#### **In the UK**

**The UK has a bigger, better and more connected network of wetlands with over 100,000 ha of created, restored or better managed wetland habitats able to sustain healthy wetland nature and provide nature based solutions.**

*100,000 ha is huge but it represents part of a wider target in the 25 Year Environment Plan and originates from the natural capital committee originally.*

**The majority of the public are significantly more connected to and benefitting from wetlands, with at least a million people directly taking action for wetland**

*Connecting people to wetlands has always been part of our DNA and Refocus enhances this further by a wider connection to people, including where they live and work or go to school. Our future generation wild project will connect thousands of children from disadvantaged areas.*

#### **Internationally:**

**In our priority countries, which currently includes Madagascar, Cambodia and China, wetlands are valued and considered in local, national and regional decision-making**

*Our work in Madagascar is worth just dwelling for a moment as it is now celebrated in a brand new exhibit at Slimbridge. A conservation story that started with saving one of the world's rarest ducks which has led to ecological improvements in a whole lake ecosystem and its catchment, improved livelihoods for thousands of local people and led to further substantial funding and a remit with local and national decision makers in Madagascar to influence national policy and with it a massively important wetland resource. What better case study and what better example of an approach linking species recovery to a whole ecosystem approach; a blueprint for our thinking in refocus.*

**Key international decision-makers are valuing wetlands and we have built a global community of highly skilled individuals delivering high quality wetlands, and mobilising support.**

*This includes our wider work on key flyways and influencing key policy makers. But it also includes a recognition that we can achieve great things for wetlands by engaging and upskilling individuals in areas where monitoring, wetland management and protection needs more work.*

Refocus means that some projects will be prioritised and developed and some will be reduced or postponed. We will continue to work across wetlands and with wetland species, but with a re-emphasis of our species as flagships or ambassadors of wetland change benefitting multiple species – a wider ecosystem approach.

The Chief Operating Officer stated that WWT continued to value its wetland sites. They covered a vast area of national and often internationally important wetlands and supported thousands of wetland birds and other species. Constantly checking and improving how we manage sites well, was an important part of delivering outcomes, and they had a vital role in making wetlands relevant to members and visitors. The refocus plan would strengthen this purpose, ensuring experiences effectively engage and inspire visitors, irrespective of their motivation to visit sites.

WWT will actively seek more opportunities to develop wetlands on the successful model established at Steart Marshes; connecting wetlands to communities and demonstrating how to deliver multiple nature-based solutions.

It will also look at how efficiently we operate sites and the support they receive centrally to make sure WWT is investing as much income as possible in delivering wetland management and inspiring experiences at sites.

With a new director in place, as welcomed earlier by the Chair, the central Marketing and Supporter Development team had a key part to play in two areas: helping to deliver how WWT will make wetlands more relevant and more widely understood, and also in providing income generation, communications and marketing support and delivery across the charity.

Part of this will be developing new ways for people to engage with WWT to enable them to learn about the value of wetlands and be inspired, and how WWT can reach more diverse audiences using new channels.

WWT will invest in other types of fundraising, including grants, trusts, foundations and major donor networks and seek new and innovative approaches to supporting project fundraising, so that it can raise more funds to support its work and maximise the contributions to support core staff costs too.

The Refocus plan considers several areas of the operation where WWT can do better:

- How we can improve our digital systems across WWT to make sure we are working most efficiently in how we enter and analyse data and how our systems link with each other.
- Further develop opportunities, support and training for volunteers to help deliver our work. However, we recognise the impact of Covid 19 on volunteers and some roles in the shorter term.
- Set targets to reduce costs of travel, meetings and accommodation as we go forward
- Negotiate better prices for our goods and services
- Invest in sustainable features, such as solar panels and leak detection
- Introduce measures to widen the diversity within our Charity and among those who visit and support us and visit our sites
- Measure what we do, tell you all how we are doing and adapt to what we learn.

He explained that all of this meant there would be some alterations to the way WWT works, including changing some of the structures to support the recommendations of the Refocus plan and decreasing the number of roles in some areas. Very sadly, this would result in some roles being made redundant and we are just completing consultation over some roles across the Charity. As part of this process, ways to minimise redundancies and mitigate the effects of those proposals were fully explored. Some new roles had also been created as part of the Refocus proposals and redeployment opportunities offered where skills match.

Consultation must be completed before announcing any changes more widely and in an organisation like WWT any loss of staff is difficult and on top of everything this had hit everyone hard. It was essential to acknowledge the huge contribution made to WWT by each and every person who would be leaving.

The Chief Operating Officer finished by thanking everyone for their continued support, through what had been a tough time, which was vital to essential conservation work. Whether that had been by keeping sites open and continuing to care for wildlife throughout the pandemic, joining as a member, maintaining membership, visiting sites, donating to the Coronavirus Emergency Appeal, or by sending messages of support; WWT could not have got this far without this help and members remained a vital lifeline for the charity and he was sorry not to see everyone in person this year.

Despite all the knocks and barriers the year seemed intent on throwing, he had never been more confident of the future, never more convinced of the ability to make a real difference for wetlands and all the wetland birds and other species they support, and never been more sure that what WWT could do was critical. In his career he'd sometimes been asked what would Peter Scott think; he did not perceive to know, but he achieved a step change, and WWT believed it was time for another step change.

## 11. Questions raised with the Chair prior to the meeting

The Chair thanked members for submitting questions ahead of the AGM and encouraged use of the question box for any further questions arising from the meeting. Questions were raised as follows:

From Owen Wallis:

**1. I believe that WWT have a funding reserve equivalent to about 6 months' worth of operating costs. In the light of this year's reserve closures and further lockdown measures set to take place, how does this funding reserve currently stand and is there any possibility, that if the planned month-long lockdown from 5 November, is extended for any length of time, that the Council may have to consider moth-balling [...] or even [...] closing any of the reserves?"**

**"And finally a message for all WWT staff and volunteers. Take care and stay safe."**

JRew responded that WWT holds a Contingency Fund which comprises 6 months of essential expenditure, which currently equates to £7m. This fund has not been depleted this year despite the closures of sites and capping of visitors. There were a number of reasons for this:

- We have been careful with our expenditure
- We have also held back on most building projects at sites.
- We have made full use of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (and received £2m)

- We have applied for other emergency funding from government and grant-making bodies
- The emergency appeal has been successful with over £300k raised, thank you to those who have contributed
- Supporters have continued to generously support us through leaving substantial legacies to the charity. Thank you to all those who have kindly created a pledge to WWT.

For all those reasons, our Contingency Fund has not been affected and is therefore still available should there be closures over the coming year, when we may not get as much government and other funding as we have.

Despite the news about the vaccine, we are being prudent in regard to the next financial year, with uncertainty over the pandemic and also Avian Influenza, as well as the usual risks of inclement weather affecting our visitor numbers.

The announcement that the furlough scheme will continue to be generous for the time being is a big help.

The charity's reserves are therefore still in a healthy position despite the year that we have had, and we do not think that our finances will force us to moth-ball or close any reserves.

From Brian Bertram:

- 2. Please can you confirm that the suggestion of changing the Trust's title to the Wetlands Trust has been shelved? It seems to me that now is the worst possible time to spend time and money on such a change, which in my view would be a serious mistake anyway: it would seem to signal a waning of interest in the birds that are the basis of much of the public support that the Trust receives.**

CP replied that she has been reviewing the documents connected with the rebrand since joining WWT in July and is aware of the plans that were being discussed.

We do not intend to take the rebrand forward in the next 12 months, given that we have had such an exceptional and disruptive nine months and the fact we expect this to continue for at least another three months. We therefore wish to focus on other issues in 2021/22, including celebrating our 75th anniversary, and focusing on rebuilding after the pandemic and refocusing in line with the priorities outlined by Kevin.

However, the original objectives for the rebrand, including the need to ensure we can engage with broader audiences to raise awareness of the importance of wetlands and wetland species, and to encourage more people to take action for wetlands, remain just as valid. Given this, we propose to return to this issue in the second half of the next financial year so that we can review the work that has already been done, and make an assessment of how the project should be taken forward in the following year after that which would be 22/23.

From Tony Martin:

- 3. Why has the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust been steered so far away from its stated charitable objectives, which start with the words ' TO PROMOTE THE CONSERVATION AND STUDY OF WILDFOWL AND THE WETLANDS FORMING THEIR HABITAT'**

**Wildfowl have been progressively airbrushed out of the organisation, its website and magazine.**

**The WWT that I joined had a unique and clear identity, and I very much regret that this has been lost.**

JR stressed that our core mission as a charity has always been the promotion of wetland habitats and the wildlife that depend on them, which includes wildfowl and other waterbirds.

Peter Scott and those around him worked indefatigably to save the world's wetlands and their wildlife from the many threats they faced – and continue to face. Scott and others understood the only way to save endangered waterbirds, and many wetland species, was to safeguard the wetlands where they live. Due to their migratory journeys and dependency on wetlands that cross borders, waterbirds are particularly vulnerable to habitat loss and degradation.

Our strategic direction and focus has never deviated away from this basic premise even if we have found different ways to achieve it. Given our current pressures, not least on resources, we still believe the best way to save our wetland wildlife is to focus on their habitat, on building support for their conservation and influencing those whose decisions can save or degrade it. We know from the Ramsar convention that a third of the globe's wetlands have disappeared in the last 50 years and damage and destruction continues.

We are refocusing our work to have a greater impact for wetlands in the UK and internationally, to adapt to the changing world we live in and to ensure we do this within a robust financial framework. This has become even more important due to the severe impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on our operations and financial reserves.

We have also continued to recognise and uphold Sir Peter Scott's belief that the key to successful wetland conservation lays in encouraging people's curiosity and love of nature. Through our new plans, we are expanding his central premise by making wetlands more relevant to a wider range of people and their everyday lives to create meaningful change.

We believe an effective way to make wetlands more relevant to people's and decision-makers lives is a recognition of both the huge wildlife value of wetlands but also their wider ability to help solve some of our more difficult environmental issues facing the world. The Refocus plan makes this a key focus, and ensures we are able to quickly respond to today's fast moving environmental opportunities and challenges.

Sir Peter Scott was a pioneer who believed in progress. In his lifetime he embraced the cutting-edge communications tools of his day, i.e. TV, and used these to make wetlands and wildlife relevant to people. Unusually for his time he opened up WWT centres to the public so they could connect and care for nature. We believe he would be supportive of the Refocus for the Future plan's central principles of creating a bigger impact for wetlands by making them more relevant to people's lives and by protecting them at a landscape scale for wildfowl and the vast number of other wetland species that depend on them.

From Mary Matthews:

- 4. "To promote the conservation and study of wildfowl and the wetlands forming their habitat and to under take any activity which in the opinion of council is calculated to promote knowledge of and interest in wildfowl in all parts of the world....."**

**Today WWT states as "Our Mission":**

**“We conserve, restore and create wetlands, save wetland wildlife, and inspire everyone to value the amazing things healthy wetlands achieve for people and nature.”**

**This Mission seriously diverges from the stated objects. Major changes in objects would require legal approval by the Charity Commission.**

- 1. Have you taken legal advice to change the objects?**
- 2. What steps have you taken to launch this Mission statement – and when?**
- 3. Have members been informed or consulted – and when?**

The Chair answered that it is really important to hear from our members on these fundamental issues and explain what we think.

Our charitable objects are actually much longer than the section quoted and include such things as “the dissemination of knowledge and understanding of wildfowl, wetlands and conservation and the provision of educative recreational activities”.

I would argue that WWT’s mission statement is a fair summary of our objects. In the words of the Charity Commission: “Objects’ describe and identify the purpose for which your charity has been set up. They do not say what it will do on a daily basis.”

As I have stated, charitable objects draw the parameters within which we can operate. We are operating within our objects so we are not looking to change them.

Our current mission statement was launched in 2016, along with our 25-year vision statement and laid the way for our five-year strategy. It was developed by Management Board and approved by our Council of Trustees.

It replaced our former mission statement, which was “Saving wetlands for wildlife and for people”. And it has been a prominent feature of our Annual Report and Accounts since the 2015/16 financial year without any previous comment or question from the membership.

We have taken legal advice and are satisfied we are delivering appropriately against our objects.

From Liz Hall:

- 5. Following the retirement of Martin Spray in the Spring of this year, it appears that WWT has had no Chief Executive for 6 months or more. In these challenging times surely it is an important role that needs to be filled?**

The Chair confirmed a replacement would be sought in the New Year, as mentioned earlier in the AGM.

From Ian Baker:

- 6. How is WWT going to replace Martin Spray as Chief Executive?**

The Chair confirmed a replacement would be sought in the New Year, as mentioned earlier in the AGM.

From Derek Forshaw:

- 7. I understand that the Trust, in a change of emphasis and direction, will terminate all its research programmes into the goose and swan populations wintering in the British Isles or using the west European flyways. Please can you confirm if this is true, and what arrangements are the Trust making to ensure this vitally important work continues into the future?**

JR responded that WWT was instrumental in establishing repeated, large-scale counts of waterbirds. The National Wildfowl Counts were instigated by WWT in 1947, before becoming the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS), and helping to catalyse the International Waterbird Census (IWC). We are very proud of these achievements.

In 2004, the WeBS scheme was taken over by the British Trust for Ornithology who continue to organise it very well. WWT currently organises the UK Goose and Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP) on behalf of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and Scottish Natural Heritage. Our contract ends in 2022 and we now believe that it is more efficient to bring all UK waterbird monitoring together and have spoken to these government agencies to explore how this is best done in the future.

We will continue to monitor swan and goose populations at our sites and contribute to the national schemes. We are going to focus our efforts on building capacity for wildfowl monitoring in countries along flyways where there is greatest need, for example in west Africa and China. This work will ultimately help to identify wetlands of international importance and allow local people to monitor the fortunes of wildfowl species. Our scientists continue to serve of the technical committees of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement and the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership, influencing the biggest decisions that impact on goose and swan populations on these flyways.

To address one of the biggest threats to swans and geese and their wetland habitats, we will continue to monitor whether shooters are complying with the ban in the use of lead shot over wetlands in the UK. The marvellous announcement that a vote from the EU parliament on the banning of lead shot across the EU, was largely down to lobbying and support from WWT over many decades. And as a component of our efforts to ensure goose management is sustainable across Europe, we are supervising PhD students who are studying Greenland barnacle and Greenland white-fronted geese. We are using this research to influence decisions on goose management which is one of the most important things we can do to ensure the future of our goose populations. We are also seeking to develop new relationships with universities to analyse our long-term datasets building on the excellent partnerships we have with the University of Exeter and other academic institutions.

Our long-term study of the Bewick's swans visiting Slimbridge continues to be an excellent way of engaging our visitors and supporters about the conservation of this species and the wetlands it uses along its flyway. This will continue. Our 'swan champions' work to reduce illegal hunting of this and other wildfowl species in the arctic breeding grounds continues and is already creating success and our intention is to have greater conservation impact on these fragile arctic wetlands as they face the existential challenge of climate change. You will hear about this work later.

Although a significant body of research and monitoring work continues, we are reducing or stopping some research projects on wildfowl, especially those that focus on populations that are not threatened. This is not unusual given that we have ended projects previously, for example the light-bellied brent goose research programme. We simply can't cover every issue and we have to prioritise.

The main threat to wildfowl is the future of their wetland habitats along their flyways, especially as climate change impacts sensitive habitats. We make no apology for redirecting resources to ensure WWT plays a leading role in securing the management, restoration and creation of habitats that will secure the future for

swan and goose populations as well as the other wetland wildlife that depends on them and the ecosystem services they provide for people too.

From Anthony Thomas:

**8. The Prime Minister has offered different views of how the UK can become a major global player. One of his plans is that the UK should become a global leader in a 'green industrial revolution'. A number of environmental groups have praised this plan. How do Trustees and senior staff see WWT contributing to Mr Johnson's 'green industrial revolution'?**

JR commented that it was absolutely relevant and a big part of his life, as he had been working on this for some time.

We established our proposals for what we have called a 'blue recovery' in the spring following a challenge to the main conservation organisations from the Environment Minister Zac Goldsmith who wanted to see a 'green recovery' for the UK to help build back better. Our proposals promote the creation and restoration of 100 000 Ha of new wetlands in the UK and establish proposals for WWT's role in the delivery of this creation of wetlands at scale. The blue infrastructure we are advocating will create huge natural stores of carbon, reduce flood risk, treat water pollution and provide wetlands in places where they can help to improve people's health and wellbeing. Our thinking is aligned with the government's existing 25-year plan for the environment. We have communicated our approach to the membership in an article in the recently published Waterlife magazine and he urged members to look at this for more detail.

Since then we have been meeting politicians, senior government officials, water companies and many other individuals and organisations who can help us to realise our ambition. We therefore welcomed the PM's 10 point plan which promoted these types of solutions and you can read our response on the WWT website. The plan still requires more detail and significant extra resources but WWT has already applied for significant funds under the Green Recovery Challenge Fund and looking forward to a decision on this soon.

I met with the Secretary of State and other stakeholders for the environment and farming sectors earlier this week to advocate our position and to put wetlands at the front of the agenda for the ten point plan.

From Caroline Gray:

**9. Why is the AGM at 10:00am in the working day and would it attract more attendees at another time?**

The Chair thought it was a great question and something that needed to be thought about to keep engaging all members in the future.

From Gail Verdy:

**10. The LWC has in recent years benefited from the inspiring generation's programme, which offered free entry to disadvantaged school children. The funding has come to an end and is there any chance it will continue?**

The Chief Operating Officer was delighted to say that we have secured funding for an extension of the project which would be called Generation Wild. Despite children visiting our sites, we lost touch once they returned to school and want to keep in closer touch as part of the next iteration.

From Ian Thompson:

**11. Why are there not more wildfowl trust reserves in the UK compared with RSPB who have more than 200 reserves?**



The Chair responded that WWT has a unique role to play, particularly with young people using the reserves, which is an informative experience, leaves an impression and offers something different.

JR added that there are different ways in which conservation organisations work and nature management is a significant part of the RSPB strategy, but WWT's strategy is different and strives to achieve more outside its reserves. We have an incredible network to be proud of and Steart Marshes is a great example.

From Charles Dewhurst:

**12. Why do you think membership numbers have dropped 6%?**

The Chief Operating Officer responded that it was difficult to predict exactly why it has dropped, but towards the end of the period, the pandemic kicked in, and the drop is being analysed in more detail. There will be an economic impact and individual decision making from members, and we are developing ideas to engage visitors and members more to understand what motivates visits and making sure they have the experiences they want. We also want to look at how we can engage supporters who are not necessarily motivated by visiting our sites and cause-led work is something we want to develop more and more into the future.

From Elizabeth Conder:

**13. Thank you to staff and volunteers. The ability to go to the London Wetland Centre and Arundel has kept my spirits up. Stay well and best wishes for the coming season and New Year.**

The Chair echoed the sentiment of best wishes and staying well and added that wet spaces were essential for wellbeing.

In response to one final question, JRew confirmed that Mazars had been the auditors for a few years and there would be more news of a tender exercise in the coming year.

The Chair thanked everyone for their questions and noted that any not read out would receive responses in due course.

**12. Film**

Attendees watched a pre-recorded film highlighting forthcoming work from WWT's President, Kate Humble.

**13. Chair closes the meeting**

The Chair invited attendees to feedback on the new AGM format by completing a survey to be issued the next day along with a recording of the meeting.

An online link to a suite of six films showcasing the work of WWT was then shared for viewing on the website.

The Chair thanked everyone for attending, and officially closed the meeting at 11:30am.