

37th Annual General Meeting Minutes 20th July 2023 4-5pm via Teams

Attendance:
43 Members

1. Welcome

The Chair, Mike Mintram welcomed members to the FoWA's 37th AGM. There were 43 participants in the on-line meeting and the Chair received 55 Proxy votes (the quorum is 25 votes). The speakers were introduced: Emma Griffiths - CEO; Martyn Smith - Finance Treasurer; Andrew Smith – Arboretum Director, Forestry England.

2. Minutes of 36th AGM 2022

Minutes of the previous AGM were made available before the meeting. The virtual poll to approve the minutes was launched and shared on screen. The results were:

Online Poll results (22 responses):

For - 91%

Withheld – 9%

Proxy Votes in favour of the Chair vote:

For – 55

Outcome: The Minutes of the 36th AGM 2022 were approved.

3. Introduction – Chair, Mike Mintram

The team has continued to be flexible and agile following the pandemic and FoWA has supported Westonbirt with grants and collaborative working. The first half of the year was led by interim CEO, Felicia Willow and permanent CEO, Emma Griffiths started in August 2022.

Members continue to be the biggest source of income from subscriptions, donations, appeals and fundraising events. After an unprecedented rise in membership numbers during the pandemic, numbers declined slightly in 2022 to just over 37,000 members.

During 2022 FoWa paid £159,000 in grants in support of arboretum projects and pledged grants of £440,000 to future projects emerging from Forestry England (FE) site development plans. Many projects have completed or are near completion (including the Coppice Shelter, Quarantine House and Community Shelter).

FoWA also provided £48,000 in shop rental and £728,000 Arboretum Access Rights payments (AARP) which allows members free access to the site during opening hours and directly funds the running of the site (contributing a sizeable proportion of the site's overall income).

The shop has been impacted by the economic crisis and severe weather in the lead up to last Christmas causing a decline in visitor numbers. This led to a loss for the shop this year but, with the support of FE, a more favourable rental agreement has been negotiated and a return to profit for the shop is anticipated in 2023.

During 2022, FE prepared to launch a National Membership Scheme. This offering and the local FoWA membership scheme are different in scope but there were concerns that it could lead to an erosion of member numbers. Through collaborative work with FE, the local FoWA scheme is being protected for the next 5 years and it is the only scheme sold on site to visitors.

FE's progress towards finalising a Masterplan for Westonbirt site development has been slowed by the impact of COVID and resourcing challenges but FoWA looks forward in 2023 to supporting Westonbirt "To be a world leader in trees, inspiring people through education, participation and conservation."

Beth Botterill and John Parker have resigned as trustees and they are thanked for their contribution to FoWA. Owen Forster, Paul Isherwood, Sian Troupe and Alaana Woods all joined as Trustees in 2022. Gavin Grant is also standing down as a trustee and he is thanked for 8 years of support. This is the Chair's final year as Chair/trustee and he is succeeded by Neil Sachdev MBE, an independent Chair, Non-Executive Director and FTSE/AIM Director with a national profile. Christian Walker from the National Trust and Nigel Frost from Highgrove Enterprises have recently been appointed as new trustees. We have a strong and experienced CEO and a Board committed to a successful future for FoWA and Westonbirt Arboretum. The passionate and dedicated staff, volunteers and staff are thanked for all their work. Members are also thanked for their continuing support during challenging times.

4. 2022 FoWA Review – CEO, Emma Griffiths

This is the CEO's first year in office. During the year, Head of Finance, Emma Frost left and Finance Director Helen Turner started in September. The staff team were thanked for adapting to transition and change and especially Jane Shute, Head of Supporter Journey, for maintaining continuity of leadership for the organisation. There has been a focus on building new and nurturing existing relationships and building a positive, collaborative working alliance with our FE partners and the Arboretum Director.

The annual report (available on the website) details all this year's grant funding activity and projects (such as the Community and Coppice Shelters, mobility scooters and Quarantine House) supported by FoWA and members will be updated regularly through our social media, E-News and the magazine. We are grateful for the ongoing support of members and FE volunteers who help promote membership on-site and sign-up members on our behalf at the Welcome Building.

5. Finance Report and Accounts - Treasurer, Martyn Smith

Highlights of the Accounts were as follows: FoWA's financial position is sound with income of just under £2 million and expenditure of just over £2 million (expenditure exceeded income by £18,000).

Expenditure includes grants given to Westonbirt so money put aside in previous years is being spent on projects at the arboretum. Despite spending some of previous years' surpluses, we ended 2022 with nearly £1.3million unrestricted and total funds and cash of over £1.8 million to support reserves.

Income: Similar to previous years, membership was the most significant generator of income and total membership income was slightly up for the year as was income from donations and legacies. Shop income was up as the impact of the pandemic decreased and footfall rose although other income was down as there were no COVID related grants in 2022.

Expenditure: Similar to 2021, the biggest outgoing is money paid to the arboretum for members' access to the site (which was more this year because membership increased). We paid significantly more in grants in 2022 than the previous year and that is the main reason for the deficit on the year. Shop costs increased as a result of increased sales.

In summary, £18,000 of previous years' surplus was used to balance the difference between income and expenditure.

A summary of Charity funds shows a breakdown of £1.3 million funds at the end of 2022. There is £345,000 in the arboretum development fund ready to be given to the arboretum for projects as needed. There is £587,000 in 'other specific funds' which is promised to the arboretum to fund approximately a dozen specific projects (during the year, funds move from the development fund to the specific funds as projects are identified). There is a small negative reserve reflecting the loss the shop made. There is £400,000 of general funds which is legally required to be set aside to keep the charity operating under any circumstances. This is up slightly on previous years.

6. Auditors Update

It was originally intended to hold a poll to reappoint the auditors. However, the audit process has been difficult for us and the auditors who found themselves with too much work and too few staff. It was challenging to meet deadlines to enable the presentation of account information at this meeting. It has been decided not to re-appoint the current auditors but to undertake a tender process and we are contacting a small number of auditors with a view to selecting one of them. We are grateful to Bishop Fleming for the past 5 years of service but feel this decision is in both our interests.

7. Thanks to outgoing Chair and Trustees

Four trustees have departed during the year and both the Chair, Mike Mintram and Gavin Grant will soon reach the end of their terms. In line with charity best practice, the limit is 3 terms of 3 years. Mike has been a superb Chair and he and Gavin have contributed greatly to FoWA. They are both thanked and will be missed.

8. 2022-2023 Arboretum Overview – Arboretum Director, Andrew Smith

An overview of the Arboretum's work most relevant to FoWA was given. The arboretum relies massively on volunteers and there are currently 290 volunteers who gave over 25,000 hours of service last year which is back to the pre-pandemic level. Volunteers drive the shuttle bus which FoWA introduced 5 years ago and a grant offer has just been received from FoWA to replace the shuttle bus with an improved version later this year. Other activities include member sign-ups, guided walks and flora and fauna surveys and the arboretum could not operate without them. Members are urged to consider volunteering if they do not already.

Three really important projects fully funded by FoWA have been completed: The Community Shelter which users helped to design and construct (this project will be extended with the building of a green woodworking shelter over the summer to house equipment); The Coppice Shelter with a compost toilet and the Quarantine House.

There have been some new staffing posts that are Forestry funded – Engagement Manager; Project Manager (who was previously employed by FoWA on a temporary basis) and a Building Surveyor. FoWA funded posts include a permanent Tree Conservation Manager, Trainee Arborist, a Silk Wood Community Planting Project Manager and a Community Co-Ordinator.

9. Questions - One Question was received before the meeting:

What does the incoming Chair see as the immediate priority for the Board?

FoWA has been working on a new 3-year plan with board workshop sessions, meetings with staff and engagement with FE senior leadership team about FoWA priorities (which will be identified as part of the Masterplan for the Westonbirt site) with emphasis on ongoing fundraising and returning the shop to profitability as well as delivering a great service to our members as efficiently as possible.

It was noted that holding the AGM remotely was questioned. Holding the meeting on-line has significantly increased attendance. The plan is to hold a hybrid AGM with a face-to-face meeting but enhanced IT equipment will allow for on-line attendance.

While awaiting further questions, Andrew Smith gave an update on Silkwood House which was a significant FoWA commitment. We are conducting a baseline biodiversity survey to better understand how to improve the biodiversity of the Silkwood property. We are scoping projects to ensure they are delivered in an appropriate priority order (including Silkwood House).

Ash Trees have had to be felled and we have developed a Silkwood Project. We need to plant 9,000 trees and given the success of the work at the Community Shelter, we are aspiring to involve the community in this planting, especially those who may be disadvantaged.

Trustees have agreed to fund a replacement for the shuttle bus which will have capacity for a whole family to be transported. It will have better weather protection, a longer battery life and it will give access to a greater range of areas than currently. Less mobile visitors will be able to take short walks from the bus on the Downs.

FoWA CEO noted that a key aim of our strategy is to improve participation and inclusivity. We are addressing some of the barriers to accessing nature (especially for more marginalized sections of society) and working with partners such as Cotswold Area of Natural Beauty, Wetland Wildlife Trust and National Trust to combat issues such as transport to and from the site. We are also working with the Barnwood Trust and we will use money ringfenced by trustees for a community grant to support this work.

The following questions were posted in the chat facility:

What species are you planning to plant in the Silkwood cleared area? Silkwood has the status of ancient woodland so we have to focus on native species – Oak, Lime and Whitebeam and Sorbus. We will be trialing alternative methods of protecting young trees from deer using sheep wool instead of plastic.

Is Electronic labelling being developed? We are trialing use of QR codes giving an audio description of some interpretation panels although the poor signal coverage causes challenges for digital technology.

Are we short of volunteer shuttle bus drivers? We have recruited 12 new drivers this Spring but generally there is a challenge getting volunteers at weekends.

How will the 10-year vision be brought to life? FE team, FoWA staff and volunteers are working towards those plans and there will be demand for voluntary help and collaboration to deliver on the 29 projects that have been identified.

Are there plans to improve catering? We are planning to pilot pop up tricycle ice cream facilities in more remote areas. However, staffing can be a challenge and the need to provide toilets could be difficult.

Members were encouraged to send further questions via email after the meeting and a response will be provided.

Everyone was thanked for attending – member support is extremely important.