

## 36th Annual General Meeting Minutes 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022 4pm – 5pm via Zoom

Meeting recorded and available to view via eNews and website

Attendance: 37 members  
22 proxy votes received voting with the Chair

### 1. Welcome

The Chair, Mike Mintram, welcomes members to the FOWAs' 36<sup>th</sup> AGM. There are 24 participants in the live meeting and Mike shares that he has received 21 Proxy votes and notes that, to be quorate, FOWA need 25 votes. The Chair then introduced Martyn Smith (Finance Trustee), Felicia Willow (Interim CEO) and Andrew Smith (Arboretum Director). Reminding people Felicia has previously led the charity before the appointment of Mike Coe. The chair welcomes Roger Busby (Vice President) and shares an apology from Steven Segar, the previous Chair. The Chair asks participants to note that the meeting is being recorded. The meeting will be 1hr in duration and he will try to allow maximum time for questions. Some questions have been submitted in advance and participants are asked to put their questions into the zoom chat. Participants are reminded to keep their cameras and sound turned off through the meeting.

### 2. Minutes of 2021 AGM for Approval

Mike Mintram proposes approval of the minutes of the previous AGM, seconded by Martyn Smith (Trustee).

The Virtual Poll is launched, the results are below (including Proxy votes for completeness)

#### **Poll results**

##### Online poll results

For	22/23 1/23	Against	0/23	Vote Withheld
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##### Proxy votes

For	20/22 2/22	Against	0/22	Vote Withheld
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##### Final Total

For	42/45 3/45	Against	0/45	Vote Withheld
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Outcome: Minutes approved.

The online poll results are shared with on the screen.

### 3. Introduction from the Chair

2021 was another year of adapting to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are proud of how our team has continued working flexibly and kept everyone safe at these challenging times. People have turned to Westonbirt as a place to escape the pressures

of life and walk among the trees. We have now reached over 38,000 members which is an all-time record in FOWA's history, and something we should all be proud of. Expenditure has been limited this last year, which has mainly been down to the struggles facing the onsite Forestry England (FE) team with limited staff capacity and resources during the pandemic. Despite these challenges we have supported a range of activities and developments on site, which Felicia will talk about later. FOWA has also contributed considerably to the Arboretum Development Fund which is in place and ready for when plans are progressed to implement the vision.

The continuation of the pre booking system for day visitors and members in 2021 and early this year has created additional challenges for access to the site. As we have come out of the pandemic FOWA has been championing for improved access for both our members and visitors. We have been working behind the scenes with FE to address our concerns and some of our members concerns about accessing the site. Recent progress has been made to move away from pre booking except for busy periods and hopefully this will continue.

There have also been some challenging conversations with FE about their desire to implement a national membership scheme for all FE sites around England. This would have incorporated Westonbirt and may have directly impacted the interests of the site and of the charity. After extensive consultation over many months FE and FOWA are close to adopting a feasible alternative proposal suggested by the Friends. These issues have caused significant uncertainty for the FE and FOWA teams and we hope now moving forward we can continue to build a collaborative and professional relationship and focus now on implementing our new vision whilst incorporating the Silk Wood purchase into the site.

We said goodbye to Mike Coe, our CEO for 3 years. Mike achieved so much, strengthening the FOWA team, helping to develop the Westonbirt vision and introducing a new member relationship management system. We have welcomed back Felicia as our interim CEO and during the year sadly we said farewell to Bev and to Lorna but welcomed Tracy, Ellie, Rachel, Linda and Debbie to the team. In 2022 we are looking forward to supporting and seeing the further development of the masterplan and proposed works, working in partnership with FE for Westonbirt's 10 year vision, to be a world leader in trees, inspiring people through education participation and conservation.

Finally, a big thank you to our members and supporters for your ongoing support in these challenging times.

#### **4. 2022 FOWA Review**

Felicia Willow provided a review of 2021, recognising the leadership of the previous CEO Mike Coe who was in post for most of the year. The goals were to encourage and support the masterplan, support onsite projects that further develop the arboretum for the benefit of the tree collection and the general public, to further develop our engagement with current supporters and develop future relationships and build relationships with wider stakeholders. In 2021 we did fund a number of grants but it was slower than expected. We supported the Community Shelter which has now been completed and looks fantastic. We continued to fund the student arborist role which has been going for 3 years. The role is now coming to an end after this year and we will be considering if this should be taken forwards. We funded the climate propagations unit, topped up the quarantine house funding and funded two new mobility scooters. FOWA also paid unrestricted funds for member's access and shop rent to FE to support the site. One of the positive outcomes of not being able to spend funds is that we now have over £1

million to spend on the vision and should be able to advance quickly on the masterplan's key priorities.

In 2019, the shared vision was released between FE and FOWA and it is now the detailed planning of that vision that is being focused on. It has been delayed and we are working on ways to help FE to move this forward.

We have an all-time record number of members which is due to the fantastic membership and supporter services team who work hard to engage members, tell the story of Westonbirt and help members to participate on site. We hugely value our members. Members account for two-thirds of the visits to site and contribute to the additional spend in the catering and retail facilities. Also, members are the ones who are more likely to participate in the advocacy work that we do and are more likely to support our fundraising efforts. FOWA is only here because of our members.

FOWA exceeded its goal of 35,000 members and achieved 38,852. Retention is also really important, our goal was to retain 83% of members and we exceeded this target at 88%. We also exceeded our fundraising goal of £24,000 plus gift aid, raising nearly £35,000. We have also appointed a new individual giving manager.

Slides were shared showing members by age and where members travel from.

There have been changes in the shop with a new retail manager, Tracey. The shop has been refreshed internally. Our buying policy has been further developed with an increased focus of artisan makers and suppliers and more opportunities to buy Westonbirt merchandise. There is a focus on local sustainable and recycled products and a focus on British woodlands and wildlife. The values of the charity and the site come through the products on offer.

A slide showing the FOWA team is shared and Felicia read out some messages and feedback from existing members.

In 2022 we are looking forward to working on the masterplan and our shared 10 year vision. We have a target to grow membership by 4%, build our individual giving with a new lead and welcome a new CEO who will be starting in August.

## **5. 2022 Report and Accounts Review**

Martyn Smith (finance Trustee) summarised the 2022 highlights. Please see the Annual Report and accounts for details. Our financial position is healthy and the accounts received a clean audit opinion from Bishop Fleming.

Income was £1,873k, expenditure £1,722k, giving a net income of £151k. This was slightly higher than we had hoped as we wanted to be able to spend more funding FE projects. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down progress on the projects and therefore our spend is not as much as we would have liked.

At the year end, unrestricted funds were £1,310k and restricted funds £12k (total £1,322k). Cash in the bank was £1,862k. Our cash dipped as we put money into funding Silk Wood House but has now crept back up again and we are looking forward to funding FE projects as they progress.

Membership income is our biggest source of income by far and has increased since last year. Donations and legacies were down on last year. Shop income has increased, mainly because we have been able to trade more in 2021 than we could in 2020 due to the pandemic restrictions. We hope that we will achieve a full year of trading for 2022. Other income is mainly made up of government grants and the job retention scheme income.

FOWA grants to the arboretum in 2021 were up on 2020 but still much less than we would have liked. Access rights payments were much higher than last year due to the arboretum closure reducing the 2020 payment. Magazine and other member activity costs remained stable. Shop rent costs are slightly up as we occupied the shop for 12 months rather than 10. Shop costs are slightly up with the employment of more staff and more products sold. Fundraising costs and support costs are stable.

A graph is shared to show the overall income and expenditure. Martyn explains the detail of the charity's expenditure, including shop rent to Forestry England (which we kept paying even when the shop was closed due to COVID-19), Arboretum Access Rights (a large cost), grants to the arboretum and the money retained for future grants.

Finally, Martyn explained the composition of the charity's funds. The largest items by far are the £826k in the Arboretum Development Fund (an unrestricted designated fund to be used to develop the arboretum in the future), and £325k in General Reserves (the unrestricted fund required by the Charity Commission to ensure financial resilience).

## 6. Approval of Bishop Fleming as 2022 Auditors

Appointment of Bishop Fleming as 2022 auditors. The Virtual Poll is launched, the results are below (including Proxy votes for completeness)

### Poll results

#### Online poll results

For	30/30 30/30	Against	0/30	Vote Withheld
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#### Proxy votes

For	20/22 2/22	Against	0/22	Vote Withheld
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#### Final Total

For	50/52 2/52	Against	0/52	Vote Withheld
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Outcome: Approved.

The online poll results are shared with on the screen.

## 7. Arboretum 2022 Overview

Andrew Smith, Arboretum Director, started by showing photos of the highlights from 2021. The work the Arboretum has done with Climate Change, engagement with diverse audiences, art installations in silk wood, a visit from Teresa May and her husband who made shingles to go toward the community shelter, for the first time a theatre in the forest with a production of the Grimm Sisters and the wellbeing boards which have had really positive responses. The arboretum also hosted visits from the new Forestry Commission Chairman and Chief Executive.

Last year the FE team were able to increase volunteer support again. Andrew talks through a large number of activities that the volunteers have worked on including the introduction of visually impaired guides, shuttling passengers and learning events.

A graph showing the last 7 years of visitor numbers shows that the core day visit number has been maintained and the last year has been even slightly higher. The numbers for the Christmas event have stayed at a similar level. The numbers missing this year are the concert events which are now restarting in 2022 after a 3 year gap and also the learning visits. These visits which were totally suspended in 2020 and only a few ran in 2021. We hope this is also going back up to pre-pandemic levels in 2022.

There has been a significant amount of activity in Silk Wood. The worst affected ash trees were clear felled and the woodland where ash was only a component was thinned. This was shown on a map. The operation opens up opportunities to include the community in replanting. FE hope to do some pilot planting this coming winter. Silk Wood and the arboretum has been made safe in regards to dead and dying ash trees. There are still some ash trees of non-English species which are being monitored. There are also a number of common ash which seem to be healthy.

The Quarantine house project was able to restart after COVID-19, this project is now largely complete and is really exciting as it will allow the introduction of plants to Westonbirt from other places in a bio-secure way. There has been a lot of learning from other centres. Extra water reuse systems have been added including treatment of the water used inside the unit and rainwater recycling. The rain water will be treated with UV and sand and meets our target to become less reliant on mains and borehole water. It will also provide us with experience for future projects where we hope to use rainwater recycling and grey water reuse.

The Community Shelter has been a long project and was first proposed 4 years ago. It is designed and built by the communities who are going to use it. The timber was milled at the woodworks here at Westonbirt, therefore using very few carbon miles and locking up carbon within the timber shelter itself. The shingles were made by the community, volunteers and staff. It is a unique building and a great sized space. We have received a lot of tributes from groups involves especially those which included children from disadvantaged groups.

Over the last year there has been a lot of work to look at what projects and programmes need to be taken forward to realise the vision. There is a mix of activity programmes, extending our Business As Usual work and some projects that will involve new built infrastructure. These projects include looking at endangered tree species, supporting a PhD student, reducing our carbon footprint, visitor welcome improvement and further joint research with Bedgebury pinetum.

## **8. Matters Arising**

Mike Mintram recapped the missed agenda item of matters arising and asks for matters to be sent to him via the online chat. None were received.

## **9. Questions**

Mike Mintram welcomed questions via the online chat. He starts by answering questions that had been sent in advance:

***Qu. 1. What reassurances can you give that the Friends is recognised as a highly valued partner by Forestry England? Does it still have a stronghold at Westonbirt now and in the future?***

Mike Mintram answers that over the last few years COVID-19 has made it very difficult for people to work together and has had an impact on teams. The Friends and FE have had differing views on a few issues such as member access. We clearly need to do more and ensure that all FE staff and volunteers understand FOWA's contribution to the site. Going forward the FOWA Chair is confident that the charity is viewed as a strong and valued partner to FE as the groups work together on the vision. FOWA's contribution is not only recognised at a local level but now, increasingly, at a national level. Andrew Smith echoes Mike's words, especially about the limits COVID-19 put on teams as they worked in secure 'groups' to ensure their safety and business continuity. A way forward has been agreed on admissions and booking. Two thirds of the visits are made by members so FOWA is fundamental to the way the arboretum operates and gives us a unique opportunity to take forward projects. FOWA managing the shop is a great enterprise.

***Qu. 2. Please consider what you can do to keep the old arboretum dog free***

Andrew Smith answered that FE are committed to keeping the old arboretum dog free although there has been an increase in dogs in this area due to the visually impaired guides work that has been going on. Andrew did ask staff if any of them felt there had been misuse of the old arboretum by other dogs, it does happen occasionally, but they don't believe it has been worse this year than previous years.

***Qu. 3. Are there any plans to introduce EV charging at the Arboretum this year?***

Andrew Smith answered that there are plans to put in 4 new EV chargers in the visitors car park, hopefully by the end of 2022. This is one of the projects where we may be hampered by the electricity supply and there may need to be decisions on which projects do we prioritise over others.

***Qu. 4. The children's play area seems to be closed fairly often, are there plans in place to carry out more maintenance or upgrade the facilities available?***

The exploratory play area has been closed quite regularly over the last 18 months, initially due to COVID-19 and then for maintenance. It is now up and running again. The wider play in the arboretum which was introduced 10/15 years ago is now time expired and the next project FE want to bring forward, even in advance of the masterplan, is a play project. It is quite clear from the audience insight work that has been done that attracting young families is a key market segment and we urgently need improve the play facilities across that site to continue to attract these groups.

***Qu. 5. Why are we no longer allowed to enter Silk Wood after 5pm in summer when we used to be able to?***

Andrew Smith answered that there are two issues with visits after 5pm. The first is that after 5pm there are no staff on site to manage incidents, for example first aid needs, which may occur. Second, in respect to the Friends membership and specifically the gift aid that is collected from the membership payment. The eligibility for gift aid is that the member has to be able to access the site under the same restrictions as the general

public. Allowing Friends only after 5pm would jeopardise the gift aid contribution which equated to about £250K a year.

***Qu. 6. Would FOWA and FE reconsider having a concessionary membership for disabled people in receipt of certain benefits? Given the cost of loving crisis, people are struggling and it is reasonable to look at fair access to nature for disabled people on lower incomes.***

Mike Mintram answers that he understands this was looked at a while ago and there was a considerable cost to the concessions given at the time. FOWA and FE need to be in sync with any concession offered. At the moment carers of disabled people can access the arboretum free of charge. Mike asks Andrew Smith if this is something they could have a rethink about. Andrew adds that yes, necessary carers get free entry when they accompany their dependant. There has been a trial over the last few years of a community access scheme for defined groups, including special educational needs and disability schools and groups. The scheme offers discounted group tickets which equates to 50p per person. Felicia, FOWA's CEO, is also looking at the potential for a FOWA fund for a wider scheme which could also include funding travel costs. This is something we are taking forward with the new CEO who has experience with this type of scheme.

***Qu. 7. Could the smokehouse be opened more often to provide additional choices to the main restaurant and the pantry?***

Andrew Smith answered that Forestry England is really pleased with Fosters the catering providers who have massively improved the three catering facilities on site, the restaurant, the pantry and the smokehouse which in particular is something quite special. We are glad to see people want more of it. The contract with Fosters only requires them to open on a daily basis the pantry and the restaurant. They open the Smokehouse when it is viable to do so which seems to be weekends and school holidays. There are discussions with Fosters about making the Smokehouse bigger because at peak times it can't manage the demand.

***Qu. 8. Why is this meeting on line when life has effectively returned to normal. Can you assure us that next year's meeting will be in person?***

Mike Mintram answered that FOWA had many discussions over whether this meeting should be on line or in person. FOWA overall would prefer to run the AGM face-to-face, however, there is no doubt that holding them online does make them more accessible to more members who may not be able to get to the arboretum. Potentially next year we will look onto a hybrid meeting if at all possible.

Mike Mintram thanks members for joining the meeting and for their support.

**Mike Mintram closed the meeting 17:01pm**

Signed by Chair (as a correct record)	Date Signed
Issued by L Barnes Issued on	