



Annual General Meeting of The Henry Doubleday Research Association (known as Garden Organic)

Draft Minutes of the 36th Annual General Meeting held at 10.30am on Thursday 18th May 2023 at Garden Organic, Ryton Organic Gardens, Coventry, CV8 3LG and via Zoom.

The AGM was recorded.

Trustees present: Andrew Collins (Interim Chair), Keith Arrowsmith (Treasurer), David Robinson, Rhiannon Davies, Joe McIndoe, Mark Mitchell, Angela Wright.
Adam Alexander (Vice Chair) & Amanda Sandford) via Zoom.

Executive Team present: Fiona Taylor, Chief Executive; Joanne Ford, Director of Finance & Corporate Resources; Hannah Rogers, Director of Membership & Communications; Colette Bond, Director of Horticultural Engagement; Bruce Pearce, Director of Horticultural Science.

10 members of Garden Organic joined virtually via Zoom.

70 joined us in person.

Introduction and Welcome by Fiona Taylor, CEO

Fiona Taylor introduced Andrew Collins, Interim Chair; Keith Arrowsmith, Treasurer. The etiquette for the meeting was noted, and that the meeting was recorded.

1. Andrew Collins welcomed all to the meeting and presented a snapshot of the charity's achievements in 2022.
 - 1.1. Last year's AGM was held on June 25th, and I took over as interim chair until the end of my term, which is today – as I've now served 9 years as a Trustee. Today we present you with a summary of our work during 2022 – set out in the Annual Report & Accounts.
 - 1.2. It was a year where we focused the charity back on the scientific evidence of how organic gardening supports biodiversity.
 - 1.3. We expanded our team and maximized our growing area for the Heritage Seed Library, resulting in our biggest ever seed harvest here at Ryton.
 - 1.4. We grasped new opportunities to work with communities after the pandemic restrictions were lifted, in particular in the realm of composting.
 - 1.5. We demonstrated organic growing here at Ryton by opening for pre-booked tours and gardening courses.
 - 1.6. We created two award-winning show gardens for the BBC Gardeners' World Live shows in Birmingham and Audley End – our first piece of major public engagement since the pandemic.
 - 1.7. We introduced a series of impact measures – a first for the charity, but important so we can see what difference we are making.
 - 1.8. During 2022 we welcomed three new trustees, and I am delighted to say that today a further two new trustees will be joining the board. All biographies are on the website.

1.9. And we have welcomed two new vice presidents, Jane Davidson, and Pam Whittle, joining Tim Lang and Raymond Blanc in helping to steer our charity in a direction that resonates with people of influence.

2. Apologies for Absence

2.1. 70 members have sent their apologies and have given their proxy to the Interim Chair. With the proxy votes and the members in the room I can confirm that we are at quorate.

3. Minutes of the 2022 AGM held at Ryton Organic Gardens on Saturday 25th June via Zoom.

3.1. The Minutes of the AGM held last year were posted on our website. Paper copies were available by post if requested.

3.2. The minutes of the 35th AGM held on Saturday 25th June 2022 were confirmed as a correct record. The proposer was Joe McIndoe, and the seconder was Angela Wright. The minutes were formally approved as a true record.

4. Speech by Fiona Taylor, Chief Executive

Salient points from the speech:

4.1. Land is not just for building or farming, it is for nature, for people, for recreation and also for growing. There is enough to go around.

4.2. Our expertise is called upon to ensure people succeed in composting, and food and flower growing, whilst supporting biodiversity. We offer training courses, we get alongside and show people how, we do talks, we inspire, we join in, we do.

4.3. We campaign too. Currently, this focuses around calling for a ban on peat, pesticides, and weedkillers, whilst promoting open-pollinated seed and sustainable growing media, such as peat-free potting compost.

4.4. We have done a lot of work this year to try and improve our service to you. Thank you so much to the many of you who have filled out our surveys – these have helped guide us in starting this new chapter for the organisation.

4.5. We have invested in our new website and are responding to your thoughts about what you would like to see more of in The Organic Way.

4.6. We have been refining our Members' Experiments – sometimes known to the outside world as Citizen Science. Our experiments are designed to gather data that will help the wider research into organic methods of growing, looking at soil health, composting and overcoming challenges presented to us all by today's growing conditions. Thanks to everyone who has joined in. Citizen Science offers purpose, because we know that organic practice has never been more needed than now if we want to restore soil health, bolster all natural life on land, and show people how to grow some of their own food.

4.7. Our climate is changing but plants are a great deal more capable of adapting than humans, which is why our seed conservation is so important. Last year we introduced eight rediscovered varieties into the Heritage Seed Library – including the Metissa Broad Bean and Yellow Belle Tomato.

4.7.1. Following investment in the Heritage Seed Library, we were able to enlarge our team, and improve the infrastructure here at Ryton. New polytunnels and isolation beds came into their own with a highly productive growing season – together with around 180 seed guardians who grow varieties on for us and send the seed back, we safeguarded 134 different crops with fresh seed.

- 4.7.2. We shared a bumper edition of the seed list with members in December. 175 varieties were made available, including a record 36 varieties not offered before.
- 4.7.3. The Heritage Seed Library is a collection of national importance, and I am unbelievably grateful to Lawrence Hills for having the foresight to know that vegetable varieties that aren't grown commercially would simply have died out.
- 4.8. One of the best ways to hook people into organic growing is to show them how to do it - and we do this in spades via our volunteering programme.
 - 4.8.1. We think that our need for volunteers to work with us is going to dramatically increase, because more and more land is being turned over to community use, volunteers are required to support local parks due to cuts in local services, and many of those without gardens are keen to have the opportunity to join in.
 - 4.8.2. Last year, through the sheer tenacity of our communities' team, we doubled our community outreach work, majoring on composting and growing, and we look set to increase that work again.
- 4.9. This year we are 65 years of age. 65 years young, if you will. It is time to look forward - to safeguard the knowledge and experience we have all accumulated in order to raise the next generation of organic growers.
 - 4.9.1. We are currently putting together a research paper that offers hope around the theme of Biodiversity in your Backyard. The paper will say that we know the state of nature's decline is dire, but we also know that our gardens and allotment sites, when tended the organic way, have more biodiversity than farmland, than parks, than verges, than pretty much any other greenspace other than nature reserves.
 - 4.9.2. The paper will be out later this year - and we will proudly publish it under the Henry Doubleday Research Association, a name that has carried weight and prestige in academic and research circles for 65 years.

5. Presentation of Consolidated Financial Statements 2021 by Keith Arrowsmith, Treasurer

- 5.1. The Treasurer advised that the consolidated Financial Statements had been made available on the charity's website from 20th April 2023 and had been made available by post if required.
- 5.2. Just as for GO members, 2022 was a financially difficult year for GO with inflationary and budgetary pressures reducing funds available to charities such as GO.
- 5.3. 2022 was the first year of the three-year business plan that I mentioned last year. The aim is to increase the charity's capacity for income generation and at the same time control costs. The strategic investments made in 2022, for example in key staff and the new website, have been successful in laying the foundations for future income growth, but of course the costs impacted the "bottom line" in 2022.
- 5.4. During 2022 operating income of £1.5m was £250k down on 2021, with expenditure of £1.9m, £100k up on 2021. This gave us a net operating deficit of over £400k - in line with the Budget agreed on by the Trustees. We also incurred investment and actuarial pension losses of £250k - giving total (restricted and unrestricted) loss of £658k.
- 5.5. Income reduction was largely due to receiving £300k less in legacies, some of which was timing differences. Membership income was broadly the same - thanks to our tireless membership team and generous members adding donations to their subscriptions. Income from public authority contracts was up by nearly £100k - a positive sign for the future.
- 5.6. Increased expenditure reflected higher salary costs from taking on new staff and critical cost of living salary increases, focused on staff on lower salaries.

- 5.7. GO drew down £400k from our investments in 2022 to cover our deficit and fund the website development and pension liability. Our investments suffered losses of around £200k in 2022, in line with losses incurred on world markets. As a result of drawdowns and losses, at 31 December our investment portfolio was £940k, down from £1,530k a year earlier. The investments continue to be managed by Aberdeen in line with our ethical policy.
- 5.8. Our defined benefit pension scheme continues to be a significant liability on the balance sheet. At 31/12/22 the liability is £804k, down from £862k at 31/12/21. We are following an agreed repayment plan to pay off this liability – contributing £129k in 2022.
- 5.9. At the end of the year, we had available unrestricted reserves of £19k which is less than our official reserves policy of £500k requires. The trustees understand that we currently have insufficient official reserves but are confident that the 3-year budget plan will increase GO's income-creating ability and therefore the level of our reserves.

6. Adoption of the Annual Report and Consolidated Financial Statements for 2022

- 6.1. The Treasurer asked for a proposer and seconder to adopt the annual report and consolidated financial statements for 2022. The proposer was Tim Lang, and the seconder Peter Brink.
- 6.2. GO members present and online were asked to vote, including proxy votes received by the Interim Chair, the total figures were 109 for, 0 against and 1 abstention. The Annual report and Consolidated Financial statements for 2022 were adopted.

7. Appointment of Auditors 2022

- 7.1. The Treasurer asked for a proposer and seconder to authorise the board to appoint auditors for 2023 and to fix their remuneration. The proposer was Jane Thorp and the seconder Julia Robinson.
- 7.2. GO members present and online were asked to vote to authorise the board to appoint auditors for 2023 and to fix their remuneration. Including proxy votes received by the Interim Chair, the total figures were 110 for, 2 against and 1 abstention. The board was given authority to appoint auditors for 2023 and to fix their remuneration.

8. Election of Board Members

- 8.1. The Chair advised that Our Articles of Association state that we can have a maximum of 11 trustees; the total number of 11 trustees may be exceeded by co-option. We currently have 10 trustees on the Board. Trustees are elected for an initial term of 3 years and can be re-elected for two further consecutive 3-year terms. Mark Mitchell, who was co-opted onto the board in 2022, is now able to be elected for an initial term of 3 years.
- 8.2. Retiring Trustees – Andrew Collins is stepping down after 9 years of service, the maximum term he is allowed to serve. Emma Sayer is stepping down after 2 years of service, although she is remaining as an advisor to the charity.
- 8.3. We advertised in The Organic Way, via our e-newsletter and a number of other external locations for members to apply to join the Board, and we received two nomination forms by the closing date - from Catherine Dawson and Nicola Hope (apologies from them both as they could not attend today).
- 8.4. As the number of candidates was less than the number of vacancies no election was required. The appointment of Catherine Dawson & Nicola Hope was confirmed.

- 8.5. Andrew Collins was appointed chair for a period of 12 months only whilst an external recruitment process was run for the position of chair. The process is still ongoing, but we hope is nearing a successful outcome. It is anticipated that a new chair will be in place during the coming months. In the meantime, Mark Mitchell and David Robinson have assumed the duties of Interim Co-Chairs, with the support of other trustees.
- 8.6. Details of the biographies of all our board members can be found on the Garden Organic website.

The Chair announced that the business of the AGM was concluded and closed the meeting.

The floor was opened for questions:

Q – How do visitors to the gardens know they are gardened organically or what it means?

A – Fiona Taylor; at the moment if people come to look at our gardens, they will have probably booked through our website, so we probably already pre-select, so people would expect to see an organic garden, but we shouldn't take this for granted. Head Gardener Emma O'Neil has signage ready to go into the garden, which should be complete by the Autumn.

Q – At the entrance why is there signage for Coventry University and Ryton Gardens, but no mention of Garden Organic? There should be a sign saying this is the home of Garden Organic

A- Fiona Taylor, yes, that is a great idea, I will make that request.

Q – What plans does the organisation have to enhance, improve, or work on the relationship with partner gardens over the coming years?

A- Hannah Rogers; we work with a lot of partner gardens in many ways. We are looking at who we work with and who we can partner with to forge strong relationships. It is really important to us that people who cannot get to Ryton have places to visit. Bruce Pearce commented that we are encouraging partners and organic gardens to engage with the members' experiments too, so that we get groups of people, rather than just individuals taking part.

Q – Many nurseries are turning to selling peat-free compost only, but people find it is getting difficult to find one suitable for acid-loving plants and cannot find an alternative. They are concerned about plants coming from the Continent as it is not banned there. Are GO working on this problem?

A – Anton Rosenfield responded to this. There are some companies such as Daylesford who are already making ericaceous composts for acid loving plants, but it is still in progress. GO do not have the resources to work on this, but there are companies who are.

Q – Could we have a members' experiment for members to have a go at making their own ericaceous compost?

A – Bruce Pearce; the simple answer is yes. This afternoon we have a Citizen Science workshop.

Q – The research paper that was talked about; will it be available to members?

A – It will be coming out in stages and yes it will be available to members on the website

Q – Is GO registered with the fundraising regulator? It is not apparent on the website.

A – We are registered, yes, but regarding website accreditation, we will check into that.

Q – There are lots of charities that work with children and schools that are all looking at doing the same thing; it is difficult to sign up for them all. Is there any way you could all come together?

A – Fiona Taylor; it is a big challenge, but we do try to work in partnerships with other charities as much as we can. Colette Bond; we do have a coalition with a number of organisations the Countryside Classroom, which is around food and farming. It is a one-stop shop for schools as we do realise it is a minefield for schools. It is there for useful information, resources, advice, places to visit, which can be searched by key stage (where children are at in their schooling). Colette Bond is happy to share information about the coalition if requested.

Q – Could there be an offer for large allotments and could GO be more proactive to allotments?

A – Hannah Rogers pointed out that there was a group membership rate and we do work with the National Allotment Association and support events like their National Allotment Week in August. We also make sure our advice can be applied to allotments. Hannah reiterated the possibility of group membership and said she would share the information with whoever wanted it.

Fiona Taylor closed the question-and-answer session.