



Summary Minutes of the Soil Association AGM

Saturday 25th September 2021

Held digitally

Present Staff: Helen Browning (CEO), Martin Dawson (COO), Louisa Pharoah (Director of Fundraising), Cathy Cliff (Policy Advisor), Gemma Heaysman-Burns (Marketing Manager)

Trustees: Martin Nye (Chair)

1. Welcome and Introduction- Martin Nye - Chair of Trustees

Martin welcomed everyone to the AGM and provided an overview of the agenda. He also thanked everyone for their support over a difficult year with the pandemic and explained the way the AGM will work being digital.

2. Financial and Governance - Martin Dawson

Martin Dawson advised that the Soil Association charity trustees decided not to run an AGM last year, for reasons relating to Covid-19. The Charity Commission were supportive of many charities taking this approach.

Martin gave an update on the charity and group finances. Martin mentioned the changes and departures of the trustee board and those who have joined; John Carson, Jez Rose, Oliver Dowding and Gabriel Scally have all left and Andrew Burgess, Steven Lizars, Phillip Fearnley, Sepideh Golzari, Jonathan Spencer and Caroline Missen have all joined since the 2019 AGM. Martin mentioned the impacts of the pandemic and what challenges the Soil Association faced, however the charity finances stood up well. The charitable giving was £2.3 million and an increase of a third on the previous year. Funding from grants totalled over £6 million, however income from providing services under contracts did decline from the previous year to just under £1.5 million. The pandemic particularly impacted the Food for Life scheme, in regard to the catering sectors as these were not running in their usual manner, as well as the work with local schools. Income from the charity trading subsidiaries, such as SA certification, increased by nearly a quarter to over £800,000 and demand for certified products held significantly well to provide nearly £300,000 of profit gift aided to the charity. The charity spent broadly similar amounts on charitable activity as the prior year, but this was less than planned due to disruption from the pandemic. This all contributed to an unrestricted funding surplus of just over £1.1 million. Martin gave an overview of the balance sheet, explaining that free unrestricted reserves were at a healthy level, enabling additional investment to be made in the current financial year.

3. Our Grow Better Together Strategy- Helen Browning

Helen Browning introduced the section by talking about the most important thing we can do as an organisation, and how the Soil Association have refreshed the strategy to make an impact over the next 10 years detailing what the best work is that we can do as an organisation. She explained how vital it is to be doing this work now to make an impact and how much support it will need. Helen explained how the Soil Association work across 3 areas: On our land, In Our Lives and In Public Life. She spoke about how working with citizens and members we can campaign for change, how we can bring farmers and consumers together to bring a better future for everyone. Helen mentioned how we will dial up our work with forestry and agroforestry and on the diversity issue within farming, making the best food accessible for everyone. Helen mentioned where we want to go further, particularly with Soil Association Exchange, Landscape Leadership and sustainable, good quality local food. Also, on Innovative Farmers, forests, woodland and agroforestry, and policy and influencing.

4. Healthy and Sustainable Diets – Cathy Cliff

Cathy gave a brief overview on Policy. Cathy then went on to explain how our policy worked during 2021, detailing about the National Food Strategy led by Henry Dimbleby and what the strategy supports and recognises, and how it links with the Food for Life scheme. Cathy then explained about how the National Food Strategy has helped the Food for Life Scheme. Cathy then spoke about the Food not Feed campaign, highlighting the impacts of intensively reared chicken. Cathy shared some news articles regarding the campaign. Cathy then spoke on the Ultra-Processed foods campaign, highlighting the impacts of the growing and producing ultra-processed foods on climate and nature and what to do about it, leading in to talking about the UN Food Systems Summit, asking members and supporters to join for a webinar with a panel of experts discussing solutions to the ultra-processed foods crisis.

5. Fundraising- Louisa Pharoah

Louisa provided an update on fundraising and detailed how important our members are and what impact they had and thanked members. Louisa explained how we are trying to gain more members and some new fundraising initiatives. Louisa explained that the charity is in year one of a five-year plan to double the number of members for the Soil Association, finding out what will prompt people to support our work and how we can find new ways to reach people. Our supporters receive updates through social media, emails, veg boxes, websites, and newsletters etc, and Louisa mentioned how we will try and find new ways to find more members by investing in our fundraising team. Louisa then explained that the Soil Association were talking to more companies to support our work like Pukka Herbs, Yeo Valley and Good Energy. We are also working with Blue Diamond, Papple Steading and Deloitte who have just named us as one of their client change charity partners. Louisa also mentioned we have launched a Gifts in Wills Campaign and the importance and impact that this can have on soil, climate

and biodiversity. There is a guide available for supporters to help them make the right choices and how we will use legacies to make a difference.

6. Discussion topics from attendees (More were submitted and are to be addressed via the crowdcast Q&A box)

Do you know if the Government are planning to remove subsidies and support for non-sustainable and carbon intensive farming practises and instead planning to give subsidies to organic and other sustainable farming practises to reduce overall carbon footprint in the UK?

Yes, it is an interesting time, where we are going to see some changes to farming support, since coming out of the agricultural policy and Brexit, the Defra team have been looking into the support. Our mantra has been- public money for public goods so that we support the practises that are going to be better for climate and for nature. We are looking at the practises that will help us move in the right direction, they aren't quite currently grabbing the systems approach meaning organic, so we are encouraging for them to focus on this. There's lots of work to do in this area, movement is in the right direction, but we need the support for organic to really start seeing the benefits.

How can we get the Government to subsidise quality organic food to try and wean people away from processed cheap rubbish, the carrot usually works better than the stick so taxing the junk will not be so affective and likely cause descent?

Yes, changing the way that people eat is certainly challenging, Public procurement is one way. We know that from our Food for Life programme that this can be transformational. This also offers a channel for the government's spending power into healthy and sustainable produce including organic. Children in Food for Life schools are twice as likely to eat they're five a day compared to children in comparisons schools, and caterers in some of the most deprived areas of the country are serving organic ingredients which shows that through Food for Life, healthy and organic food can be served to anyone and everywhere and delivered on a tight budget.

How does the Soil Association reach people outside of its usual clientele, people who don't think about environmental issues that much?

We do believe more and more people are thinking about the environment now which is positive. It is hard on a tight budget as a charity, but we are trying to talk to conscious consumers, and we have a new citizen engagement team who are talking with them and are trying to campaign for people to really make a difference and we want to congratulate them and support them and invite them to join us. Lady Eve once said that "The Soil Associations most important objective was to harness the power of informed public opinion, to drive change in our food and farming systems" and this is what the citizen engagement team are doing.

How do we reduce the consumption of intensively reared chicken bought in fast food outlets?

Yes, also a big challenge as chicken is the UK's most popular meat. We need to eat less and better meat. We need healthier and more sustainable options to be possible and affordable. Some local authorities have already started tackling this by working with some shops, to stop them using cheap meat and highly processed ingredients. If these efforts are used on a national scale it might help us change the way, we eat and stop using cheap chicken.

What can environmental groups do to ensure that enough pressure is put on the government to stop the damage done in garden centre sales of poisonous substances?

Blue Diamond Garden Centres who we have been working with since April, who are passionate about leading a more friendly nature led way of gardening. We are working with them to get this message out. We are partners with them to raise awareness to the benefits of organically approved products and nature alternatives to gardening. Spreading this message to their huge customer database. This partnership will really help to drive change within the industry.

What pressure are you placing on the government and elsewhere to sort out the organic labelling and ability to have European organics sold in the UK (and vice versa)?

This is the proposal by the EU to remove UK certifiers from Annex IV of Art.33 of EU organic regs, thus removing our approval as individual certifiers to approve all organic food and drink for export to the EU or NI, whether covered by the trade agreement (TCA) or not. The TCA only covers organic products grown or processed in the UK. The EU point that such products are out of scope of our Trade Agreement and as we have an agreement, we should be in Annex III not Annex IV., which is a county agreement and leaves individual certifiers only able to work to the letter of the TCA. This eventuality means around 130 businesses we currently certify under our Annex IV approval will no longer be able to export to the EU. We and UKCOG have been asking licensees to write to their MP (with templates), writing to various EU trade and policy organisations (IFOAM, OPTA etc) and our own ministers. We have had direct representation (attended in person) into the EC Committee on Organic Production. We have even sought legal advice on actions licensees and their suppliers could take against the EC and briefed licensees. Having done all we can, we now awaiting the outcome of an EC vote on our movement from Annex IV to III.

Any tips on Gardening?

Yes, please check our Instagram and see Blue Diamond as they have more information.

What is the Soil Association's policy on soya used in the feed for organic certified chicken?

We have launched the Food not Feed campaign of which peak poultry is a part. We feel like we are firmly on the right track.

Are organic farmers/producers being impacted by the agricultural labour and HGV driver shortages?

The driver shortage is affecting all businesses now. The organic sector is equally facing troubles with this and it is a disruptive time.

What is meant by the term agroecological?

Farming in harmony with nature. Agroecology seeks to describe, analyse, and improve the sustainability of food and farming systems. Nature friendly farming.

How can you get a school into the food for life programme?

Start by looking at the Food for Life website. Talk to the headteacher or cook of the school and start to explore what it is and what benefits it would bring and the Food for Life team will be able to help with this.

Ends