

Soil Association 2024 Annual General Meeting Minutes

Date: 7 November 2024 at 7pm

Location: Online (Zoom webinar)

Chair: Martin Nye, Chair of the Board of Trustees

Speakers: Helen Browning (CEO and organic farmer), Nicola Spencer (Group Resources Director), James Cashmore (Charity Managing Director), Rose Lewis (Woodoaks Programme Manager), Eddie Bailey (RhizoPhyllia)

1. Welcome and Introduction

Speaker: Martin Nye, Chair of the Board of Trustees

Summary: Martin welcomed attendees to the Annual General Meeting.

Agenda

- Financial performance and governance update by Nicola Spencer, Group Resources Director.
- Update on Soil Association impact by Helen Browning, Chief Executive.
- Presentation on organic conversion at Woodoaks Farm by Rose Lewis.
- Talk by Eddie Bailey on soil health.
- Q&A session led by James Cashmore, Managing Director.
- Closing remarks by Helen Browning.

Year in Review

Martin reflected on the challenges faced this year, including environmental, political, and economic turmoil. He noted growth in the UK organic markets but acknowledged financial pressure on farmers, along with the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. Martin highlighted the Soil Association's commitment to promoting sustainable and resilient solutions, collaborating with communities, organisations, and policymakers to advocate for nature-based approaches.

2. Financial Performance and Governance

- **Speaker:** Nicola Spencer, Group Resources Director
- **Summary:** Nicola presented key financial figures for the year ending March 31, 2024:
 - **Income:** £8.1 million, marking a 12% increase from the previous year.
 - **Membership:** Membership income remained stable, and donations continued despite economic pressures.
 - **Legacies:** Legacy contributions decreased from previous years, following some large prior bequests.
 - **Grants:** Accounted for 42% of income, supporting programmes like Innovative Farmers, Sustainable Food Places, and Horizon Europe projects.
 - **Contract Income:** Increased due to work with local authorities and ticket sales from the first Agroforestry Show.

- **Subsidiary Income:** Organic and FSC certification businesses contributed £377,000, along with corporate fundraising income.

3. Impact Update

Speaker: Helen Browning, Chief Executive

Summary: Helen discussed the achievements of Soil Association teams, emphasising the support from members. Key initiatives included support for farmers transitioning to sustainable practices, promoting healthy and sustainable diets, and advocating for policies grounded in data and practical outcomes.

4. Woodoaks Farm Update

Speaker: Rose Lewis, Programme Manager

Summary: Rose provided updates on Woodoaks, the Soil Association Land Trust's farm near Rickmansworth, detailing its ongoing organic conversion and key developments over the past 12 months.

5. Soil Health and Food Webs

Speaker: Eddie Bailey, RhizoPhyllia

Summary: Eddie spoke on the importance of soil health and the soil food web, underlining its critical role in sustainable agriculture and ecosystem health.

6. Q&A Session

Chair: James Cashmore, Managing Director

Summary: The Q&A session addressed pre-submitted and live questions from attendees. Martin assured attendees that unanswered questions would receive follow-up responses post-meeting.

Q Can you tell us a bit about how Woodoaks is interacting with other farms and showcasing what's possible for farmers and farming more generally?

Answered by: Rose Lewis

Woodoaks is not completely unique, as there are many great farmers doing similar work. However, its location on the edge of London allows it to reach a wider audience. The farm connects with the community and other farmers through outreach and demonstration. They have partnered with Ocado, which sponsors five demo farms as part of their collaboration with the Soil Association. This partnership showcases the Soil Association's work and helps bring other farmers onto the same journey towards organic farming.

Q: Can you share more about the animal welfare practices at Woodoaks, particularly in relation to organic certification?

Answered by: Rose Lewis

Woodoaks has recently received organic certification for its land. However, the animals require a longer conversion period, meaning it will take until 2025 before the cattle are fully organic. The farm works closely with its tenant farmers, the Whitbys, to transition their other farms to organic practices. Animal welfare is a priority for the farm, and the Soil Association's organic standards help guide these efforts.

Q: Helen, could you expand on the Soil Association's work on animal welfare and its connection to organic farming?

Answered by: Helen Browning

Helen became an organic farmer because of her commitment to animal welfare, which she feels is a key component of organic farming. Organic standards ensure that animals have a more natural and healthy life, with access to outdoors and space to engage in natural behaviours. The Soil Association has worked to define what a "good life" looks like for farm animals and helps ensure this is embedded in other assurance schemes. Animal welfare is a major focus of the Soil Association's work, which is also expanding through the Ocado partnership to further support farmers.

Q: What is the Soil Association's position on the consumption of meat and dairy, especially with regard to reducing or removing animals from the food chain?

Answered by: Helen Browning

The Soil Association advocates for "less but better" meat and dairy consumption, aiming to phase out intensive livestock production due to concerns about animal welfare and antibiotic use. They believe animals should play a role in regenerative farming and conservation efforts, but they should eat less grain that could be used to feed people. The Soil Association supports a balanced approach, encouraging reduced consumption while promoting good welfare for animals and increased plant-based options in diets.

Q: Could you briefly talk about the availability, affordability, and accessibility of organic food?

Answered by: James Cashmore

The Soil Association launched the "Organic for All" initiative to make organic food more available, affordable, and accessible to everyone. There is a clear opportunity for growing more organic food in the UK, and the Soil Association has been working to promote stronger policy support to incentivise farmers to convert to organic farming. They're also working with retailers to expand organic offerings and ensure fair pricing to make organic food accessible to a wider audience. Additionally, community initiatives like box schemes play a key role in reaching those who otherwise might not have access to organic food.

Q: Can you elaborate on the relationship between the Soil Association and Soil Association Exchange?

Answered by: Helen Browning

Soil Association Exchange helps facilitate knowledge exchange between farmers, offering support for transitioning to organic farming and improving practices related to sustainability and animal welfare. It has its own Chief Executive, Joseph Gridley and it plays a significant role in the Soil Association's broader mission to promote sustainable farming practices.

7. Closing Remarks

- **Speaker:** Helen Browning, Chief Executive
- **Summary:** Helen closed the meeting by expressing gratitude to members, staff, and trustees for their dedication. She encouraged ongoing support and participation in the organisation's mission.