

Soil Association 2025 Annual General Meeting

Minutes

Date: 13 November 2025, 7.00pm

Location: Online (Zoom webinar)

Chair: Phil Fearnley, Chair of the Board of Trustees

Speakers:

Helen Browning (Chief Executive)

David Hobdey (Group Resources Director)

James Cashmore (Charity Managing Director)

Jon Haines (Agroforestry Advisor)

Alex Gray (Farming Ambassador, Brooksby Land-Based College)

1. Welcome and introduction

Speaker: Phil Fearnley, Chair

Phil welcomed members and supporters to the Annual General Meeting and thanked everyone for joining online. He noted that the online format allowed more people to take part than a traditional in-person AGM and confirmed that the meeting was being recorded for members unable to attend live.

Phil introduced himself as the new Chair, having taken up the role on 1 November following Martin Nye. He shared a brief overview of his background, his four years as a trustee and deputy chair, and his personal connection to land, farming and soil health.

Phil thanked Martin Nye for his leadership of the Soil Association since 2019, particularly through the COVID years, and for his role in key developments including Soil Association Exchange, Innovative Farmers and Woodoaks Farm. Martin will continue to support the organisation as Chair of Soil Association Exchange.

Phil outlined the agenda and reflected on the wider context of the past year.

Agenda:

- Financial performance and governance update – David Hobdey
- Review of Soil Association impact and plans for the 80th anniversary year – Helen Browning
- Presentation on agroforestry and the Trees on Farms programme – Jon Haines
- Farming ambassador insight from Brooksby Land-Based College – Alex Gray
- Q&A session chaired by James Cashmore
- Closing remarks from Helen Browning

Year in Review (Chair's Overview):

Phil acknowledged the environmental, political and economic pressures facing farmers, food producers, charities and households, and emphasised the importance of the Soil Association's role in championing practical, evidence-based solutions for nature-friendly food

and farming. He thanked members, supporters, partners and staff for their continued commitment.

2. Financial performance and governance

Speaker: David Hobdey, Group Resources Director

David presented highlights from the financial year ending 31 March 2025 and encouraged members to refer to the Annual Review and Accounts for full detail.

Income

- Total income was £9.7m, an increase of £1.5m on the previous year.
- The increase was driven largely by a one-off corporate donation of £1.2m and strong performance from trading subsidiaries.
- Soil Association Certification performed particularly well, with profits increasing from around £400k to £1m.
- Grant income reduced by approximately £900k, reflecting an increasingly competitive funding environment for charities.
- Membership income and legacies increased slightly and were highlighted as especially important because they support the charity's core work.

David noted that some income, including large corporate donations, is restricted in how it can be used. While this funding is vital, it reinforces the ongoing need for flexible, unrestricted income to sustain the organisation's work and resilience.

Expenditure

- Total expenditure was £9.4m.
- Costs increased due to inflationary pressures.
- Investment rose in priority areas, including Healthy & Sustainable Food (+9%) and Farming & Land Use (+11%).
- Fundraising costs remained broadly in line with the previous year.

Surplus, reserves and outlook

- The charity recorded a net surplus of £267k.
- Unrestricted funds were in surplus, largely as a result of the one-off corporate donation.
- Restricted funds reduced as previously received project funding was spent.
- David explained that much of the charity's reserves are not freely available, including land held by the Soil Association Land Trust and designated assets such as the Bristol headquarters building.

- Free reserves stood at just over £1m, within the Board's agreed range, providing an important but modest buffer.

David spoke openly about the ongoing financial challenges facing the organisation. Inflation and rising employment costs continue to put pressure on finances, and the charity has had to make some staff reductions to keep costs aligned with income. He stressed that careful cost control, alongside continued fundraising and supporter generosity, remains essential.

Governance

David confirmed that an external governance review completed during the year found the charity to be well governed. A small number of recommendations have been implemented to strengthen arrangements further. Trustees serve in a voluntary capacity, and recruitment is underway to refresh the Board as trustee terms come to an end.

3. Chief Executive's report

Speaker: Helen Browning, Chief Executive

Helen thanked members for attending and reflected on a challenging year for the charity sector. She acknowledged the difficult decisions that have had to be made to manage costs responsibly and thanked staff for their professionalism and resilience during this period.

Helen expressed her sincere thanks to members, supporters and donors, noting that their generosity played a crucial role in maintaining the organisation's financial stability and avoiding a much more difficult position.

Helen welcomed recent corporate support, including funding associated with Lloyds, while noting that much of this income is restricted or semi-restricted and sits alongside an ongoing need for unrestricted funding to support the charity's core work.

She emphasised the importance of earned income alongside charitable funding, not only for financial resilience but because it enables the Soil Association to reach more people and deliver greater long-term impact.

Key highlights from the year included:

- **Food for Life**, celebrating its 15th year and now influencing over 1.5 million meals a day, with strong reach across schools in England and Scotland.
- **Certification**, supporting nearly 4,000 organic businesses and certifying over 28 million hectares of forest globally, alongside sector leadership through events such as the BOOM Awards and Organic Trade Conference.
- **Soil Association Exchange**, now an independent business, expanding its work to measure, improve and reward environmental, social and animal welfare outcomes on farms, including a new pilot Exchange Market.
- **Innovative Farmers**, celebrating its 150th Field Lab and directly inspiring the government-backed ADOPT research scheme, strengthening farmer-led research.
- **Animal welfare**, with the development of the Good Life Framework, shifting focus towards positive animal experiences.

- **Policy work**, securing organic support in Wales and Scotland, while continuing to campaign for progress in England.
 - **Sustainable Food Places**, now active in 117 locations, reaching more than 24 million people.
 - **Out to Lunch campaign**, driving restaurant pledges that will improve an estimated 20 million meals per month.
 - **Agroforestry**, including the second national Agroforestry Show at Woodoaks and publication of the UK's first agroforestry handbook.
 - **Woodoaks Farm**, where a successful Heritage Lottery Fund award will support a new visitor centre and expanded community engagement.
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4. Agroforestry programme update

Speaker: Jon Haines, Agroforestry Advisor

Jon outlined the benefits of agroforestry for livestock and arable systems, including improved resilience, productivity and animal welfare. He highlighted the Trees on Farms programme, including farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange, regional agroforestry networks, the national Agroforestry Show and the updated Agroforestry Handbook.

5. Farming Ambassador presentation

Speaker: Alex Gray, Farming Ambassador, Brooksby Land-Based College

Alex shared practical examples of agroforestry in action at Brooksby College, including a 20-acre field conversion, mob grazing systems and efforts to embed agroforestry more firmly within land-based education and training.

6. Q&A Session

Chair: James Cashmore, Charity Managing Director

Summary: A live Q&A session addressed attendee questions. Unanswered questions will receive follow-up responses.

Q: Exactly what is being done to ban glyphosate and other pesticides?

Answered by: Cathy Cliff

A: Cathy explained that despite growing awareness of the harm's pesticides cause to human health and the environment, global pesticide use continues to rise. She emphasised:

- Highly hazardous pesticides like glyphosate are not used in organic farming.
- The Soil Association is supporting farmers of all types to transition away from pesticide-reliant systems.

- They welcomed the UK government's pledge to ban bee killing neonicotinoids, the publication of the Pesticides National Action Plan, and commitments under the Global Biodiversity Framework.
- The organisation continues to call on governments to support farmers to move away from pesticides and address their risks to humans and wildlife.

Q: Organic or Regenerative? How will Soil Association protect the integrity of its symbol?

Answered by: Helen Browning

- Regenerative farming interest is positive, especially among new farmers, but it has no legal definition, so it can be used inconsistently.
- Organic remains the only regulated and certifiable standard, protecting consumer trust.
- Soil Association Exchange helps measure outcomes across both organic and regenerative farms.
- Many farmers start with regenerative practices and later move to organic.
- SA will support progress in all systems while safeguarding the integrity of the organic symbol.
- Organic and regenerative movements can learn from each other; Soil Association aims to be a broad church, welcoming everyone while staying proud of what organic delivers.

Q: Are we going to get involved at COP this year to make sure soil care is on the agenda as a climate change mitigator? What activities are we sharing?

Answered by: Cathy Cliff

A: Cathy said they would love to see soil health discussed formally at COP due to its major role in climate mitigation, but soil still lacks the recognition it deserves.

- The Soil Association:
 - Works with farmers to build resilience and reduce emissions.
 - Highlights soil health as crucial to climate action.
 - Does not have direct representation at COP this year but is active in public advocacy, reporting on the need for changes in food and farming.
- Cathy referenced a recent blog the organisation published on the topic.

Q: What can gardeners do to help support bees?

Answered by: Jon Haines

A: Jon recommended:

- Planting a diverse range of bee friendly plants.

- Incorporating trees (fruit trees and early flowering trees like hazel or almond), which provide critical early season pollen.
- Ensuring a full “calendar of bee food” across the year so bees have consistent resources.

Q: What is the Soil Association’s response to the issue of ultra-processed foods?

Answered by: Cathy Cliff

A: Cathy explained that the Soil Association is:

- One of the most active UK NGOs on UPFs.
- Running multiple public engagement campaigns calling for government intervention.
- Working with media, MPs, NGOs, and academic partners to highlight the issue.
- Helping schools, hospitals and nurseries reduce UPF use.
- Contributing to the UK government’s food strategy review.

Q: What is the overall soil health in the UK and what can we do as individual gardeners to help stop soil degradation?

Answered by: Alex Gray

- Soil health has been degraded historically by intensive production, but practical improvements are possible.
- Keep soil covered (mulch, cover crops) to retain moisture and protect biology.
- Minimise soil disturbance (avoid excessive digging/tillage) to preserve structure and microbes.
- Increase diversity (rotations, herbal leys, organic matter additions) to build organic matter and resilience.
- Garden scale actions of composting, mulching, diverse planting are making a meaningful local difference.

Q: How does organic farming respond to the changing climate, and how is the Soil Association helping farmers adapt?

Answered by: Helen Browning

- Organic farming builds healthier, more resilient soils, helping farms cope with droughts and heavy rainfall.
- Organic systems generally have lower emissions and support carbon sequestration.
- Soil Association supports farmers through:
 - Innovative Farmers climate-focused field labs

- Soil Association Exchange to measure and improve climate outcomes
 - Farmer networks and practical guidance on climate-smart practices
 - Healthy soils and diverse rotations are essential for both adaptation and mitigation.
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7. Closing remarks

Speaker: Helen Browning, Chief Executive

Helen closed the meeting by thanking members, trustees, staff and supporters for their continued involvement and generosity. She encouraged members to remain engaged with the charity's work as it approaches its 80th anniversary and reaffirmed the vital role of the Soil Association's community in delivering lasting change.

Members were reminded that further detail, particularly on finances, is available in the **Annual Review and Accounts**, which are linked alongside these minutes.