

**These questions were received for the 2023 AGM – some questioners provided their names, others just asked their question verbally prior to the event.**

- 1. This is a question from Dean Muslin. I live in Rochford Essex which has many open spaces and country land, some of which has recently being hugely developed by a huge Housing company Bloor Homes to build over 600 new homes. Do you as a wildlife charity see future in my area of Essex for 'rewilding, wild planting areas spaces to roam?**

Our Wilder Communities programme is aiming to support communities to rewild areas of the towns and villages and urban spaces where they live. We are looking for 'urban champions' who will lead on creating these green resources for communities. The Trust isn't big enough to do everything itself, but we aim to inspire, empower, train and support people with the knowledge and skills to drive things forward. So, there is definitely a future to rewild areas of Rochford.

- 2. A question from Dr Mary Younger. I recently heard that the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts have decided to discontinue the bird food partnership with Vine House Farm. Are EWT going to continue to work with Vine House? What is the rationale for ending what appears to have been a mutually beneficial arrangement. I was very disappointed to learn of this decision and want to understand why this has been made.**

The national deal wasn't right for all 46 Wildlife Trusts and not everyone was completely happy with the commercial arrangement. From an EWT perspective, Vine House wanted exclusivity on our website and that wasn't something we were prepared to give, for the relatively small financial return being offered. At the time we were also producing bird seed ourselves at Abbots Hall Farm, so we didn't actually need a supplier. When this stopped (when we ceased commercial farming at AHF) we developed a better financial arrangement with *Gardman* bird seed, than Vine House could offer. So, despite fully supporting what Vine House do, the commercial deal they were offering was not as good as others.

- 3. Do you have any more plans to reintroduce beavers in Essex?**

This is obviously referring to the beavers that were introduced in Finchingfield in 2019. But it wasn't actually the Trust that did this – it was Archie Ruggles-Brise, a very innovative and enterprising landowner at the Spains Hall Estate. EWT merely supported and advised Archie from an ecological perspective. This project has been an incredible success and there are now 12 beavers in an area of 44 hectares. Many Wildlife Trusts across the UK have now released beavers and their ability to dam rivers and hold back water in the landscape is a great nature flood management tool. There are no plans for EWT to release any beavers any time soon, but that's not to say we won't in the future if the right project comes along.

- 4. Why is the Trust still using diesel vehicles, when surely it should be using all electric vehicles?**

Having an electric vehicle fleet is indeed the Trust's overall vision. However, at the moment, not all of our vehicles have the equivalent vehicle in electric form – for

example our off road 4x4s which are such a vital part of our land management work for transporting equipment. To provide some further context, I've spoken personally to Toyota at their main factory, and they said that as a company, they had made the decision to wait for the electric infrastructure to be in place in the UK, before they rolled out a full electric range of vehicles. The Government's recent announcement on delaying the ban on diesel and petrol cars from 2030 to 2035 clearly hasn't helped the scenario I've just described. However, the Trust has already invested in some electric vehicles to test out whether the existing electric charging infrastructure will allow us to be able to carry out our work around the county as normal. Where we can't get electric vehicles, but where we urgently need new vehicles, we are currently hiring and leasing as a compromise, so that we aren't left owning petrol vehicles in the future. So, we are transitioning to an electric fleet, but it won't be a complete overnight change.

**5. Why isn't the Trust doing more to stop big housing development around the county?**

Essex is indeed a developing county which faces big pressures from new housing developments. It's predicted that Essex is going to grow by 20% by 2050 – that's a lot of new homes that will have to go somewhere. Government targets are 300,000 homes per year in the UK, and in Essex that figure is around 8,500 per year. As a Trust, we must be pragmatic about where we put our energy into fighting or objecting to proposed developments. A good example is Middlewick Ranges – a piece of rare acid grassland owned by the MoD where 1,000 homes are planned, and we have objected strongly and vocally. But with limited resources we can't fight every application. What we can also do is work with developers in the pre-planning phase, to ensure the environmental considerations and mitigations are in place and also that the right houses are built in the right places.

**6. Why is Abbots Hall Farm still closed to the public?**

The reserve at Abbots Hall Farm closed in March 2020 due to Covid and it has been closed ever since. During the last three years the reserve hasn't been an operational priority and as a consequence, some of the infrastructure has deteriorated – hides have taken a battering from the elements, in some cases animals have taken up residence, paths have got overgrown and trip hazards have developed. Plus we haven't had a major staff presence on site – so there were risks to potential visitors, with farm machinery still accessible in the yard. As a consequence, there are health & safety considerations that need to be fixed before we can reopen to the public. There is a further consideration that we now have a nature nursery on site, for 2-5yr olds (an "outstanding nature nursery" according to Ofsted). This means there are safeguarding considerations that we must put in place before reopening. England's new coastal path will be coming through the farm in 2025, so we also have to make plans for that. So, I would imagine that we will reopen the AHF reserve at some point in 2024, but at the moment I can't give an exact date, because I don't want to raise expectations.

**7. I heard that the Trust was investing in new computer systems – Shouldn't the Trust be putting that money into actual conservation?**

We are a medium sized charity – with over 200 staff, 2000 volunteers, 11 centres, 8,400 acres of land and this all needs to be managed. To do this we need modern

systems. We have a new risk & compliance system that monitors all health & safety audits, mandatory training, and risk assessments. We also have a new finance system – our old system was over ten years old and was implemented when the Trust was significantly smaller – so it simply couldn't cope and wasn't fit for purpose anymore. We have an upgraded HR system, and we are just about to implement a new CRM system (Customer Relationship Management) – to allow us to have better, more informed relationships with you our members, with our funders and with our stakeholders. This is a vital operational tool for any credible modern charity, with any level of ambition. These systems will allow the Trust to deliver its charitable objects in a more efficient and impactful way.

**8. Why don't you let dogs go in your nature discovery centres?**

Whether or not to allow dogs into our centres is a constant topic of conversation. We did trial it in a number of our centres, but it was found to be untenable from the point of view of the health & safety of our visitors. As a dog owner myself, I can sympathise with the frustrations, because I obviously believe that my dogs are well trained, well behaved and wouldn't hurt a fly – but most dogs owners believe this. But from every ten complaints that we receive about not allowing dogs in, we'll receive five times as many arguing they should be kept out. So, we have to accept that we'll never please everyone and we therefore defer to the recommended health & safety protocols.

**9. What do you see as the biggest challenge facing the Trust going forwards?**

There are, unfortunately, a great many challenges facing our wildlife, and this is undoubtedly the most important decade for nature Conservation in our history. Internally, our financial sustainability is a big challenge for the Trust, with deficit budgets, cost of living crisis, high inflation and high competition for ever decreasing funds. So, we must operate within our means.

Externally, it's hard to look beyond climate change because that's the driver of so much change. But right this minute, the biggest challenge is the lack of political will to take the environment seriously. The best example of this apathy towards the planet is probably the Rosebank oil field. This decision isn't in the interests of the climate (and it won't affect supply or cost) – it is politically motivated, with a forthcoming election in mind. Yet Germany is planning to cut energy consumption by 26% by 2030 and they have passed a law to make it compulsory. If the Germans can reduce their electricity consumption, why not the UK?

**10. The news seems to be full of endless problems at the moment – should I remain optimistic?**

I completely understand the significant concern and frustrations regarding the state of nature in the UK. We live in one of the most nature depleted countries in the world and the recent State of Nature report showed that 1 in 6 species is now threatened with extinction. So, things in the UK are far from great; but there is hope, and the State of Nature Report gave some great examples of where positive action is leading to not just protection of species, but the restoration of species and habitats. You only have to look at what the Trust has achieved at Thameside Nature Park in Thurrock to get some much-needed inspiration. Here we are restoring what was North-West Europe's biggest landfill site into a wonderful nature park with iconic

species like adders, lizards, skylarks, peregrines, short-eared owls and bumble bees.  
We've gone from refuse, to refuge.