

**MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
HELD VIA ZOOM
WEDNESDAY 27th JULY 2022**

Present:	Randal Wilson Donald Rice Stuart Allison Albert van Dedem Maurits van Dedem Hendrick van Beuningen Aiden Bell Barbara MacDonald Glyn Robson	Chairman Dundonnell Eilean Darach Fannich Fannich Foich Inverewe Letterewe Lochluichart
In Attendance:	Ken Bowlt Caroline Cook Richard Cooke Ben McKeown	Secretary/Treasurer Bowls Chartered Surveyors ADMG NatureScot
Apologies:	Gordon Crawford Angus Davidson Ruari Matheson Jake Buckthorp Gary Ross Norman Kelman Andrew Oliver Kenny Ross Cieran Watson Kenny MacLean	Eilean Darach Fannich Fannich Foich Gruinard Heights of Kinlochewe Letterewe Lochrosque Forestry and Land Scotland Garve & District Community Council

I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Action

The Chairman, Randal Wilson (RW), welcomed everyone to the AGM. He explained that later in the meeting he hoped to be stepping back from the role of Chairman, but in doing so he wanted to reflect on the tremendous progress that the group and its members had made over the last 10 years. He highlighted that the Deer Management Plan (DMP) had been put in place, refined and revised from time to time, and we now have our web presence which hosts not only the DMP, but also our Minutes.

He emphasised that this hadn't been achieved by KSB's team and himself alone, but by a great deal of help from all of the group members in collecting data on habitat monitoring and deer population generally. We have been able to feed this back into our DMP Population Model, helping us all to make much more meaningful and collaborative decisions than we were able to before.

He/

He advised that as he steps back, he would like to think that the group can move forward and maintain the momentum which will be needed to face the challenges ahead and emphasised that it was vitally important that the group members give support to the new management/administration to ensure that this happens.

2. MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 16th JUNE 2021

2.1 Adoption

The meeting adopted the Minutes as an accurate record of the previous AGM, this being proposed by Barbara MacDonald (BM) of Letterewe and seconded by Hendrik van Beuningen (HvB) of Foich.

2.2 Matters Arising

There were no matters arising, it being agreed that all of the issues noted as being actionable in the previous Minutes had either been dealt with or would be dealt with through items on the Agenda.

3. DRAFT FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 30th SEPTEMBER 2021

The meeting shared the income & expenditure account for the year to 30th September 2021 and budgets for the years to 30th September 2022 and 2023 which had been previously circulated. KSB advised that the first column highlighted in yellow showed the actual figures for the year to 30th September 2021. To the right of that, shaded green, was the approved budget for the same period. What the figures showed was a saving of some £1,100, this reflecting the Covid experience of virtual meetings. In other words, savings had been made as a result of having virtual meetings.

4. BUDGET FOR THE YEARS TO 30th SEPTEMBER 2022 AND 2023

4.1 Budget

KSB explained that the third column shaded blue represented the revised draft budget for the year to 30th September 2022. He explained that the only difference between the revised budget for the year to 30th September 2022 and the earlier draft budget for the same period was that provision had been made for an element for taking on the new management arrangements and the role of facilitator, which added £1,100 to the costs.

KSB then went on to discuss the fourth column, also shaded blue, which represented the draft budget for the year to 30th September 2023. This budget reflected the new management/administration structure and costs associated with/

with it. This indicated an increase in the overall costs from around £8,000 to around £13,000.

There being no queries on the financials, the revised draft budget for the year to 30th September 2022 and the draft budget for the year to 30th September 2023 were approved by the meeting, proposed by Glyn Robson (GR) of Lochluichart and seconded by Donald Rice (DR) of Dundonnell.

4.2 **Members Subscriptions**

The meeting then considered the membership subscription schedule previously circulated and shared with the meeting. This schedule, showing total subscriptions of £6,924, related to the revised draft budget for the year to 30th September 2022 previously discussed.

KSB highlighted the earlier discussion about how the annual subscription should be apportioned between group members. He drew attention to the different coloured columns in the schedule, with the gray columns showing how the subscription had historically been apportioned; namely on the basis of stag cull for the previous season. He then drew attention to the columns coloured green which showed how the subscription would be allocated if it was to be apportioned on the basis of stags, hinds and calves culled in the previous season. Lastly, he drew attention to the yellow columns which showed how the subscription would be apportioned if it was done on the basis of estate area.

There was some discussion on this, with RW suggesting that he would be happy if the subscriptions were calculated on the average of the three methods. KSB drew attention to the column coloured blue on the right hand side of the schedule which showed the average of the three methods. GR of Lochluichart agreed with RW that the average would probably be the best way of doing this.

After the discussion, the Chairman asked the floor for a proposer and seconder for the change in methodology of apportioning the subscriptions and so the change to working on the average was proposed by Maurits van Dedem (MvD) of Fannich and seconded by GR of Lochluichart.

RW confirmed that, moving forward, the subscriptions would be apportioned and the demands issued on the basis of the average.

5./

5. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN**

5.1 **Review of Actions Arising from the DMP**

RW drew attention to the Schedule of Actions from the group's DMP which was shared on the screen. He reminded everyone that this schedule was updated following every group meeting and that the schedule had been updated 16 times since May 2016, keeping it as a live and working document.

5.1.1 Designated Sites

RW reminded the group of the plan target that designated sites currently described as “unfavourable” as a consequence of herbivore impact would have deer management in place to work towards favourable/unfavourable recovering status through the development of an action plan for sites in unfavourable condition, exploring funding options.

The Section 7 Agreement had been put in place between SNH/NatureScot to cover the areas within the Fannich Hills SAC and clearly the steps put in place had had a positive result. At the March 2022 meeting, Graeme Taylor (GT) of NatureScot was asked to confirm whether NatureScot were happy that the management of the Fannich Hills Section 7 Agreement area should revert back and be incorporated into the West Ross Deer Management Group (WRDMG).

Ben McKeown (BMcK) of NatureScot confirmed that NatureScot were indeed happy for the management of the Section 7 area to revert back to the WRDMG, this generally being welcomed by the affected members.

RW confirmed that the group had also committed, through the DMP to reviewing the status of all designated sites within the group area and to facilitate any actions that may be required. In this context, Barbara MacDonald (BM) of Letterewe advised that their voluntary Memorandum of Understanding with NatureScot would be coming to an end this year. She confirmed that NatureScot were currently undertaking surveys, although no results had been received as yet.

5.1.2/

5.1.2 Retaining Existing Native Woodland Cover

RW acknowledged the group's commitment to reviewing the condition of native woodland within the group's area and to facilitate any action that may be required to retain and improve the condition of the native woodland, exploring options for SRDP funding.

He reminded group members that this had been on the back burner for some time, pending the availability of a country-wide methodology for the survey work to be undertaken. RW was delighted to note in June 2021 that NatureScot had produced a methodology which was being considered by their Best Practice Working Group. At the group's last meeting in March 2022, GT of NatureScot confirmed that he would circulate a link to the draft methodology and invited all members to access it.

KSB confirmed that this had been received and had been circulated by email to all members.

RW queried whether anyone had used the methodology, with BM of Letterewe indicating that she was assuming that NatureScot would be using it for their survey work at Letterewe.

5.1.3 New Woodlands

RW reminded the group of the action whereby group members would be encouraged to explore the possibility of woodland expansion in the context of deer management group needs and that in the event of woodland expansion being undertaken by group members, consideration would be given to deer population levels via the deer population models. Regard to be had for any changes in range, forage and shelter.

At the meeting in March 2020, it was confirmed that the report produced by Dr Ben Lennon of Bowlts on woodland opportunities had been circulated to all group members. At the meeting in November 2021, GR of Lochluichart agreed to arrange for a plan of their new woodland to be sent to KSB, with all members being encouraged to keep KSB informed of any new proposals so that they could be incorporated into the group's plans.

Caroline/

Caroline Cook (CC) of Bowlts confirmed that she had received GR's plan of the new woodlands at Lochluichart and confirmed that when the DMP was updated, these would be incorporated.

Hendrik van Beuningen (HvB) of Foich advised that a new woodland was planned in 2023 on Foich and he would arrange for plans of the proposals to be forwarded to CC for incorporation in the group's plans.

HvB

5.1.4 Carbon Sensitive Habitats

RW confirmed the group's Action to consider opportunities and priorities for the creation and restoration of peatlands, identifying funding sources where possible, and further that the group would encourage members to minimise surface damage to peatland.

At this point in the meeting, CC shared the updated plan which she had produced showing peatland work undertaken by group members.

At the last meeting in March 2022, RW encouraged members to take advantage of the NatureScot peat wetland scheme and he was delighted to see this being put into effect by members.

Donald Rice (DR) of Dundonnell confirmed that he would forward data of the Dundonnell project areas to CC.

DR

5.1.5 Habitat Monitoring

RW talked about the Action within the DMP for improvements towards "good management" of each habitat and that once the means of collating, analysing and presenting the habitat impact data is available, the group will identify a sustainable level of grazing and trampling for each of these habitats. RW noted that these sustainable levels had previously been agreed.

The group undertook to map the grazing and trampling impacts, which had been done, and to agree necessary action.

It was noted in June 2021 that the three year Habitat Impact Assessments (HIA) on the original baseline sites were due, in the hope that the majority would be completed by the end of July 2021 with data being forwarded to KSB's office. It was further noted at the November/

November 2021 meeting that the three year HIA were due with a request being made for all data to be sent to KSB.

CC outlined whose data she had received and Stuart Allison (SA) of Eilean Darach confirmed that their data should be available shortly. HvB thought that the Foich three year assessments had already been done but confirmed that he would look into this.

HvB

It was also agreed that Mark Lorimer (MA) of Inverbroom would be asked whether their data was available.

CC

5.1.6 Deer Population and Population Model

RW talked about the Action within the DMP to develop/fine tune a simple population model based on local conditions to provide guidance on group and estate target cull setting over the long term. Everyone is now familiar with our population model, the group now being in the exciting phase of being able to input data and to use that collaboratively to set culls for the group as a whole and for each member.

CC loaded the population model on the shared screen and KSB took the meeting through the data.

KSB firstly drew the meeting's attention to the first tab "Density Model". On the top right hand side, there is a large grey box which sets out the general objectives of the model. This box shows within it the aspirational sporting cull of stags currently set at 400 per annum and a calving rate of 28%. This shows that if we are to have a stag:hind ratio of 1:1, if we have 3,000 stags and 3,000 hinds, that should result on average in a sporting stag cull of 400 beasts being available. If on the other hand, as a compromise, we have a stag:hind ratio of 1:1.25, this would suggest a requirement for 3,000 stags and 3,750 hinds, which taken with calves would total 7,800 animals in total. Thus, looking at the two stag:hind ratios, 1:1 and 1:1.25, this suggests that the total population might need to be within the range of 6,840 to 7,800 animals.

KSB then reminded the group that the last spring population count showed that there were a total of 9,134 animals, somewhat in excess of the requirements. The group's previous view was that there was scope to reduce the number of beasts on the ground overall, this giving those beasts on the ground better opportunity to flourish without prejudicing the sporting cull of stags that might be available. Therefore,/

Therefore, stag and hind culls had been managed accordingly with a view to bringing the population down a little, but not too drastically.

KSB highlighted the stag, hind and calf mortalities shown for each season. The group started off with stag mortality projected at 6% on average per year, hind mortality at 2% and calf mortality at 6%. As each year passed, these projected figures were replaced with actual figures and we now have actual figures obtained from the recruitment counts, which then allowed the population to be estimated using the 2018 spring count as the base level. Following this through, it would appear that the spring population should amount to around 8,344 beasts in 2022, providing the data that we had been entering is accurate.

CC then highlighted the figures obtained from group members for the 2022 recruitment count. No figures had been obtained from Dundonnell, Fannich, Heights of Kinlochewe, Inverewe, the Forestry Commission, Strathvaich or Tournai. Recruitment count figures had been obtained from Foich, Gruinard, Inverbroom, Letterewe, Lochrosque, Lochluichart and Strathbran. The conclusion from the data supplied suggested that on average, recruitment amounted to 24%. When this figure was entered back into the density model tab, this allowed us to arrive at the spring population number of 8,344.

The model also allowed the group to look at target culls going forward. CC switched the view to the “Cull Targets” tab and this broke the projected group cull down estate by estate. There was some discussion and it was noted that there were difficulties in applying these figures pedantically to individual estates and therefore an element of judgement has to be used, but overall the cull figures were sound.

RW invited BMcK of NatureScot to clarify where the group was in NatureScot’s helicopter count programme. BMcK confirmed that NatureScot should be able to count the group at some point in the next couple of winters.

SA of Eilean Darach highlighted their problem as a result of hitting the hinds hard in previous seasons as they ended up having to cull too many hinds according to the model. RW agreed that each estate had to consider carefully where their cull should be, but confirmed his view that the model gives a very good indication for the direction of travel with regard to cull levels. BM of Letterewe confirmed that last/

last year there were a lot of hinds on the ground at Letterewe and that their intention was to cull more, however during the last season, at a certain point, the hinds disappeared. This movement of deer during the seasons doesn't make life any easier and BM of Letterewe confirmed that they were considering a winter count as well as a summer count.

RW agreed that as deer numbers were being reduced due to the cull, there seemed to be a tendency for there to be greater movement within the population.

HvB of Foich mentioned the woodland felling on Foich and how the removal of shelter would impact on the deer population, meaning they would increase the stag cull.

5.1.7 Deer Welfare

RW highlighted the Action which provided for the group continuing to encourage members to provide appropriate data on mortality, recruitment and larder weights and for the group to review the data on a group wide basis and where appropriate feed the output into the deer management planning process.

He also acknowledged that this Action had been on the back burner for some time, given the group's reluctance to ask people to gather additional data, but RW suggested that it was now time for the group to pick this one up and move forward with it.

He acknowledged also that there was disappointment that NatureScot had not been able to come up with a simple way of analysing the data in order to provide an insight into deer welfare.

SA of Eilean Darach queried what the data might tell the group. RW suggested that whilst it might be difficult to extract meaning from the data in the short term, if each member gathered the data and this was collated year after year, the possibility was that it would give the group an idea on the welfare status of the herd.

Whilst dealing with the issue of deer welfare, BMcK of NatureScot mentioned Inverasdale Community Council, where there was concern at deer moving in from hill ground. Given the lie of the land, RW queried whether the National Trust could do more. Aidan Bell (AB) of the National Trust confirmed that there was a problem with deer/

deer getting into Inverewe Garden and that the National Trust were starting to work on that issue, and would intend to work out from there to the wider area.

BMcK of NatureScot confirmed that the whole peninsula is a problem in terms of deer numbers. In some of the villages such as Gairloch, a further problem is that some people want deer in their garden and some don't. Some people are even feeding deer in their gardens.

Richard Cooke (RC) of the ADMG said that it was not surprising that deer would move into an area with greater carrying capacity. He suggested that NatureScot may need to help with pulling together a concerted effort as the problem clearly lay outwith the WRDMG area and it would be necessary to pull together a meeting of all interested parties both within and outwith the group.

RW suggested that putting heads together would be a good idea and asked whether BMcK of NatureScot could try to pull things together in terms of organising a meeting, confirming that he (RW) would be very happy to attend the meeting, or at least to ensure that someone from the West Ross Deer Management Group was in attendance to assist.

BMcK

5.2 **Proposed Priorities for the Coming Year**

Following discussion, RW confirmed the priorities for the coming year as:-

- updating the DMP, the original of which ran to 2021 (this including the incorporation of the Section 7 Fannich Hills SAC plan);
- completion of the HIA and collation of the data.

5.3 **Budgetary Implications**

RW confirmed that CC and Linzi Seivwright (LS) would come back to the group with any budgetary implications in terms of the cost of updating the DMP.

5.4 **Funding**

It was agreed that there was nothing of note for the group, other than the funding available to individual members.

6./

6. **POACHING**

It was acknowledged at the meeting that poaching was not really a significant problem at the moment.

7. **ASSOCIATION OF DEER MANAGEMENT GROUPS (ADMG)**

RW thanked RC of the ADMG for kindly stepping in and attending the virtual meeting and asked him to update members on the activities of the ADMG over the last year.

RC confirmed that it was good to be back for a WRDMG meeting and advised that he had always considered the group as a good example of how a group should be run. He queried whether the group's website had been updated and RW confirmed that it had.

RC advised that the ADMG had met with the current Minister for Deer (Lorna Slater) who is a Canadian from the Rockies, who had been very interested in a recent site visit. The trip also included a visit to a deer contractor. RC explained that the Association wanted to make the Minister aware of the "common ground project" which indicates that although deer management, and in particular environmental bodies may have different interests, they also had a lot in common.

RC advised that at the end of August, the Association will organise a conference, part of which will be about working together, which is vitally important for deer managers and the other stakeholders such as foresters, environmental bodies and the like.

RC suggested that the red deer population in the open range are well managed and under control, with perhaps only a few exceptions. He said that his concern is the government buying into the idea of a "deer problem" as sold by the media. Ministers tend to listen to what is in the press and to react to it and this did not always reflect reality.

RC suggested that the problems that we have to deal with are not going away, only changing in character, and therefore there is much to do.

As to current consultations, RC mentioned land reform and biodiversity consultations where the Association would be responding on behalf of the industry. He reminded the group that the Deer Working Group Report's recommendations had largely been accepted by the government. A Deer Board had been appointed, with most of its members from public service. The Deer Working Group, which had been the task group appointed to report on the deer sector, no longer exists.

RC/

RC suggested that there is a lot going on and that his hope is that regulation, if it is to be brought in, which it probably is, has a light touch and that as much of the voluntary principle as possible remains.

RC expressed the view that the venison market is still disappointing, but improving, and it is good to see the Quality Assurance Scheme getting back on track.

In thanking RC for his presentation, RW suggested to the group that the common ground policy has to be a good thing and deserves our support.

8. **NATURESCOT REPORT**

BMcK gave the group a quick update. He mentioned the Strategic Deer Board, the appointment of which would have implications on the biodiversity strategy. By this, he meant more regular habitat impact assessments of various habitats and woodland and where 90% of plots would be expected to have only low impacts and 90% of woodlands to at least be in recovering status.

In concluding, he suggested that if anyone didn't have a deer cull return form, that they should get in touch with him.

9. **ELECTION OF OFFICE BEARERS**

Both RW and KSB stepped down to allow the group to consider the future management/administration. At this point, CC shared on the screen a summary of the future management preferences which showed that the vast majority of members were in favour of option 3; namely the appointment of Dr Linzi Seivwright (LS) to chair the group meetings, with Bowlts continuing to carry out their functions, it being acknowledged that KSB would step back a bit and CC would largely take over.

RW asked for a proposer and a seconder for option 3, this was proposed by GR of Lochluichart and seconded by BM of Letterewe.

BM of Letterewe asked that a note of thanks be accorded to both RW and KSB and his team for all the work that they had done which helped with the great progress made by the group over the last 10 years.

RC confirmed that he was very impressed with all the work undertaken, and in particular hoped that RW, although stepping back, would continue to play an active role in the deer management scene. RW confirmed that "we hadn't seen the last of him yet!"

10./

10. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There were no items of other business.

11. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

RW confirmed that LS/CC would revert to everyone in due course as regards a date for the next meeting.

RW closed the meeting, thanking everyone for their attendance.

KSB/AM WRD/03
4th August 2022