

**Wiltshire Wildlife
Community Energy**

LESS CARBON, MORE WILDLIFE



Wiltshire Wildlife Community Energy

Annual Report 2022-23

Annual Member Report

Note from the Chair

As chair of Wiltshire Wildlife Community Energy, everything the board and I do is guided by our two core principles – to promote the proliferation and protection of nature, and to reduce carbon emissions in Wiltshire.

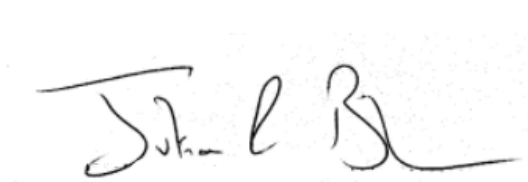
Our pursuit of improving biodiversity on our sites and beyond is led by Rob Gillies, and he will provide a fulsome update later in this report. However, from a personal perspective I have been delighted by the incredible array of species that have been spotted making our solar parks their home this year. We continue to collaborate with our partners at Wiltshire Wildlife Trust (WWT) to assess the positive impact that the solar panels installed on its buildings are having on its carbon emissions, and in the forthcoming year, Jessica Thimbleby our champion in this area of activity, is undertaking an audit of other sites within the Trust's estate which may be suitable for solar going forward. Elsewhere, plans for the proposed WWCE development at Petersfinger have now been submitted to Wiltshire Council and, after some weather-related delays, our rooftop scheme at Silverwood School is moving forward at pace. This is all hugely positive, and I am hopeful that we will see considerable progress in the months ahead.

I am similarly pleased that we have been able to extend our reach beyond our own hedgerows, by supporting other organisations who share our objectives via the Community Fund. This year, we have helped local schools to create wildlife havens and backed schemes which educate the next generation on the importance of protecting the natural environment, as well as providing vital grants for carbon reducing programmes like accessible cycle lanes in Chippenham. All of this serves to make Wiltshire a greener, cleaner place to live. Due to a positive PR campaign requests for funding have risen greatly and we have employed our enhanced income to support more projects, as Jon Bateman explains later in his report.

After much planning, WWCE launched its own energy advice service toward the end of 2022. The initiative sought to help people from some of Wiltshire's more rural communities to reduce their own carbon emissions and save money on their household bills, during what proved to be an incredibly challenging winter. Jessica Thimbleby reached 360 residents of Melksham, Purton, and surrounding areas with her sessions and was recognised by Secretary of State Michelle Donelan MP for its invaluable contribution. The response to the energy advice cafés was overwhelmingly positive, and we are in the process of mapping out plans for a new incarnation this winter. As well as supporting our stakeholders we also need to steward our finances and you will see from the finance report that we've gone from a £8k profit last year to a £7k loss this year. Since the operating profit was up by 4.9%, this change has arisen solely through increasing the members interest payment from 4.0% to 5.5% last year, as the interest on Triodos decreases due to loan payback. With the aim of increasing to 7% this year.

As the cost-of-living crisis continues, it is more important than ever that we share our good fortune and offer a helping hand to the people and projects that need it most. We remain committed to delivering a solid rate of return for our shareholders, while simultaneously ensuring that surplus profits are pumped back into the community. Thanks to increased visibility in the press, the last Community Fund call for applicants received a record number of responses, and so we will be increasing the money available to ensure a greater number of worthwhile projects can be brought to fruition.

Finally, I'd like to extend my gratitude to Russell Abbott, Jon Bateman, Lesley Bennett, Rob Gillies, David Lewin and Lucy Normington, my team of non-executive directors who, over the past year have worked on a pro bono basis. They together with Angela Newman, Jessica Thimbleby, Samantha Moore, and the operations team at Communities for Renewables make all our good work possible. Here's to another great year!



Julian Barlow – Chair WWCE



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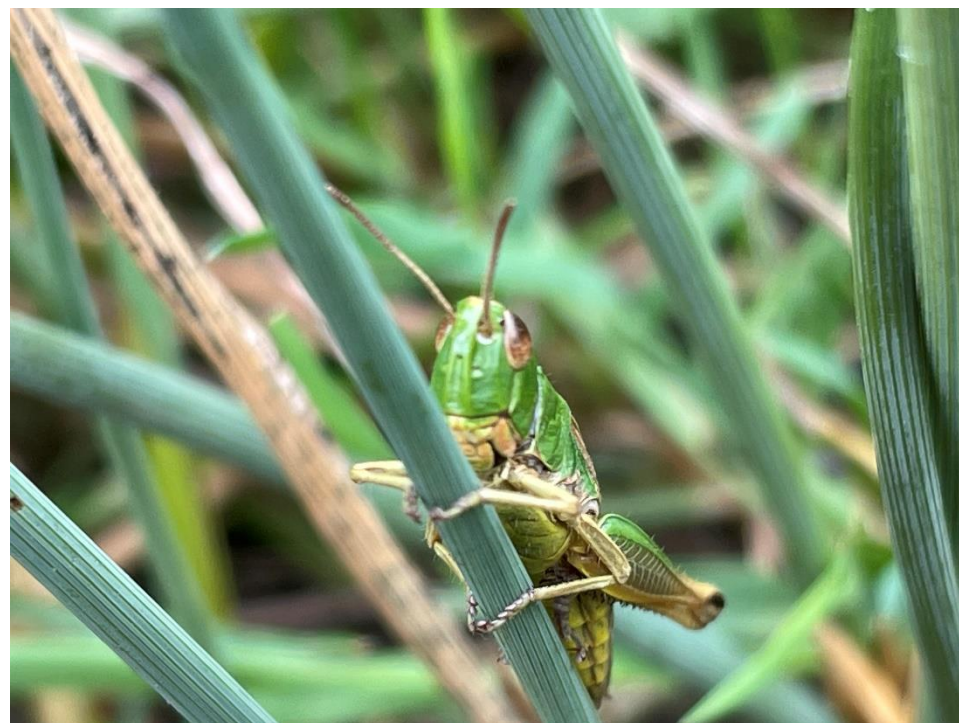
WWCE Group Financial Performance

Now in its seventh full year of operation, WWCE is pleased to continue to report a solid financial performance. The group's focus remains very much on its mission of 'less carbon, more wildlife,' whilst continuing to strive to maximise interest payments to members and community fund contributions.

The combined group revenue of £869k (2022: £808k) is a 7.6% increase on last year. Cost of sales remain in line with previous years. Administrative costs are 4.1% up at £537k (2022: £516k). The operating profit of £303k (2022: £289k) is a 4.9% change on last year's. Financing interest charges at £304k (2022: £281k) continue to decrease as we pay down the first of the Triodos Loans, and we continue to invite and pay back member shares in accordance with our share buyback policy on the website.

The group has made a small loss before tax for the year of £7k (2022: £8k profit), this is due to the increase in member interest payments made last year versus the previous year. We are expecting the forthcoming financial year to 31 March 2024 to be profitable for the group as the energy prices drive up our power purchase agreement (PPA) prices at both Braydon and Chelworth sites.

The group continues to be cash generative, and as we hope to achieve and maintain a 7% interest payment to members, we are also looking to achieve our long-term goal of 'less carbon and more wildlife' through driving new initiatives and increasing our contributions to the Community Fund so that the benefit of good financial performance can be felt more widely within the community.



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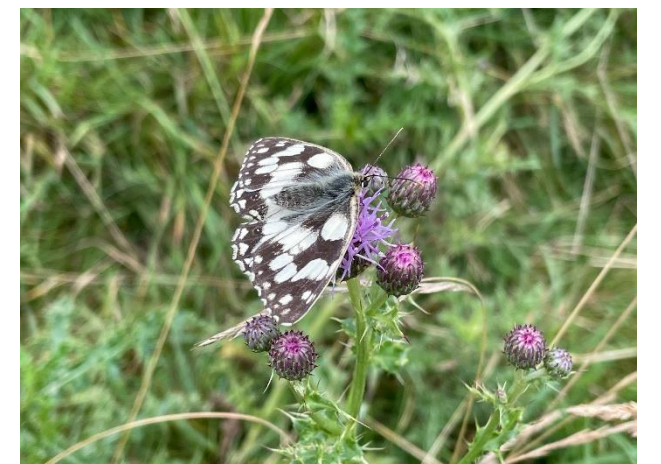
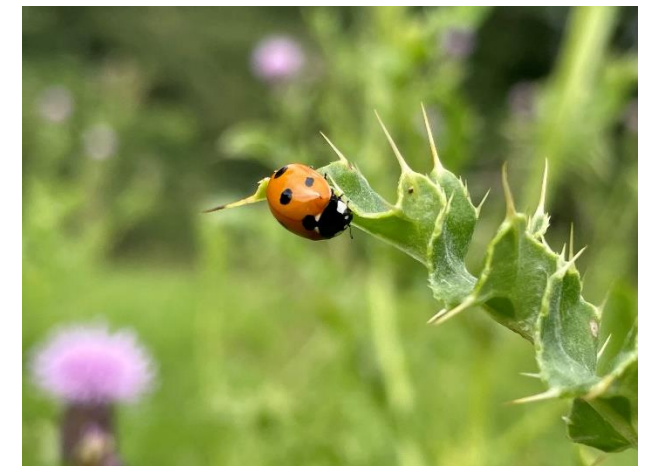
WWCE Land Management

We continue to carry out management activities on both our Braydon and Chelworth sites to encourage wildlife and enhance biodiversity where we can. We do this through proactive management of trees and hedgerows and grassland between and around the solar panels at both sites, and at Chelworth through the creation of habitats such as bug hotels, scrapes, hibernacula and a pond to support a wide range of reptiles, insects and other animals. This year we commissioned ecologists from the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust to carry out an assessment of the land management and ecological monitoring practices at Chelworth and a habitat baseline assessment at both sites. The assessment and habitat baselines will be used to refine the future land management plans and set a common baseline compatible with the new Biodiversity Net Gain scheme in England. Depending on the evolution of this new policy and biodiversity improvements on the sites it may be possible to gain BNG credits in the future.

The work provided some useful recommendations, based on how the two sites are developing over time, on how we can improve our ecological monitoring and management, particularly of the grassland. The findings of the Chelworth assessment included evidence that the land management regime is providing beneficial habitat for a range of common animal species. For example: the boundary habitats are particularly important in providing breeding habitat and a vital food supply in the autumn and winter months for a range of IUCN Red and Amber List bird species; the grassland is also used for nesting and foraging for a number of red list species. Monitoring data suggests that the hedgerow management has had a positive impact on endangered brown hairstreak butterfly populations with a site record number of eggs identified in the most recent survey in March.

At Chelworth our two beehives were set up with new colonies during the spring following the loss of the original colonies last year. These new honeybees will join the native pollinators who have been enjoying the nesting sites we have created around the pond in our wildlife area, foraging on the wildflowers blossoming amongst the solar panels and exploring the wider landscape of the neighbouring WWT nature reserve.

WWCE has participated as a panellist in two local discussions on the role of solar parks in increasing biodiversity; The first was hosted by Westmill Sustainable Energy Trust at the Westmill Wind Farm and Solar Park just north of Swindon, and the second by Bath & North East Somerset Council as part of its Festival of Nature. Both events were engaging and informative, with lively debate and insightful contributions from the panellists on the challenges and benefits of solar parks for nature. It's clear that there are concerns about the impact of solar on land use but there is a growing bank of research and practical local experience, including from our own sites, that where nature and biodiversity objectives are part of the management regime, good results can be achieved. At Wiltshire Wildlife Community Energy, we are always happy to share our experience of managing solar projects to enhance nature and biodiversity. Things don't always work as we'd hope (nature follows its own path!) but we are always learning.



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Community Fund

WWCE donates part of its annual operating surplus to the Community Fund for allocating grants to projects brought forward by local communities and voluntary organisations involved in wildlife conservation, climate change mitigation, carbon reduction and reducing fuel poverty. WWCE members can also donate their annual interest to the Fund.

The Fund is independently managed by a Panel comprising representatives from WWCE, WWT and their members and is administered by WWT. In addition to assessing applications and awarding funds, individual panel members liaise with project leaders, monitor progress and report to the Panel.

In September 2022, the Panel welcomed Ged Brockett as member from the WWT membership. Ged, a long-term member of WWT, was inspired by our Chelworth solar installation and is keen to promote community renewable energy. She brings valuable expertise in planning, project management and community participation. The panel continues to have a WWCE member vacancy and would be delighted to hear from any member interested in this varied and rewarding role.

After the 2022 AGM, WWCE paid £10k into the Fund which with funds brought forward, allowed a budget of £15k for the 2022-23 year. Throughout 2022-23 the Panel continued to promote opportunities for financial support to projects across Wiltshire and received several worthy applications, most of which after evaluation and clarification were awarded grants totalling over £15k. Allowing for a project that encountered unforeseen issues and became unfundable, the Fund's balance at 31 March 2023 was £4.3k. Many of these projects are highlighted in the map overleaf which shows the growing reach of WWCE's community involvement over the years.

The Panel has assessed all projects as worthwhile, but cash flow limitations has permitted only one project (bat and swift boxes in Cricklade) to be progressed with the remainder being prioritised and queued for funding as money becomes available. In view of Wiltshire's Climate Emergency status and in the light of WWCE's improved cash position following recent refinancing and higher electricity prices, the Panel requested WWCE Board to approve additional funding of £20k to bring forward these projects into the current year in advance of the members' resolution at the 2023 AGM. The directors have supported this request and it is hoped to formalise awards in the coming weeks. These projects, which include Community Energy, Cycleway Planning, Wildlife Enhancement, Access to Nature and Engaging Young People in Environmental Work, will feature in coming newsletters.

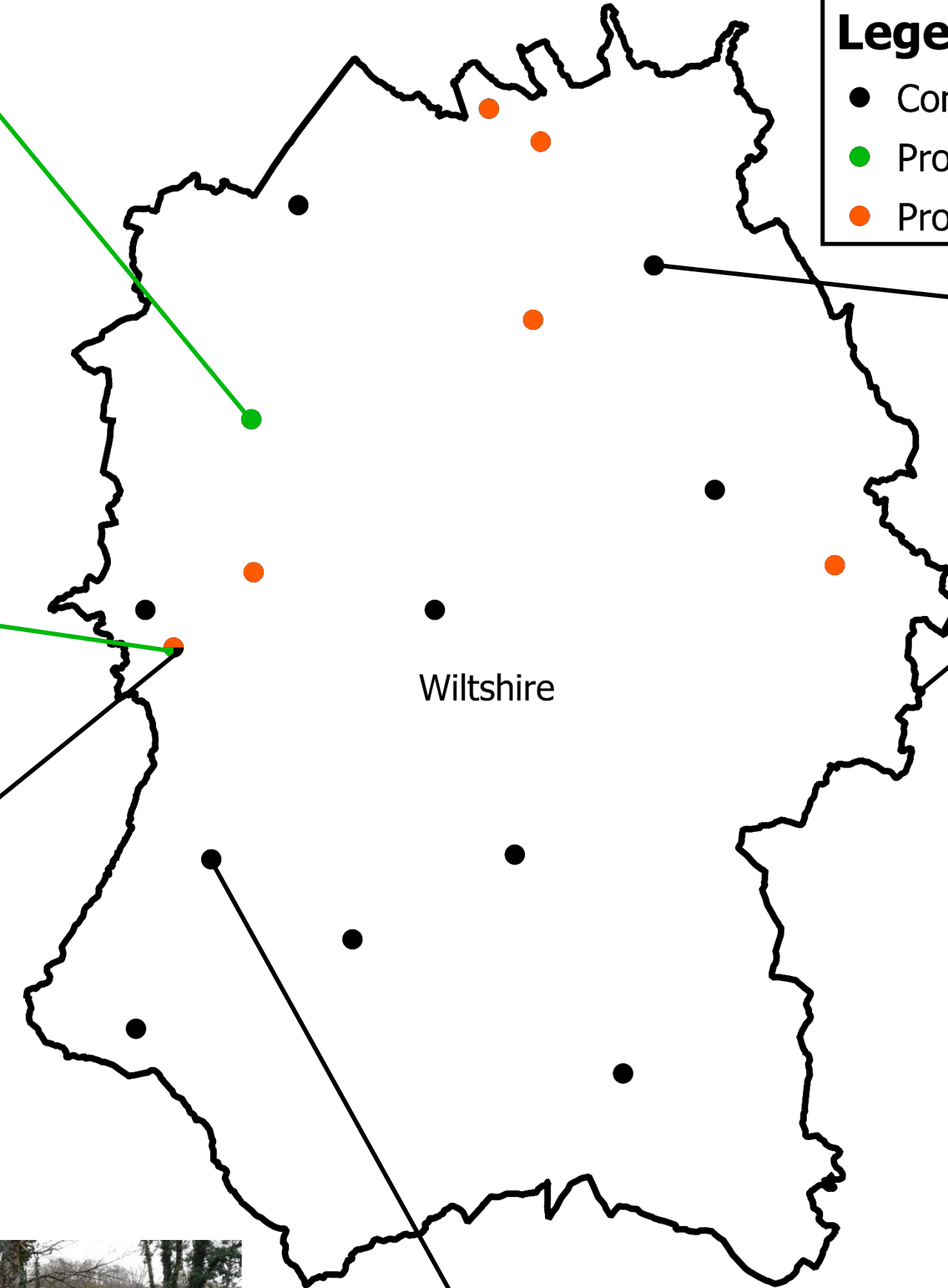
Also looking forward, the Directors believe that to extent achievable, the outcomes of Community investment can be better served by embodying WWCE's mission of "More Wildlife, Less Carbon" into the Community Fund's selection criteria. We believe members will support this move.





Legend

- Completed projects
- Projects in progress
- Projects identified for future funding



Cycle Chippenham - £5,000

This project funded measures for removing barriers and obstacles deterring people from cycling in Chippenham Town. Specific items included removal of chicane barriers, providing additional CCTV at a cycle parking area on Town Bridge to improve cycle security and helping creation of a new cycle route so cyclists can avoid busy roads.



Friends of Broadmead Pond, Trowbridge - £4,813 (over three seasons)

We awarded a grant to de-silt the pond over 3 successive years to help reduce water loss from the pond, reducing the need for tap water and improving water quality to create a sustainable habitat for wildlife and the protected Great Crested Newt population.

Holbrook Primary School, Trowbridge - £1,235 (Phase 2)

Taking their school wildlife and learning garden into the next phase, we funded development of the school's wildlife and learning garden by supporting an outdoor learning hut, enhancing the pond area into a peace garden, creating a bog garden habitat for reptiles and a pebble pool with a solar panel for a radial water feature.



Smallbrook Toad Patrol, Sustainable Warminster - £574

This small project funded Sustainable Warminster to preserve the substantial population of amphibians in the Smallbrook Meadows Nature Reserve area by recording and rescuing amphibians, raising awareness of amphibian deaths on roads and the importance of conserving them and their habitat.

Shaw Ridge Primary School PTA, Swindon - £1,050

This educational project aimed at increasing biodiversity in the school's newly created Community Unity Eco Garden by surveying and monitoring wildlife activity and sharing data with the school and local community. We funded two wildlife cameras, hedgehog houses, a bat detector and a display board made from recycled wood.

Splash, Youth Action Wiltshire (Wiltshire-wide) £2,500

'Out There' Project - providing meaningful, positive activity and respite days for young carers during school holidays. The grant supported over 80 young people facing challenges in their own lives by providing fun, educational engagement in and around nature at various venues across the county. Activities included river dipping, a day on the farm, survival skills, wildlife identification, shelter building and litter picking.

One Splash parent said, "She's really into protecting the environment and today you've helped her understand a bit more about how she can help and get her friends to help too."

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Carbon Reduction Champion

Following the creation of this role last year Jessica Thimbleby has been dividing her time between projects for WWCE and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust. During 2022-23 Jessica raised awareness of WWCE and the Community Fund within Wiltshire, at local events including ‘Think Energy Devizes’ in January 2023, organised by Sustainable Devizes’ Energy Group and part sponsored by WWCE. The main focus of her work at WWCE was to generate local benefits for Wiltshire communities by developing and delivering ‘Keeping Warm This Winter,’ a project to support households struggling with energy costs. This was a new venture for WWCE and couldn’t have been timelier.

Over the winter, Jessica organised 10 Pop-up Energy Advice Cafes in and around Melksham and 6 in the Purton area and spoke to 360 people, raising awareness and providing practical help and advice on the steps households, worried about energy costs, can take to reduce bills. The project was a close collaboration with local community groups and the cafes, providing a face-to-face opportunity to ask questions, enabled the project to reach people likely to be struggling to keep warm at home. Host groups included Melksham Foodbank, libraries, lunch clubs and Pip’s Community Café, home to Purton’s Community Fridge. Conversations covered topics such as draught proofing, heating a single room, energy use of different appliances and reducing damp, condensation, and mould.

The project attracted the attention of Chippenham MP and secretary of state for science, innovation, and technology Michelle Donelan, who visited a cafe at Melksham library to meet our Chair Julian Barlow and find out more. The project also benefitted from linking into the Centre for Sustainable Energy’s Rural Community Energy Support Network in Wiltshire and Swindon. Following its success, WWCE are keen to continue supporting households to reduce their energy bills and, in turn carbon emissions, and Jessica has been developing a continuation project for winter 2023/24.

Julian Barlow Chair of WWCE said, “the impact of Jess’s work in her first full year with us had been very impressive. Whilst she splits her time between serving the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and WWCE she has established a strong role in the region offering energy saving tips and advice. Anything that encourages the people of Wiltshire to save electricity also has the by-product of reducing our carbon footprint as a county. So not only is she saving money for residents but also contributing to reaching our net zero ambitions.”

“Nearly everyone learned new things and where to find the information. The practical displays piqued most interest, and conversations. That sort of thing doesn’t come over on paper. For our group, the informal session was exactly the right way to do it”- John, That Meeting Space



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Communications

Working in conjunction with our external communications consultant, WWCE’s comms team has had another productive year. Ahead of the launch of any new share offers for proposed schemes at Silverwood and Petersfinger, the team has been working hard to publicise WWCE’s Community Fund with a view to increasing applications, and to build background brand awareness by profiling our chair, Julian Barlow across social media and in the press.

The team has also continued to produce and issue quarterly newsletters for members, as well as regular blog style material for publication on the WWCE website, and opinion pieces for regional newspapers which included reaction to the Budget. In the year to 16th August, over 40 pieces of coverage have been recorded for WWCE in the press, featuring in titles such as: Salisbury Journal, Swindon Advertiser, Wiltshire Times, Warminster Journal, Yahoo! UK and Ireland, New Valley News and Swindon Link.

In advertising terms, this level of coverage equates to a spend of over £90,000. In total, more than three million people had the opportunity to see WWCE’s media coverage. By generating positive coverage of the enterprise and the great work being done by the Community Fund in particular, applications for grants have reached record numbers. As a result, we have been able to increase funding for community benefit schemes and will be able to support many more projects going forward.

Our own community initiative, the Keeping Warm This Winter programme, was also introduced for winter 22/23. It featured prominently in local publications as well as further mentions across partner organisation’s websites and social media. The initiative was recognised by local MP Michelle Donelan, who joined Julian Barlow and Jessica Thimbleby for the final session. As a result, Julian has been invited to attend the Secretary of State’s local business roundtable on behalf of WWCE in September.

WWCE is seeking to form useful partnerships with third party organisations who share our views and objectives, and to this end has recently joined The Climate Coalition. We hope to be able to utilise this relationship to our advantage going forward and will be looking for ways to work together. Similarly, WWCE has had a presence at several events this year, manning a stand at Wiltshire Wildlife Trust’s ‘Country Comes to Town’ event in May, and sponsoring and speaking at Sustainable Dezives ‘Think Energy’ events. Our land management lead, Rob Gillies was also invited to join the panels of regional debates concerning the ways in which solar parks can build in biodiversity. To support all this activity, WWCE has established a presence on LinkedIn and Facebook, as well as reserving a placeholder account on Twitter rival, Threads. Our LinkedIn page now has just shy of 100 followers, with one recent post achieving over 7,000 organic impressions (opportunities for people to see our post).



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Future opportunities

Petersfinger

We're pleased to report that good progress has been made in developing the community solar project at Petersfinger Farm, Salisbury since our last report. The project secured its right to connect to the electricity network, numerous studies have been conducted on the site to understand how the project interacts with the local landscape and ecology, and a 30-year project option and lease is due to be signed imminently which will enable the land to pass into the hands of the WWT should the project receive planning permission.

Great news, but there do remain some hurdles to cross before we can bring the project to life. WWCE are undertaking a contractor tender to complete our understanding of the costs associated with the project's connection to the Wessex Water treatment plant, and the project's economics. Our planning application is due to go live on Wiltshire Council's planning portal shortly, which we hope will be well received. We remain optimistic that the stars will align for this project and hope to offer members the opportunity to invest in another wildlife enhancing community energy project in late 2024. We'll be in touch to notify you when the planning application has been launched to request support for the project and will keep you informed as things progress.

Silverwood School

Formed in 2020, Silverwood School is a co-educational special school for children and young people aged 4-19 years with Campuses in Rowde (near Devizes), Trowbridge and Chippenham. Following the school receiving planning permission approval in late 2021 work started on a new classroom block, specialist teaching spaces and play areas. WWCE is partnering with the school to fund the construction of a 500kW rooftop solar array on the new buildings and to sell the generated green power to the school.

The construction work continued throughout 2022 with adverse weather in early 2023 resulting in a significant delay to the work programme due to flooding on site. As such, the new commissioning date for the rooftop solar array on the new school building roof is April 2024.

A community fund raise for the solar array is planned for early next year.

