

THE GUIDE DOGS FOR THE BLIND ASSOCIATION

MINUTES of the EIGHTY EIGHTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Held On Tuesday 19 September 2023

At 1.00pm At the National Centre, Banbury Road, Bishop's Tachbrook,  
Leamington Spa CV33 9QJ

<b>Members Present:</b>	Jamie D Hambro	Chairman, Member & Trustee
	David Adams	Member
	Jill Allen-King	Member
	Sandra Bannister	Member
	Alan Brooks	Member
	Catherine M Crofts	Member & Trustee
	Christiane A B Elsenbach	Member & Trustee
	Catherine Evans	Member
	Helen Farrow	Member & Trustee
	Sheila Foster	Member
	Joan Hattersley	Member
	Peter Hattersley	Member
	Lynne V Hill	Member & Trustee
	Richard Hummerston	Member
	Mark A T Johnstone	Member & Trustee
	David Mitchell	Member
	Patrick A Moran	Member & Trustee
	Jenny Pape	Member
	Gill Sheppard	Member
	Jane Sillett	Member
	Peter Sillett	Member
	Anne Skinner	Member
	Ranjit Sondhi	Member & Trustee
	Emma J West	Member & Trustee
	Brenda Wildish	Member
<b>In attendance:</b>	Chris Austin	Associate Director of Property & Workplace
	Sarah Bennett	Acting Chief Financial Officer
	Deborah Bourne	Director of Fundraising
	Helen Bliss	Director of Transformation
	Phillippa T Caine	Association Secretary
	Danielle Cranston	EA to CEO
	Neil Ewart	Guest
	Jon Farley	Director of Technology
	Roy Foster	Guest
	Emma J Foulds	Chief Marketing and Strategy Officer
	Angela Forrester	Guest
	Michael Hutson	Guest
	Sue Johnson	Guest
	Chrissie Kennedy	Internal Communications Manager
	Lisa Knight	Head of Community Fundraising
	Nicola Knight	Access Assistant

Claire Leech	Liaison & Special Projects Lead
Andrew Lennox	CEO Designate
David Maynard	IGDF Company Secretary
Phillipa Moran	Guest
Peter Osborne	Chief Operations Officer
Joanna Reckord	Assistant Association Secretary
Jane Richards	Guest
Charlotte Speedy	Head of Communications
Tim Stafford	Director of Canine Affairs
Angela Tuck	Guest
Kathryn Ward	Director of People
Tom C Wright	CEO

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**23/01 INTRODUCTION BY THE SECRETARY**

- a) Phillippa Caine opened the meeting by introducing herself, Jamie Hambro, Chairman, Tom Wright, Chief Executive Officer and Andrew Lennox, Chief Executive Officer designate. She thanked everyone for attending the meeting.
- b) She went on to explain the voting process and how questions would be managed at the end of the CEO's presentation.
- c) She confirmed that the meeting was quorate.

**23/02 CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME**

- a) The Chairman welcomed everyone to the Guide Dogs' 88th Annual General Meeting and thanked the Members for attending.

**23/03 APOLOGIES**

- a) Apologies had been received from David Anderson, Ron Arnott, Paul Baker, Mr T Chambers, Jacqueline Cook, Meggie Cumini, Rob Deakin, Marigold Deveson, Barbara Devlin, Christopher Dunston, David Evans, Joan Garrett, Bill Glover, Daphne Glover, Andrew Glynn, Arthur Graves, George Gurr, Ann Hales, Maureen Hammond, Christine Hankey, Rose Hewitt, Christopher Hilder, Jill Jackman, Mary Jobbins, Alison King, Hilary Leckie, John Murray, Anne Plimpton, Valerie Ray, Thelma Scott, Jean-Clare Schaur Miller, Kerry Small, Jennelle Tilling, Margaret Tyres, Frederick Vaughan, W A Vigés, Mrs B Walton, Audrey Ward, Barry Weatherill, Christine Wood, Mike Wroe, and David Wilson.

**23/04 CHAIRMAN'S REPORT**

- a) The Chairman delivered his annual report. He welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending. He acknowledged the dedication, commitment, and generosity of people, including Members, which had

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contributed to the achievements of the past year, enabling Guide Dogs to present ambitious plans for the continued recovery and growth of the guide dog service. He said that the impact of Covid had probably been greater and lasted longer than anybody had predicted, and he paid tribute to staff and volunteers for all they had done since the decision was made to reduce the breeding programme at the start of the pandemic.

- b) He went on to say that over £20M had been invested in 2022 to improve services, site infrastructure, and expand the number of puppies and operational resources to achieve future guide dog partnerships beyond pre pandemic levels. He mentioned the introduction of an in-house veterinary care provision and the expansion of support programmes and services.
- c) The Chairman said that the impact of the pause in breeding for 5 months in 2020 had continued in 2022, with only 387 new guide dog partnerships created although we were able to support over 4000 existing partnerships. He was pleased to report that recovery plans were starting to see results with puppy numbers increasing to 1217 compared with 967 in 2021.
- d) The Chairman drew attention to the opening of the Guide Dogs Academy in 2022, a brand-new training school for Guide Dog Trainers and Mobility Specialists. He reported that so far, 59 graduates had started working within the regional centres, with 110 more to be recruited in the next 3 years. There had also been investment in a new training centre at Redbridge, redevelopment at Leeds and a new site at Newcastle.
- e) The Chairman mentioned some of the many ways we had supported people beyond our core guide dog service, providing a critical lifeline to those experiencing sight loss. Over 1500 people participated in the newly launched sighted guide training and we supported 496 new My Sighted Guide partnerships. We provided 2500 iPads to young people with a vision impairment and over 6000 accessible CustomEyes books.
- f) The Chairman said that he was extremely grateful to the remarkable supporters who had enabled us to sustain our fundraising efforts and emerge from 2022 in a strong financial position despite the continuing impact of Covid and the cost-of-living crisis.
- g) The Chairman highlighted the results for last year and said that donations reached £53.7M, a slight decrease from the previous year (£54.4M in 2021), which he described as being not unexpected considering the cost-of-living crisis. Legacy income amounted to £65.9M compared with £77.7M in 2021, a fall he explained that we had anticipated due to an exceptional legacy received the previous year. Although total income of £141.6M was lower than the previous year (£153.0M), it remained stable despite the cost-of-living crisis and the macro-economic challenges. Total expenditure of £128.3M was just over £12M higher than the year before, reflecting the investment in our modernisation programme.

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- h) The Chairman provided an update on a significant change to the leadership of the charity and said that at the conclusion of this meeting, Tom Wright would retire as Chief Executive Officer to focus on his career as a Trustee and Chair of multiple not-for-profit organisations and a new executive role. He paid tribute to Tom Wright who had led Guide Dogs for 6 years with unprecedented investment into the future. He said that Tom's impressive track record included leading the organisation through the challenges of the pandemic while planning and delivering a major modernisation and transformation programme. This included substantial investment in digitalisation, launch of the Guide Dog Academy and the transformation of our vehicles. The Chairman expressed gratitude to Tom for his dedication and commitment to Guide Dogs. He said that he left behind a strong foundation for the future of the charity, and that his legacy could also be seen in the 30 puppies who would join the next generation of guide dogs thanks to Tom's vital role of volunteer as breeding dog holder. He was delighted that Tom and his wife would continue this vital volunteer role and thanked them for all they had done.
- i) The Chairman said that the Board of Trustees had appointed a new Chief Executive Officer, and on behalf of the Trustees, it was with great pleasure that he welcomed Andrew Lennox as Guide Dogs' new CEO. He said that Andrew had extensive experience of delivering transformation strategies and we looked forward to continuing our modernisation plans under his leadership.
- j) He went on to explain the changes to the Board of Trustees since the last meeting. Polly Williams had retired at the end of 2022 and Rob Deakin would be standing down at the end of this meeting. The Board and the organisation were grateful for their commitment and loyalty to the charity and the Board would miss their wise counsel and contribution at their meetings. He confirmed that we had welcomed four new Trustees in April 2023, Christiane Elsenbach, Helen Farrow, Patrick Moran and Kerry Small.
- k) He concluded by expressing his grateful thanks to everybody who had supported Guide Dogs during the year including donors, volunteers, and staff. He thanked Members for their time and wished them well.
- l) The Chairman invited the CEO to deliver his annual report.

**23/05 CEO REPORT**

- a) The CEO expressed his thanks to the Chairman and thanked everyone for attending.
- b) He said the past 6 years had been highly eventful in ways that nobody could have imagined but they had gone quickly. He reminded Members that the 'By My Side Strategy' was launched back in 2018. The plan was for 5 years which, in normal circumstances, enabled us to see the results of our changes/improvements, but the past 3 years had been anything but normal.

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- c) Following on from the Chairman's report, TCW also acknowledged the unprecedented investment in a modernisation programme across all areas of the organisation which the Board had approved. The most significant investment was in the guide dog service with a carefully planned programme to build capacity. The past 12 months had been focussed on recovery and this would continue next year.
- d) Echoing the words of the Chairman about the huge challenges faced by the organisation because of Covid and, particularly, the impact on our breeding programme when operations were paused for 5 months, TCW said these huge operational challenges had been well reported by guide dog schools throughout the world. Over the next 12 months, we would continue to focus on recovery, and he was pleased to report that we were making good progress with around 1300 puppies bred in 2022 compared with around 2000 in 2021 and 450 in 2020.
- e) TCW highlighted some of the measures we had taken to modernise and transform our key guide dog service and to increase our dog partnerships so that we could reach more people and enable them to live the life they chose. He explained that Guide Dog Trainers and Guide Dog Mobility Instructors underwent a long and rigorous training programme, lasting 4 years and therefore as we needed a more sustained approach to recruitment and training, we had developed the Guide Dog Academy. He confirmed that we currently had 233 technical staff in post with 110 more appointments planned during the next 3 years.
- f) TCW explained that, to support the work on developing a sustainable pipeline of qualified technical delivery staff, we had updated and improved the way we trained our dogs through the implementation of STEP and PREP, benefitting our dogs, staff, and volunteers with improved outcomes for service users. He acknowledged that there were some differing views about these new methods but, as members of the IGDF and ADI, we were fully committed to their ethical approach to training, with the emphasis on positive reinforcement and the well-being of the dogs at all stages of the process. TCW added that there was overwhelming scientific approval for Positive Reinforcement Training for being both ethical and effective. He said that training times were shorter meaning that dogs were ready to be matched more quickly. He said that STEP continued to evolve, and we would continue to review and improve the new methods of training.
- g) TCW reminded the Members that partnerships had fallen dramatically during the pandemic and the impact on the success rates of dogs fell from an average of 70% pre Covid to 50% during the pandemic which was due to limited opportunities for socialisation and the impact on training protocols. TCW was pleased to report that rates were recovering well and were now at around 60% and that continuing to improve success rates remained a key area of focus for our Operations team.

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- h) TCW acknowledged the huge support the organisation had enjoyed from volunteers for many years. He said that another effect of the pandemic was losing some experienced Puppy Raisers due to family circumstances or following a reassessment of their commitments post Covid. TCW said the whole charity sector had been impacted, with a loss of around 17% volunteers since the pandemic. He confirmed that there was a positive response to our media coverage earlier in the year with many people applying to become puppy raisers.
- i) TCW said that investment was underway or planned at a number of sites as the development and modernisation of the sites would support our growth plans long into the future, with improved capacity and facilities for staff and volunteers, training and looking after our dogs. There would be capacity for other mobility services for people with sight loss and more support available through expanding the team of Vision Rehabilitation Specialists to help people on the guide dog Ready to Train list. He said that two in-house veterinary clinics opened during the year, managing a range of treatments for our dogs at the National Centre and at the Reading Hub.
- j) TCW reported that, as part of our membership of IGDF (International Guide Dog Federation) we underwent a rigorous process of an external assessment in May 2023. The multi-day, multi-centre assessment process involved detailed evaluation of our written policies, facilities, vehicles, and observation of our approach to dog training, welfare, and client services. He was delighted to say that we had passed all 10 standards, without any issues being identified.
- k) TCW acknowledged that we had not met all the objectives of the 'By My Side' strategy due to the restrictions of the pandemic which had an enormous impact on our day-to-day operations, our breeding programme and the need to find alternative ways of working and supporting our service users for almost two years. He said that, in common with other assistance dog organisations in the UK and internationally, in many ways we were still coping with the substantial impact Covid had on our work, but it had been a privilege to lead the organisation through that and back into recovery. He said that as we navigated our way through the pandemic and the aftermath, he had been impressed by the creativity and determination of our volunteers and staff, the resilience of our service users who were a continuous inspiration, and our incredibly generous donors and volunteer fundraisers, without whom we could not fund and deliver our services.
- l) TCW did not deny that there was still some way to go before service users saw the full benefits of our investments, but Guide Dogs was well set, with the modernisation programme continuing, to recover from the pandemic and to continue to grow and to reach more people. He concluded by showing the video "Investing in Guide Dogs" which further demonstrated the transformational work that was underway and the substantial investment in our people, services and infrastructure which meant we would be in the strongest position possible from which to accelerate our

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guide dog service, extend our other services, grow our reach and awareness, thereby helping more people with sight loss live the life they chose.

- m) Tom Wright handed over to the Chairman who invited questions from the floor.

23/06 QUESTIONS

- a) *Sandra Bannister asked if there was a formal policy for keeping in touch with those who were waiting a long time for a dog to ensure that they did not feel as though they had been forgotten. She said that she was aware of the habilitation services offered but having a dog was more of a life choice.*
- i) Tom Wright said that Guide Dogs were very conscious that some service users had been waiting a long time and keeping in touch with people was a priority. He described the wide range of alternative services available and acknowledged that they were not necessarily a substitute for those people who wanted a dog. He confirmed that those people who have been waiting for a long time were prioritised wherever possible.
- ii) Peter Osborne confirmed that there was a formal policy for keeping in touch with service users who were waiting for a dog. He confirmed that contact would be made by Guide Dogs at least twice a year but often more frequently. He said that we had introduced a number of ways of maintaining contact with those on the waiting list, including contact through visionary specialists, regular communications and webinars; he confirmed that the next webinar would take place the following week. PO said that he would welcome any feedback and he encouraged anybody waiting, or anybody aware of someone who was waiting, to contact Guide Dogs to check that correct data preferences were in place.
- iii) Patrick Moran commented that his current guide dog would be retired at the end of the year, and he was being kept informed about his options. He said it was important for a service user to check that they have given the correct permission to Guide Dogs to contact them.
- iv) Jill Allen-King said that she had been a guide dog owner for 51 years and her latest dog was retired in June 2023. She asked how many people were on the waiting list and said that she would like an update on the 'My Sighted Guide' service as she was still waiting to hear about this service. PO confirmed that 1200 were waiting for a dog. He said that we were struggling to recruit volunteers for the My Sighted Guide service which reflected the volunteering challenge across all organisations.
- v) Catherine Evans said it was important for any contact between the charity and the service user to be tailored to the individual and in the appropriate format. She added that she felt the service user should take some responsibility for following up with Guide Dogs. She said she waited a while

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for a Sighted Guide but was now using the service and was very pleased with it.

- b) *David Adams said that it was encouraging to hear that Andrew Lennox, the new CEO, had a wealth of experience in the delivery of transformation strategies but he cautioned that transformation was not an end in itself. He felt that we needed to have a clear strategy and hoped that AGL would be focussing on dogs as the name of the charity suggested. He said that RNIB were very good at providing advice, and we should not be duplicating their efforts. He felt that the Trustees needed to take a fresh look at our strategy and decide that the money should be spent on dogs. We should be working with local societies to ensure that we did not duplicate their work.*
- i) Tom Wright emphasised the commitment to our dogs which continued to be our core service. He said that increasing dog partnerships remained our top priority and significant investment continued to be made in this area. He explained that the other services offered did not in any way impact our core canine services and production of our dogs. TCW said we were meeting our objectives of helping people who were blind and partially sighted through the services we provided to those on the waiting list and through our children and young people services.
- ii) Peter Osborne agreed that we should be working with local organisations to identify additional sources of support and to make sure we were not duplicating what others were providing. He said that he and several other members of staff were attending the Visionary Conference the following week to find out more about other local teams.
- iii) Brenda Wildish commented that the services offered by the RNIB were used extensively by some guide dog owners. She mentioned a dual system in the past whereby an owner would be matched with a replacement dog when their current dog reached around 9 years, so they received the new dog shortly after the current dog retired. She said she was aware of someone who had been waiting for 2 years.
- c) *STEP Training*
- i) *Alan Brooks said that he acknowledged all the work that was underway to rebuild the number of partnerships and to reduce waiting lists and he noted the increase of 70 new dog partnerships compared with the previous year. He made the following comments:*
- He questioned the increase of 70 new dog partnerships if productivity had increased by only 2%.*
  - He did not believe that there was any scientific evidence to support STEP and we should not be using STEP exclusively as our training method of choice. He said that STEP had limitations and increasing the success rate would not be achieved through STEP alone.*



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- *He said that staff were not being given the freedom to use other training methods alongside STEP.*
  - *He accepted that STEP had been introduced as the training method of choice and could not be abandoned at this stage, however, he felt that staff should be able to work flexibly and to use additional tools and skills in conjunction with STEP, as appropriate.*
- ii) Alan Brooks went on to request that a vote of no confidence in STEP be put to the Members, with staff given the authority to adopt a more flexible approach to training and to use additional methods alongside STEP, as appropriate. Phillippa Caine, Association Secretary, explained that, under the Companies Act, it was not possible to put an additional resolution to Members at the meeting today. Only resolutions which had been included in the Notice circulated to Members within the stipulated timeframe, could be put to Members today. She explained that a Member would need to give appropriate notice of a resolution in accordance with the Constitution and the Companies Act.
- iii) TCW acknowledged that there were differing views about STEP. He explained that our training methods followed the guidance of the International Guide Dogs Federation (IGDF) and Assistance Dogs International (ADI). He reiterated that we had recently undergone the IGDF assessment process and had achieved accreditation with no issues raised in any areas. TCW said there was no evidence that STEP trained dogs were less effective than traditionally trained dogs and we were constantly monitoring and learning. TCW added that Tim Stafford recently presented to an audience of international specialists in Canada and received a standing ovation. Alan Brooks suggested that the audience were applauding the delivery of the presentation rather than the facts, adding that the audience were not dog training specialists.
- iv) Jenny Pape said that she was not opposed to positive reinforcement and her view was that we had always used that approach in training our dogs. She said that she used positive reinforcement in the form of praise when training her first dog and that this had been fundamental to the success of the training. She added that she felt very upset to hear the suggestion that guide dog owners would want to be cruel to their dogs, she thought we were leading the way with our training.
- v) Catherine Evans commented that a lot of people were frightened of change and were not keen to engage with new training methods but this should not stop the charity from adopting more up to date methods.
- d) *Jenny Pape acknowledged the huge loss of volunteers. She said that the results of a recent volunteering survey indicated that 65% of empty nesters, that is, parents whose children had left home for University, would be interested in exploring some form of volunteering. She suggested that we investigated this group of people as a possible source of volunteering. She also thought that we should be changing the ethos of*

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*branches to make them places where everybody involved with Guide Dogs could come and feel connected to the organisation, not just fundraising volunteers. Everybody should feel connected to the organisation through the branch, and she extended an invitation to those local to Reading to attend the monthly coffee morning hosted by her branch. She also mentioned a picnic that had been organised recently at Hillfields to thank volunteers. She said that some puppy raisers were very upset to be told they could not bring their puppies to the event. She felt we should be looking for opportunities to bring all volunteers and dogs together to thank them. Finally, she reiterated her comments from the previous meeting that we should try and overcome the data protection issues so that people outside of fundraising could be included. Phillippa Caine explained the challenges to this but confirmed that work was underway to resolve this challenge.*

- i) Tom Wright agreed that cross volunteering was critical, however, he explained that if an individual had not given express permission under GDPR, we could not contact them. He said that another challenge had been having different databases for different groups of volunteers; although this was in the process of being resolved.
  
- e) *Linda Hole commented that she had been a puppy raiser for many years and currently had her 43rd dog. She said that Kallidus which was used for online PREP (Puppy Raising for Excellent Partnerships) training was difficult to access and difficult to navigate without a contents page or index. She asked if it would be possible to have a contents page/index and a hard copy instead of the online training.*
  - i) Kathryn Ward agreed that Kallidus was not the most user-friendly system although she hoped that the recent updates had made it easier to use. KIW undertook to investigate how we could make the online training more user-friendly and offer a printed version as an alternative.
  - ii) Peter Osborne added that the PREP content was currently being revised and that a shorter, more flexible and better indexed version would be available in the coming months.
  - iii) Tom Wright acknowledged the huge contribution Linda Hole had made to the charity as a puppy raiser to so many dogs that would go on to train to become guide dogs. He thanked her for all she had done.
  
- f) *Neil Ewert, a guest, said that in his view, the training managers were the greatest problem. He said that, in the past, trainers used to train 10 to 12 dogs per annum and the success rates in residential centres was 80%. He said we should look at why success rates were much higher in the past and we should learn from past success. He said it was inevitable that trainers would sometimes make mistakes, but trainer error was never given as a reason for failure these days.*

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- g) Gill Sheppard and Neil Ewart left the meeting.

*Brenda Wildish said that the food incentive was a cause of great concern for some guide dog owners: for instance, there were practical difficulties in fumbling for a treat at the same time as carrying a bag of shopping. She was also concerned that puppy raisers were now sometimes being expected to carry 16-week-old puppies. She repeated the request she made last year for puppy raisers to be able to use a puppy sling. She also felt that puppy raisers were being expected to do more these days, with some keeping their puppies for 18 months.*

- i) Linda Hole said she had experienced some issues with the food rewards used during training. She explained that in the past, dogs always returned to the owner in response to a whistle, but they did not always come back these days if they knew they would not be receiving a treat.
- ii) Peter Osborne undertook to investigate the H&S implications of using a baby sling.
- h) The Chairman thanked Members for their questions and for the comments and points raised. He assured Members that these would be investigated by the Executive Directors and that a response would be shared with the Members. He moved to the formal business of the meeting and announced each resolution, as set out in the Notice of the meeting.

**23/07 ORDINARY RESOLUTION ONE**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 20 September 2022 were a true reflection of the meeting and that they should be signed by the Chairman.

**23/08 ORDINARY RESOLUTION TWO**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that the Report & Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2022, which had been circulated to the Members in advance of the meeting, be received.

**23/09 ORDINARY RESOLUTION THREE**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that BDO be appointed as auditor of the Association and that the Board should determine the remuneration of BDO.

**23/10 ORDINARY RESOLUTION FOUR**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Paul Baker be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.2.

**23/11 ORDINARY RESOLUTION FIVE**

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- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Lynne Hill be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.2.

**23/12 ORDINARY RESOLUTION SIX**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Mark Johnstone be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.2.

**23/13 ORDINARY RESOLUTION SEVEN**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Jennelle Tilling be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.2.

**23/14 ORDINARY RESOLUTION EIGHT**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Emma West be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.2.

**23/15 ORDINARY RESOLUTION NINE**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Mike Wroe be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.2.

**23/16 ORDINARY RESOLUTION TEN**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Christiane Elsenbach be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.7.1.

**23/17 ORDINARY RESOLUTION ELEVEN**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Helen Farrow be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.7.1.

**23/18 ORDINARY RESOLUTION TWELVE**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Patrick Moran be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.7.1.

**23/19 ORDINARY RESOLUTION THIRTEEN**

- a) **IT WAS RESOLVED** that Kerry Small be re-elected as a Member of the Board in accordance with Article 3.7.1.

**23/20** Having concluded the formal business, the Chairman thanked everyone for attending and for their participation and he declared the meeting closed.

**23/21 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

- a) 17 September 2024

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