

17ii	To prepare a request to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council for the maximum precept of £215,678 for 2024/25.	Clerk	Complete
------	--	-------	----------

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

Minutes of a meeting held in the Rackliff Centre on 25th January 2024 at 2pm

PRESENT:

Cllr Martin Brice
Paul Burnett
Ewen Cameron
Amii Errington
Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall (Outgoing Chair)
Chris McHugh
Cllr Nicholas Pope (Incoming Chair)
Cllr Jayne Sharratt
Clare Sinha
Cllr Pamela Wilkinson

ATTENDING:

Daniel Colborne (Ranger)
Gemma Stapeley (Clerk)
Clive Evans (Friends of the Commons)
Cllr Paul Gripper (Rusthall Parish Council)

OBSERVING

David Clover
Anthony Pawson (Friends of the Commons)
Joy Podbury (Friends of the Commons)
Neil Spalding (Freehold Tenant)

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. DECLARATION OF BUSINESS INTEREST

There were no business declarations.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies were received, Corin Thoday was absent from the meeting.

3. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

In accordance with the third Schedule of the County of Kent Act 1981 it was noted that the Conservators are required at the first meeting held on or after 1 January each year to appoint a Chair for the ensuing year. Conservators agreed that Cllr Nicholas Pope, representative of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, be appointed as the Chair until the quarterly meeting of the Conservators in January 2024.

Cllr Nicholas Pope continued as Chair.

The outgoing Chair, Ian Marshall, was thanked for his service during the last twelve months.

4. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 19th October were considered and approved. A copy to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

5. MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The minutes of the Committee meetings held since the last quarterly Conservators' meeting on 6th November 2023, 11th December 2023 and 8th January 2024 were considered and approved and would be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

6. MATTERS ARISING

S106

The Clerk confirmed that the S106 funds had not been allocated to any particular projects, other than to cover the costs of the high value tree survey and associated works.

Fir Tree Road car park ditch and bund

In the 6th November Committee meeting, the Ranger had an action to prepare a project proposal for a ditch and bund at Fir Tree Road car park. In the 8th January meeting, the action was deferred to later in the year due to resource constraints and to ensure newly discovered gas pipework could be accommodated.

Fairground car park lighting

SLacey chased the removal/switch off of the temporary flood light, which was now not necessary due to the installation of the new lighting. IMarshall asked if the installed electric cabling for the potential third set of lights could be tidied up.

Action: PBurnett to organise for the temporary flood light to be turned off and or removed. PBurnett to organise to survey the lighting in the car park at night, to establish if a further set of lights is required.

Linden Park Cricket Club cafe proposal

No response from the Club to the Clerk's collated Conservator questions, sent in November 2023.

7. MEMBERSHIP

The under mentioned Conservators were appointed by the bodies specified to serve for the period indicated.

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council – one-year term end 31 December 2024

Councillor Martin Brice
Councillor Nicholas Pope
Councillor Jayne Sharratt
Councillor Pamela Wilkinson

Freehold Tenants – 3rd year of three-year term until 31 December 2024

Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall
Chris McHugh
Clare Sinha

Manor of Rusthall – 2nd year of three-year term until 31 December 2024

Paul Burnett
Ewen Cameron

Amii Errington
Corin Thoday

8. RISK MANAGEMENT

Accidents

Since the last meeting in October 2023, there have been no reported accidents.

Incidents

- Graffiti on several bins on TW Common, removed by Ranger.
- January 8th, collapse and fatality on Tunbridge Wells Common. No further information available.

Campers

In the last quarter:

- Small tent on Rusthall Common.

Fly-tipped waste.

In the last quarter:

- General rubbish including fabric, crate and bottles on Racecourse.
- Metal chair on Eridge Road.
- Fabric black sacks on Hungershall Park.
- Trolley behind Wellington Rocks toilet block.
- Heras fence panel on Tea Garden Lane.
- A mattress on Castle Road.
- Black sacks and grout bucket on Castle Road.

Complaints

There were no recorded complaints in the previous quarter.

Risk Register

While the Clerk reviews the Risk Register quarterly, the annual review for Conservator approval will be completed for the 25th April 2024 full meeting.

Insurance claims

There are no active insurance claims. The insurance policy was renewed on 1st January 2024, with Zurich.

9. CLERK'S REPORT

Volunteers

There have been Saturday volunteering sessions on the Commons on 28th October, 2nd December and 6th January. Since 10th January 2024, weekday Ranger volunteer sessions are taking place every Wednesday morning and are run by the Ranger but organised by the Clerk. This has meant that the Ranger's time is much more efficiently used and more coordinated work, as directed by the Ecological Management Plan (EMP), can be completed.

S106 – Requests and current status

As an update this is the current status of our requests:

Date Requested	Property	Number of dwellings/increases in dwellings	Amount requested	Latest update
18/03/2022	WA Turners (22/00238)	94	£18,800	Pending decision.
23/05/2022	Beechcroft Eridge Road	40	£8,000 (+£42,000 contribution)	Funds are now in the bank account.
11/07/2022	Showfields Estate (22/01576)	36	£3,377.75	Application pending decision. Email from R Hazelgrove on 22/02/2023 re adjustment to S106 from £7,200 originally requested
05/09/2022	Cinema Site (22/02304)	166	£33,200	05/01/2023 application approved. 27/11/23 notification of developer's intention to commence in January 2024.

Treasurer recruitment

Following the resignation of Alan Leale-Green, the Clerk is currently working to recruit a new Treasurer. The role is advertised on our website, has been posted on Facebook, advertised on the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) weekly update, all volunteers in the email distribution list have been contacted and various other contacts have been asked whether they are interested or know someone who might be interested. There has been one application for the role to date.

Ecological Management Plan (EMP)

The final versions of the documents have been received and distributed to all Conservators, for adoption at the meeting. A very successful workshop, led by Kate Ryland, for Conservators and other invited interested parties took place on 6th December. The session clearly demonstrated the level of Conservator interest and enthusiasm for the plans.

As a result of discussions, the Clerk and Ranger have drafted EMP work schedules to detail how the prescriptions in the plans will be implemented. At this early stage the work schedules are a review of the work completed in the previous quarter and plans for the quarter ahead. In time they will be populated to explain plans for the remainder of the year. The documents will be presented to Conservators at each quarterly meeting for approval and act to mitigate risk in the event that the Ranger is unavailable for work. Later in the meeting the Conservators requested that the two work schedule documents be merged into one document for ease of understanding.

Projects Group

Project proposals were submitted and approved by the Freehold Tenants, to be discussed later in the meeting. Discussions are underway with the Friends of the Commons, as they will be approving project funding at their Committee meeting on 28th January 2024.

Planning – Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

As an update since the last Clerk's Report:

- Legislation will be released on 12th February 2024.
- The Local Authority should be actively encouraging landowners to register to demonstrate local demand and the range of habitat types for replacement or uplift.

- There is no set rate for units. This is worked out on a case-by-case basis (role for consultant) using costs for enhancing the land for 30 years, remediation if it goes wrong, inflation, price of having the land locked in, etc.
- There are no costs to registering as an offsite BNG provider.
- In Kent there will be a Kent County Council (KCC) registration system for prospective sites

It was agreed that the Clerk would register the Commons as a prospective BNG offsite provider. By registering, developers, KCC and TWBC will be made aware of our interest, giving time for legislation to be in and more thorough discussions of the costs, benefits and realities to take place.

Action: The Clerk to register the Commons as a prospective BNG offsite provider on the KCC system.

Funding

The Ranger's application to the Sussex Lund, to fund a three-year project to improve the biodiversity, aesthetic appeal and safety of the Victorian Terraces area of Tunbridge Wells Common was successful.

Waste collection and disposal.

There are two contracts for managing the waste generated from the Commons; the litter bin servicing contract, currently with LML, which requires the emptying of the individual litter bins into the large 1100 Litre bins and the waste disposal contract, currently with Countrystyle, to empty and dispose of the waste from the large 1100 Litre bins.

The litter bin servicing contract expires at the end of March 2024 as such the Clerk is conducting a re-tendering exercise for a like for like contract (with minor amendments), with the tender being publicised from 16th January 2024, with a deadline of 26th February for submission.

Flooding and drainage

The Ranger has prioritised time spent on small scale drainage mitigation work on Tunbridge Wells Common, to temporarily hold water to prevent the river Grom being overwhelmed during storm events.

KCC Highway's Asset Management Team have confirmed the closure of Fir Tree Road from 29th January for up to 6 weeks, while they restore and rework the drainage system. The same team have suggested that drainage works on Major York's Road will commence (phased project) during the Summer of 2024.

A member of the KCC Flood and Water Management Team met with the Clerk and Ranger on TW Common on 5th January to discuss the Ranger's observations during storm events, his existing work on mitigation and his ideas on further mitigation. KCC have appointed Waterman Infrastructure and Environment Ltd to conduct a feasibility study on the Commons which involves developing a hydraulic model for the Commons area to better understand the flow pathways and current drainage systems in place. KCC will then use the hydraulic model to inform possible options to reduce flood risk in the area. Officers are pleased that although slow, some progress is being made.

Other

- The Langton Road speed reduction plans have had a setback, with a rejection from KCC. The Clerk and Ranger are working with Rusthall Parish Council to consider an appeal.
- The review of posts and bollards has commenced with survey recommendations being implemented by the Ranger.
- The Clerk continues to meet monthly with William Benson to exchange news and other relevant information.
- An oak tree to commemorate the King's Coronation was planted on Tunbridge Wells Common as part of a ceremony organised by TWBC.

- Discussions have continued with TWBC and their consultants from PJA on the proposed cycle path from Langton Green to Tunbridge Wells.

Action: The Clerk to set up a PO Box as the official address for the Commons Conservators.

Requests to Conservators

Since the last meeting on 19th October 2023 there have been no requests to Conservators.

10. ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT PLANS AND WORK SCHEDULES

The Ecological Management Plans were formally adopted by the Conservators, to be balanced with access, amenity and affordability within the budget. It was requested that the work schedule documents be collated into one version for both Commons. Conservators agreed that the final EMPs should be made available on the website.

Action: The Ranger to collate work schedule documents.

11. RANGER'S REPORT AND FINANCIAL WORK PLAN

Trees:

Ash dieback

Ash dieback continues to be closely monitored, with the main focus continuing to be the roadside trees on Rusthall Road, Langton Road and Coach Road. The Conservators agreed to contract with Gimbles to remove eight diseased ash trees at a cost of £3,000 and a further £2,000 was approved for ash dieback mitigation works, identified as part of the winter tree safety survey.

Other Trees (not Ash)

The Ranger has completed the autumn/winter tree safety survey and has identified mitigation work up to an estimated £8,000.

With a total of £13,000 required to be spent on tree works during Q4, the Ranger advised Conservators that the tree budget could go over budget by up to £7,400 (without taking into consideration any more unexpected major failures that might require contractor assistance because of further storm damage). It should be noted that the Treasurer highlighted in his Finance Report (for the period up to 30th September 2023), that the Ranger may need to request permission to make use of the under-budget amounts in the short grass and grass and cleared areas budgets in order to deal with the costs associated with Q3/Q4 (autumn/winter) tree costs. As such, Conservators agreed that the over-spend on trees for Q4 could be covered by the under-spend in other areas.

The Ranger highlighted that during the prolonged wet and stormy weather over Christmas, emergency work to clear trees that had collapsed over paths had been completed in house, no emergency contractor costs were incurred during the period.

High Value Trees

The Committee approved the appointment of Living Forest to carry out the high value tree survey, which took place in December 2023. The report has now been received and the recommended works are currently in the process of being scheduled into future plans and budgets. The survey and recommended works are being funded by S106 funding (Beechcroft).

Ecological Management Plans (EMP) work schedules

Conservators approved the works planned as set out in the EMP Work Schedules and Financial Work Plans for this quarter.

12. FINANCE REPORT

Accounts

Alan Leale-Green is providing interim Treasurer support, until such time as we recruit a new Treasurer, for the meeting he provided a report on the financial accounts for the nine months to 31st December 2023.

On 31st December 2023, the Conservators had £200,000 in cash at the bank of which all but £700 was on deposit. This is £68,000 more than this time last year.

Maintenance of the Commons expenditures was £27,800 under budget and expenditure in total was £31,100 under budget, including the contingency budget.

Budget for 2024/25

In addition to the finance report, Alan Leale-Green had provided a document with considerations for the 2024/25 budget. It was agreed that these discussions and decisions would be delegated to the Committee, prior to a draft budget being presented to the Conservators.

13. UPDATE FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE COMMONS

APawson provided an update from the Friends in advance of the meeting:

Memberships

The current memberships stand at 500.

Projects for 2023

Funding has been provided for new tools for the Ranger, a clearance on Major York's Road and a contribution of £2,000 towards the van for the Ranger's use.

Events

60 Friends attended a lunch at the Spa Hotel on Sunday 19th November. An event to thank volunteers will be organised for later in the year.

Other

CEvans made a request to replace the tree planted in memory of Patrick Shovelton, as the tree was not successfully moved last year and had subsequently died. The Conservators agreed.

Action: The Ranger to order, purchase and plant a replacement tree.

14. MARKETING AND PR REPORT

The report highlighted that there had been one press article in the last quarter, on Kent Live.

The Facebook group now has 2,131 members with monthly reactions from members between 1,247 and 2,413. The most popular posts, during the quarter, related to:

1. Deer found dead alongside Langton Road.
2. Contractors working to remove young sycamore, holly and birch along Major York's Road (descended into discussions with John Harvey).
3. Ranger working on drainage ditches.

4. Deer on the Commons.
5. Clearance on Major York's Road, images.

The Instagram account has 505 followers, while the website has monthly users of between 335 and 859. Two blogs had been published during the last quarter which had both informed and pushed visitors to the website.

15. TREE MANAGEMENT POLICY

The policy was presented to the Conservators and approved.

Action: The Clerk to add the tree management policy to the website.

16. SHORT GRASS CUTTING CONTRACT

The Ranger is working with the Committee to agree the details of the tender and the proposed contract. The Committee have requested further work be undertaken by the Ranger with zoned maps for all areas to ensure that the optimum level of detail and maximum efficiency from the new regime is documented and approved. It was noted that there are a number of discrepancies between the 2018 contract and what is currently cut by Bridgland.

17. EXTERNALLY FUNDED PROJECTS

Sussex Lund

The Ranger gave details of his successful application to the Sussex Lund to fund project work on the Victorian Terraces. The Conservators gave approval for the project work.

Freehold Tenants

IMarshall gave details of the projects that the Freehold Tenants had agreed to fund:

1. St Helena - Restoration of views of the Rocks from London Road.
2. Mount Edgecumbe Rocks - Feasibility Study for Restoration of Historic Pond.
3. Wildlife Scrape at (Rusthall Village) end of the Tarry Path.
4. Restoration and installation/improvement of the existing 'path' from the Langton Road through to the Beacon.
5. Eales Terrace phase 2 (towards Apsley Street).
6. Happy Valley Vistas Improvements/ Restoration.
7. Improve aesthetic quality and wildlife value of Bumps Path towards Tarry Pond.
8. Laurel eradication.

The Ranger was asked to review the route of the path extension, listed as project 4.

The Conservators gave approval for the projects.

Action: There was a request from Conservators to take part in project site visits to better understand the planned work, the Clerk to organise with the Ranger.

18. ANNUAL REVIEW FEEDBACK

The Committee and Officer team held an annual review meeting on 9th January, to look back over what has gone well and less well in 2023 and to identify where focus should be directed in 2024.

The suggested priorities for 2024 are as follows:

- Ongoing focus on the Commons being for the community. Continue with proactive community and stakeholder engagement efforts, being appropriately selective to make best use of time and considering if and when to conduct a public consultation exercise.
- Next steps with the management plan:
 - Following adoption of the TW and Rusthall Ecological Management Plans by the Conservators, develop priorities, work schedule and budget, and begin implementation.
 - Agree approach and develop a public access and amenity plan to balance with the ecological objectives in our overall priorities and budget.
 - Investigate and, if possible, commission a data management system to support implementation of the plan and effective record keeping.
 - Look for additional funding.
- Continue to work to enhance our way of working, in particular the use and management of contractors, balancing it appropriately with in-house and volunteer work.
- A healthy and happy team. Recruiting and bringing in a new Treasurer and making sure we continue to have a happy, productive team.

19. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- Update on the plans for the new path at Happy Valley (Friends project)

Prior to the meeting there had been a site visit to view and discuss the proposed plans for the path.

In March 2020, the Conservators had approved the project in principle but requested further details as the project developed. The update presented by the Friends contained the full specification and current position of funding. The Friends reiterated their commitment to cover maintenance costs and resource. The Conservators approved the specification and plans to proceed, as long as the project did not take up too much of the Ranger's time.

- Proposed cycle path from Langton Green to Tunbridge Wells centre

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council had been invited to provide an update on their proposal, to include route and specification. The Clerk hadn't received the information and so could not discuss further.

18. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

23/02846/FULL | Erection of detached dwelling, hard and soft landscaping and access from Hungershall Park, 1 Hungershall Park, Royal Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN4 8ND.

Response on behalf of the Commons Conservators as follows:

On behalf of the Commons Conservators, I would like to highlight that the proposed development is located adjacent to Tunbridge Wells Common, designated as a Local Conservation Area and registered as Village Green (VG22). The proposal is sympathetic to the local ecology and is clearly an important aspect of the plans, which is to be commended.

Our Ranger feels that having the entry/exit point for the new development off Cabbage Stalk Lane, instead of Hungershall Park would reduce the impact on habitat availability and potential wildlife corridor links. However, if this isn't possible, he would like to ensure that the substrate and materials used for the proposed new driveway

from Hungershall Park utilises materials that are ecologically beneficial and as environmentally friendly as possible.

Considering the proximity of the location to Tunbridge Wells Common, the Commons Conservators would like to remind the applicant that no tools, equipment or materials can be stored, and no vehicles can park, on the Common.

UPDATE: Application refused.

MEETING ENDED

DATE OF NEXT MEETING – 25th April 2024, The Rackliff Centre, Rusthall.

Agreed Actions

Agenda Item	Detail	Responsibility	Progress/update
4&5	Chair to sign the minutes of the previous meetings and send to the Clerk.	Chair	Complete
6	To organise for the temporary flood light in Fairground car park to be turned off and or removed. To organise to survey the lighting in the car park at night, to establish if a further set of lights is required.	PBurnett	Complete Outstanding
9	To register the Commons as a prospective BNG offsite provider on the KCC system.	Clerk	Complete
9	To set up a PO Box as the official address for the Commons Conservators.	Clerk	Complete
10	To collate work schedule documents.	Ranger	Complete
13	To order, purchase and plant a replacement tree in memory of Patrick Shovelton.	Ranger	Ordered, awaiting planting
15	To add the tree management policy to the website.	Clerk	Complete
17	To organise project site visits for Conservators to better understand the planned work.	Clerk and Ranger	Ongoing

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

Minutes of a meeting held in the Rackliff Centre on 25th April 2024 at 2pm

PRESENT:

Cllr Martin Brice
Paul Burnett
Ewen Cameron
Amii Errington
Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall
Chris McHugh
Cllr Nicholas Pope (Chair)
Cllr Jayne Sharratt
Clare Sinha
Corin Thoday

ATTENDING:

Daniel Colborne (Ranger)
David Miller (Treasurer)
Gemma Stapeley (Clerk)
Clive Evans (Friends of the Commons)
Cllr Paul Gripper (Rusthall Parish Council)

OBSERVING

David Clover

APOLOGIES

Cllr Pamela Wilkinson

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, David Miller was introduced to all and welcomed in his new role as Treasurer.

1. DECLARATION OF BUSINESS INTEREST

There were no business declarations.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Pamela Wilkinson.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 25th January were considered and approved. A copy to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

4. MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The minutes of the Committee meetings held since the last quarterly Conservators' meeting on 5th February 2024, 5th March 2024, and 15th April 2024 were considered and approved and would be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

5. MATTERS ARISING

Fairground car park

The Committee minutes of 5th February recorded that RCP are proposing to relocate the pay machines from the car park entrance to a new location adjacent to the footpath down to the mirror shop. CMcHugh commented that this path led to an unsafe crossing point and queried whether this was a good idea. PBurnett explained that the machines at the entrance suffered with poor signal, but discussion would be added to the Committee's next agenda.

IMarshall asked when the old bollard lighting would be removed, PBurnett to investigate.

Action: Committee to consider safety of the proposed new location of the pay machines and PBurnett to investigate when the old bollard lighting would be removed.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

The Clerk confirmed that Tunbridge Wells Common and Rusthall Common had been registered on the Kent BNG site register as a prospective off site BNG provider.

6. RISK MANAGEMENT & REVIEW OF RISK REGISTER

Accidents

Since the last meeting in January 2024, there have been no reported accidents.

Incidents

In the last quarter:

- An attempt by travellers to access Fairground car park barrier and then an attempt on the Lower Cricket pitch. Both stopped by Ashleigh (LML).
- Motorbikes riding along the Victorian Terraces on Tunbridge Wells Common, reported to the Police.
- Motorbike riding along the path at Happy Valley.
- Potholes reported in Fir Tree Road car park.

Following discussion, it was agreed that incidents of motorbikes on the Commons should be reported to the Clerk, with accompanying photographs, if possible and safe to do so. The Clerk will then collate the reports and notify the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council's (TWBC) Community Safety Team and or the Community Safety Unit at Kent Police. The Ranger is also considering opportunities to block motorbikes with barriers or ditching.

Campers

In the last quarter:

- One tent alongside Eridge Road.
- Two tents behind the Victorian bench on the footpath down to the Pantiles on Tunbridge Wells Common.

Fly-tipped waste

In the last quarter:

- 6 large plastic containers, 25 litre oil can, 2 x wheels with tyres and 1 x white good in Fairground car park.
- Large commercial fridge.
- Length of kitchen worktop on Castle Road.

Complaints

There was one anonymous complaint about the behaviour of dogs in Fir Tree Road car park, making it intimidating for the person to visit the Commons. The Ranger is planning a summer campaign to require dogs on leads in the car park area.

Risk Register

The full Risk Register and heatmap summary document were supplied to the Conservators in advance of the meeting. Conservators agreed that they were satisfied with the method, the risks identified and the management actions. JSharratt raised an incident of flashing reported on the Tarry path on Rusthall Common the day before the meeting (24th April) and one other incident which indicated that the risk of violent/sexual offence should be reviewed again. CSinha commented that the full register was overdue a review by the Committee, to ensure that they are doing enough to minimise risks.

Action: Clerk to review the rating for violent/sexual offence and the Committee to complete an additional review of the whole risk register.

Insurance claims

There are no active insurance claims. The insurance policy was renewed on 1st January 2024, with Zurich.

7. CLERK'S REPORT

Volunteers

There have been Saturday volunteering sessions on the Commons on 3rd February and 6th April. Ranger volunteering sessions have taken place every Wednesday and are proving to be both popular and very productive with conservation project work taking place across the Commons including at the archaeological dig site, the area opposite The Beacon, the rocks between St Helena and Gibraltar Cottage and the glade behind Highbury.

S106 – Requests and current status

As an update, this is the status of our requests:

Date Requested	Property	Number of dwellings/increases in dwellings	Amount requested	Latest update
18/03/2022	WA Turners (22/00238)	94	£18,800	Pending decision.
23/05/2022	Beechcroft Eridge Road	40	£8,000 (+£42,000 contribution)	Funds are now in the bank account.
11/07/2022	Showfields Estate (22/01576)	36	£3,377.75	Application approved.
05/09/2022	Cinema Site (22/02304)	166	£33,200	05/01/2023 application approved. Building in progress.

Treasurer recruitment

David Miller was successfully recruited to the role of Treasurer to the Commons Conservators, starting on 29th February. The Clerk, Ranger and Treasurer are working through an induction, to both the Commons and the systems and processes, which is progressing well.

Projects – Friends of the Commons

For 2024/25 the Friends of the Commons have agreed to fund the following:

- Fungi survey by expert Martin Allison.
- Two guided fungi identification walks for the community on Tuesday 8th October and Wednesday 6th November, led by Martin.
- Two Earth School sessions for the community, all managed by Nature Makers (forest school), on 26th July and 19th August.
- Two Family Nature Walks for the community on 31st May and 1st November.

Waste collection and disposal contract

The litter bin servicing contract was put out to tender in February and produced two very good options. Following thorough consideration, LML Services retained the contract, to continue from 1st April 2024 until 2026, with an optional one-year extension. Costs have remained the same, as per the budget.

Flooding and drainage

The drainage improvement works on Fir Tree Road were successfully completed in January and February without any issues, to the satisfaction of Kent County Council (KCC)'s Highways Asset Management Team, the Ranger and the community.

Conservator permission was given to the same officers in the Highways Asset Management Team to proceed with their plans for the three phases of the drainage improvement works for Major York's Road, scheduled to take place between June and September.

Proposed cycle path

On 16th April, three Conservators, the Clerk and Ranger met with TWBC's Economic Development Manager, Hilary Smith, and their consultants from PJA to walk the Tunbridge Wells to Rusthall section of the proposed cycle path from Langton to Tunbridge Wells. The purpose of the walk was to identify the proposed route on the ground and thereby highlight any potential issues in terms of logistics, ecology, visual appeal etc. Several concerns were raised which require further work by the consultants. The Clerk reported that she had found a Solicitor who specialised in the law of Common Land and Village Greens to assist with the legal implications of potential deregistration and investigate whether sealed surfaces were allowed on a Village Green.

Commemorative benches

The annual price review for commemorative benches has been undertaken and is confirmed as £700 for a refurbished bench and £1,000 for a new bench.

Union House car park and Village Green registration

As a result of the Ranger's investigations into the ownership of Union House car park, it was discovered that Dandara had not been invoiced for the management of the exchange land since 2016. The Clerk has been in communication with Dandara to try to resolve the matter.

Other

- The PO Box address is confirmed as PO Box 729, Tunbridge Wells, TN9 9WF. Post has been received via this address.
- The Beacon planning application, pending since November 2022, has been rejected by TWBC.
- On behalf of the Commons Conservators, the Clerk has responded to the TWBC Town Centre Plan consultation.

Requests to Conservators

Since the last meeting on 25th January 2024, the following requests have been put to the Conservators, their outcomes are listed:

Date of request	Detail	Outcome
26/02/2024	Request to hold various community events on the Commons, to be funded by the Friends.	Approved

8. ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT PLAN WORK SCHEDULE for Q1 2024/5

Since the last meeting, the work schedule documents have been collated into one version for both Commons. The work schedule will ensure that the recommendations from the Ecological Management Plans are properly considered, prioritised, documented, approved, actioned and reported upon in a timely and organised way.

The Ranger reported highlights from the last quarter, including the first year of the three-year Sussex Lund funded project to improve the wildlife value and connectivity, safety, aesthetics and historical context of the Victorian Terraces above Brighton Lake. The project utilised a combination of volunteers and contractors working together with great success to create a new glade and to start widening some of the path edges. Volunteers will now survey and monitor the changes over time, to include aerial photography and amphibian, reptile, pollinator and bird surveys. The area will also be included for surveying as part of an ecologist led weekly bat transect from May to October.

The second year of the Eales Terrace/Apsley Street rock project involved the successful removal of trees that had grown up through the rocks and the removal of scrub and brambles to reveal the rocks and allow more light to the area. Work to maintain the positive outcomes will now be continued using a combination of volunteers, Ranger and occasional use of a contractor.

Conservators approved the work planned for quarter one 2024/5.

9. RANGER'S REPORT AND FINANCIAL WORK PLAN

Trees:

Ash dieback

Progress on the management of trees affected by ash dieback continues to be mapped, for ease of review. In time the map will be diversified to include all trees.

Dieback mitigation works that were scheduled for winter 23/24 have now been completed, except for one large tree, which had to be delayed due to wildlife concerns. The tree is not by a major road or busy path and will have to be dealt with as soon as the bird nesting season comes to an end. Ash will be continuously monitored but as usual there will be a formal June/July safety survey as per the Tree Management Policy.

Other Trees (not ash)

The Ranger was able to complete the autumn/winter tree safety work within the budgets agreed at the last meeting.

High Value Trees

Some of the works highlighted in Living Forest's high value tree survey has been completed and specific safety work, such as deadwood removal, is currently being prepared for this period.

Grass management contract

The amenity grass cutting contract is currently out for tender with a deadline for submissions of 7th May. The new contract is due to commence on the 17th June 2024, for three years with an optional one-year extension.

There has been a good level of interest in the contract and the Ranger remains confident that a quality contractor will be identified.

Dogs and anxious dogs/people

While considering the complaint about dog behaviour, the Ranger has observed that the number of dogs running loose in Fir Tree Road car park is too high, creating stress and worry for anxious dogs, dog owners and or non-dog owners with or without children who don't enjoy or appreciate the experience. There have also been several near misses relating to dogs roaming around or crossing the car park. Cars are increasingly quiet or even silent as electric vehicles increase in popularity and pose a risk to loose dogs.

To protect users and dogs, the Ranger proposed to trial a request that dogs be kept on leads in the vicinity of Fir Tree Road car park and five-bar gate entrance to the Common. To communicate the campaign, the Ranger will put temporary signage on bins in the vicinity, update social media and have an initial presence. The Conservators approved the proposal.

Action: Ranger to prepare a project plan for the trial of dogs on leads in and around Fir Tree Road car park.

10. FINANCE REPORT, BUDGET APPROVAL, ANNUAL ACCOUNTS APPROVAL AND ASSET REGISTER

The Treasurer presented the draft financial accounts for the year to 31st March 2024.

On 31st March the Conservators had £163,032.27 in cash at the bank, £87,147.60 more than this time last year.

Expenditure was £30,334.05 under budget, predominantly in Maintenance of Commons expenditure which was £27,218.57 under budget mainly from the grass and cleared areas and short grass budget lines. The underspend was due to the Ranger leaving areas to grow longer for survey purposes and as he better understood the mowing requirements.

SLacey queried the way that the S106 developer contributions and the Beechcroft contribution to the maintenance of Tunbridge Wells Common had been recorded as income by the previous Treasurer. The new Treasurer agreed and proposed to discuss this with the internal auditors, recommending that this and similar funding be shown as separate reserves in the balance sheet without being put through the general Income and Expenditure Statement at all, in order to avoid distorting the figures. Subject to the recommendations of the auditors, Conservators approved the draft financial accounts.

The Treasurer recommended that a deposit account be opened with another bank, principally to ensure that our existing accounts did not exceed the FSA (FSCS) compensation level of £85,000 but also to seek better interest rates than those offered by Lloyds and Barclays.

Action: the Treasurer agreed to provide a recommendation for a new deposit account.

Budget for 2024/25

Conservators all approved the budget for 2024/5 which included £21,000 of the underspend in 2023/4.

Asset register

The Clerk presented the annual asset register check, which was approved by Conservators. It was highlighted that the van should be added to the check, which was subsequently added and checked.

11. UPDATE FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE COMMONS

Memberships

Up to 300 members of the Friends have not increased their standing orders, to cover the increase in subscriptions, agreed in July 2023, those affected are now being sent a letter to ask them to make changes.

Projects for 2024

Members of the Committee are working on a new, mobile friendly website which will have an online payment function.

The new path installation and restoration works are well underway at Happy Valley. Thanks go to John Barber for his determination to see this project proceed.

Events

On 18th May the Friends are holding a thank you lunch for members of the Friends who volunteer on the Commons, to be held at the Forum. All of the Commons Conservators' volunteers were also invited.

12. MARKETING AND PR REPORT

The report highlighted that there had been articles in the Town Crier publication.

The Facebook group now has 2,262 members with monthly reactions from members between 1,431 and 2,734. The most popular posts, during the quarter, related to:

1. Neighbours clearing mud from the road in Upper Street/Harmony Street.
2. Video of water flowing down the 101 Steps at Happy Valley.
3. Announcement that the path project at Happy Valley was starting.
4. Camouflaged deer at Church Road.
5. Thanking volunteers.

The Instagram account has 539 followers, while the website has monthly users of between 335 and 742. Two blogs had been published during the last quarter which had both informed and pushed visitors to the website.

DClover asked whether there was a marketing and PR Strategy and if so, what were Conservators trying to achieve? The Clerk explained that there wasn't a recorded strategy but that she was trying her best to communicate all of the positive work on the Commons via social media, the website, local press, presentations and talks. Resource restrictions did mean that there was a limit to what could realistically be achieved.

AErrington offered to support the clerk with Instagram, connecting it with the Facebook account.

Action: The Clerk to arrange a Zoom meeting on Instagram with AErrington.

13. FUNDRAISING PROJECT UPDATE

The Clerk had been allocated 12 extra working days to work on a fundraising project. As part of the work, the Clerk presented a Funding Wishlist, which had collated all possible projects from the Ecological Management Plans and suggestions from officers, Friends and members of the Facebook community. The list splits projects into existing project commitments, new project funding ideas, equipment and physical resources, projects for the Ranger/Clerk/volunteers and amenity plan ideas. It is a living document, which will be updated as and when more ideas emerge. If it is decided that a project will be developed, a fully costed project plan will be developed for Conservator approval.

The Clerk explained that she had started background research into the project to restore Brighton Lake, to include the removal of invasive species. She had submitted a request to discuss the project further with the Farming In Protected Landscapes (FiPL) DEFRA fund and was awaiting feedback.

Conservators agreed that work on the Amenity Plan would fit within the Clerk's fundraising project budgeted hours.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

i. Request from the Rusthall Bonfire and Fete Committee

The Rusthall Bonfire and Fete Committee had submitted a request to hold the Bonfire on 26th October 2024 on the Common View meadow. Following lengthy discussions it was agreed that the event would be given permission, however Conservators would like to see steps being taken to minimise the ecological impact of the event and requested that the Bonfire and Fete Committee engage with the Ranger and Clerk to establish how this could be achieved.

ii. A264 Langton Road, 30mph speed limit extension

CMcHugh explained that the Commons Conservators had agreed with the principle to align the speed limits on all roads across the Commons. The Clerk had approached Kent County Council (KCC)'s Highways Team to make the request to extend the 30mph speed limit along the Langton Road, from the junction with Rusthall Road, in response she was encouraged to work with Rusthall Parish Council (RPC) on the matter. A project team comprising of RPC's Cllr Liz Ellicott and Cllr Paul Gripper, the Clerk and Ranger and resident Angela Culley had been working to make progress.

The KCC Officer leading on the response to the request has taken part in a site visit, conducted a traffic survey and had many communications with the project team, which have concluded with a rejection of the request via email stating that all future correspondence on the matter will simply be 'read and filed'. No satisfactory explanation has been provided for why KCC refused this reduction project, given that RPC was willing to cover the implementation costs.

CMcHugh highlighted that the speed limit request must be disconnected with the historical request for a crossing, as this appears to be a barrier to progress. The KCC Officer does not seem able to take account of any circumstances outside of a remit to focus on cars (not pedestrians) and appears to be conflating the speed limit reduction request with the cost of a potential road crossing in order to refuse the request.

PGripper explained that he has connected with Speldhurst Parish Council, to see if they can join forces to instigate change. MBrice added that there was a general difficulty with speed reduction requests across the town. Greg Clark MP took part in a site visit where the project team highlighted all of the issues. A community protest is also scheduled for Saturday 4th May to channel the frustrations of the community.

In conclusion, the Clerk and Ranger will continue to work with the project team, although Conservators will consider a communication separately with KCC to ensure that the Conservators' request is properly understood.

- **Flooding and drainage proposal**

On 16th April, the Clerk and Ranger met with members of KCC's Flood and Water Management Team, to hear their consultant's recommendations following the feasibility study for Tunbridge Wells Common (note their contractor is Waterman Infrastructure and Environment Ltd). The recommendations incorporated habitat

management, wetland scrapes, a swale and new drains. The Clerk offered to send the full report to any interested Conservators.

The Conservators agreed to allow the Clerk and Ranger to progress discussions with the Flood and Water Management Team, to develop full project proposals, which would then be put to the Conservators for approval.

- S100 letter for Major York's Road drainage works

For information only, the Conservators were provided with a copy of the S100 Highways Act 1980 notification from KCC for the drainage improvement works scheduled for Major York's Road in the summer.

- Resident site meeting regarding drainage works on Rusthall Common

The Chair had been contacted by a resident of Rusthall who had complained about the works to trees affected by ash dieback. The Chair had taken part in a site visit on Rusthall Common, with the resident, during which the resident had explained a number of drainage issues, which needed to be communicated to the Clerk and Ranger.

Action: The Chair to communicate, details of the drainage issues identified, to the Clerk and Ranger.

- Gibraltar Cottage

The Clerk had been contacted by a project manager, appointed by the owner of Gibraltar Cottage to complete works on the property. The Clerk had been made aware of a desire to install a fence around the property and had arranged for a site visit to discuss the request and to ensure that such a fence would only follow the boundary of the permitted encroachment, not the entire boundary of the property.

15. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

24/00748/LAWPRO | Lawful Development Certificate (Proposed) - Siting of caravan in the front garden for ancillary use to the main residential dwelling | 31 Eridge Road Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN4 8HR.

Response on behalf of the Commons Conservators as follows: On behalf of the Commons Conservators I would like to raise our concern that the proposed permanent static caravan would be located only metres from Tunbridge Wells Common, registered Village Green (VG22) and a designated Local Wildlife Site, the location is also within a Conservation Area, as such a static caravan would not sit at all well, visually, within the context of the local environment.

MEETING ENDED

DATE OF NEXT MEETING – 27th June 2024, The Rackliff Centre, Rusthall.

Agreed Actions

Agenda Item	Detail	Responsibility	Progress/update
3&4	Chair to sign the minutes of the previous meetings and send to the Clerk.	Chair	Complete
5	To consider safety of the proposed new location of the pay machines in Fairground car park.	Committee	Complete
5	To investigate when the old bollard lighting would be removed (Fairground car park).	PBurnett	Complete
6	To review the Risk Register rating for violent/sexual offence.	Clerk	Complete
6	To complete an additional review of the whole risk register.	Committee	Complete
9	To prepare a project plan for the trial of dogs on leads in and around Fir Tree Road car park.	Ranger	Complete
10	To provide a recommendation for a new deposit account.	Treasurer	Complete
12	To arrange a Zoom meeting on Instagram with AErrington.	Clerk	Outstanding
14v	To communicate details of the drainage issues, identified on Rusthall Common, to the Clerk and Ranger.	Chair	Complete

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

Minutes of a meeting held in the Rackliff Centre on 27th June 2024 at 2pm

PRESENT:

Cllr Martin Brice
Paul Burnett
Amii Errington
Ian Marshall
Cllr Jayne Sharratt
Corin Thoday
Cllr Pamela Wilkinson (Chair)

ATTENDING:

Daniel Colborne (Ranger)
David Miller (Treasurer)
Gemma Stapeley (Clerk)
Clive Evans (Friends of the Commons)

OBSERVING

Anthony Pawson (Friends of the Commons)

APOLOGIES

Ewen Cameron
Stephen Lacey
Chris McHugh
Clare Sinha

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. It was noted that Cllr Nick Pope had not been re-elected as a Borough Councillor and so had stepped down in his role as Conservator. Although absent, Nick was thanked for his contributions.

1. DECLARATION OF BUSINESS INTEREST

There were no business declarations.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Ewen Cameron, Stephen Lacey, Chris McHugh and Clare Sinha.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 25th April were considered and approved. A copy to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

4. MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The minutes of the Committee meetings held since the last quarterly Conservators' meeting on 14th May 2024 and 14th June 2024 were considered and approved and would be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

5. MATTERS ARISING

Motorbikes on the Commons

IMarshall raised further concern about motorbikes going at speed along the Victorian Terraces and Cabbage Stalk Lane on Tunbridge Wells Common. The Ranger noted that it was also an issue on Rusthall Common and explained that the local Police Officer was encouraging all to report the issues via 101 and or report to the Clerk. There were discussions about an appropriate staggered barrier which would be further progressed by the Ranger. The Clerk also agreed to discuss the matter with Terry Hughes, the Community Safety Manager for Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC), especially the suggestion by PWilkinson of a Public Space Protection Order for the area.

Action: Ranger to investigate an appropriate barrier for the junction of Cabbage Stalk Lane and the Common and the Clerk to get guidance and advice from the Community Safety Team and report back.

Dogs on leads in the vicinity of Fir Tree Road car park

The Ranger and Clerk had been due to visit Ashdown Forest to meet with their lead Ranger, who focuses on dog behaviour and campaigns, but unfortunately the meeting has had to be rescheduled.

Action: Ranger to work on a project plan for the new guidance.

Drainage works on Major York's Road

The Clerk provided an update on the drainage works planned for Major York's Road, from the Kent County Council's Highways Asset Management Team as follows:

“Although a bit later than we originally hoped, Phases 1 & 2 are to start on the 8th July using traffic light control, this will lead into the road closure start date of 22nd July for Phase 3. It is not expected that phases 1 & 2 will be fully completed during the 2 weeks from 8th to 22nd, so any remaining work on those phases will continue on from phase 3, although we expect parts of those phases will probably be worked on during the closure too”.

Rusthall Bonfire and Fireworks event

The Clerk provided an update as follows, at the last Conservators' meeting, approval was given for the 2024 Rusthall Bonfire and Fireworks event to take place on the Common View meadow, subject to ongoing discussion with Officers to take steps to reduce the environmental impact of the event.

On May 13th Officers met with the Bonfire and Fete Committee and conversations were started. There is both resistance to change and to scaling back of the event. They were not keen on gradual change, instead they wanted one complete change. However, they did commit to restrictions in the specification of wood that can be burnt on the fire, which Dan is investigating with Lewes Bonfire Organisation. The Bonfire and Fete Committee agreed to investigate a show that combines fireworks and lasers in 2025.

On 13th June, the Clerk attended Rusthall Parish Council's Environment Committee to discuss reducing the environmental impact of the event. Encouragingly the Committee were very supportive and wanted to see the event gradually scaled back over time, taking the community on a journey through good communication. They felt that the event went on for too long, had become too big and the fireworks too loud. They also wanted the emphasis of the event being local for the village.

Throughout all discussions the members of the Bonfire and Fete Committee have been praised for all of their hard work and dedication to the event. Discussions will be ongoing with the Committee.

6. RISK MANAGEMENT & REVIEW OF RISK REGISTER

Accidents

Since the last meeting in April 2024, there have been no reported accidents.

Incidents

In the last quarter:

- Significant verbal attack on the Ranger, in Fir Tree Road car park (9th May). Having considered how to better protect the Ranger from future incidents, a body/dash camera has been purchased and the Clerk will be writing a lone worker policy for officers and volunteers.
- 3 incidents of indecent exposure on Rusthall Common during April, police investigation and significant media coverage.
- Break in at Rusthall Cricket Clubhouse and storage container (9th June).

Campers

In the last quarter:

- One tent at Toad Rock.

Fly-tipped waste

In the last quarter:

- 1 x pallet at Toad Rock.
- Large metal drum BBQ at Wellington Rocks.
- Sofa cushion at Wellington Rocks.
- Single mattress next to Coach Road bin store.
- Shed on Harmony Street.

Complaints

There were no complaints in the last quarter.

Risk Register

Full review of the Risk Register completed by CSinha on behalf of the Committee on 14th May. The Committee have several significant questions regarding risk, which have been added to the agenda for their next meeting on 8th July.

Insurance claims

There are no active insurance claims. The insurance policy was renewed on 1st January 2024, with Zurich.

Action: The Clerk to write a lone worker policy for approval by Conservators.

7. CLERK'S REPORT

Volunteers

The Ranger has been asked to start collating the number of volunteer hours received, to assist with audit and funding requests. This information will be reported to Conservators quarterly.

S106 – Requests and current status

As an update, this is the status of our requests:

Date Requested	Property	Number of dwellings/increases in dwellings	Amount requested	Latest update
18/03/2022	WA Turners (22/00238)	94	£18,800	Awaiting decision.
11/07/2022	Showfields Estate (22/01576)	36	£3,377.75	Application approved.
05/09/2022	Cinema Site (22/02304)	166	£33,200	05/01/2023 application approved. Building in progress. 27/11/23 – notification of developer’s intention to commence in January 2024.
15/05/24	Phillips and Eynsham House (23/01150)	44	£8,800	Awaiting decision

Speed limit extension along Langton Road

The Langton Road speed limit extension request was rejected by Kent County Council, but the project group continue to work to get the decision reversed. There has been a village protest and petition organised and community comments and experiences are being collated.

Guided walks on the Commons

The Clerk, supported by the Ranger, has led several guided walks on the Commons for officers at Tunbridge Wells Borough Council including Chief Executive, William Benson, his Directors, Lee Colyer (Finance, Policy and Development) and Paul Taylor (Change and Communities) and Heads of Service covering Planning, Economic Development and Property, Democratic Services and Finance and Procurement. All were glowing in their feedback on the Commons, our management and value.

Other

- Union House car park and Village Green registration - The Clerk continues to battle to get the outstanding balance of £2,000, plus tree works. Dandara have now said that while they agree with the request, but that the debt lies with their management agent, First Port.
- On 5th June, the Clerk took part in a visit to Wimbledon Common along with colleagues from her Common Therapy group. It was a fantastic opportunity to discuss best practise in all areas including land management, grass cutting, volunteers, funding, policy and governance.

Requests to Conservators

Since the last meeting on 25th April 2024, the following requests have been put to the Conservators, their outcomes are listed:

Date of request	Detail	Outcome
20/05/2024	Request from Rusthall Parish Council to install a cycle rack on the grass at the junction of Common View.	Approved

8. ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT PLAN WORK SCHEDULE FOR Q2 2024/5

Conservators approved the work planned for quarter two 2024/5.

9. RANGER'S REPORT AND FINANCIAL WORK PLAN

Trees: ash dieback

The Ranger reported that the June ash dieback survey had been completed. Decline in the trees appears relatively significant this year and as such some canopy 'dead wooding' and small tree removal has been identified for relatively urgent removal in June and July. The work has been split and allocated to two different contractors who charge similar competitive day rates but have slightly different logistical capabilities.

Quotes will be obtained in July/August for the larger tree works required so that work can commence as soon we enter the end of the breeding season and can safely undertake larger scale tree work (i.e. late Sept into Oct).

Other Trees (not ash)

Whilst the ash survey is underway the Ranger is also taking the opportunity to identify any other potential issues with other tree species. Mitigation works for ash is being mixed in with these works to ensure greatest efficiency wherever possible.

High Value Trees

The Ranger is now obtaining of quotes from our contractors to prepare for the mitigation works that were recommended by Living Forest as part of the High Value Tree Survey undertaken in 2023.

Some works are already taking place due to safety reasons, the rest will be scheduled as part of a programme over the autumn/winter.

Grass management

Since the last meeting, the new amenity short grass contract has been awarded and commenced on 17th June for three years, with an optional one-year extension. The successful contractor was Bridgland. Additional small scale maintenance strimming work has also been allocated to LML Services to ensure that the car park, and path/road sight lines are more visible. More area around benches will also be strimmed to a more useable and tidier standard.

Long Grass strimming and flail Bot work also continues with Honnington on a more flexible basis. This is increasingly showing itself to be highly beneficial for the balance required between ecology, aesthetic and safety.

Litterbins

With generous donations from the Friends of the Common, we have been able to purchase and install four new bins on the Commons. In accordance with our budget, four more bins will be purchased in June, but as these are due to be installed in areas affected by anti-social behaviour, the Ranger is recommending that a more robust design is chosen, for these four bins only. The alternative design suggested by the Ranger is successfully used at Barden Park in Tonbridge, The bins do not have a large surface area on which to spray with graffiti and only have one central leg which allows them to sit far enough above the ground to avoid being urinated on by dogs. It will also slow down the risk of erosion from wet grass. There is no difference in price between the current Derby design and the more robust design. The Conservators approved the purchase of four bins in the alternative design.

Financial work plan

Conservators approved the financial work plan for quarter two 2024/5.

10. FINANCE REPORT, FINAL ACCOUNTS FOR 2023/24, FEEDBACK FROM INTERNAL AUDIT AND APPROVAL OF ANNUAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY RETURN (20223/4) (AGAR)

Accounts

The Treasurer presented accounts for part quarter to 14th June 2024, final quarter end accounts will be circulated during the month following the quarter end. As of 14th June, there was a net income/expense of £70,979, compared to budget of £54,154, due to timing. Conservators approved the bank reconciliation of 14th June, which was signed by the Chair.

New bank deposit account

The Treasurer explained that he had been looking at a new a deposit account with a different bank. This is partly to obtain a better interest rate than paid by Lloyds or Barclays, our current bankers. It is also partly to reduce the risk of loss in the event of a bank going out of business while holding deposits in excess of the Financial Services Compensation Scheme limit of £85,000. Balances on 14th June were £132,000 at Lloyds (who pay 1.3% on instant access and 2.5% on our 32-day notice account) and £106,000 at Barclays (1.51%). Having discussed several options, the Treasurer recommended the Unity Trust's instant access business deposit account, currently yielding 2.77% AER. Unity Bank is a member owned financial institution and has been recommended by several other parish clerks. Conservators approved a request to progress to opening the account.

Final accounts for 2024/5

For completeness, a copy of the final accounts for 2024/5 were provided to the Conservators.

Internal Audit

The internal audit concluded on 13th June, design and performance of operational controls for the relevant objectives during the 2023/4 financial year were considered to be sound. Mid Kent Audit had provided a full report of their findings and recommendations, which would be reviewed by the Clerk and Treasurer and an action plan, to tackle the highlighted recommendations, would be presented to all at the next meeting.

Action: Clerk and Treasurer to prepare an internal audit action plan for the October meeting.

To note, for future approvals taken outside of the main meetings, all requests would come from the Clerk, who would collate and report back at the following meeting, for approval in person under Matters Arising.

Alternative internal auditors

The Conservators gave permission for the Clerk to progress discussions with alternative auditors, who had indicated that the current five-day audit was unnecessarily long and that a half day audit would be sufficient.

Action: the Clerk and Treasurer to consider the alternative quotes and appoint a new internal auditor for 2024/5.

Approval of AGAR

The AGAR had been provided to all Conservators in advance of the meeting and had been signed by the Treasurer before the meeting commenced. Conservators approved the AGAR so it was signed by the Chair and Clerk.

Action: The Clerk would upload the AGAR and supporting documents to the website to enable commencement of the period for the exercise of public rights. She would also send the AGAR, along with further supporting documents, to the external auditor, by the deadline of 1st July 2024.

11. UPDATE FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE COMMONS

Events

The first woodland wander, hosted by Nature Makers, took place on 31st May. Despite poor weather, the feedback has been very positive. The volunteers get together at the Forum was well attended and the food provided by Charlie's Angels was well received. The Forum was thanked for providing their facilities free of charge. The Friends' Annual General Meeting will take place at the Spa Hotel on the 24th July.

12. MARKETING AND PR REPORT

The report highlighted that there had been articles published in the Town Crier, an article in Rusthall Life and a feature about the indecent exposure incidents on BBC South East.

The Facebook group now has 2,374 members with monthly reactions from members between 1,848 and 2,734. The most popular posts, during the quarter, related to:

1. Volunteers clearing the Cold Baths (Tunbridge Wells Common) of bramble, grass and litter.
2. Digger work on the archaeological dig site.
3. The Freehold Tenant funded extension of the all-abilities path.
4. Petition to Kent County Council to reduce the speed limit on the Langton Road.
5. Work of the community archaeological group (West Kent Diggers).

The Instagram account has 571 followers, while the website has monthly users of between 335 and 685.

13. PROJECT PROPOSALS

In advance of the meeting, the Clerk had provided a report on three project proposals that required Conservator permission to progress:

1. Ecological enhancement of Brighton Lake
2. New pond at the archaeological dig site at the junction of Rusthall Road and Langton Road
3. Restoration of 101 Steps

The report provided full details to justify need and were approved by Conservators.

The Clerk went on to provide details of three further projects/works that had arisen between the provision of the meeting papers and the meeting itself as follows:

4. Reshaping the surface of Fir Tree Road car park, to involve regrading the combination of type 1 aggregate and tarmac, reshaping the material to form new cross falls and levels and compacting down with a roller. As discussed at the last Committee meeting on 14th June, a quote had been received for the work and Officers were required to obtain a second quote. The Clerk provided details of two quotes for the work and Conservators agreed to allow the more cost-effective quote to be progressed. It was noted that there would be ongoing maintenance, but that this would be manageable for the Ranger and within budget.
5. Ditching and tree trunks to protect the encroachment of cars parked on Tea Garden Lane, approved by Conservators.
6. A funding request to support the purchase 6 scythes and training for their use. The scythes would be used to take off long coarse grasses in areas such as the Marlpit ponds, around Linden Park Cricket Club, the Dell opposite St Paul's Church and Ant City, as referenced in the Ecological Management Plan. This was approved by Conservators.

14. FUNDRAISING PROJECT UPDATE

The Clerk was allocated 12 days (72 hours) from April 20204 to work exclusively on fundraising. Having completed 11 out of the 12 days the following had been achieved:

- Project wish list – a master list for externally funded projects and projects for the Ranger, Clerk and Volunteers.
- Table of funding and grant opportunities.
- Further investigation into the Farming in Protected Landscape fund and engagement with Kent High Weald Natural Landscapes who administer the fund.
- Funding For All mentoring and attendance at a webinar entitled ‘Funding For All Environmental Projects’
- Legal guidance from Edward Harris.
- Biodiversity Net Gain registration, background research and new template response for planning applications to enhance our S106 requests.
- Addition of a fundraising page on our website.
- Introductory works on a new Amenity Plan and full planning for a community public consultation exercise.

The Clerk requested permission to add a PayPal link to the website, which was approved.

15. FAIRGROUND/UPPER PANTILES CAR PARK – RCP proposed signage and payment meter.

PBurnett explained that RCP had considered the requests of the Committee and had amended their original signage pack proposal to include a reduced number of signs, reduction in sign size and more sensitive colourings. Conservators approved the signage proposals.

PBurnett went on to explain that RCP wanted to move the payment meters from the entrance of the car park to the entrance of the desire line path leading down to the mirror shop for health and safety reasons and to find a location with a better signal, to ensure car parking payments can be made. In email exchanges before the meeting and again during the meeting, concerns were raised that the proposed new location for the payment meter encouraged use of the desire line path. The path leads to a very dangerous crossing point, across Eridge Road, with a serious risk of accidents due to a blind bend often taken at speed. IMarshall asked whether a signal booster could be used to enable the meter to be moved to a safer location within the car park.

It was agreed that the preference would be for a safer location using a signal booster. If this isn't possible then the meter would be moved, but there would be clear signage indicating the safe route from the car park, across the Major York's Road pedestrian crossing and behind Law 365. If signage was necessary, agreement for the wording for the signage was delegated to the Committee to agree.

Action: The Committee to progress discussions on the logistics of the meter move and any necessary signage.

PBurnett asked whether Conservators would consider electric car charging points in the car park, for users of the car park. It was agreed that a proposal should be put to all Conservators at the October meeting.

Action: PBurnett to prepare a proposal for electric car charging points.

16. TEMPORARY ADVERTISING SIGNAGE ON THE COMMONS PROMOTING COMMUNITY EVENTS

There are only a small number of community events that lead to requests to install advertising signage on the Commons, as follows:

- St Paul's School fete, A frame at junction of Rusthall Road and Langton Road.
- Rusthall Village fete, 6 small signs on High Street, Coach Road and Rusthall Road.
- Rusthall Bonfire, 4 signs in High Street.
- Langton Village Fete, one sign at junction of Coach Road and Langton Road.
- Hospice in the Weald run, one banner and small signage at 4-5 road junctions.

All signage is allowed up to 2 weeks before the event and must be removed the day after the event. The requests are managed by the Clerk and it was agreed that this system works well.

All agreed that the signage for the Pantiles events had become excessive, PBurnett proposed a single notice board in Fairground car park, near the payment meters to advertise the events. All agreed, this would be progressed via the Committee.

Action: Committee to work through the proposal for a noticeboard for advertising signage in Fairground car park.

The promotional banners on the Cold Bath (Bath Square) will be removed immediately, either by the Pantiles team or the Ranger as they were unsightly and not allowed under the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council contract for the management of the Cold Baths.

17. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- The Forum disabled access path request

The Forum has submitted a request to install a disabled access path off Castle Road through to the tarmac path which enables access to the rear of The Forum. The current track is in poor condition with clear evidence that there was a hardcore path there at some point. Keith Bedford has indicated that the work would cost in the region of £3,000, The Forum would contribute all/half/some of the costs and potentially source funding. Given the importance of access for all, the Conservators agreed to the request.

- Request from Linden Park Cricket Club for a nursery to use the Clubhouse

Linden Park Cricket Club has submitted a request to allow them to sublet the Clubhouse to a local nursery and to install a storage shed.

The Conservators agreed to the proposal. AErrington noted that the works to the car park should be coordinated to avoid times when parents would be dropping off their children.

- Apsley Street pipe

PBurnett was able to confirm that the exposed pipe on Apsley Street was not a gas or water pipe. UK Power Network had confirmed that there was power running in the area and needed to complete a site visit to confirm whether the pipe was live or not.

- Fairground car park litter bin servicing

IMarshall raised concerns that the two litter bins in Fairground car park were not being serviced and were causing significant litter problems.

Action: PBurnett agreed to investigate what contracts and arrangements RCP had in place to manage the litter bins (note, this is not the red Biffa bin).

- Meeting scheduling

A request was made to move the Conservators' meeting times from 2-4pm to 1.30-3.30pm, this was agreed.

18. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

24/01150/FULL | Redevelopment of the site involving the demolition of existing buildings in a conservation area and the provision of 38no. residential houses & 6no. residential flats, creation of new access, landscaping and associated works | Phillips House & Eynsham House, Crescent Road, Royal Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN1 2PL

The Clerk had submitted comments on behalf of the Conservators.

MEETING ENDED

DATE OF NEXT MEETING – 17th October 2024, The Rackliff Centre, Rusthall.

Agreed Actions

Agenda Item	Detail	Responsibility	Progress/update
3&4	Chair to sign the minutes of the previous meetings and send to the Clerk.	Chair	Complete
5	To investigate an appropriate barrier for the junction of Cabbage Stalk Lane and the Common.	Ranger	Ongoing
5	To get guidance and advice about preventing motorbikes from using the Commons/reporting incidents from the Community Safety Team and report back.	Clerk	Complete
5	To work on a project plan for the new guidance (dogs on leads in and around Fir Tree Road car park)	Ranger	Complete
6	To write a lone worker policy for approval by Conservators.	Clerk	Complete
10	To prepare an internal audit action plan for the October meeting	Clerk and Treasurer	Complete
10	To consider the alternative quotes and appoint a new internal auditor for 2024/5.	Clerk and Treasurer	Complete
10	To upload the AGAR and supporting documents to the website to enable commencement of the period for the exercise of public rights. To send the AGAR, along with further supporting documents, to the external auditor, by the deadline of 1 st July 2024.	Clerk	Complete Complete
15	To progress discussions on the logistics of the car park meter move and any necessary signage.	Committee	Complete
15	To prepare a proposal for electric car charging points.	PBurnett	Outstanding
16	To work through the proposal for a noticeboard for advertising signage in Fairground car park.	Committee	No longer necessary as being managed by Clerk and Targetfollow (Pantiles)
17	To investigate what contracts and arrangements RCP had in place to manage the litter bins (note, this is not the red Biffa bin).	PBurnett	Completed by Clerk

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

Minutes of a meeting held in the Rackliff Centre on 17th October 2024 at 1.30pm

PRESENT:

Cllr Martin Brice
Paul Burnett
Ewen Cameron
Amii Errington
Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall
Cllr Matthew Sankey
Cllr Jayne Sharratt
Clare Sinha
Corin Thoday
Cllr Pamela Wilkinson (Chair)

ATTENDING:

Daniel Colborne (Ranger)
David Miller (Treasurer)
Gemma Stapeley (Clerk)
Clive Evans (Friends of the Commons)
Cllr Paul Gripper (Rusthall Parish Council)

OBSERVING

David Clover
Anthony Pawson (Friends of the Commons)

APOLOGIES

Chris McHugh

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted that Cllr Matthew Sankey was attending for the first time, as an elected Borough Council Conservator.

1. DECLARATION OF BUSINESS INTEREST

Cllr Sankey declared that he was a tenant of the landlord, Targetfollow.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Chris McHugh.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 27th June were considered and approved. A copy to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

4. MINUTES OF THE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The minutes of the Committee meetings held since the last quarterly Conservators' meeting on 8th July, 2nd September and 23rd September 2024 were considered and approved and would be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

5. MATTERS ARISING

Rusthall Bonfire and Fireworks

The Clerk was asked for an update and went on to explain that since the last meeting on 27th June, Officers had issued instructions to the Rusthall Bonfire and Fete Committee (RBFC) allowing only untreated wood pallets to be burned on the bonfire. This change removes the risk of non-specification materials finding their way onto the fire and is a best practice, which has been adopted by other bonfire event organisers, in line with Environment Agency guidance. While Officers had communicated that a change to the specification of wood was to be expected, it appears that RBFC were not expecting this and as such it can be concluded that there was a genuine miscommunication between both parties. The change to pallets is a significant change, requiring work on logistics and planning which Officers acknowledge. Disappointingly, the instruction triggered the Chair of RBFC, Lisa Coghlan, to write an unnecessary, targeted social media post, which mischaracterised the facts to a point that was considered defamatory.

A meeting took place on 20th August between the Clerk, Lisa Coghlan and the Deputy Chair of RBFC, Alison Fagan, with Cllr Paul Gripper attending to mediate. The meeting concluded that Lisa Coghlan had behaved disappointingly and was not correct in some of her actions or words, Lisa was asked for a formal apology, which was not given. As follow up, on 26th August Cllr Pamela Wilkinson, as Chair of the Conservators, issued a letter to RBFC confirming that further communication with Officers would only take place between them and Alison Fagan and that a repeat of the unacceptable communication and treatment of Officers would not be tolerated. The letter asked for reassurances on how RBFC would communicate with Officers to reduce the environmental impact of the event.

A personal letter from Lisa Coghlan was received on 22nd September and an acknowledgement letter sent in response on 3rd October from Cllr Pamela Wilkinson. In the meantime, Officers are working well with Alison Fagan, when matters that impact the Common are discussed. Cllr Paul Gripper confirmed that RBFC were working hard to make the required changes and to ensure that the event continues to be a success.

Drainage works on Major York's Road

The Clerk and Ranger provided an update, confirming that the engineering works on Major York's Road, planned and managed by Kent County Council's (KCC) Highways Asset Management Team had been completed. The aim of the work was to reduce the risk of the River Grom being overwhelmed during significant storms and heavy rain; it was not possible to guarantee that the Pantiles would never flood again.

Running alongside the engineering works, KCC's Flood & Water Management Team have continued to work through the recommendations of the Flood Mitigation Options Appraisal for Tunbridge Wells Common, produced by Watermans Infrastructure and Environment Ltd. Both KCC Officers and the Ranger had identified that there is a culvert on the footpath along Major York's Road which is not connected to the drainage system and during significant storms the culvert overflows with water, flowing at speed and high volume down the footpath, overwhelming the Hydrorock at Law 365. As a matter of urgency KCC's Officers and consultants from Watermans are proposing to connect the culvert to a new pipe under Major York's Road to a new attenuation pond, on the Fairground car park side of the Common. The area marked for the new pond currently has poor quality scrub, which would need to be cleared, the Ranger would be leading on this aspect of the planning to ensure significant trees are protected. KCC asked permission to progress the plans and Conservators gave permission to install the pipe, two headwalls and the attenuation pond.

CThoday and MSankey expressed significant concerns about flooding of the Pantiles and Pink Alley, flagging up that the Framptons' drain was a concern. The Clerk had already had email exchanges with Jon Moore of Targetfollow and had asked him to discuss the drain and whether it was appropriately engineered with his own contacts at KCC. The Clerk and Ranger stressed the importance of reporting all blocked drains to KCC via their online reporting form.

PBurnett and CThoday discussed a dormant Flood Forum group, with PBurnett tasked with reconvening the group. PWilkinson confirmed that Mike Martin MP was aware of the issues, through her own communications with him on the matter.

Action: PBurnett to investigate restarting the Flood Forum group meetings.

6. RISK MANAGEMENT & REVIEW OF RISK REGISTER

The Ranger was thanked for all of his hard work in managing the significant number of incidents, camps and fly tips, there wasn't a particular reason for the increase that could be identified.

Accidents

Since the last meeting in June 2024, there have been no reported accidents.

Incidents

In the last quarter:

- Ongoing issue of motorcycle encroachments on Victorian Terraces, Happy Valley and The Bumps. People are now being actively encouraged to report directly and immediately to the police whilst also reporting to us.
- Theft of log barrier at St Paul's Lime Grove.
- 2 incidents of indecent exposure, 28th June on the path behind Linden Park Cricket Club and 5th August at Happy Valley.
- Significant amount of drug taking waste and syringes found on and around John Barber's bench at Happy Valley.
- 13th July, campfire lit over several days on the land north of The Forum.
- 31st July, damage to height barrier in Fir Tree Road car park.
- 8th August, removal of large tree trunk used to prevent encroachment at the end of Common View.
- 25th August, tree fell on lamppost on the desire line path coming from Fairground car park. Passed to our insurance company to assess due to significant repair costs.

Campers

In the last quarter:

- Two tents north of Sainsburys roundabout.
- Two tents adjacent to rear of Fairground car park.
- Tents behind Brighton Lake.
- Two sets of tents north of Sainsburys roundabout.
- Homeless family camped near Victoria Grove, taken to YMCA hostel by Ashleigh.
- Two separate tents by side of path running up from Law365.
- Large camp near Bumps.
- Small camp near Bumps.

Fly-tipped waste

In the last quarter:

- 3rd July, mixed waste left on the path down to the Pantiles.
- 24th July, carpet dumped on Castle Road near Romanoff Lodge. 30th July, 2 x transformers on Hungershall Park.
- 4th August, car bumpers, bed frame and mattress in Fairground car park (RCP paid for this).
- 22nd August, mixed waste including bike and two chairs on Church Avenue in Rusthall.
- 30th August, three car wheels along Hungershall Park.
- 4th September, 11 x black sacks of nitrous oxide canisters dumped by the Coach Road bin store.

- 7th September, wheelchair dumped at Bull’s Hollow.
- 9th September, dead deer on side of Mount Edgumbe Road, removed by specialist contractor due to complaints.
- 12th September, approximately 10 black sacks of cans and rubbish duped around Brighton Lake.
- 26th September, 12 cooking oil cans dumped around Bracken Cottage easement.
- 30th September, camp materials dumped on footpath alongside Langton Road.

Complaints

There were no complaints in the last quarter.

Risk Register

Full review of the Risk Register completed by the Committee on Monday 23rd September.

Insurance claims

There is one active insurance claim for the damage to the lamppost on Fairground car park. The insurance policy was renewed on 1st January 2024, with Zurich.

7. CLERK’S REPORT

Summary of volunteer hours:

Volunteer sessions	Total number of hours contributed (since last meeting)	Financial value (as per National Lottery Heritage Fund rate of £10/hour)
Ranger volunteers (every Wednesday)	86	£860
Monthly Saturday mornings	90	£900

S106 – Requests and status

As an update this is the status of our requests:

Date Requested	Property	Number of dwellings/inc reases in dwellings	Amount requested	Latest update
18/03/2022	WA Turners (22/00238)	94	£18,800	Awaiting decision.
11/07/2022	Showfields Estate (22/01576)	36	£3,377.75	Application approved.
05/09/2022	Cinema Site (22/02304)	166	£33,200	05/01/2023 application approved. Building in progress. 27/11/23 – notification of developer’s intention to commence in January 2024.
15/05/24	Phillips and Eynsham House (23/01150)	44	£8,800	Awaiting decision

Public Enjoyment Plan

While the ecology of the Commons is supported through the five-year Ecological Management Plans, it is important to focus on the requirements of the Conservators (as per the 1981 Kent Act) to provide free access to the public to attend and play games and enjoy recreation on the Commons. As a result, the Clerk has drafted the beginnings of an Amenity Plan. The Committee, Clerk and Ranger all agreed to rename the proposed Amenity Plan to the Public Enjoyment Plan and collaboratively worked on objectives for the plan as follows:

1. To ensure that all users of the Commons remain safe.
2. To make sure that we are listening to what our community have to say and would like to see happen on and to the Commons.
3. To provide excellent communication with our community to help them maximise their enjoyment of the Commons.
4. To encourage and increase free use of the Commons for lawful sports and pastimes, events and activities, enabling more people to enjoy and benefit from the land.
5. To develop an enhanced education programme for young people.
6. To continuously strive for better accessibility and always have one live access project underway.
7. To work with stakeholders and third-party experts to capture essential data, information, thoughts and guidance relating to the Commons, to assist with better management and planning.

Conservators approved the objectives listed. Supported by Clare Sinha, the Clerk has created a Google forms questionnaire to seek the views of the Community on how to enhance their enjoyment of visits to the Commons. The results of the questionnaire will be reviewed and used to populate the Public Enjoyment Plan.

Action: the Clerk to bring a first draft of the Public Enjoyment Plan to the January 2025 Conservators' meeting, for Conservator review.

Fundraising

Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL):

A funding application for tools and equipment to enable scything sessions to be run with volunteers has been submitted to the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL) grant scheme.

Funding for all mentoring and webinars:

The Clerk has been working with Funding for All, the Kent based charitable organisation that supports charities and voluntary sector organisations with mentoring and resources to help increase chances of fundraising success. During a mentoring session it became clear that a significant issue for Officers is a lack of staffing resource to plan, carry out and administer projects and improvements. Additional support in basic administration, data management and support to deliver the public enjoyment plan, to produce blogs for the website, social media, website updates and to design set posters and information boards would be a welcome addition. A funding application for staffing resource in terms of a part time person/hours to deliver a project should be considered in future.

Action: the Clerk and Committee to consider a funding application for staffing resource.

Project Planning

The Clerk detailed progress on two significant projects:

1. Restoration of the 101 Steps on Rusthall Common

Officers have already completed site visits with the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) Conservation and Urban Design Officer, TWBC Principal Conservation Officer, KCC County Archaeologist and a possible contractor, all of whom were very supportive of the project and proposed approach. It is possible that some of the work being scoped will require planning permission and so this needs to be factored into a plan. The Ranger has been asked to develop a full project specification as a starting point.

Action: Ranger to deliver a full project specification for restoration of the 101 Steps project.

2. Ecological enhancement of Brighton Lake

At the last meeting, Conservators approved the project proposal to help enhance the ecology of Brighton Lake on Tunbridge Wells Common, since the meeting, the following actions have taken place:

- The start of discussions with neighbours, which need to be continued.
- Collation of data to form baseline surveys.
- Volunteer time clearing vegetation and litter picking
- Selection of preferred contractor, Aquamaintain based in Crawley Down, who have completed a site visit to discuss removal of curly water weed and electrofishing.

The Clerk proposed to proceed with the quote for works received from Aquamaintain as follows:

- Removal of approximately 80% of invasive curly water weed (to then be maintained by volunteers ongoing): Truxor Weed Cutting/Removal Boat with operator and banksman, including fuel and delivery: £950.00 + VAT / day.
The weed will be left to one side for 24 hours enable invertebrates to move out, the weed will then need to be collected and disposed of at additional cost,
- Electro-Fishing operation to remove as many fish from the pond as possible, 4-man team, with EA Fish removal permission applied for, transport tanks and waste disposal included: £1200.00 + VAT / day, estimated to take one day.
- Site Security and Safety - Heras Fencing, orange mesh barrier fencing and site safety signage: £115.00 + VAT / week (min. 1 week hire) Heras and mesh barrier fencing to be erected around the pond during the works to prevent any public access. Site safety signage would be installed.
- Installation of 2 x floating reedbeds (2m x 1m) includes native aquatic wetland plants, installation, anchoring with anti-grazing measures. £850 + VAT + delivery. This will help mitigate against potential algal bloom following removal of existing invasive waterweed.
- New 'No fishing' and 'No fish' signage (on the Island and by fishing spots), estimated at £300.
- Interpretation board detailing the historical context of the pond, and the ecological enhancement works. £500 estimate.

The Clerk proposed that finances for the project be taken from the Beechcroft contribution towards management of Tunbridge Wells Commons received during the Aldi deregistration process. Conservators approved the request. Conservators also approved a request to implement a communication plan, to include a letter to be delivered to all residents along the stretch of Eridge Road, opposite the pond.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

The Clerk has been approached by Kier Developments, who were interested in discussing buying BNG units on the Commons. Paul Burnett and the Clerk have met with their project lead, and expressed interest, establishing exactly what is required, and getting a better understanding of the relatively new legislation. To comply, Conservators are required to have the Commons ecologically surveyed and possible enhancement projects identified and costed, at this point a financial value to the credit can be discussed and the value to the Commons considered. Kier have agreed to pay for the survey work and take this value from the credit, if we progress. The Clerk is sourcing quotes for the ecological surveys and will revert to the Committee to discuss options once received.

Fungi walk and talk

The Clerk has organised two fungi identification walks for the Commons, led by fungi expert Martin Allison and kindly funded by the Friends of the Commons. Sessions are scheduled to take place on Tuesday 22nd October

(Rusthall Common) and Wednesday 6th November (Tunbridge Wells Common), with tickets being sold via Eventbrite. Both events sold out quickly, indicating interest and demand.

Earth school

During the school summer holidays, Nature Maker's Forest School hosted two sessions of "Earth School" on the Commons with interactive eco play sessions, both of which were well received. They are back on Tunbridge Wells Common on Friday 1st November for a family Woodland Wander, places are still available. All sessions have been kindly funded by the Friends of the Commons.

Disease Resistant Elm project

Working together with Kent County Council's Plan Tree team, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Kent High Weald Partnership, the Clerk and Ranger are part of a project to plant a significant number of disease resistant elm trees in the Borough. The Commons have been allocated 30 feathers (small saplings) and 20 standards (6-8cm girth trees) which must be planted in specific areas to theoretically replace historical elm trees that died due to Dutch elm disease and areas where other trees have been cut down, for example ash trees affected by dieback. The project promotes the return of a beautiful tree species and encourages white-letter hairstreak butterflies that feed on elm trees, a high priority species for conservation. The Ranger has submitted planting maps and awaits further direction from the project group.

Other

- South & South-East In Bloom, gold and category winner for Commons/Open Space.
- On 3rd September Officers joined William Benson and Kent Police's Community Safety Unit Inspector Christian Mayers, to discuss anti-social behaviour on Rusthall Common and get his views on enhanced safety.
- The Langton Road speed limit extension request remains rejected by Kent County Council, but the project group continue to work to get the decision reversed.
- The Forum disabled access path has been installed.

Requests to Conservators

Since the last meeting there have been no requests to all Conservators.

8. ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT PLAN WORK SCHEDULE FOR Q3 2024/5

Work continues to progress well following the recommendations in the two Ecological Management Plans. Conservators approved the work schedule planned for quarter three 2024/5. It was noted that the flail mow collector works had taken place between the 8th and 10th of October, but as the land was very wet, obvious damage had been done to the ground by the tractor. In 2025 the scheduling of the works needs to be better managed, with contractors booked for several weeks/a month earlier to avoid this issue.

9. RANGER'S REPORT AND FINANCIAL WORK PLAN

Trees:

Ash dieback

Preliminary condition surveys took place in July and are currently taking place again to prioritise which trees need to be removed or mitigated this quarter. A plan and specification are now being drafted with a view to receiving quotes from three contractors in time for the Ranger's recommendations, to be presented and considered by the Committee on the 4th of November. Work will then be prioritised and scheduled with the chosen contractor/s.

High Value Trees (HVT)

Quotes have so far been received from one contractor (Gimbles) to carry out the necessary Autumn/Winter works as identified by the external tree consultants (Living Forest) as part of their December 2023 HVT report. A second

quote is now being produced. Some of the recommendations had to be expedited due to storm damage etc and the Ranger will be presenting the details and contractor quotes to the Committee on the 4th of November 2024 for approval.

Other trees

The October tree safety survey is also looking at all other trees that will require mitigation work this quarter. Continual review/monitoring will also take place as we enter Autumn and then Winter in the usual manner.

Drainage/water management:

Flood mitigation

Reducing the risk and impacts of flood events resulting from rain on the Commons is a continual goal that the Ranger takes extremely seriously. Identifying where issues are likely to occur prior to them taking place is critical and much has already been done to divert, slow down and hold onto excess water during and after storm events. The aim is to help to stop the drainage solutions and rivers downstream of the Commons from being overloaded wherever possible.

Several approaches are now being implemented as follows:

- Ensuring that the annual programme of digger work is now taking place to allow ditches to work as effectively as possible. However, it should be noted that the existing drainage ditch systems are mostly designed to evacuate excess water from the Commons. Subtle amendments are now taking place so that they can hold more water (attenuate) before allowing the water to then drain away.
- Creating small side drains and ditches along path edges to catch, hold, divert and slow the initial flow of each deluge. This is particularly important in relation to London Road, Mount Edgecumbe Road and Major York's Road catchment areas.
- Whilst not technically the responsibility of the Commons Conservators: Encouraging all relevant interested parties/neighbours/stakeholders to work to ensure that road drainage is kept clean and serviceable.
- Consultation and close engagement are ongoing with KCC Highways/Flood Team to advise regarding potential large- and small-scale solutions.

Grass management:

Short/Amenity grass areas

The new short grass contract is settling in with the service being of a higher standard this year.

Long grass areas

The relationship with the longer grass contractor is developing very well due to the operator being ecologically trained, very local and equipped with precisely the right resources. This is allowing the Ranger to increasingly focus upon important grassland/meadow areas for both aesthetic and ecological gains.

Ad-hoc grassland strimming

The addition of a third new contractor is progressing with continual improvements and helpful benefits in terms of improved time available to the Ranger to prioritise other work. Further improvement is expected into the next cutting season.

Public Engagement

The Ranger and Clerk have continued to work hard together to ensure that the community are kept fully informed and engaged wherever possible. This is bringing significant benefits in terms of public perception, knowledge and enjoyment with feedback being overwhelmingly positive.

Fir Tree Road car park

In August, works took place to rework and restore the surface of Fir Tree Road car park. Due to heavier use of the car park by nursery parents dropping off and picking up children from the cricket club, traffic diversions, very

heavy rain and anti-social behaviour in the car park, additional work is required to fully restore the ground. Keith Bedford will be returning to assist with modification works, costs are reflected in the financial work plan.

Financial work plan

Conservators approved the financial work plan for quarter three 2024/5.

10. FINANCE

Finance Report

The Treasurer presented the accounts for Q2 2024/5. Net income and expenditure for the six months was £30,913, £36,004 better than the budgeted shortfall of £5,091 and £7,634 higher than for the same period last year.

Much of the positive budget variance arises under the heading of Maintenance of Commons, particularly for grass and cleared areas; this is regarded as a timing difference caused to some extent by weather conditions and is expected to be reversed over the next two quarters. Other income includes £4,569 from the East Sussex Lund Fund, part of a £15,000 grant spread over three years to fund the ecological enhancement project on the Victorian Terraces.

Contributors to the prior year variance include van costs, which did not feature last year, and payroll, with increases in line with budget.

Bank reconciliation

Conservators approved the bank reconciliation as at 30th September, it was signed by the Chair.

Internal audit action plan

The internal audit report for 2024/5, prepared by Mid Kent Audit, had been provided to Conservators at the June 2024 meeting. The Clerk and Treasurer had been given an action, to take all of the recommendations within the report and create an action plan to ensure that each recommendation was acted upon. The internal audit action plan was provided at the meeting, which included planned actions and timescales.

Action: Conservators to review progress against the internal audit action plan at the January 2025 meeting.

From 2025, a three-year contract has been signed with new internal auditors, Mulberry Local Authority Services Ltd. It is the opinion of the Clerk and Treasurer that the new company will provide a more qualitative and cost-effective service. Mulberry provides an interim internal audit, scheduled for 29th November, to ensure that all procedures are correctly implemented, prior to the year-end audit, a process which appealed to the Officers.

Review and acceptance of the 2023/4 external audit

At the end of September PKF Littlejohn LLP carried out the external audit. Their work concluded that there were two except for matters:

The AGAR was not accurately completed before submission for review:

1. The smaller authority has not restated the prior year figure in Section 2, Box 9, following a change in fixed asset valuation policy in 2023/4. Please note that the Practitioner's Guide allows smaller authorities to use any reasonable valuation method, provided that the prior year figure is restated for consistency and compatibility.
2. Box 7 to 8 reconciliation incorrectly includes the net book value of fixed assets as a reconciling item. This indicates that purchases of assets have not been accounted for through Box 6 in accordance with proper practices. Please ensure that amendments are corrected in the prior year comparatives when completing next year's AGAR.

Conservators reviewed and accepted the external audit report.

Action: The Treasurer to implement changes to the accounts and accounting methods to ensure that the except for matters raised are corrected for 2024/5.

Reserves policy

The internal auditor raised the fact that the reserves policy details:

“At the December 2021 meeting of the Conservators, they agreed that the General Reserve would be kept at or above 25% of our Net Revenue Expenditure in reserves (expressed in the ratio of reserves to annual operating expenditure)”.

Instructions given by the Committee in February 2024 required Officers to prepare a budget accounting for a 30% reserve, this was not amended in the policy.

The Treasurer and Clerk would like to review the reserves policy and calculations, to then incorporate this into the Financial Procedures.

Action: Treasurer and Clerk to bring a proposal for the reserves policy to the January 2025 meeting.

Precept 2025/6 approval

The Clerk confirmed that RPI for September 2024 was 2.7% and proposed that Conservators requested the maximum precept from TWBC for 2025/6 of £221,502. Conservators approved the proposal.

Action: The Clerk to prepare a request to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council for the maximum precept of £221,502 for 2025/26.

11. UPDATE FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE COMMONS

CEvans provided an update highlighting:

- The successful afternoon tea and AGM at The Spa Hotel in July.
- Earth School sessions and family walks for the community, funded by the Friends.
- Fungi walk and talk sessions, again funded by the Friends.
- Purchase of a mobile defibrillator for use on the Commons by the Ranger, particularly aimed at availability during the volunteer sessions.
- A new website for the Friends.
- A request for new Committee members to help with administration.

PWilkinson explained that Council Conservators all sent out regular newsletters to members of their community and that news from the Friends could be included, if information was sent to them.

12. MARKETING AND PR REPORT

The report highlighted that there had been articles published in the Town Crier and Rusthall Life.

The Facebook group now has 2,599 members with monthly reactions from members between 1,754 and 3,147. The most popular posts, during the quarter, related to:

1. Flooding of the Pantiles.
2. Volunteers clearing the Cold Bath, south of the Forum.
3. Opening of a cafe in the St Paul's Church Lodge adjacent to Rusthall Common.
4. Volunteers working hard on Rusthall Common.

5. Before and after photos of Ranger volunteers working in Denny Bottom.

The Instagram account has 589 followers, while the website has monthly users of between 335 and 1,200.

The Clerk did explain that marketing and PR had not been a priority due to lack of time and staffing resource, while other work and projects had been undertaken.

13. PROPOSED DATES FOR MEETINGS IN 2025

- Thursday 30th January 2025
- Thursday 24th April 2025
- Thursday 19th June 2025
- Thursday 16th Oct 2025

Action: The Clerk to book the main hall at the Rackliff Centre for the 2025 meeting dates.

14. POLICY REVIEW

Conservators approved the reviewed and amended versions of the following policies:

- Encroachment policy
- Health & Safety policy statement
- Open Spaces policy

The new Lone Worker policy was also approved.

Action: The Clerk to add the new versions of all of the policies to the website.

15. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- i. Request from West Kent Diggers to start work on Site B on Rusthall Common, near Dingley Dell

Conservators were informed that KCC's County Archaeologist and Officers within TWBC's Planning Team had notified the Clerk that they were unable to support the work of Nigel Stapple of WKD Archaeology, who leads West Kent Diggers. They raised significant concerns about his methodologies, techniques and interpretation of finds. As such it was felt that Conservators could not consider the request until all parties could find agreement and common ground. To note, Nigel is an incredibly valuable volunteer and supporter of the Commons, so all involved find this position very disappointing.

- ii. Request from Hospice in the Weald to hold their annual 10km, 5km and family fun run on Tunbridge Wells Common on 21st September 2025

Conservators approved the request.

- iii. New RCP Field Manager

The Clerk was delighted to have met the new RCP Field Manager covering Fairground car park, Bill Weir. Mr Weir seemed to be very proactive in wanting to make improvements to the car park, enquiring about new styles of bins, clearing large items of rubbish and better management of the site in general. Mr Weir had explained that the new payment meter location was still not working satisfactorily and requested a possible move to the area by the ANPR camera post. Conservators approved the request.

Action: PBurnett to coordinate planning for the payment meter move alongside the proposal for electric car charging points.

16. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

No comments were made on any planning applications during the last quarter.

MEETING ENDED

DATE OF NEXT MEETING – 30th January 2025, The Rackliff Centre, Rusthall.

Agreed Actions

Outstanding actions from meeting on 27th June 2024:

Agenda Item	Detail	Responsibility	Progress/update
5	Investigate an appropriate barrier for the junction of Cabbage Stalk Lane and the Common.	Ranger	Options not considered practical.
15	Prepare a proposal for electric car charging points.	PBurnett	

Actions from 17th October 2024:

Agenda Item	Detail	Responsibility	Progress/update
3&4	Chair to sign the minutes of the previous meetings and send to the Clerk.	Chair	Complete
5	Investigate restarting the Flood Forum group meetings.	PBurnett	
7	Bring a first draft of the Public Enjoyment Plan to the January 2025 Conservators' meeting, for Conservator review.	Clerk	Working towards
7	Consider a funding application for staffing resource.	Clerk and Committee	Considered requirements as part of annual review. Clerk to work on a proposal.
7	Deliver a full project specification for restoration of the 101 Steps project.	Ranger	
10	Review progress against the internal audit action plan at the January 2025 meeting.	Conservators	New interim internal audit report to agree and adopt, as per agenda.
10	Implement changes to the accounts and accounting methods to ensure that the except for matters raised are corrected for 2024/5.	Treasurer	Complete/ongoing
10	Bring a proposal for the reserves policy to the January 2025 meeting.	Clerk and Treasurer	The reserves policy will be included in the Financial Regulations, currently being developed for Conservator consideration.
10	Prepare a request to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council for the maximum precept of £221,502 for 2025/26.	Clerk	Complete

13	Book the main hall at the Rackliff Centre for the 2025 meeting dates.	Clerk	Complete
14	Add the new versions of all of the policies to the website.	Clerk	Complete
15ii	Coordinate planning for the payment meter move alongside the proposal for electric car charging points.	PBurnett	