

TUNBRIDGE WELLS COMMONS CONSERVATORS

Minutes of a meeting held in the Rackliff Centre on 30th January 2025 at 1.30pm

PRESENT:

Clr Martin Brice
Paul Burnett
Ewen Cameron (Incoming Chair)
Amii Errington
Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall
Clr Jayne Sharratt
Clare Sinha
Clr Pamela Wilkinson (Outgoing Chair)

APOLOGIES

Chris McHugh
Clr Matthew Sankey
Corin Thoday

ATTENDING:

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

OBSERVING

David Clover

PRESENTING

Adrian Berendt (Town Forum)
Joy Podbury (Friends of the Commons)
Warren Silk (West Kent Diggers)
Nigel Staple (WKD Archaeology)

1. DECLARATION OF BUSINESS INTEREST

There were no business declarations.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Chris McHugh, Clr Matthew Sankey and Corin Thoday.

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 Ewen Cameron, representative of the Manor of Rusthall, be appointed as Chair until the quarterly meeting of the Conservators in January 2026.

Ewen Cameron continued as Chair. The outgoing Chair, Clr Pamela Wilkinson, was thanked for her service during the last six months.

4. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 17th October 2024 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 5th November 2024, 9th December 2024 and 10th January 2025 were considered and approved and would be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

6. MATTERS ARISING

Barrier for junction of Cabbage Stalk Lane and Tunbridge Wells Common

The Ranger confirmed that after due consideration there wasn't a suitable barrier that would deter motorbikes from entering the Common while also allowing horse and contractor access.

Electric car charging points for Fairground car park

Tesla had contacted Targetfollow to enquire about possible installation of trickle chargers in two car parking spaces on Fairground car park. Targetfollow need to investigate further and consider the feasibility of adding chargers to additional extra spaces. This would also tie in with the move of the payment meter.

Action: PBurnett to submit a full proposal to the Conservators for consideration.

Flood Forum meetings

PBurnett confirmed that Targetfollow's Jon Moore had been tasked with trying to restart the Flood Forum group meetings.

Action: PBurnett to update Conservators on progress at the next full meeting.

Public Enjoyment Plan

The Clerk had struggled to find the time to write the first draft of the Public Enjoyment Plan due to other work commitments. She had circulated a questionnaire to the community to find out more about how to improve visitor experience on the Commons and the responses would help inform the Plan. The Plan and staffing resource had been discussed during the annual review.

Action: The Clerk to continue working on the Public Enjoyment Plan.

101 Steps

A project proposal for work to the steps and drainage on the 101 Steps had been submitted to the Freehold Tenants for funding in 2025. The Freehold Tenants had approved the project, which would be taken in stages, as and when full project specifications and costings were available.

Reserves Policy

The Treasurer has reworked the existing reserves policy to reflect how reserves are now managed. The policy details will be added to the full Financial Regulations document which is currently being revised as a result of comments and guidance from the internal auditors.

7. KENT COUNTY COUNCIL (KCC)'S PLANNED DEVOLUTION

Adrian Berendt of the Town Forum and Joy Podbury of the Friends of the Commons joined the meeting to present a summary of the proposed plans for KCC's devolution.

Adrian explained that KCC and Medway had voted to ask for the County Elections to be postponed in May 2025 and for Kent & Medway to be part of the Devolution Priority Programme. If approved, he explained that the Borough elections scheduled for May 2026 may be cancelled and that implementation of the changes would take place as soon as May 2027.

It is proposed that there will be three or four Unitary Authorities to replace KCC and one Mayor for the whole County. As a default the four Conservator places currently allocated to elected Tunbridge Wells Borough Councillors, would be allocated to the Unitary Authority Councillors.

Adrian raised the fact that Tunbridge Wells is currently unparished and so there could be an option to allow residents to vote for a Town Council to be created. He stressed the importance of making sure that decisions were made well rather than quickly. Councillor Conservators added that there was a cross-party working group already focused on the process and implications.

Adrian and Joy were thanked for their contributions. Adrian left the meeting.

8. WEST KENT DIGGERS/WKD ARCHAEOLOGY REQUEST TO WORK ON SITE B

Background to the presentation, added to the minutes by the Clerk for context:

1. At the last meeting (October 2024), Conservators discussed a request from West Kent Diggers/WKD Archaeology, to start working on a new site adjacent to Dingley Dell. No decision was made because the Clerk informed all that the County Archaeologist did not support the request and raised significant concerns about WKD.
2. After the meeting, Cllr Martin Brice, the Clerk and Ranger met with Nigel Stapple and Chris Gurr (WK Diggers and WKD) to discuss a way forward to enable the request to be resubmitted, with the support of the County Archaeologist.
3. It was agreed by all in attendance that the Clerk would investigate KCC's concerns and that she would try to find a way forward to address all concerns raised.
4. The Clerk spent time communicating with KCC and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) Officers and got confirmation that a more detailed project brief was required.
5. The Clerk contacted Nigel Stapple to request the required information:

"I would like to ask you to prepare a detailed, evidence led brief which explains why the dig is required, detailing all of the background research such as surface finds, historic mapping, archive research, landscape features, test pit data and geophysical survey".

6. Following the request, Nigel objected to the demand. He sent several challenging emails to various parties, including his volunteers and stepped down as archaeological lead in Rusthall.
7. Nigel asked if he could join the next Conservators' meeting to discuss his request again.

During the 30th January meeting, Nigel Stapple presented a summary of his involvement in the archaeological research that has taken place on Rusthall Common since 2017, which included his experience, work with independent experts and papers written and submitted to professional bodies. He explained that West Kent Diggers was a popular community group that had provided educational outreach, work experience and a high level of local interest.

Nigel was unhappy with the recent involvement of TWBC's David Scully and KCC's Wendy Rogers, neither of whom he felt were suitably qualified to judge his work or place working restrictions on the group. He reminded Conservators that the Common was private land and that the decisions lay with the Commons Conservators, not Council Officers. He was not interested in appeasing bureaucrats.

After further discussion, it was agreed by all, including Nigel, that he would prepare a suitably detailed, evidence led brief for the consideration of the Conservators.

Following the meeting, Nigel notified the Clerk that he would not be seeking permission to carry out further excavations on Rusthall Common.

9. 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 2025

Councillor Martin Brice
Councillor Matthew Sankey
Councillor Jayne Sharratt
Councillor Pamela Wilkinson

Freehold Tenants – 1st year of three-year term until 31 December 2025

Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall
Chris McHugh
Clare Sinha

Manor of Rusthall – 3rd year of three-year term until 31 December 2025

Paul Burnett
Ewen Cameron
Amii Errington
Corin Thoday

10. RISK MANAGEMENT

Accidents

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

Incidents

In the last quarter:

- 31st October, fireworks being set off on Wellington Rocks.
- 25th November, two verbal assaults on visitors, by a homeless man, known to frequent the Common.
- 21st December, campfire on Wellington Rocks, with 6-12 people waving torchlit branches/sticks (Winter Solstice celebrations).
- Ongoing incidents of camps and littering in the “Pear Cider Den” behind Brighton Lake TWBC’s Community Safety Team and Kent Police involved.
- 20th January, extensive graffiti on Lower Cricket Pitch bin and inside the Wellington Rocks toilets.

Campers

- Two camps reported by IMarshall.

Fly-tipped waste

In the last quarter:

- End of October, red leather chair left near Fairground Car Park.
- 5th November, sofa tipped on slope down from Gibraltar Cottage.
- 19th November, front seats of a van tipped by Coach Road layby.
- 19th November, three-piece suite tipped by Coach Road layby.
- 27th December, mattress dumped along Church Avenue to St Paul’s Church.

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

The insurance claim for the damage to the lamppost on Fairground car park was rejected by Zurich, TWCC were considered not liable.

The insurance policy was renewed on 1st January 2025, the public liability value and fidelity guarantee were increased, as recommended by the internal auditor.

11. 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	135	£1,350
Monthly Saturday mornings	40	£400

S106 – Requests and status

As an update this is the status of our requests:

Date Requested	Property	Number of dwellings /increase in dwellings	Amount requested	Latest update
18/03/2022	WA Turners (22/00238)	94	£18,800	18/12/2024 - application approved and S106 request approved.
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

S106 Reserves

Brighton Lake ecological enhancement works:

Since the project was approved at the last meeting, £1,992 of the S106/contribution reserve for Eridge Road retirement flats has been spent on removal of a vast proportion of the invasive curly water weed and a large amount of bull rush from the pond. Contractor, Aquamaintain, used a Luxor weed boat to collect 4.6 Tonnes of green waste for composting.

A further £1,440 was then spent in December, when Aquamaintain returned to rehome a number of fish in the pond:

13 x Carp (Common Carp and Mirror Carp) up to 13lb
15 x Tench up to 2lb
18 x Pike up to 6lb
2 x goldfish/Carp hybrids around 2.5lb
5 x Rudd up to 8oz
23 x Perch up to 8oz

They purposely left several of the very small Perch, Rudd, Tench and Pike, as some of these will be food for fish eating birds and are not very appealing to the fishermen.

Several Ranger volunteering sessions have focused on the pond, to remove scrub and bramble, sensitively working to remove scrub and poor-quality saplings and trees on the two islands and removing fishing tackle and debris. The Ranger has removed the signs which indicate that fishing is allowed.

The immediate community living on Eridge Road, adjacent to the pond, have been kept fully informed and the wider community have been kept updated on the project via the website and social media.

Outstanding work as per the original proposal:

- 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' 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.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG):

It was agreed by Officers and the Committee that the offer made by Kier for the purchase of offsite BNG units on the Common, for the proposed Philips and Eynsham House development, was not financially viable or a good use of resource.

As a reminder from the Committee meeting minutes:

Offer: £37,720

Costs to take out of offer:

Ecological survey: up to £5,000

Legal title checks and drafting/reviewing, negotiating and registering a S.106 Agreement (or Conservation Covenant: £5-10,000

Plus, other costs to take out of offer:

1. Local Planning Authority (LPA)'s legal costs in relation to the S.106 Agreement
2. LPA's ongoing monitoring and enforcement fees (over 30 years)
3. Site Registration with Natural England
4. Costs of sale of the units (including sale contract)
5. Accountancy/tax advice (if required)

Public Enjoyment Plan

The Clerk's progress in producing the Public Enjoyment Plan had been much slower than anticipated due to the demands of the day-to-day work. However, a questionnaire, asking for the Community to comment on their time spent on the Commons and how the experience could be improved has now been distributed, with 102 responses received to date. The responses will be analysed and the data used to populate the Plan

Fundraising

Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL)

The Clerk's application for funding from the FIPL fund to buy scything tools and equipment was successful and initial training with volunteers took place on Sunday 19th January. There is now a very short window to fulfil the commitments of the agreement before the final report needs submitting on 28th February. The Ranger and volunteers are committed to helping achieve the deadline.

Sussex Lund Project: Year 2

The work scheduled to take place on the Victorian Terraces, to open the route down to Brighton Lake and to enhance the view of St Mark's Church and railway line, has now been completed by contractor S Young. The work will and continues to be supplemented by the volunteers.

Planning/Planning applications and implications

The planning applications, including those listed in the agenda, have generated and continue to generate a great deal of work relating to the protection of the Common and prevention of encroachment. It appears that a number of Officers within the TWBC Planning Team need a refresh on the legal obligations of Village Green registration and encouragingly, the Clerk has been contacted by Carlos Hone, Head of Planning, to address this, together with the following proposed:

- Planning Team guided walks on the Commons, led by the Clerk.
- The development of information regarding the legislative framework for the Commons and how it relates to the town planning function as local planning authority, to be shared with newer officers and members of the department.
- Drafting of a planning 'informative' for decision notices that would direct applicants to the relevant legislative framework they also need to consider as part of any development decision making.

Kent County Council - Flood and Water Management

The Ranger and Clerk continue to work closely with the Flood and Water Management Team. At the last Conservators' meeting, approval was given for the installation of a culvert and pipe across Major York's Road and infiltration basin to the north of Fairground car park. Since then, Officers have been working with KCC Officers and their consultants, Waterman Infrastructure and Environment Ltd, to collate plans for the infiltration basin. The Ranger has been working to ensure that significant trees and their roots are protected, while allowing other poor-quality trees and scrub to be removed.

At the same time, plans are being developed for the nature-based solutions, which will come to the Conservators for approval when finalised. As a reminder, £5,000 of the Union House S106 funding has been set aside to contribute towards these works.

Fungi walk and talk

Fungi expert, Martin Allison has finished and submitted his fungi survey report for 2024. Martin reported that the Commons had a waxcap community of regional importance.

Other

1. Rusthall Bonfire and Fete Committee confirmed that they would not be holding the Bonfire and Fireworks on the Common View meadow in 2025. This change provides Officers with

the opportunity to consider the major habitat restoration project as proposed in the Ecological Management Plan.

2. The TWBC Facilities Management Team have requested that the rental agreement for Unit 1 is changed to Unit 3, as such Officers are organising to empty and clear Unit 1 and use Unit 3 instead. This actually gives greater opportunity for storage and for handyman tasks to be completed there, such as restoration of noticeboards.

Requests to Conservators

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

12. ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT PLAN WORK SCHEDULE FOR Q4 2024/25

Work continues to progress well following the recommendations in the two Ecological Management Plans. Conservators approved the work schedule planned for quarter four 2024/5.

13. RANGER'S REPORT AND FINANCIAL WORK PLAN

Trees

The Ranger reported that during the last quarter there had been several consecutive storms, resulting in a challenging number of emergency tree issues to be managed.

Ash dieback

Safety mitigation plans and scheduled works to a large proportion of the ash trees affected by dieback were approved by the Committee in December 2024, with the contract being awarded to Gimbles. The work focused on the main road and path side trees with issues along the Langton Road, Coach Road and Rusthall Road. The contracted works were carried out without issue between the 13th and 17th January.

Given the highly prominent location of the works in Rusthall village, specific attention was given to ensuring that the community were informed and understood the reasons for the works before they were carried out. This included direct communications with Rusthall Parish Council, via social media and in Rusthall Life and Town Crier. While the work was unavoidable it does provide the opportunity for replacement tree planting over time to increase biodiversity, wildlife value and to enhance the aesthetics.

There remain ash trees affected by dieback which require mitigation works, for example at Still Green and Bishops Down, and a further plan for these is currently being prioritised and costed.

Elm Trees

Twelve disease resistant elm standards have been allocated to the Commons and will be strategically planted to ensure maximum aesthetic value and biodiversity benefits. The scheme is being deployed as per best practice ecological guidance to provide good habitat for the key species that were historically severely impacted by the loss of mature elms back in the 1970s.

High Value Trees (HVT)

The recommendations within the HVT survey continue to be followed, with some work having to be fast tracked due to storm damage. Recommended work on the three veteran oaks on the Union House exchange land (Mungo's) has now been completed. In theory, the cost of this work should be paid by the Estate of Union House, and the Clerk is pursuing this claim. There are now only two remaining trees that require work, the Queen Anne Oak and the large Chestnut by the footpath at the Lower Cricket Pitch, both on Tunbridge Wells Common. This is specialist work and quotes have been requested so that the works can be carried out within the next few weeks. The estimated cost is £1,500.

Drainage/Water Management

Work continues across both Commons to ensure that the ongoing programme of flood mitigation and drainage management is maintained and increasingly effective.

Additional flood mitigation drainage/ditching solutions are planned for the land adjacent to the footpaths on the London Road catchment area. This work should help to increasingly ease the pressure on the river Grom, particularly during heavy rain/flash flood events.

Grass Management

Short/Amenity Grass Areas

The new short grass contract has continued to work well and to a good standard. The warmer weather that is seen throughout most of the winter months is impacting the short grass, which does not appear to go into full dormancy. This is an issue as ever-growing grass on saturated soils is very difficult to maintain using mowers.

Long Grass Areas

During the last quarter there have been changes to the contractors working on long grass. At the end of October 2024, Honnington Farms suddenly stopped attending the Commons. This was disappointing and led to some areas not being cut as expected. However, from mid-January a trial commenced with a new contractor, Gardens of England. The new contractor has a greater array of equipment options and more operator availability, which will be very helpful going forward. So far, their work has been undertaken to an extremely high standard and first impressions are very positive. Gardens of England will be used to complete catch up work during the final quarter of the year.

Handyman

Unfortunately, the handyman that had been working on the Commons has decided to focus on other work and is no longer able to assist on the Commons. He had been a great addition, supplementing volunteer and Ranger work. The Ranger and Clerk will be taking time to find a replacement.

Fir Tree Road car park

The Ranger confirmed that further work was needed to be completed, to the entrance apron area of the car park, due to sustained damage by vehicles turning and manoeuvring. It was noted that installation of a sealed surface was not allowed on the village green. The Ranger is investigating alternative options and costings.

Financial work plan

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

14. FINANCE

Finance Report

The Treasurer presented the accounts for Q3 2024/5. Net income and expenditure for the nine months was £89,821, £48,977 above budget and £10,360 higher than for the same period last year (as restated to exclude planning agreement income, now shown in separate reserves).

As was the case last quarter, the bulk of the positive budget variance arises under the heading of Maintenance of Commons, with grass cutting affected by adverse weather conditions. Recent storms created an increased need for tree works, invoices for which are still coming in.

Income includes £8,000 for benches, now given their own heading under both income and expenditure. This consists of £3,000 previously included under other income, £2,000 received from Friends of TWCC and £3,000 transferred from a separate legacy reserve after it was allocated to the provision for four identified refurbished benches. Expenditure on parts and labour for new and refurbished benches is shown under Maintenance of Commons as incurred.

Adequacy of funds

As reported to the Conservators in October, adequacy of funds is now measured by comparing the accumulated General Reserve at the balance sheet date with a figure representing 30% of the full Precept for the year. The recommended minimum level is three months, i.e. 25%, as shown at the foot of the balance sheet, the General Reserve on 31 December of £175,641 exceeded the 30% of Precept figure by a comfortable £110,937.

Reserves

The balance sheet shows separate reserves relating to s106 planning contributions of £7,851 for Union House and £44,244 relating to Eridge Road, to be applied to relevant expenditure. Of the Union House balance, £5,000 has been informally 'ring fenced' for essential drainage works, leaving £2,851 for other expenditure.

Changes in accounting policies

Following input from the new internal auditors, it has been decided to cease accounting for depreciation on fixed assets. Depreciation has continued to be shown in these accounts but will be reversed out for this and previous years in the year end accounts.

For commercial entities it is standard practice to write off the cost of an asset to reserves as depreciation over its useful life to give a 'true and fair' view of the entity's financial position. However, for a smaller authority such as Tunbridge Wells Commons Conservators (TWCC), it is normal practice to prepare accounts on a receipts and payments basis and to show fixed assets at cost. Indeed, the AGAR (Annual Governance and Accountability Return) cannot be made to balance without including depreciation as a reconciling item, leading to an audit qualification.

The accounts no longer show payments of insurance premiums and car tax as prepayments, to be amortised over four quarters, but are recording them as an expense when incurred. This treatment already applies to Precept income, recorded as received every six months instead of spread evenly over the year. The Treasurer will continue to accrue for invoices received and paid shortly after a quarter end as a way of maintaining comparability.

Potential reclaims

The internal auditors highlighted that local authorities and similar bodies can recover VAT on purchases by making a VAT126 claim. This does not depend on being registered for VAT and making chargeable supplies as would be the case for a commercial entity. A claim for just over £45,000 has been submitted, but it remains to be seen whether all or some of it will be allowed, depending on whether TWCC is a qualifying body and on the adequacy of some of the older supporting invoices.

Bank reconciliation

Conservators approved the bank reconciliation and statements as at 31st December 2024.

Action: Bank reconciliation and statements to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

Review and acceptance of interim internal audit 2024/5

The Interim internal audit report from Mulberry Local Authority Services Ltd was reviewed and accepted by Conservators.

The Treasurer had collated the report comments and recommendations, alongside discussion during the audit and provided a list of considerations for the Conservators which were discussed and actions agreed as follows:

Point/question	Response/Action
Should TWCC be using an accounting package?	Treasurer prefers the security and flexibility of using an accounting package, but our

	spreadsheet-based system works reasonably well and is cheaper. Action: Treasurer to make enquiries and report back.
Should we keep a register of declarations of interest?	Yes, and continue to ask for declarations at the beginning of each meeting. Action: Clerk to set up.
GDPR: should conservators have individual twcommons.org email addresses to help avoid data breaches and restrict access in the event of an investigation?	All were made aware of the possible risks, Council Conservators and Freehold Tenants were happy to continue with their TWBC emails and personal emails respectively. Manor of Rusthall Conservators requested a Targetfollow@twcommons.org address to be accessed by all four Conservators. Action: Clerk to set up.
Do we have a website accessibility statement? This basically provides for anyone with any disability (e.g. sight) to access anything on TWCC website?	Action: Clerk to ask website provider to resolve.
Are Conservator meeting papers published on the website?	Agenda has always been added, new sentence added saying that all supporting documents can be requested from the Clerk. Complete.
Are draft meeting minutes published on website as well as final versions?	Complete.
Either delete references to standing orders in the financial regulations, as we haven't any, or adopt some, as useful to have guidelines on voting etc.	Action: To be adopted.
Financial regulations last reviewed October 2023 with next review due Oct 2026 but already need updating re. reserves levels and presentation.	Agreed update as necessary following this interim audit
Table of authority levels is unduly prescriptive and outdated, meaning the tendency is not always to follow them exactly.	For lower value items need more freedom for officers. For higher value items we need contract regulations and if doing open tenders, need to publish information. Clerk and Treasurer to propose something more workable for consideration, referring to NALC guidance
Is VAT being recovered on purchases where possible? It is possible for Local Authorities and similar bodies to recover VAT using VAT126 claim form and can go back 3 years.	This appears to have been missed by past and present officers and Conservators, as well as past internal and external auditors. Treasurer has submitted a backdated claim. Complete.
TWCC's current Zurich insurance policy has public liability cover of £5m but recommendation for local authorities is £10m. Suggested fidelity cover level is year-end reserves balance + half of annual precept, so say £300k vs £50k currently in policy.	Complete.
Fixed assets are held at less depreciation in our accounts, which is standard for commercial entities, but local authorities always hold assets	The most straightforward and sensible course of action is to change our policies to show fixed assets at cost. The amounts involved are not

at cost. This caused a stir at the last year end because fixed assets were shown in the AGAR at cost as required but total reserves were shown after depreciation, as per our accounts, requiring the depreciation charge for the year to be included under 'All other payments' in the AGAR to make the figures balance, causing an audit qualification to be raised. AB was far more helpful in discussing and advising on this than previous auditors.	significant and it makes everything more straightforward. Treasurer to update financial regulations and amend December 2024 and subsequent accounts to show fixed assets at cost. Also need to restate March 2024 figures as required by AGAR
Bank reconciliations are now signed quarterly by Conservators, but recommended practice is to sign copy bank statements too.	Complete.
In our accounts and AGAR we should show mileage, payroll fees etc separately from salaries and staff costs such as pension contributions and employer's NIC.	Action: Treasurer to update accounts spreadsheet to analyse and report separately
Only need to show 5 previous years' accounts on website	Complete.
Need to ensure public right to query accounts is given full 30 consecutive working days, which must include first two weeks of July. Day of publication and of intention to publish not to be included in the 30 days.	Action: Clerk to ensure timetable followed
Next internal audit meeting set for Monday 9 June, at which figures, and compliance will need to be complete for passing to external auditors.	Action: Treasurer and Clerk to ensure all work is timetabled and completed in time, taking holidays into account.

Draft 2025/26 Budget

The Clerk presented the draft budget for 2025/6, as agreed by the Committee, Treasurer and Ranger. Conservators approved the draft budget.

15. UPDATE FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE COMMONS

CEvans provided a list of possible Friends' funded projects for 2025, all would concentrate on direct public benefit:

1. Provision of a plaque for the Coronation of King Charles III commemorative tree. (The Ranger confirmed that he already had a plaque for the tree)
2. Noticeboard for Fir Tree car park area.
3. Information board for the historic racetrack
4. Forest school sessions, provided via Kent High Weald Partnership.
5. Fungi Walks x 2 and survey.
6. Developing a Tree Walk (someone to give knowledgeable guided walks required)

16. 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 2,717 members with monthly reactions from members between 1,336 and 3,147.

The most popular posts, during the quarter, related to:

1. Interest in the 101 Steps and cold bath.
2. Happy Valley cold bath, with images and historical discussions.
3. Deer spotted by Rocklea.
4. Project work at Brighton Lake.
5. Ash dieback work scheduled for Rusthall in January 2025

The Instagram account has 622 followers, while the website remains a popular source of information.

17. POLICY REVIEW

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

- Risk Management (no amendments)
- New safeguarding policy.

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

18. EXTERNALLY FUNDED PROJECTS FOR APPROVAL

The Clerk and Ranger had submitted several full project proposals to the Freehold Tenants' Committee for funding in 2025. The proposals were discussed at the Freehold Tenants' AGM and they had agreed to fund the following:

1. Cabbage Stalk Lane Pond – glade improvements.
2. Scalloping to edges of footpath down to Law 365.
3. Mount Edgcumbe Road – protection of cherry tree avenue.
4. Fir Tree Road glade restoration.
5. Phase one of works to repair the 101 Steps including drainage works and resetting the stones.
6. Happy Valley historic vistas.
7. Lion path vista restoration.

The Freehold Tenants were thanked for their very generous contributions.

Officers also highlighted that following the recent news, the Rusthall Bonfire and Fireworks event would not take place on Common View. There was now opportunity to consider a feasibility study into restoration and enhancement of the meadow.

Action: Officers to develop a plan for a Common View feasibility study.

19. ANNUAL REVIEW

The Committee and Officer team held an annual review meeting on 16th January, to look back over what has gone well and less well in 2024, how well the team had progressed against agreed priorities, and where focus needed to be in 2025, including any budget implications. It was agreed that progress was encouraging, despite numerous challenges, such as weather, anti-social behaviour, conflicting views on what should be allowed on the Commons, legislation and regulatory change etc.

The Committee recommended that the broad priorities remain unchanged in 2025, as follows:

- Ongoing focus on the Commons being for the community:
 - Stakeholder engagement, understanding and managing points of view.
 - Public consultation (survey underway, analyse responses and consider next steps).
 - Continue outreach efforts.

- Next steps with the Ecological Management Plan:
 - Continue EMP implementation.
 - S106-funded projects.
 - Draw on input from consultation and user counts to articulate Public Enjoyment plan.
 - Ensure we are in a good position to use all the valuable data we are collecting. Investigate Data Management System.
- Continue to enhance our way of working:
 - Continue to refine procurement process (new Financial Regulations)
 - Continue prioritising Ranger's time and trialling optimum mix of Ranger/handyman/contractor/volunteer resources.
 - Look for ways to release additional Clerk/General Manager time, consider admin/data/IT support options and bring a proposal to the Conservators.
- Continue to focus on having a happy and productive team.

20. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

i. Holly trees planted on Rusthall Common at Dingley Dell.

The Clerk explained that the owners/occupiers of Dingley Dell on Langton Road had planted five standard holly trees on the Rusthall Common side of the boundary wall, without Conservator permission. Conservators agreed that the trees would need to be removed and instructed the Clerk to write to the owner/occupier to give notice for the work to be completed by the end of February 2025.

Action: The Clerk to write the aforementioned letter and send by recorded delivery.

ii. Bus stop on Major York's Road

CSinha asked the Ranger to lay a paving stone by the bus stop on Major York's Road.

Action: The Ranger to investigate whether the request is possible.

iii. Incidents on the Commons

JSharratt has received communication from one of her residents asking what action could be taken to make the Commons feel safer, following several incidents on Rusthall Common over the last few years. All agreed that CCTV would not be possible/effective over 256 acres and that a more realistic approach would be to continue to engage with the community, encouraging the reporting of all incidents, engaging with the local Police and making areas feel safer by clearing scrub and opening up unlit, darker areas.

21. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

05/00175/FULL | Retrospective: timber shed and garage. | 37 Upper Street Rusthall Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN4 8NX.

The Clerk had submitted an objection on behalf of the Conservators.

Application approved.

24/02798/FULL | Variation of Condition 9 of Planning Permission 24/00029/FULL - Updated drainage details | South Lodge Nevill Park Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN4 8NW.

The Clerk had submitted an objection on behalf of the Conservators.

Application approved.

24/02850/FULL | Replacement slimline windows and doors & barge board to northern gables, installation of timber shutters, fencing and vehicle gate | Gibraltar Cottage The Common Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN4 8BJ.

The Clerk had submitted an objection on behalf of the Conservators and the application was withdrawn, amended and resubmitted to accommodate concerns.

The Clerk explained that the applicant had asked whether a gate could be installed on Common land at the entrance to their driveway, given that the land is registered as Village Green then this was not allowed by Conservators.

MEETING ENDED: 15.07

DATE OF NEXT MEETING – 24th April 2025, The Rackliff Centre, Rusthall.

Agreed Actions

Actions from 30th January 2025:

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	Submit a full proposal to the Conservators, for the installation of electric car chargers and payment meter move, for consideration.	PBurnett	
6	Update Conservators, on progress to restart Flood Forum, at the next full meeting.	PBurnett	
6	Continue working on the Public Enjoyment Plan	Clerk	Ongoing
14	Bank reconciliation and statements to be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.	Chair and Clerk	Complete
14	Internal audit recommendations	Treasurer and Clerk	Ongoing
17	Add the new versions of all the policies to the website.	Clerk	Complete
18	Develop a plan for the Common View meadow feasibility study.	Clerk and Ranger	
20i	Letter to be written to Dingley Dell asking for removal of holly trees.	Clerk	Complete
20ii	Investigate installation of paving slab by Major York's bus stop.	Ranger	