

Minutes of a Tunbridge Wells Commons Conservators full meeting held in the Rackliff Centre on 29th April 2026 at 1.30pm

Present:

Cllr Martin Brice
Paul Burnett (On Zoom)
Ewen Cameron (On Zoom)
Cllr Simon Davidson
Mark Dennison
Cllr Corinna Keefe (On Zoom)
Stephen Lacey
Ian Marshall (Chair)
Harry Matthews
Cllr Jayne Sharratt
Clare Sinha

Apologies:

Corin Thoday

Attending:

David Miller (Treasurer – on Zoom)
Gemma Stapeley (Clerk)
Joy Podbury (Friends of the Commons)
John Barber (Friends of the Commons)
Cllr Paul Gripper (Rusthall Parish Council)

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

1. Declaration of business interest and conflicts of interest

Cllr Simon Davidson declared that he was a Director for the International Council for Standardization in Haematology. This is an unpaid role and not a conflict in his view, his fellow Conservators agreed.

There were no other business declarations including conflicts of interest, when a Conservator's personal or business interest, or those of a person or organisation connected to them, conflicts with the interests of the organisation.

2. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Corin Thoday.

3. Membership

Harry Matthews was welcomed as a new Conservator representing the Manor of Rusthall, while Cllr Simon Davidson and Cllr Corinna Keefe were welcomed as new Conservators representing Tunbridge Wells Borough Councillors.

4. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 21st January 2026 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 meeting held on 13th February 2026; 13th March 2026 and 10th April 2026 were considered and approved and would be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

6. Matters arising

6.1 Sussex Lund

The Ranger was asked whether a further funding application could be submitted to the Lund Fund, he confirmed that he would be investigating the opportunities.

6.2 DutchTrig vaccinations

The Clerk confirmed that approximately 20 trees would be vaccinated during May, as part of a three-year programme. The first year of vaccinations will cost £810.

All other actions from the previous meeting had been completed.

7. Risk management

7.1 Accidents

Since the last meeting in January 2026, there have been two accidents, both have been recorded in the accident book:

- A Ranger volunteer twisted her ankle while working on the Commons.
- Two-year-old girl cut her hand on a sharp signage fixing located around the Linden Park Cricket Club outfield barrier. LPCC informed and asked to make safe.

7.2 Incidents

In the last quarter:

- Two instances of the same two men using a chainsaw to cut down trees and remove logs on Rusthall Common, both incidents included verbal abuse to officers and or volunteers. Incidents reported to the police, who are continuing to investigate.
- Person removing pond weed from Brighton Lake, became abusive to volunteer who approached them.
- Reports of campfires at Happy Valley.
- Motorbikes on the Bumps area of Rusthall Common, aggressive when challenged by the Ranger.
- Campfire and destruction at Rusthall Forest School area, off Common View meadow (Monday 20th April).

7.3 Campers

No camps that Officers are aware of.

7.4 Fly-tipped waste

In the last quarter there were five reported instances of fly tipping.

7.5 Complaints

No complaints were received since the last meeting.

7.6 Risk register review

Full review of the Risk Register due September 2026.

7.7 Insurance

The Zurich insurance policy was renewed on 1st January 2026

8. Sale of Commons

Targetfollow were unable to progress the phase II bid from the Friends of the Commons, in their view, it was substantially below the level required to remain competitive in the process. Targetfollow are now having conversations with other interested parties and will continue to market the Commons and car park.

The Friends explained that they were ready and willing to re-engage with Kroll, on behalf of Targetfollow, and remained open to a constructive discussion. The Friends have received a material increase in pledged support since their phase II bid, both in number and aggregate value, reinforcing the strength and depth of community backing for the proposal.

When asked how long the re-marketing process will take, being mindful that community pledges could be time limited, PBurnett suggested that the Friends should re-submit the “best offer that they can”.

9. Clerk’s Report

9.1 Volunteers

Volunteer sessions	Total number of hours contributed (since last meeting)	Total number of hours year to date 1 st April 2025 to 31 st March 2026	Financial value (as per National Lottery Heritage Fund rate of £10/hour)
Ranger volunteers	230	563	£5,630
Monthly Saturday mornings	56	206	£2,060

For the full financial year April 2025 to March 2026 volunteers have contributed 769 hours to helping on the Commons, equivalent to £7,690 (at £10/hr).

9.2 S106 Requests and status

Date Requested	Property	Number of dwellings / increases 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	£2,048.54 requested and received, the balance of £1,329.21 yet to be released.
05/09/2022	Cinema Site (22/02304)	166	£33,200	05/01/2023 - application approved. Build in progress.
15/05/2024	Phillips and Eynsham House 24/01150	44	£8,800	Following a planning appeal, works have commenced.
26/11/2025	Hendy Garage/The Culverdens 25/02604/FULL	104	£21,840	Still awaiting decision

	Spratsbrook Farm, Eridge Road			
03/02/2026	26/00094/FULL	125	£26,250 (incl 5% admin)	Awaiting decision

9.3 S106 balance for each reserve

- Union House (The Potteries) reserve balance: £2,851
- Eridge Road retirement flats balance: £27,991
- Russell Hotel reserve: £1,800
- Showfields estate (part 1) reserve: £0

9.4 Public Enjoyment Plan

The second public engagement questionnaire was launched w/c 26th January 2026 and was promoted for a 6-week period using social media, targeted emails to identified stakeholders, the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) weekly e-newsletter and printed QR coded cards that were distributed on the Commons. 524 people responded, far exceeding the target of 100-200.

Analysis of the responses enabled the Clerk to create a list of priorities as follows:

- Adding people who wanted to volunteer to our volunteering email distribution list.
- Adding people who wanted more communications to our information email distribution list.
- Continue to cut back bramble at main path junctions, for safety and accessibility.
- A review of path surfaces and maintenance, continue to report issues on footpaths to Kent County Council PROW and for issues on tracks consider installation of Fittleworth stone and or improved drainage.
- Clearer signage and way marked routes.
- Updated/new information boards.
- Purchase of mobile information boards (like an A-Frame) for use in areas where volunteers are working and projects taking place.
- Review the suggested locations for new litter bins and consider installation.
- Review the suggested locations for new benches and consider installation.
- Prioritise the refurbishment of poor condition benches where possible.
- Consider introduction of a couple of trial picnic benches.
- A targeted campaign focusing on littering and on dog behaviour and fouling.
- Review of guided walks, with the aim of offering more (already scheduled for 2026).
- Consider how to promote the Commons to local groups and schools, to include information about the space and facilities.
- Review of all infrastructure suggestions (question 13) and evaluate what would be possible.
- Review all improvement suggestions (question 16) and evaluate what would be possible.

The next stage will be to work through the prioritised actions and identification of areas for focus with key stakeholder groups, if required. It was proposed and agreed that a record should be kept explaining what action had or hadn't been taken for each suggestion/idea.

Lighting along some of the footpaths into Rusthall village had been flagged up as needing improvement and while the Ranger commented that he had worked hard to clear trees and scrub in the area, it was suggested that a site visit after dark could be helpful to check the issues.

Action: The Clerk to organise an evening walk along the paths of concern with Cllr Jayne Sharratt. Cllr Simon Davidson to provide the Clerk with the contact for the TWBC Officer responsible for lighting on footpaths.

Pedestrian counts:

The Clerk has completed a small number of counts to date, but initial calculations suggest that the Wellington Rocks/LPCC area of Tunbridge Common has an estimated 560,000 human visitors per year and an estimated 290,000 dog visits per year, with the most popular activity being dog walking. Further count data will help validate these estimates.

9.5 Kent County Council (KCC) - Flood and Water Management

The hard engineering for the culvert and drainage basin on Major York's Road has been completed. Follow up discussion scheduled with KCC to discuss water flow if the culvert overflows.

9.6 Sink hole/Southern Water

TWBC's Environmental Protection Officer, Scott Levett met with Officers and Jamie Baker of the Environment Agency, on site on 12th February. Scott carried out several dye tests and investigated other potential sources (such as the rain gully in the road near to the pipe). On 31st March Scott confirmed that plans to seal the pipe and make the necessary repairs can commence. As riparian owners, Targetfollow agreed to lead on project plans for the repairs. There is disagreement between the Clerk and Targetfollow regarding who will pay for the repair work. It was proposed that a legal opinion might be needed to confirm the position.

Action: The Clerk to send a file note on the sink hole to the new Conservators.

9.7 Cycle path from Langton Green to Town

The Clerk provided an update on the project from TWBC's Chloe Rutland. The email confirmed that following the public engagement, Rusthall High Street and its surrounding area had been identified as the priority section. To date, no further work has been undertaken on how the eastern phase (Coach Road-Langton Road-TW Commons) could be delivered. Any proposals involving Village Green must appropriately address the legal considerations associated with this and would require much further detailed consideration.

9.8 Wildlife surveys

In addition to the existing annual wildlife surveys, William Malpas of Butterfly Conservation Kent is undertaking two butterfly transect surveys, one on each Common, per month. Reptiles and amphibians are also now being surveyed by volunteers.

9.9 High Weald Swifts

The Clerk has connected with Martin Garwood of High Weald Swifts, who is able to donate 10 swift boxes (funded by High Weald National Landscape) to houses in Rusthall village, to help support and build on existing swift colonies. Suitable locations within the village are currently being identified.

9.10 Fun Day

Plans are in place for the Fun Day, a celebration on the Commons on Saturday 6th June between 12 noon and 3pm.

9.11 Requests to Conservators

Since the last meeting the following requests have been sent to the Conservators:

- Dylan Miles car show – not approved
- Cripps fun run - approved

10. Ecological management plan work schedule for Q1 2026/27

Work continues to progress well following the recommendations in the two Ecological Management Plans. Conservators approved the work schedule planned for quarter one of 2026/27.

11. Ranger's report and financial work plan

11.1 Felling licence

Winter work and projects completed in accordance with the Felling licence.

11.2 Tree safety surveys

The Ranger is continuing to survey and assess as per the Management Plan. Independent tree consultants (Living Forest) will be commissioned to carry out inspections of the more prominent/high risk/high value locations in June.

11.3 Ash trees

Ash dieback is now under control with the remaining roadside and path side trees being closely monitored. The extent of any issues will be known during the Summer with plans then being created for mitigation in the Autumn.

11.4 High value trees

Victoria Grove – The recommendations made by Living Forest for the protection and longevity of the Grove were all undertaken by the end February 2026.

Black Poplar hybrids at the junction of Rusthall Road and Lower Green Road were crown reduced during Q4 to mitigate against potential catastrophic wind damage.

Two large oak trees by the entrance to Common View Meadow were addressed, one had excessive dead wood and the other had a significant trunk fault.

11.5 Tree planting

33 disease resistant saplings have been planted across the Commons. A detailed report to explain the planting programme in terms of locations and species selected is available on the website and here: <https://twcommons.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Elm-Planting-Locations-Tunbridge-Wells-and-Rusthall-Commons-January-2026-1.pdf>

100 bare root saplings of a mixture of dog rose, guelder rose, wayfarer and spindle were planted in various places across both Commons as they are low growing and will increase both the aesthetic and wildlife value of the Commons.

27 bareroot willow were also planted. Locations for these were chosen to present greater opportunities for butterflies and/or to help flood mitigation.

11.6 Projects

The third and last year of the Lund Fund project was successfully completed in January.

The area behind the archaeological dig has been cleared of holly scrub to create a glade.

The areas of the Racecourse, south of the cricket ground has undergone extensive work to halo oaks, remove poor/dense holly and sycamores, improve quality of ground/herb layer and improve safety, wildlife value and aesthetic.

Bumps extension path (west of Bumps) has been delayed by wet weather; initial works have started and hope to be completed in the next few weeks.

11.7 Invasive species

The last quarter prioritised management of laurel. Q1 of 2026/27 will prioritise ongoing laurel work and rhododendron treatment.

11.8 Handyman

The new handyman is working well and infrastructure such as removable security bollards, byelaws signs, bins and benches are being installed and maintained at an increasingly efficient rate since he started. The Sherwood Men's Shed have started to create dormouse boxes for use on Rusthall Common.

11.9 Bollards

No progress on the following since the last meeting:

- Replacement of the timber bollards at Common View.
- Installation of a new lockable access barrier at the Rusthall Road entrance to The Bumps.
- Replacement posts around Inner London Road lower island.

Action: Ranger to progress work on bollard projects.

11.10 Financial work plan

Conservators approved the Ranger's financial work plan for quarter one 2026/7.

11.11 New van proposal

The Committee recommended that £20,000 be allocated as a budget to buy a replacement mid-size Ranger's van, which should be second hand, 1-3 years old and use diesel fuel. It was noted that there was £17,500 above the required reserve in the accounts at year end, with additional resale value of the old van.

Several questions were raised by Conservators that had been resolved in the Committee meetings but not reflected in the Ranger's proposal document. CSinha confirmed that the Committee had investigated all options at length, such as electric vans, sponsorship, lease hire etc and that their recommendation demonstrated best value. Conservators approved the proposal and Committee's recommendation.

Action: Committee to work with the Ranger to progress the purchase of the replacement van.

12. Finance

12.1 Finance report and accounts

Net income less expenditure for the year was £17,525, compared to net income of £1,497 per the budget, i.e. £19,022 higher net expenditure overall. The net surplus for the previous year was £13,800 after adjusting to exclude depreciation.

The bulk of the negative variance arises under the heading of Maintenance of Commons, where Trees expenditure was £36,707 higher than budget and Grass and cleared areas was £6,467 higher. The higher spending under these headings was intentional, to spend all the Precept for the year and use up some of the accumulated surplus and was all necessary and beneficial.

The Treasurer explained that applications made to recover input VAT, first under VAT126 (available to local authorities, parish councils, academies and specific public bodies not registered for VAT) and

subsequently under s33 of the VAT Act 1994, aimed at specified public bodies, had stalled. The VAT126 claim has been rejected outright, removing the right to make a retrospective claim going back four years. The Treasurer is still being advised that recovery as a s33 body should be possible, but professional assistance will be required, this was agreed by the Conservators.

Action: Officers to approach recommended solicitors and or tax accountants to request an initial free outline opinion and meeting. If a way ahead is proposed, either pro-bono or for a reasonable capped fee, further recommendations will be made to Conservators.

12.2 Annual accounts for 2025/26

The Treasurer presented the unaudited 2025/26 accounts which Conservators approved.

12.3 Bank reconciliations

A reconciliation as of 31 March 2026, supported by copies of relevant bank statements, were provided for approval and signing.

12.4 Asset register

Using the asset register prepared by the Treasurer, the Clerk confirmed that she had completed a physical asset verification and the register was complete and correct.

12.5 Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) prior to audit

The Treasurer presented the draft AGAR figures, which were approved by Conservators.

13. Freehold Tenant projects for approval

Ian Marshall, on behalf of the Freehold Tenants, submitted the following projects for approval:

- New steps at Happy Valley
- Pidgeon Wood clearance
- Hungershall Park to Bracken Cottage path, clearance (one side only)
- Phase 2 clearance around Cabbage Stalk Lane Pond

Conservators approved the projects.

14. Friends of the Commons

Joy Podbury provided the following update:

- Focus had been largely on the sale of the Commons.
- The community has truly stepped up.
- 300 new members since January 2026, bringing total membership to 773.
- New committee members and a fantastic group of volunteers.
- A special debt of gratitude to Ian Marshall and John Barber; their commitment in connecting the Friends with potential charitable donors, is truly appreciated.
- The Commons are looking wonderful, Dan, Gemma and volunteers have made a huge contribution.

Grateful to Dan for restoring the information boards at Tarry Path and Lower Cricket Ground.

Looking Ahead:

- The Friends have officially formed a new Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO): The Friends of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons Association, with Roger Barton as Chair.
- A new set of Objects for the CIO has been approved by the Charity Commission.
- The Friends are funding a series of family walks and activities.

Joy confirmed that she will be stepping down as a Trustee on 11th May. The Conservators thanked her for enabling the Friends to make significant positive steps and go from strength to strength during her time as a Trustee and Chair.

15. Marketing and PR report

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

The Facebook group now has 3,049 members with monthly reactions from members between 789 and 2,598. The most popular posts, during the quarter, related to:

1. The Friends' bid to buy the Commons.
2. March to raise awareness of the Friends' bid to buy the Commons.
3. Update on the Friends' bid to buy the Commons
4. Report of a lizard spotted on Rusthall Common.
5. Female sparrow hawk on the Lower Cricket pitch.

The Instagram account has 828 followers, while the website remains a popular source of information.

16. Policy review

16.1 Role of Conservator

Conservators approved the new policy.

Action: the Clerk to circulate a final copy to all Conservators for signing.

16.2 Risk Management

There were no changes to the existing policy, which Conservators approved.

Action: The Clerk to add all revised policies to the website.

17. Any other business

17.1 Hospice in the Weald's request to sell alcohol at their 10km, 5km and family fun run event

Conservators did not approve this request.

18. Planning Applications

26/00094/FULL Spratsbrook Farm Eridge Road Royal Tunbridge Wells TN3 9ET. The Clerk submitted a comment, which included a S106 request.

Meeting ended: 14.45

Date of next meeting: 17th June 1.30pm at the Rackliff.

Agreed actions

Agenda item	Agreed action	Responsibility	Progress/update
5 & 6	Chair to sign the minutes of the previous meetings and send to the Clerk.	Clerk and Chair	Complete
9.4	Organise an evening walk along the paths of concern with Cllr Jayne Sharratt. Cllr Simon Davidson to provide the Clerk with the contact	Clerk	Contact details received.

	for the TWBC Officer responsible for lighting on footpaths.		
9.6	Send a file note on the sink hole to the new Conservators.	Clerk	Complete
11.9	To progress work on bollard projects.	Ranger	
11.11	To progress the purchase of the replacement van.	Ranger Committee	
12.1	To approach recommended solicitors and/or tax accountants to request an initial free outline opinion and meeting. If a way ahead is proposed, either pro-bono or for a reasonable capped fee, further recommendations will be made to Conservators.	Treasurer	
16	Add all revised policies to the website.	Clerk	