

Minutes of a Tunbridge Wells Commons Conservators full meeting held in the Rackliff Centre on 17 June 2026 at 13.30

Present:

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

Attending:

David Miller (Treasurer)
Gemma Stapeley (Clerk)
John Barber (Friends of the Commons)
Cllr Paul Gripper (Rusthall Parish Council)
Martin O'Meara (Targetfollow)

Observing

Neil Spalding

A. Exempt session

The exempt session to discuss Officers' pensions took place between 13.30 and 14.00.

At 14.00, the Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting. It was noted that Harry Matthews was leaving Targetfollow and therefore stepping down as a Conservator, he is to be replaced by Martin O'Meara.

1. Declaration of business interest and conflicts of interest

There were no declarations of business interests or 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 Cllr Jayne Sharratt who was unable to stay for the full meeting.

3. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 April 2026 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 meeting held on 3 June 2026 were considered and approved and would be signed by the Chair and returned to the Clerk.

5. Matters arising

5.1 Brighton Lake – Canada geese

It was reported that the two adult Canada geese and their two goslings had gone missing from Brighton Lake. The Ranger was aware of the situation and believed that one of the adult geese may have been the victim of a catapult attack. The remaining adult and the goslings had subsequently been sighted near the tennis club.

The Ranger was already liaising with the Police and the Community Safety Unit regarding the matter. Cllr Keefe confirmed that the misuse of catapults is a known issue within the town and that the Council's Community Safety Team is working in partnership with the Police to address the problem. The Clerk advised that she would be attending a dedicated meeting on the issue of catapult misuse on 24 June.

5.2 Footpath lighting – Rusthall Common

Lighting along some of the footpaths leading into Rusthall village has been raised as a concern with Cllr Jayne Sharratt, by a resident living near Toad Rock. 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: Cllr Jayne Sharratt to liaise with the concerned resident and organise an evening site visit with the Clerk and Ranger.

All other actions from the previous meeting had been completed.

6. Risk management

6.1 Accidents

Since the last meeting in April 2026, there have been no accidents.

6.2 Incidents

In the last quarter:

- Motorbikes and quad bikes driving around Rusthall Common in the evenings.
- Campervan parked by St Paul's Church overnight (J331 CCH) and another pulled into the area behind the Forum overnight (ND63 KXB).
- 24 May - Campfire and destruction at Rusthall Forest School area, off Common View meadow, repeat incident after it was repaired on 2nd May.
- 12 June - report of youths digging up the ground to make bike jumps/ramps at Bull's Hollow.

6.3 Campers

No camps that Officers are aware of.

6.4 Fly-tipped waste

In the last quarter there was one reported instance of fly tipping.

6.5 Complaints

Since the last meeting, one complaint had been received. The complaints procedure was followed, full investigation by Clerk and action agreed with the Chair.

6.6 Risk register review

Full review of the Risk Register is due September 2026.

6.7 Insurance

The Zurich insurance policy was renewed on 1 January 2026. The Clerk is getting quotes for critical illness cover.

7. Clerk's Report

7.1 Volunteers

Volunteer sessions	Total number of hours contributed (since last meeting)	Total number of hours year to date 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2027	Financial value (as per National Lottery Heritage Fund rate of £10/hour)
Ranger volunteers	96	96	£960
Monthly Saturday mornings	36	60	£600

7.2 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 + £2,684.64 indexation = £35,884.64	Money now available to draw down.
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
03/02/2026	Spratsbrook Farm, Eridge Road 26/00094/FULL	125	£26,250 (incl 5% admin)	Awaiting decision

7.3 S106 balance for each reserve

- Union House (The Potteries) reserve balance: £7,851.27
- Eridge Road retirement flats balance: £27,991
- Russell Hotel reserve: £1,800

7.4 Public Enjoyment Plan

During Quarter 2 (Q2), the Clerk will be prioritising work on the public consultation analysis and continuing pedestrian counts.

7.5 Fundraising

No further updates.

7.6 Friends of the Commons

The following guided walks have been kindly funded by the Friends:

- 9th July - Butterfly guided walk with Michael Blencowe.
- 21st July – Moth survey with Michael Blencowe.
- 15th August – Nature walk with Michael Blencowe.
- 10th September – Evening bat walk with Michael Blencowe.
- 1st October – fungi walk with Martin Allison.
- 13th October – fungi walk with Martin Allison

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

The Ranger will be organising additional scrapes planned to accommodate any drainage basin overflow, funded by KCC (see further comments under Ranger's Report).

7.8 Sink hole/Southern Water

Paul Burnett confirmed that he and Ewen Cameron were finding a local legal advisor to clarify who was responsible for repairs to the sinkhole.

Action: Paul Burnett to update Conservators on the planned repairs and legal clarification.

7.9 Cycle path from Langton Green to Town

The Clerk had met with KCC's Commons Registration Officer, Melanie McNeir, and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) Officers, Hilary Smith and Chloe Rutland, to discuss the impact of the Village Green status on the proposed cycle path. The following was confirmed:

- Melanie confirmed that if a disgruntled member of the community disliked the project, they could make a legal case against the path, which would go to the magistrates' court for a decision. Worst case scenario, because the project does involve disturbance of the soil, the path would be considered illegal and TWBC would be required to return the land to its original state.
- Melanie supported the Clerk's proposal that Hilary and Chloe prepare a paper that incorporates their acknowledgement of the Village Green law, the public consultation exercise that they have undertaken, their proposal that the path improves access to the Commons and that they acknowledge the risk and take on that risk. The paper must state that there is no risk to the Commons Conservators. This paper will be presented to Conservators for consideration and comment, not approval.
- Melanie suggests that the paper and proposal is put to the Open Spaces Society for their comments, to be added to the report.
- The Clerk explained that the Conservators felt the weight of the statutory responsibility to protect the land and couldn't approve the project, in the same way that KCC can't approve the project, this must be TWBC's considered risk.
- Hilary and Chloe would also need to check with the West Kent Right of Way team whether the route incorporates footpaths as these would need to be upgraded to bridleways. This has been checked and the footpaths are all PROW.

Conservators, the Friends and other interested parties were invited to attend a stakeholder consultation site visit on 11 June to provide the new design contractor with feedback and comments.

TWBC will collate the comments, concerns and suggestions, and an update will be provided in due course.

7.10 Butterfly Conservation Kent (elm tree project)

- Bartlett Tree Experts vaccinated 17 mature elm trees using DutchTrig on 12 May. All of the trees have reacted well to the vaccine. The vaccinated trees have been mapped.
- There are now 5 confirmed locations on the Commons where White-letter hairstreak butterflies have been recorded. This has been mapped and reported.
- William Malpas has created a spotting sheet of all the butterflies of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons.

7.11 High Weald Swifts

Five homes around Sunnyside in Rusthall have been confirmed as suitable for the installation of a swift box by Martin Garwood of High Weald Swifts. The Ranger is now organising installation.

7.12 Fun Day

The Rusthall Common Fun Day, scheduled for Saturday 6 June had been cancelled due to very poor weather conditions making the event unsafe.

7.13 Conservation Club

Conservators approved a proposal from the Clerk to start a monthly conservation club for children on the Commons. These will be free sessions with conservation themed, low-cost activities and skills, such as wildlife surveys, making bird feeders, bug hunting, wood craft etc.

7.14 Requests to Conservators

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

8. Ecological management plan work schedule for Q2 2026/27

Work continues to progress well following the recommendations in the two Ecological Management Plans. Conservators approved the work schedule planned for Q2 of 2026/27.

9. Ranger's report and financial work plan

Tree work:

9.1 Felling licence

Consideration of potential projects is now commencing to ensure ample lead in time for felling licence as appropriate.

Action: Ranger to prepare a felling licence to cover autumn and winter works for 2026/27 and provide an update to Conservators at the next meeting.

9.2 Tree safety surveys

The Ranger is now commencing the summer survey as per the Management Plan. Independent tree consultants (Living Forest) have been commissioned to carry out inspections of our more prominent /high-risk/high-value locations in June/July.

9.3 Ash trees

Ash dieback has advanced on more of our roadside trees although the survey is still underway. The extent of the issues will be known during the summer with plans then being created for mitigation in the autumn.

9.4 Tree planting

Disease resistant elms planted over the last year are doing well although there has been some vandalism and deer damage as expected. The Ranger is increasing the robustness of tree guards to ensure that the trees are as protected as possible.

The record-breaking spring temperatures and low rainfall has placed many of the bare root saplings under stress and the Ranger has been doing his best to water regularly.

9.5 Conservator approved projects:

Bumps extension path

Project successfully completed during April 2026.

101 Steps

Now scheduled for August 2026.

Freehold Tenant projects (2025/26)

Action: The Ranger to ensure that the FHT projects are incorporated into the work schedule.

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

The Ranger will be working with the Treasurer to ensure that any works organised on behalf of KCC are appropriately invoiced and state that KCC have ongoing responsibility.

9.7 Grass management – long grass areas

It was noted that the combination of lots of rain and high temperatures had resulted in significant growth of vegetation, especially bramble. For June and July the hours worked by Gardens of England had been increased from 20 hours per month to 20 hours per fortnight to tackle the overgrown areas.

9.8 Bollards

Four new lockable (black and white) metal access posts have been installed to improve security and access at different points on the Commons.

No further progress on:

- 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.

9.9 Negative feedback

The Ranger reported that he had been subjected to unpleasant verbal abuse from some members of the community following the marketing of the Commons by Targetfollow as a potential development opportunity. Unfortunately, this has led to a perception among some people that the Ranger's work is connected to, or preparing the site for, future development.

9.10 Replacement van

At the 3 June Committee meeting, it was agreed that Officers will contact local garages to explain the vehicle requirements and budget and ask to be alerted when a suitable van is available. It was agreed that if a vehicle was found, Officers had permission to proceed with the purchase.

9.10 Financial work plan

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

10. Finance

10.1 Finance report

Accounts for the quarter ending 30 June 2026 will be circulated in due course.

Action: The Clerk to circulate the Q1 accounts to all Conservators.

Following agreement by the Conservators at the meeting of 29 April 2026, the Treasurer and Clerk have engaged Surrey Hills Solicitors to undertake a preliminary review of submissions to and correspondence with HMRC from our initial VAT claim in January 2025 to date. The solicitors are currently undertaking a preliminary review of documents and correspondence, at an estimated cost of £600 to £900 plus VAT, prior to providing initial advice on what further steps should be taken.

10.2 Annual internal audit report and review of the effectiveness of internal control

The final clearance meeting for the internal audit for year ended 31 March 2026 took place by telephone on 4 June, all relevant documents and explanations having previously been provided to the auditors.

Conservators were provided with a copy of the internal audit report for the financial year ended 31 March 2026. The report noted:

“Your auditor is independent from the management of the financial controls and procedures of the authority and has no conflicts of interest with the audit client, nor do they provide any management or financial assistance to the client.

Our testing did not identify any procedural errors requiring reporting to the external auditor at this time, nor did we observe any material weaknesses in internal controls that would pose a risk to public funds. In fact, the processes and procedures together with own built in compensating controls are robust, strictly followed and in many respects a model of good practice.

We are pleased to report that overall, the systems and procedures currently in place are appropriate and effective”.

Conservators reviewed and accepted the internal audit report and following discussion, agreed that the system of internal control was effective.

The Treasurer and Clerk were thanked for all of their hard work in preparing the documents for the audit and congratulated on the outcome.

10.3 Section 1 of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return for 2024/25 (AGAR) Annual Governance Statement

The Clerk referred to pages nine, ten and eleven of the internal audit report and highlighted the comments made by the auditor. Conservators approved the Annual Governance Statement, which was signed by the Chair and Clerk.

10.4 Section 2 of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return for 2024/25 (AGAR) Accounting Statements

The Clerk referred to page eleven and twelve of the internal audit report and highlighted the comments made by the auditor. Conservators approved the Accounting Statements, which were signed by the Chair (having been signed by the Treasurer in advance).

10.5 Exercise of public rights

Conservators approved dates for the exercise of public rights as 22 June 2026 to 31 July 2026.

Action: The Clerk to upload the AGAR and supporting documents to the website on Friday 19 June to enable commencement of the period for the exercise of public rights from Monday 22 June. She would also send the AGAR, along with requested supporting documents to the external auditor, by the deadline of 1 July 2026.

10.6 Bank reconciliations

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

11. Friends of the Commons

11.1 Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)

The Friends have set up an incorporated charity (CIO). In time, this entity will replace the established unincorporated charity, but for the short / medium term both entities will operate concurrently, with the same objectives. Both charities are registered with the Charity Commission.

The CIO was initially set up with 3 Trustees, Roger Barton (Chair), Adrian Berendt and Nick Leech. There are now two new Trustees: Ann McCue, as Secretary and Mike Trudel, as Treasurer.

11.2 Membership

Membership now numbers over 800 households, an increase of 350 since 1st January.

11.3 Sale of the Commons

On 4 June the Friends wrote to their members and pledgers thanking them and the wider community for their support. They explained that despite reaching their fundraising target, they realised that they were not close to Targetfollow's price expectations and withdrew their bid. The Friends stated that their view of the economic value of the Commons was too far removed from that of the sellers.

On this point, John Barber explained why the Friends felt their views on economic value differed to Targetfollow's:

- The Lord of the Manor title is only valuable as a means to appoint Conservators.
- Targetfollow's sales brochure notes that "900 surrounding properties (are) reliant on access and service rights across the Commons" and "The estate currently generates circa £18,000 per annum from wayleaves and easements" there is limited capacity to generate further income.
- The sales brochure notes "The land also offers in excess of 20 Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) units per hectare". However, all of the land registered as the Commons has been covered by an ecological management plan since 1992, therefore there are no "unmanaged units" available. Conservators investigated BNG potential in January 2025 and rejected it as a viable option.
- "A strategic land exchange with a comparable 2-acre parcel at Still Green, Rusthall Common" is not considered comparable.
- Given specific Statute and the Village Green registration, there is virtually 0% chance of building work being possible on the Commons.
- With an Upper Pantiles car park net income of £70,000-80,000 per year, plus circa £12,000 per year of other net income (c£100,000 net income per annum in total) a realistic value is £1 million.

John Barber concluded that other views on the valuation might be available.

The Friends are pleased that during the negotiations they have had a positive dialogue with Targetfollow and look forward to this continuing. They believe that they are acknowledged to be the best fit to own the Commons and are still optimistic that, over time, this can happen. The community continues to be very supportive, and the Friends will continue to maintain contact with both the community and Targetfollow so that they are best placed to respond to all contingencies.

12. 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 3,062 members with monthly reactions from members between 789 and 2,598. The most popular posts, during the quarter, related to:

1. Geese and goslings at Brighton Lake.
2. Video (1) of a guided walk at Happy Valley.
3. Foxgloves at Sweeps Cave.
4. Vaccination of elm trees.
5. Video (2) of guided walk at Happy Valley.

The Instagram account has 892 followers, while the website remains a popular source of information.

16. Policy review

No documents require a review.

17. Any other business

17.1 Logo

Conservators approved a request from the Clerk to modify the existing logo to ensure that the name “Tunbridge Wells Commons Conservators” was included.

18. Planning Applications

26/01264/FULL The Lodge on the Common London Road Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN2 5BF
Conversion of existing offices into 4No. Flats.

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

Meeting ended: 15.05

Date of next meeting: 21 October 13.30 at the Rackliff.

Agreed actions

Agenda item	Agreed action	Responsibility	Progress/update
3 & 4	Chair to sign the minutes of the previous meetings and send to the Clerk.	Clerk and Chair	Complete

5.2	liaise with the resident concerned about footpath lighting in Rusthall and organise an evening site visit with the Clerk and Ranger.	Cllr Jayne Sharratt	
7.8	Update Conservators on the planned repairs to the sink hole and legal clarification.	Paul Burnett	
9.1	Prepare a felling licence to cover Autumn and Winter works for 2026/27 and provide an update to Conservators at the next meeting.	Ranger	
9.5	Ensure that the FHT projects are incorporated into the work schedule.	Ranger	
9.8	Progress work on bollard projects.	Ranger	
10.1	Circulate the Q1 accounts to all Conservators	Clerk	
10.2, 10.3, 10.4 & 10.5	Upload the AGAR and supporting documents to the website on Friday 19 June to enable commencement of the period for the exercise of public rights from Monday 22 June. She would also send the AGAR, along with requested supporting documents to the external auditor, by the deadline of 1 July 2026.	Clerk	Complete