



The Friends of Tunbridge Wells
and Rusthall Commons
The Coach House
Tunbridge Wells
TN4 8AY

Key Points of Meeting with Members 24 January 26

- The Friends of the Commons is a charity which brings together residents who have a love of the Commons. With over 500 members, the Friends is one of the largest member organisations in the area.
 - Our trustees are Joy Podbury, Roger Barton, Adrian Berandt, Nick Leech, Chris Gurr, Ian Beavis, Lizzie Gripper and Clive Evans.
 - The Trustees are ably assisted by John Barber, the Freehold Tenants, Gemma Stapeley and the Town Forum.
- The majority of the meeting was focused on the forthcoming sale of the Commons.
- The Commons have been owned since 2008 by Targetfollow, which is a property management company based in Norwich. They are selling the Commons now to refocus on city centre investments. They will continue to own part of the Pantiles.
- The Friends have been exploring the possibility of buying the Commons from Targetfollow on behalf of the community.
- Ownership of the Commons carries with it the title of Lord of Rusthall Manor, and grants 4 places on the 12-person Commons Conservators, which is responsible for management and upkeep of the Commons, and is an important largely independent control for the Commons. The Friends intend to work closely with the Commons Conservators.
- The Commons are governed by a range of controls which protect the Commons and ensure the right of access.
- The Friends do not know the price at which Targetfollow will sell. In commercial terms, the Commons, together with the Major Yorks car park, generate approx. £150,000 pa according to its public sales brochure. Targetfollow has stated that they might sell the Major York Road car park as a separate lot.
- 2 statements in the sales brochure for the sale are that:
 - further income could be achieved from the 900 properties that require rights of access and access to services over the Commons
 - it might be possible to build a substantial new development on the site of the Major Yorks car park. However, such an initiative faces a high legal bar, and there is no certainty that it would be allowed to proceed.
- If the Friends own the Commons, decisions will always be made locally, in the public interest, in a transparent manner, by a charity whose sole purpose is stewardship, not return on investment.
- Ownership by the community removes ongoing uncertainty and commercial pressure. It is about certainty for future generations, not having to react to problems later. For example, the Friends would not be seeking extra income for the people who live round the Commons and would not seek to build flats on the car park.
- Many pledges of early support have already been received. These pledges are important because they show credibility and intent. They strengthen negotiations, unlock



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conversations with other funders, and help determine whether a community purchase is truly viable. The Friends are aiming to raise in the region of £1 to £1.5 million pounds

- Such a purchase will not be easy, and carries risks: the Friends will need to gear up substantially, create new charity structures and bring additional resources on board. There is a lot of work to be done.
- The prize if the Friends get it right is substantial. Opportunities to bring historic commons into community ownership are extremely rare. Once lost, that opportunity may never return.
- There were a range of questions from the attendees. These comments were supportive of the initiative of the Friends buying the Commons.
- There were questions about:
 - Who might be potential buyers? The response was that Targetfollow is marketing the sale broadly, to 'global customers'.
 - The likely sale price – the answer to which was we do not know at this stage.
 - Timescales. The response was that whilst a sale cannot be concluded until the end of March, the expectation is that sale is intended to be as soon as possible.
 - The question was whether the Friends, if they bought the Commons, would risk being out-voted on the Commons Conservators. The response was that whilst this is possible, if the Friends bought the Commons, all the Conservators would have local considerations as their primary concern, rather than commercial considerations.
 - Ongoing costs. If the Friends were to buy the Commons, would there be ongoing costs? The response was that the vast majority of ongoing costs would be met by existing funding. However, it might be necessary to insure against unexpected further costs. Gemma Stapeley responded she could not recall any such necessary costs since Targetfollow bought the Commons.
 - The question was asked whether it would be possible to make a pledge for just the Commons, not including the car-park. The answer was that this would be possible. On a show of hands, the overwhelming majority of the audience felt that Friends should aim to buy the car park as well as the Commons, if possible.
 - The question was what impact the council re-organisation may have on the situation. The response was that whilst it should not make a major difference, it is possible that the Council representation on the Commons Conservators may be less focused on the local area, depending on the outcome of the re-organisation.
- There were questions about how to make a pledge (Details are set out below).
- A number of people offered their services. All were thanked for their offers, and will be followed up.
- The meeting concluded that there was support from the public to proceed with the initiative of buying the Commons. The Friends will keep the public informed of progress.