



THE FRIENDS OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS AND RUSTHALL COMMONS

Annual General Meeting: Wednesday 2nd September 2026

MINUTES

Location: The Wells Church, Hanover Rd, Tunbridge Wells TN1 1EY

1. **Present:** Committee members Roger Barton, Chris Gurr, Adrian Berendt, Nick Leech, Lucy Maciera, Mike Trudel plus some 50 other members.
2. **Apologies:** Joy Podbury, Lizzie Gripper, Ann McCue, Clive Evans
3. **The Minutes of the AGM held on 24 July 2024** were approved.
4. **Chair's Report.** The Chair, after thanking all the members for their attendance, gave a brief summary of the year, setting out the following key points:
 - a. **Sale of the Commons**
 - i. In October last year Targetfollow put the Commons up for sale
 - ii. Since the Commons are registered as an Asset of Community Value, and the Friends registered an interest in buying the Commons obo the community, they couldn't be sold for 6 months, allowing time for Friends to put in a bid.
 - iii. The Friends spoke to members and the community to gauge the interest in buying Commons – the response was phenomenal. It was really eye-opening to see how much community interest there was and how passionate the community is about the Commons.
 - iv. Targetfollow issued a sales document which stated amongst other things that that there was scope for development of the Upper Pantiles car park as a block of luxury apartments, and increased charges to the 900 residences around the Commons for access to the Commons or for services across the Commons. This met with substantial local opposition. The Friends' view is that these potential sources of commercial income are unrealistic. In any case the Friends committed that if they were successful in buying the Commons we will not pursue these potential sources of income.
 - v. The Friends put in a bid for Commons, with the support of TWBC, by the deadline of end of April. The Friends were helped in this effort by a very wide

range of supporters, and help from a large number of people, including the members, all the people who pledged support, the Commons Conservators, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Cripps and Brevan Britten who provided pro-bono legal support, our ex-chair John Barber, and many other people, whom the Chair thanked profusely.

- vi. Despite all these efforts, the Friends bid was not accepted. It was clear there was a large gap between what the Friends were prepared to bid and what TF was prepared to accept. It seems that Targetfollow was hoping that there would be speculative commercial interest based on the income opportunities set out in their brochure. That so far has turned out not to be the case.

b. Changes to the operation of the Friends

In the process of organising for a bid for the Commons, the Friends have put in place a number of enhancements:

- i. An incorporated charity has been set up to run alongside the Friends, with identical objectives, to act as a vehicle to own the Commons
- ii. The Friends have added a number of Trustees. The Friends are deeply indebted to all the Trustees for the tireless effort they have put in this year.
- iii. As the scope and intensity of the Friends' operations has increased so has the importance and challenges of effective communications. Accordingly, the Friends have strengthened their communications capabilities, including use of social media, and plan on doing further work in this area over the next 12 months.
- iv. The Friends have put in place legal support arrangements, and consolidated links with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, the Commons Conservators, and other related organisations.
- v. The Friends continue to support a range of activities for the community on the Commons, in conjunction with Conservators. In addition, one of the Friends' new Trustees, Lucy Maciera, is helping us to plan a programme of further activities on the Commons, in conjunction with the Conservators, to reach out to various vulnerable sectors of the community. This planning is in its early stages -more will be communicated with members as we flesh these plans out.
- vi. The Friends' membership has increased substantially (see below).
- vii. The Friends' financial position has strengthened (see below).
- viii. In the mean-time, the Friends' commitment to protect, to enhance and ultimately to acquire the Commons for the community remains as strong as ever.

c. Most recent proposals for sales of the Commons

- i. Targetfollow recently announced they are now putting up the Commons for sale again, as a combined package with the Upper Pantiles. They have issued a revised sales brochure, through their new agent BNP Paribas.

Targetfollow has not yet set out a timetable or process, but this is expected to be put in place during September.

- ii. The Friends are not in the market to bid for the combined package of the Pantiles and the Commons. The Friends have reiterated with Targetfollow however that we remain committed to protecting the Commons, and potentially acquiring them on behalf of the community. The Friends will consider working with or partnering with any potential purchaser of the Pantiles to achieve these objectives.
- iii. To that end the Friends will soon be contacting our pledgers and members to firm up the level of support available to acquire the Cs if the opportunity re-presents itself.

5. **Membership Secretary Report.** Chris Gurr reported that the number of residences registered as members has increased by 336 since January 2026 when the total was 474; we now have 810 Memberships. The increase was mainly due to the proposed Sale of the Commons, which gave much interest to The Commons. Also, the newly updated website made it easier for new members to join online.

6. **Financial report.** Mike Trudel presented the 2025 accounts (attached). Mike explained that the financial results for 2025 have been overtaken by more recent events. However, the year 2025 saw a surplus of £4,535 which put us in good stead for what has followed. It was in many senses a continuation of the trend of previous years. The £3,438 expenditure on projects included important scientific surveys that help establish a better understanding of the status of the Commons. The restricted fund of 144,000 can be used for the purchase of the commons.

The 2025 accounts were approved.

7. **Election of the officers.** The Chair proposed the election of the officers as follows:

- a. Chair: Roger Barton
- b. Deputy Chair & Treasurer: Adrian Berendt. The Chair explained that Adrian Berendt, in his role as Treasurer, co-ordinates with Mike Trudel, who acts as Treasurer for the incorporated Friends entity and oversees the finances of the Friends as a combined entity.
- c. Secretary: Ann McCue
- d. Membership Secretary: Chris Gurr
- e. Head of Communications: Nick Leech

These officers were duly elected.

8. **Election of other committee members.** In addition to the officers set out above, the Chair proposed that the following Trustees be elected as Committee members in the coming year:

- a. Lizzie Gripper
- b. Joy Podbury
- c. Ian Beavis
- d. Lucy Maciera
- e. Clive Evans

These committee members were duly elected.

9. Questions from members. There were a number of questions from the members, as follows:

- a. The question was asked whether an organisation buying the Pantiles might perhaps not be interested in the Commons. The Chair responded that this is quite possible, in which case the Friends stands ready to acquire the Commons on behalf of the community. Martin Brice pointed out that ownership of the Commons, and the title of Lord of the Manor, carried with it a number of responsibilities, including appointing four individuals to act as Commons Conservators, and attending quarterly meeting.
- b. The question was raised as to whether Targetfollow would put any such organisation wishing to purchase just the Pantiles in touch with the Friends. The Chair responded that Targetfollow has stated they will do so, and it is in their interests to do so. In addition, given the campaign, such potential purchasers are likely to contact the Friends directly.
- c. A member stated that the Pantiles are in a bad state of repair in a number of respects, and asked whether there was any intention of repair work being done. The Chair responded that the Council has issued a statement following the announcement of the sale of the Pantiles saying that they understood that Targetfollow would complete the agreed programme of works on the Pantiles.
- d. In response to a question relating to the irrigation channels on the Commons, Gemma Stapeley updated the members on the work which has been done to improve drainage, including the use of an absorbent material (which resembles in looks but is not polystyrene). Gemma Stapeley also updated the members on the state of the sinkhole in Eridge Road, which she believes Targetfollow is responsible for repair.
- e. The question was asked how much the Friends bid for the Commons, and what Targetfollow was prepared to accept. The Chair responded that the Friends bid was £1million, which from valuation work relating to the Commons, was what we believe is a fair price. It is not clear what price Targetfollow is prepared to accept. The only thing that was clear was that they did not consider that £1million was enough.
- f. The question was raised as to whether, if the Friends had been successful in our bid, the carpark would have been a valuable source of income. Would acquiring the Commons without the car park would be a viable option for the Friends, since the car park produces the majority of the income pertaining to the Commons? The Chair responded that if the Friends had been successful in its bid, the intention was to have granted a long-dated lease to the Council to operate the car park, in exchange for assistance in the purchase. More generally, the motivation for the Friends was the long-term protection and stewardship of the Commons, rather than commercial income. Since the maintenance costs of the Commons are already funded by the Council on an annual basis, it would be perfectly viable for the Friends to purchase the Commons without the carpark, although the preference remains to acquire both.

- g. A question was raised concerning the impending Local Government Re-organisation, and what impact this might have. In response, Adrian Berendt spoke about the recent decision by the government to replace Tunbridge Wells Borough Council with a Unitary council, covering Sevenoaks, Maidstone and Tonbridge. At the same time, the Borough Council has voted for a new Town Council for Tunbridge Wells itself. Voting for this new Town Council will be in May 2027. Once established, the new Town Council will decide, with the agreement with the new Unitary council, which services it wishes to run. While the statutory minimum for a Town Council is allotments, the Friends of the Commons committee believes that the Town Council should also look after the parks, including the Commons, for two reasons:
- i. Democracy and local representation. As a council based in Tunbridge Wells, the existing Borough Council has had a particular interest in supporting the Commons, as a key attraction for the Borough. This local concern will be diluted when the new Unitary comes into being, with the Commons having to compete for attention across a much wide area.
 - ii. Financial fairness and transparency. Residents of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall are already paying for the Commons and other parks through their council tax, on a line entitled "Special Expenses". It should be up to local residents to decide, through the Town Council, how much funding to devote to its local green spaces.

[Note: since the meeting, the government has announced a "pause" on Local Government Reorganisation. This does not, directly, impact the decision to implement a Town Council, although we wait to see if it is delayed. The Friends of the Commons committee remains of the view that funding for the commons should be decided as locally as possible].

- h. The question was raised as to whether the Friends would continue to run both the incorporated and unincorporated charities. The Chair responded that when the incorporated charity was set up the intention was in time to shift all operations and assets over to the incorporated entity, and close down the unincorporated entity. However, that would require all members to change their annual standing orders to pay their subscriptions into the incorporated entity rather than the unincorporated entity. To avoid the need for this, the Friends have decided to continue to run both entities alongside each other, at least for now.
- i. There were a number of comments from the audience about the financial position of Targetfollow, and the possibility of insolvency. The Chair responded that until advised otherwise we will continue to regard Targetfollow as a going concern, and to treat them as such in our discussions.
- j. The question was asked whether the Council should buy the Commons and possibly the Pantiles, as it had done with Royal Victoria Place. Martin Brice

responded that Royal Victoria Place had particular characteristics which made purchase by the Council strongly advisable (including the possibility of a new owner allowing it to fall into disrepair, and then looking to develop flats on the site). The Chair reported that from the outset Tunbridge Wells Borough Council had stated clearly they were not able to purchase the Commons. Instead, they have been very supportive of the bid by the Friends, and have been extremely helpful to the Friends throughout the process.

10. **Any other business.** There was no other business
11. **Meeting close.** The Chair thanked all the members for their continuing support, and closed the meeting.