

The Blaxhall Commons & Open Spaces Charitable Trust

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Dear

Introducing The Blaxhall Commons and Open Spaces Charitable Trust

This letter introduces an important new initiative to protect the open spaces which lie at the heart of our local community. The recently created Blaxhall Commons and Open Spaces Charitable Trust represents a radical new vision for the management and ownership of public access land at Mill Common, Stone Common, and elsewhere in our village. This letter is being sent out to all residents as part of the Charity's commitment to involve the local community and to make sure that the views of local people can help shape the future activities of the Charity. This project has the support of Blaxhall Parish Council and District Councillor Raymond Herring.

The open spaces at the heart of our village define the unique character of Blaxhall and are part of our village's historical, social and environmental heritage. Most of this land is freely accessible to the public and has been used and enjoyed by villagers as an open space for more than 500 years. Some of this land is registered as Common Land and has legal protection. But this land is becoming increasingly fragmented under private ownership and has been progressively encroached upon over the years. As a result its value as a community asset is coming under greater pressure.

■ Why form a charitable trust?

The Parish Council, your local District Councillor, and local campaigners agree that a charitable trust would give the people of Blaxhall the best possible chance of returning these important assets to a single, publicly accountable owner if and when they come up for sale. The Charity has access to sources of funding that are denied to the Parish Council and to other local authorities. The Charity benefits from certain tax breaks, such as Gift Aid, which can help maximize donations. Landowners will also benefit from certain tax incentives if land were to be gifted to the Charity.

■ What will the charity do?

The aim of the Commons Charity is to acquire and manage land in Blaxhall over which the public have traditionally enjoyed access. This includes Registered Common Land as well as other open spaces within our village. The Charity will ensure that the contribution of this land to the unique character of the village is maintained, that the right to enjoy access by all over this land is protected, and that important wildlife habitat is preserved.



■ Who will run the charity?

The Charity is run by a small number of trustees recruited from within the village, two of whom are nominated by the Parish Council. The actions of the trustees are controlled by charity law and no trustee is able to profit personally. The activities of the Charity are governed by a Trust Deed which clearly sets out the Charity's aims and objectives. (You can read the Charity's Trust Deed on our website.) As soon as the Charity meets certain financial criteria it will be registered with the Charity Commission and will be subject to even greater legal conditions.

■ How might common land be owned in future?

The ownership of any land purchased by the Charity will be vested in either the Parish Council or the land holding service of the Charity Commission. The Charity will not be able to sell off any land it acquires. It will only be able to transfer land and assets to another charity which has similar aims.

■ What will this mean for local landowners?

The success of the Charity very much depends upon the support of landowners and we will be writing to them separately with more detailed information. We hope that they will share our vision for the long-term security and protection of the common land and other open spaces which help to make Blaxhall the place we all know and love. So we will try to ensure that all of the charity's activities are carried out with the full support of everyone who has an interest in the land. In the short term we want to work closely with landowners to negotiate management plans which will see the land maintained in a way which enables the widest possible public benefit whilst also maximising its environmental value. We do not anticipate landowners incurring any costs associated with such work. Nor do we expect the existence of the charity to affect the existing rights of the owner to sell the land. In the long term we could see the charity providing an efficient, transparent, and mutually beneficial way for landowners to relinquish ownership of their land in a way that will maximize the benefit to the local community.

■ How will this affect access to my property?

Many people need to cross common land and other open spaces in order to get to their homes. They may already have agreements with the current landowner in order to secure those rights of access. If and when such land passes into the ownership of the Charitable Trust those private rights of access would not be affected in any way. There will be no new fees, and no new charges. Because ownership would be vested in a single body "for all time" we hope that the creation and operation of the Charity will simplify and clarify these vexing issues once and for all.

■ How will the Charity raise money?

We have already received a significant sum of money from our District Councillor's Enabling Communities budget, for which we are very grateful. This seed money will help us get the project off the ground and help us access grant funding from other organisations. But inevitably we will also need to rely very heavily upon private donations and upon a wide range of fund raising activities. We will be contacting you again soon with details of how you can contribute to our fund raising efforts.

■ How will the local community be involved?

As many of the Charity's meetings as possible will be open to the public. An annual report and financial statement will be presented to the Annual Parish Meeting which is open to all villagers. Minutes of meetings and other information will be posted on local notice boards. We will be setting up a website to provide up-to-date information, contact details, and copies of all of the Charity's important documents. Where the Charity is able to carry out conservation work we hope as many local people as possible will volunteer to help us. Where work parties already operate (for example on the Great Common) we will work with the organisers to help promote and support them. We will be holding a public meeting at 2.30pm on Saturday 5th March in the Village Hall where people will be able to learn something of the history of Blaxhall's Commons, learn about what the Charity is hoping to achieve, and find out how to contribute to the Charity's fund raising initiatives.

■ Want to know more?

Included with this letter is a map of Blaxhall's commons which contains useful information about each area. There is a short collection of answers to frequently asked questions about commons. And if you want to speak to any of the Trustees directly you also have all of our contact details.

■ Would you like to help us?

We are keen to encourage active involvement from local residents in the work of the Charity. Please contact us for more information about Trustee opportunities and other volunteer roles.

We hope you share our vision of a new future for Blaxhall's unique open spaces.

Yours sincerely,

The Trustees of Blaxhall Commons and Open Spaces Charitable Trust