

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING MAY 2023

It is a pleasure to report that the last twelve months have been pretty busy in Langford, but most of all to reflect that it has been a “normal” period – the village thankfully returning to its pre-Covid way of life.

Parish Council Personnel

There were local council elections earlier this month. Our view as a council is that elections are an important means by which local democracy is exercised, and thus we tried hard to persuade people to put their names forward to stand. However, in the event no new nominations were received and the existing councillors were re-elected unopposed. I hope that the lack of an election means that villagers on the whole approve of the way the Parish Council represents them. I am most grateful to my colleagues for continuing to serve as councillors, and I know they will join me in thanking Caroline Parsons for her excellent work as our Clerk.

Our priorities over the past year

Let me report first on the three priorities the Council identified for its work over the past year.

1) Further work on a possible affordable housing project

It is somewhat frustrating to report that limited progress has been made on this. Our view remains that the only feasible plot for a limited development of affordable housing is the field behind the school and Elms. This land is owned by WODC, and last year we had preliminary discussions with WODC about the options for a small development. After a hiatus we have tried to kick start the process, and have had further discussions with WODC. The latest thought would be for a development involving a small number of social-rent homes, plus about the same number of plots for people wanting self-build homes. The latter would help to meet the costs of upgrading the shared sewerage arrangements at the Elms and Wickets, and to subsidise the cost of the social housing. Our understanding is that both the social housing and the self-build plots would be subject to a “Langford connection” priority for applicants. To progress this WODC will produce some initial drawings to flesh out the ideas we have discussed with them.

Once we have something more concrete to go on the Parish Council will of course undertake a consultation within the village, and in particular with the residents in the Elms and The Wickets.

2) Continuing liaison with local landowners and OCC Highways with the aim of making drainage improvements to reduce flooding risks

We continue to make slow but steady progress on this aim, while recognising that it is always going to be an ongoing business. With the sale by the Church Commission of both Lower and Rectory farms over the last few years there have been multiple changes in land ownership. We will continue to build effective working relationships with land owners who have riparian responsibilities, helped by the fact that we have now mapped land ownership within the parish and identified key points (such as culverts under roads). We ultimately wish to see the Broadwell Brook, as our key watercourse, undergo a programme of maintenance

3) Organising CPR training sessions

We have drawn up plans and aim to run CPR training sessions over the next six months.

Village maintenance work

The playground at The Wickets is both the PC's main asset and our major outlay on maintenance work. It is well used and so well worth the expense of maintaining it for safe use. Apart from the playground we continue our efforts to do low level maintenance work around the village – spraying, mowing, and litter picking for example. We have also continued our grant to the PCC to help with the costs of churchyard maintenance as we regard this as a benefit to the village as a whole.

While not the PC's responsibility, a major maintenance project is being undertaken by SSEN to replace the broken transformer by the Filkins Road, and to carry out other upgrading works to the village's electrical infrastructure. Our thanks to Rob Daft for the initiative he has taken to galvanise the SSEN into action. This will involve the closure of the Filkins Road as it leaves the village, and it is a pity that this will clash with the Langford Arts Festival, but we can work around this with the necessary diversions.

Community cohesion

Something I believe very strongly is that a PC can play a key role in helping to promote something often called "a sense of community". I've been fortunate to have a long connection with Langford and my feeling is that the community spirit at the moment is as strong as it has been for many a year. It can be hard to pin down what exactly community spirit is, and how it is generated, but I believe it comes partly from trying to involve as many villagers as possible in community activities, and partly from encouraging people to have a voice on village matters, both of which in turn help to foster a sense of belonging.

Of course achieving this is due to the efforts of many people, but the PC does have an important role both directly and indirectly. Directly, often in the guise of one or two council members working with other volunteers, we organise a range of community events and activities, some recurring and some occasional – Remembrance Sunday, the Christmas Tree and village Carol Singing, the litter pick, Village Day, and the Produce Show are all examples of the former, while the Queen's Jubilee and Coronation celebrations are examples of the latter. Other regular events are not directly PC organised, but the council and councillors can find ways of showing our support for the sense of community they engender – Langford Arts Festival and Gardens Open are good examples.

Our indirect work is harder to quantify but is probably just as important. For example we can show support, financial or otherwise, to other village organisations which make major contributions to community spirit – the cricket club, Village Hall, and the church spring to mind. Less tangible, but vital, is that the PC should be seen as open and supportive, that people can come and talk to us if they have concerns, and that we make sure we consult and take account of the range of views on village matters. For instance, while the PC needs to follow our guidelines when forming a view on planning matters, we should seek to consult with applicants and interested parties to fully understand their intentions and viewpoints. Langford people may not always agree with our actions or decisions, but they should feel that as a council we listen, consult, and try to make decisions in the best interests of the village community – this is something we need to bear in mind all the time.

In my experience, that is the thing about community spirit, it can take a long time to foster, but it can dissipate remarkably quickly if you don't keep working at it. Sermon over.

Council finances

All the Parish Council's income comes via the annual precept, the amount the council requests as its share of the local "rates" paid by each household. For the past few years we have used an agreed formula for calculating our precept - the formula aims to balance the wish to control expenditure with the need to maintain sufficient reserves to cover unexpected costs. This year we were able to reduce our precept slightly, although it is broadly in line with the past few years.

Looking ahead

The Council's priorities for next year will include:

- Continuing to work with WODC to develop options for some affordable housing, and to take initial ideas to a consultation stage
- Continuing to foster Langford community spirit by active support and involvement in village activities and by our approach to council business
- As a Council we are very conscious of issues relating to environment and sustainability and we will continue to explore if there are ways we can contribute towards these areas.

Richard Kemp
May 2023