

LANGFORD PARISH COUNCIL
LANGFORD COMMUNITY LAND PROJECT
BUSINESS PLAN UPDATE – April 2024

REPORT TO COUNCIL
CONFIDENTIAL



A. DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

Historic

Almost all the farms and land around Langford had until four years ago been owned by the Church Commissioners and tenanted by local farmers. In 2020 it became clear that the Commissioners were looking to realise assets by selling their farms in the parish.

The Parish Council considered that this presented an opportunity for the village to try and acquire a modest plot of land as a local amenity. Langford has never owned any community land within the village. The Village Hall has no car parking. When outside space has been required for social or fund-raising events or for car parking, as it regularly is, we have had to rely on the goodwill of local farmers to use certain fields – we had been fortunate that our traditional links with local farmers has meant this has usually been possible, but with the sales it was clear that situation might well change.

Village Consultation

The Parish Council's first step in 2020, before doing anything else once the farm sales were made public, was to carry out a major consultation exercise within Langford to ascertain the views of residents, and to gauge the level of support for the PC raising funds through a PWLB loan to buy a parcel of community land. Fuller details of that extensive consultation process are outlined below. Suffice it to say here that there was very strong support for the PC trying to acquire some land as a village amenity.

The Sales Process

The Church Commissioners organised their sale of their land in two phases. In 2020 Lower Farm was sold, followed by Rectory and Ansell's Farms in 2022. The PC felt that the sales process might well be a unique opportunity for the village to acquire a plot, either by bidding successfully during one of the farm sales, or by being able to take advantage of any opportunities subsequent to the sales if the farms were broken up into smaller parcels.

In the event the PC attempts to acquire a plot involved 3 distinct phases:

Phase 1 – 2020

The Commissioners put Lower Farm on the market, along with Home Farm in neighbouring Kelmscott. Most of the farm was offered in one lot of almost 1400 acres. The only small lot in the village was Lot 11. While the PC felt that in some ways this was not ideal for our needs, it was a chance not to be missed, particularly as it presented an opportunity to carry out a detailed village consultation based on a concrete piece of land, the purchase cost of which could be realistically estimated.

Discussions with the selling agents during the sale process made it clear to us that Lower Farm was going to be sold as one whole lot, and the PC reluctantly decided not to make a bid for Lot 11 as it would have involved a PWLB application which had minimal chance of being needed.

Phase 2 – 2021/22

The Commissioners put Rectory Farm on the market in 2022 (the sale of Ansell's Farm was carried out by private treaty at the same time). Once the sale of Rectory Farm was formally announced the PC made contact with both the Church Commissions and the selling agents Strutt & Parker to lobby for two particular areas within the village envelope to be lotted as small plots, to give the PC a reasonable chance of making a successful bid. In this the PC was successful. Both plots, Parcels 1 & 2 in the aerial photo below, lie in the heart of the village and form a key part of the Langford Conservation Area.



In the event, conscious that the costs of buying the land through a PWLB loan would have to be met through the Parish Council precept which was paid by all householders, the PC decided to focus its limited financial resources on trying to buy Parcel 1, a 2.3 acre field called The Vineyard.

The Vineyard is the best plot within Langford for village amenity land. It had potential access from the road, it was large enough for village needs (and not so large that maintenance and running costs would be a problem), and most of all it is located in the centre of the village conservation area, next to the Grade I listed church.

The sale guide price for the lot was £50,000, and the PC made a bid more than double that as this seemed too good an opportunity to miss. Unfortunately the PC were the underbidders (by a significant margin).

Phase 3 – 2024

Finally after almost four years the PC is within reach of achieving its aim of some community land. After the Rectory Farm sale the PC discovered the identity of the successful purchaser, and monitored the situation. In 2023 the landowner sold a small part of the Vineyard to the Bell Inn (to allow the pub to upgrade its sewerage system). Earlier this year another small marginal plot was bought by the owners of a house in Church Lane.

The PC made contact with the landowner and after negotiation he has agreed to sell the remaining area of The Vineyard to the PC for £75,000. This remaining area is the part of the field that is most useful as village amenity land – at 1.8 acres (out of the whole field total of 2.3 acres) it comprises the main part of the plot; it is next to the church, has potential direct road access at one end, and access to Church Lane at the other; it is plenty large enough as a location for village events, or for car parking for major fund raising activities. The purchase price of £75,000 for the 1.8 acres prime part of the field represents better value than the larger bid the PC made to Commissioners for the whole field in 2022.

The Consultation Process

The only realistic way the Parish Council can raise the funds for a community land purchase is by seeking a loan from the Public Works Loan Board, which is then repaid over a 20-50 year period by an increase in the Parish Council precept. This is a significant commitment for householders, and so right from the start consultation with villagers has been a key part of the PC's approach to the community land project.

In 2020, once the prospect of buying some village community land first emerged LPC carried out a major consultation exercise before making any decision about whether or not to go ahead with the project – we wanted to be absolutely certain that we had strong majority support among villagers.

A leaflet explaining the aims and purpose of buying some community land, and the means of raising and repaying a loan, was delivered to every household. Every household then had the opportunity to respond to a survey asking if (a) they supported the principle of buying some community land, and (b) supported the financial means (including the increase in the precept). We had an excellent response rate, with 61 households (just over 50%) returning forms, with responses by 90 named individuals from within those households. There was an equally strong response rate from all parts of the village.

Of the 90 individual responses to the survey 85 people supported the Parish Council proceeding to try and purchase community land, with 5 against.

Appendix A includes the consultation documents:

- 1) The consultation document delivered to all households
- 2) The consultation return form
- 3) The analysis of the consultation results
- 4) A map of the household response locations

When the opportunity came the following year during the Phase 2 sale of Rectory Farm to bid for The Vineyard the PC felt that a further full consultation exercise after such a short time was not necessary given the overwhelming level of support for community land purchase shown by the original



consultation. Villagers had been informed of the failure of the Lot 11 purchase, so the PC thus publicised the changed circumstances as regards trying to buy the Vineyard – the information was posted on the village website, and circulated by the Langford googlegroups (which reaches the majority of households). People were invited to contact parish councillors if they wished to express any opinions for or against, or post comments on googlegroups. As a result the PC's view was that villager support for trying to buy The Vineyard was if anything even stronger than that shown in the original consultation, as the land is really embedded in the heart of the village.

Given commercial sensitivity, and the speed with which the PC had to act, the PC was not able to hold a further consultation exercise before making the current bid for The Vineyard, and having it accepted. However the PC did obtain letters of support from key village institutions – the Parochial Church Council and the Church Wardens, the Langford Charity, the Village Hall trustees, and the Langford Arts Festival committee, which are shown in Appendix 2. As soon as we have a PWLB loan facility confirmed we will circulate full details to all households with information about loan repayments, and the plans for how the community land will be managed, maintained and developed over time.

B. The Case for Acquiring the Land

Overall case

The case for LPC buying the Vineyard as a plot of community land rests on aspirational, practical and environmental elements.

Looking at the big picture this land lies in the heart of village and forms part of the village conservation area. Preserving it as green space is very important for the character of Langford. Whilst the location within the village conservation area may make development less straightforward, community ownership of the land would provide long term protection.

In practical terms community ownership would guarantee land within Langford for village events and event car parking. The Vineyard would be ideal for parking – access from the road would be possible, and proximity to the church for weddings and funerals, plus enough space for the cars of up to 500 visitors at our major fund raising events such as Langford Arts Festival and Gardens Open. The Vineyard is also ideally placed for village events such as our annual Village Day, and a range of other social and fund raising events.

Langford Parish Council, and local residents, have a strong environmental commitment, and ownership of this land would allow scope for community based environmental projects, including some tree planting.

Church related case

St Matthew's is by any standards an exceptional church. With its Saxon tower, and Norman additions, the unique Langford Rood, and Saxon carvings, architecturally it is arguably the most important parish church in Oxfordshire. We think it is really important to safeguard its setting.

There is an equally pressing practical reason for acquiring the land adjacent to the church, in that St Matthew's graveyard is now almost full and the only possible area for a graveyard extension is The Vineyard – there are roads on the other three sides of the churchyard.

The cost of running and maintaining St Matthew's, plus the annual Parish Share (in total about £12,000pa) place a significant challenge on the PCC. Langford is not a "rich" Cotswold village, and the

only way this cost can be met is by fundraising by and within the community. Much of the money is raised by our big events – opening our village gardens through the National Gardens Scheme, the Langford Arts Festival and the annual Village Day are three examples. These fundraisers need outdoor space, either for the event itself, or for carparking – we have up to 500 visitors in each case. Without the capacity to put on these events our ability to raise funds for St Matthew’s (and other charities and village facilities) would be limited.

C. Financing the Community Land Project

There are four sets of costs involved in buying and then managing The Vineyard.

1. Purchase costs
 Buying the land (£75,000)
 Associated legal costs (c£3,500)
2. Establishment costs
 Making an entrance from the road
 Some fencing
 Some levelling work in parts of the field
3. Running costs
 Ongoing maintenance such as mowing, ditching
4. Development costs
 Tree planting, environmental improvements
 Possible churchyard extension at some point

Of these costs by far the largest is the initial purchase costs. The PC’s agreed strategy is to apply for a PWLB loan for £75,000 to cover only the cost of land purchase (the legal costs will be covered from PC reserves). Taking a 20 year loan, rather than a longer period, reduces the overall amount to be repaid, and does not tie the hands of the PC too far into the future.

The loan period will be 20 years, and this requires that the PC take the loan on fixed rate terms. The PWLB only offers variable rate loans for a up to 10 years term.

Based on the current PWLB rate the annual repayment for the £75,000 loan will be circa £6,200. On this basis and at present based on the average precept raised by the PC over the past 4 years, Band D householders in Langford will be faced with a £33 annual increase in the PC element of council tax. In the information provided in the full consultation at the start of the project, the figure given for a likely increase for Band D households was £35, so this level of increase was supported in that consultation process.

The PC does benchmark its expenditure and precept against nearby villages of comparable size and community resource. With the PWLB loan the bench mark data would be:

<i>Village</i>	<i>Precept</i>	<i>£BandD</i>
Alvescot	14500	71
Black Bourton	13400	108
Clanfield	20500	57

Filkins	18500	85
Langford	14500	85

As regards other one-off and overhead costs set out above the PC will find other funding mechanisms to cover these. This would be in line with existing village organisations such as the Village Hall and Cricket Club, which once established are self-financing.

D. Managing the Community Land Project

Ownership and title to The Vineyard will be vested in the Parish Council. For operational purposes the PC will establish the Vineyard Management Group, which will for legal purposes be a subcommittee of the PC, thus reporting to the PC. The VMG will include a minimum of 1 parish councillor, with other members drawn from the community (and appointed by the PC), with the aim particularly if involving those with expertise that would be useful to the management of this village amenity.

Once constituted the VMG will draw up a Development Plan, and set out funding options, on which the PC can consult local residents.