

# COLNEY HEATH PARISH COUNCIL

- ✉ **Postal Address:** Highfield Park Visitor Centre, Hill End Lane AL4 0RA  
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2024/25 Item 101a

## OPTIONS PAPER

### Future of Horseshoe Field

#### 1. Background

Horseshoe Field, also referred to as Three Horseshoes Field, is located on the south side of 12 Oaklands Lane. Initially registered to Punch Taverns in 2012, it was acquired by Colney Heath Parish Council in 2014 under land title reference HD519567. The total cost of acquisition, including legal fees and other associated expenses, amounted to £26,143.68.

#### 2. Breakdown of Costs:

- Legal fees: £14,288.73
- Land purchase from Punch Taverns: £5,000.00
- Payment of additional costs to Punch Taverns: £3,334.90
- Payment to the occupier: £3,000.00
- Surveys: £520.05

#### 3. Community Concerns

Feedback and concerns regarding Horseshoe Field have been brought to attention, highlighting several key issues that require careful consideration and resolution.

- a) There are questions surrounding transparency, particularly about the costs associated with the acquisition of the field. Residents have expressed the need for clear and detailed information about the financial aspects, including the purchase price, funding sources, and any associated expenses. Without this clarity, it is challenging for the community to understand the rationale, sustainability and purpose of the acquisition.
- b) Concerns have been raised about the purpose of Horseshoe Field. There is currently a lack of clarity on the intended use of the space, leaving residents uncertain about its role within the community. Defining a clear vision and purpose is crucial to ensure the field aligns with the community's needs and expectations.
- c) The potential ongoing expenses for maintaining and managing Horseshoe Field have prompted questions. The community is seeking assurance that the financial implications of upkeep, including maintenance, landscaping, and other operational costs, have been thoroughly assessed and planned for. Long-term sustainability is a key concern in ensuring the field does not become a financial burden.
- d) The community benefit of Horseshoe Field has been called into question. Residents want to ensure that the space will serve a valuable and meaningful purpose for local people, contributing positively to the area. Whether it will be

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used for recreation, conservation, or other community activities, it is essential that the field provides tangible benefits to the community.

By addressing these concerns through open communication, detailed planning, and active engagement with residents it will be critical in fostering trust and ensuring the successful integration of Horseshoe Field back into the community.

## 4. Options for Consideration

### **Option 1: Retain as a Public Open Space**

Maintain the field as a green space for community use, supporting recreation and environmental sustainability. As an example - Transform the field into an open space with paths, picnic areas, and natural habitats to encourage biodiversity.

#### **Benefits:**

- Preserves green space in the area.
- Provides a location for leisure activities, events, or informal gatherings.
- Enhances the parish's commitment to environmental stewardship.

#### **Challenges:**

- Ongoing maintenance costs (e.g., landscaping, waste management).
- Potential need for additional facilities (e.g., benches, signage).

### **Option 2: Develop for Community Projects**

Use the field for specific community-focused projects, such as allotments, a community garden, or a play area. As an example - Establish a community garden where residents can grow fruits, vegetables, and flowers collaboratively.

#### **Benefits:**

- Creates a tangible community asset with active engagement opportunities.
- Promotes physical and mental well-being through gardening or recreation.

#### **Challenges:**

- Higher initial costs for development and infrastructure.
- Ongoing management and coordination required.
- Access and need is restricted

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## **Option 3: Lease or Sell the Land**

Explore opportunities to lease the land to a third party or sell it to generate funds. As an example - Lease the field to a local agricultural cooperative for organic farming or other sustainable practices.

### **Benefits:**

- Immediate financial return to offset acquisition costs.
- Reduces responsibility for maintenance and management.

### **Challenges:**

- Loss of control over the land's future use.
- Community opposition to privatisation.

## **Option 4: Mixed-Use Approach**

Combine public access with limited development, such as leasing part of the land while retaining a portion for community use. As an example - Divide the field into sections, using one part for a public playground and another part leased to a local business, such as a café or eco-tourism operator.

### **Benefits:**

- Balances community benefit with financial sustainability.
- Diversifies the land's utility.

### **Challenges:**

- Complexity in planning and implementation.
- Potential for conflicting uses.

## **5. Financial Implications**

The future use of Horseshoe Field presents both opportunities and challenges for a small rural parish council, particularly in the context of a cost-of-living crisis. Financial constraints mean that low-cost options are especially appealing, yet balancing community benefit with fiscal responsibility remains a delicate task.

One of the key considerations is the maintenance costs associated with the field's upkeep. Depending on the chosen use, regular expenses such as landscaping, waste management, and repairs could place a significant strain on limited parish resources. Calculating accurate cost estimates in advance will be essential to avoid unforeseen financial pressures. For example, maintaining a public open space with minimal

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facilities may be more feasible than managing a fully developed play area or garden requiring frequent care.

Another factor is the revenue potential of the field. Leasing or partial development could provide a steady income stream, helping to offset maintenance costs and support other community initiatives. Alternatively, selling the land could yield a one-time lump sum, which could alleviate immediate financial pressures but would come at the cost of relinquishing control over the field's future. In a cost-of-living crisis, such financial trade-offs must be weighed carefully to ensure long-term sustainability.

Development costs also pose a challenge, particularly for community-focused projects like allotments, a community garden, or a play area. These options require initial capital investment for infrastructure such as fencing, water access, equipment, or play structures. While such projects could provide valuable community assets and promote physical and mental well-being, they might be beyond the reach of the council's budget without external grants or partnerships.

Given these constraints, a thoughtful approach to planning is vital. Low-cost options such as retaining the field as a simple green space or exploring limited leasing opportunities could offer a balance between financial viability and community benefit. Engaging with residents to determine priorities and exploring funding opportunities from local or national sources could also help the parish council make the most of this valuable asset while navigating the challenges of the current economic climate.

## 6. Legal and Planning Considerations

A significant consideration is the ownership and title of the land. It is crucial to confirm that the land's title and boundaries are clear and accurately documented. Moreover, the existence of a charge on the property complicates decision-making, as it may limit flexibility and introduce additional financial considerations. Any decisions about the field's use must address these encumbrances to ensure compliance and avoid potential legal disputes.

Another factor is the requirement for planning permissions. Certain development options, such as establishing a play area or leasing part of the land for commercial purposes, may require planning approval. This process could result in added costs and delays, making it essential to account for these potential hurdles in the planning stages. The Parish Council must also ensure that any proposed changes are consistent with local planning policies to avoid complications.

Community engagement is equally important and may involve legal requirements for consultation, particularly for significant changes to the land's use. The Parish Council must actively involve residents to gather feedback, address concerns, and build consensus. This is not only essential for fostering transparency and trust but also for meeting statutory requirements. Failure to engage the community effectively could result in opposition or delays, undermining the success of the project.

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Balancing these challenges with the parish's financial reality requires careful prioritisation. Low-cost options, such as retaining the field as a green space or exploring limited leasing arrangements, may be more feasible in the short term. At the same time, the council must consider the long-term implications of any decision, ensuring that the chosen approach benefits the community while managing legal and financial obligations effectively.

## 7. Recommendations

### a) **Prioritise Low-Cost, Community-centred Options**

Given financial constraints, consider retaining the field as a public open space or exploring limited development for community projects. These options balance financial viability with community benefit while avoiding the high costs associated with full-scale development.

### b) **Engage the Community**

Conduct thorough consultations with residents to gather feedback on the preferred use of Horseshoe Field. Focus on transparency regarding acquisition costs and plans to build trust and foster a sense of shared ownership.

### c) **Explore Revenue-Generating Opportunities**

Evaluate options for leasing part of the land to generate income while retaining public access. For instance, a partnership with a local business or agricultural cooperative could provide financial benefits without alienating the community.

### d) **Ensure Legal and Planning Compliance**

Assess planning requirements for each potential use and factor in timelines and costs. Obtain necessary permissions before committing to any development or leasing arrangements.