

## **Chairman's report to Castle Acre's Annual Assembly May 2017**

My report covers the second year up to 31 March 2017 of the current Parish Council's four year term.

There have been changes to the make-up of the Council. Cllrs were very sorry to receive Jim Moriarty's resignation from the Council but pleased that he is remaining our Borough Cllr. Cllrs voted for Martin Tate to take Jim's position. Sheila Moister was voted onto the Council to take the vacancy created by the sad death of Richard Read. Both Sheila and Martin are making valuable contributions to Council business. The Council now has its full complement of nine Cllrs.

In previous years, planning was the largest of this Council's workload. It has so remained with 20 applications reviewed. But last year was equally dominated by trees and in particular by the magnificent but overlarge limes on Stocks Green. CAPC debated long and hard over several meetings as to what longer term action to take. We consulted the Borough's Tree Officer, Holkham's Head Forrester and other tree experts. There were various options within the constraints of their protected status. Removal of any or all the trees for replacement with a smaller tree species that may be more in keeping visually, and in their bulk, with the Stocks Green area would not be permitted. There were also financial implications for the Council's reserves that had to be factored in. Last December, CAPC approved pollarding all five trees which was carried out successfully, and with the minimum of disruption, in mid-February. Despite some criticisms that we shouldn't have taken any action or that we didn't pollard the trees back sufficiently, I think CAPC found the correct balance between maintaining the aesthetics of Stocks Green and adequate pollarding.

The Stocks Green trees spurred the Council into updating its Tree Inspection Register that contains details and images of all the trees on CAPC owned and leased land. To quote the introduction that CAPC approved in March:

*The Tree Register is a living document designed to provide a record of inspections, reports, plans and actions undertaken to manage proactively the health and safety issues of trees located on land owned or leased to CAPC. The health and safety of Parishioners and visitors to Castle Acre is the highest priority of the CAPC, and as such, it is a standing agenda item at the monthly CAPC meetings. In addition to any tree related health and safety issues raised from the standing agenda item, the Tree Register allows for the holistic, long-term management of Castle Acre's trees.*

Tim Hubbard, our Cllr with responsibility for overseeing the village trees recently undertook a very constructive one day LANTRA tree inspection course - a further step in assuring the village that CAPC is showing and will continue to show due care and diligence in overseeing its trees.

CAPC is touched by Ann Loch's very generous donation of £2,000 towards the future management of both the Stocks Green limes and the Millennium tree on the playing field.

The long saga of what is referred to as the Massingham Road hybrid development moved several stages forward over the past 12 months with agreement last October on the section 106 payment, the start of the construction of the four dwellings fronting the road and Holkham's very welcome decision not to sell their land behind to a developer but to design and construct the eleven dwellings themselves in partnership with a builder. CAPC is now waiting to review their architect's proposed designs and landscaping. We are rather taken aback by the Borough's decision, taken under Government duress, to extend the approved Local Plan by ten years to 2036 and to call on

landowners to put forward more potential building sites than CAPC had expected. The call for sites period is now closed with Holkham proposing up to 25 dwellings on their land behind its approved building land and Greene King suggesting up to eight dwellings on its land adjacent and to the west of the school. These will be evaluated by the Borough Council with a recommendation before the end of 2017 on which sites and on how many dwellings. This will then be put out for consultation.

All these developments only reinforce the long term importance of having a Neighbourhood Plan in place. CAPC held a public meeting in the village hall last July and was pleased that 25 residents attended. CAPC is delighted that six residents immediately volunteered to form a steering group with Martin Tate as its Chairman. A further 13 residents also offered their services during the consultation process. The Steering Group has been working very hard in drawing together the strands of the consultation, getting Borough approval for the designated neighbourhood area, applying for funding and preparing for the all-important pre-questionnaire public consultation with residents and consultees that took place on 2 May 2017. To everyone's delight, 85 residents and two consultees turned up on the evening to express their views through post-it notes and questions while enjoying the complementary refreshments! On behalf of the Council, I would like to extend our thanks to Martin Tate for undertaking the onerous task of chairing the NP process with diligence and patience.

CAPC approved its new five year Action Plan to 2021. This will guide Cllrs in their work on behalf of the village. It will be reviewed in the light of findings of the Neighbourhood Plan.

Sharing the mobile SAM 2 speed registering sign with Sporle village continues to work well. However, there are a persistent number of drivers going up to 60 mph in the 30 mph zone coming into and going out of the village along Newton Road. The police have conducted one speed check between 16.00 and 17.00 and caught one driver. Further random checks at different times of the day are required.

Highways continues to frustrate, as does Historic England, in their combined lack of any urgency in taking forward agreements made last summer to add a portcullis structure below the Bailey Gate arch to lower the height and to change the road signage in an effort to deter large lorries and farm vehicles from even attempting to drive up Bailey Street. Needless to say, several have tried including three tractor/trailers that blocked Bailey Street in early morning winter fog and were treated to a ticking off by residents in their wellies and dressing gowns! Drivers continue to display an inability to lift their eyes from their Satnavs and read the road width restriction signs. This was epitomised last winter by a large HGV trundling into Stocks Green at nine o'clock at night and being guided into making a 36 point turn to trundle back out again!

Flooding and damage to the verges in Archer Lane are still to be resolved. However, despite our pleas over the last three years, EH has still not programmed the necessary repair work to Bailey Gate.

Last September, Highways conducted a questionable preliminary consultation over the proposal to declassify part of South Acre Road and to stop, in particular, a minority of 4x4 drivers continuing with their childish pleasure of driving through water across the ford. Using unverified claims from an organised protest by off-roaders as proof of a majority in opposition to the road closure, rather than taking into account the desires of the village, Highways felt justified in their decision not to continue with the legal action. CAPC can't accept this as there remains a compelling case to argue that preservation of the ford should override any claimed right of passage allowed on the Highway on either side of the ford.

Regretfully, the irresponsible behaviour by a few resident or visitor dog owners by either not picking up their dog's poo or having collected it, leaving the bags on road verges or meadows or even worse throwing it into residents' gardens continues. This is completely unacceptable, environmentally irresponsible and illegal behaviour.

Over parking in the village centre at peak times can cause difficulties, particularly at well attended weddings and funerals. CAPC has established a good line of communication with the PCC and is receiving advance notice of such events to allow the Clerk to inform local businesses and the refuse collection service.

Despite one very unfortunate burglary of a house in Back Lane, Castle Acre remains a safe and crime free village, even though our PCSO cover was withdrawn two years ago.

There was excitement last autumn when the village was informed that it would be getting superfast broadband and two green fibre optic cabinets were duly installed by Christmas with plans to erect a third in Stocks Green. Alas, the BT Openreach's engineer's opinion that going live would swiftly follow hasn't materialised five months later. The village awaits!

The PC finances remain in a strong position. The Council's aim is only to spend within the agreed budget but inevitably, unforeseen expenses do occur. However, I am delighted to report net expenditure in the last financial year at £19,384 was £150 below budget, while income was £1,700 above budget, thanks to a surge in recycling credits and early repayment of VAT receipts! With bank reserves at about £7,000, CAPC was able to finance the £4,850 cost of pollarding the Stocks Green lime trees. However, this left the Council's finances very exposed to future unforeseen expenditure. CAPC took the view, not taken lightly, that it needed to increase Castle Acre's portion of the Council Tax to rebuild reserves back to the former level but to spread the rise over the next two tax years. This means for an average band D property, currently paying £33.16 pa, that there will be an extra charge of £6.17 in 2017/18.

With assistance from Richard Price, our internal auditor, Linda Roast again did an fine job in balancing the accounts and satisfying the external auditor within the budgeted cost.

To conclude, may I take this opportunity to thank our Vice-Chairman, Laurie, and Cllrs for their support and to Jim for representing the village interests at Borough level. Above all, can I thank Linda who has as always been an excellent Clerk, dedicated, conscientious and ever helpful, a real asset to the village.

Thank you.

Martin Hickey  
Chairman, Castle Acre Parish Council  
11 May 2017