

Chairman's report to Castle Acre's Annual Assembly May 2018

My report covers the third year of the current Parish Council's four year term which ends in May 2019.

Our parish year has been dominated by housing developments, both in the form of finding out resident's views through the Neighbourhood Plan questionnaire and, at times, our slightly fraught negotiations with Holkham about their planned eleven or more dwellings on the land off the Massingham Road. After two consultation meetings last September and November with the Parish Council, Holkham submitted their reserve matters planning application in December which the Council formally considered at an extra planning meeting in January. Objections were raised to the cramped site layout, the unimaginative and utilitarian housing designs and other matters. Holkham made further changes to the dwellings, though not to the site layout. However, these go part of the way to meet Council's objections. Their revised application was finally supported by the Parish Council on 3 May, though still with reservations about the house designs, adopting the two roads, the landscaping and minimizing street lighting.

The Council remains disappointed 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 the Parish Council had expected. The call for sites period is now closed with Holkham proposing up to 25 dwellings on their land behind its approved building plot and Greene King suggesting up to eight dwellings on its land adjacent and to the west of the new school. These are still being evaluated by the Borough Council and a public consultation may not go out until later this year. Subject to seeing the detailed proposals, the Parish Council needs to agree its response.

All these development uncertainties only reinforce the critical importance of having a Neighbourhood Plan in place in 2018. Thanks to Martin Tate's outstanding Chairmanship and the dedicated work of the steering group, Castle Acre's Neighbourhood Plan is still on course to be formally adopted by the end of 2018, even possibly in time for the Borough's formal consultations on its extended Local Plan. Apart from a couple of written objections, residents welcomed the questionnaire they received through their doors last July. It is very heartening to note that 408 households responded to the questionnaire, representing 555 residents, which equalled a 65% response rate, way above comparative figures for other villages and small towns in West Norfolk.

The Parish Council is pleased to support a proposal by Anne Mason to apply for a £60,000 Heritage Lottery Fund grant for a programme of archaeological investigations and activities in and around Castle Acre including wildlife surveys and improvements to habitats, aimed at both residents, their families, special interest groups and visitors. The grant money would fund these activities and pay for training and engagement of volunteers and any professional advice.

Sharing the mobile SAM 2 speed registering sign with Sporle village continues to work well, though Sporle has indicated it may purchase its own unit for full time use. However, there are a persistent number of drivers speeding in the 30 mph zone coming into and going out of the village along Newton Road. One was registered on 03/12/2017 at 14:35 doing 70.0 mph. The police have conducted only one speed check last year, at between 16.00 and 17.00, and caught one driver. Further random checks at different times of the day are required.

The Council never ceases to be amazed by driver's unswerving loyalty to their satnavs, in particular courier delivery vans who attempt to drive along East Green to get to De Warrenne Place or, in Jewson's case, think that it can nip its large truck through the ford to take a short cut to South Acre!

The Parish Council welcomed English Heritage's decision last December to erect a portcullis below the Bailey Gate arch to encourage large vehicles not to drive through, only to watch in despair when a skip lorry knocked it off last January! Equally, Highways have been terribly slow in not installing the agreed warning signs both on the 1065 and at the bottom of Bailey Street. The former finally appeared this April.

One subject elicited more responses than most in the NP questionnaire – dog poo! 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. The Council is installing a further bin by the entrance to Minns Meadow (Blind Lane end). Some dog owners are also irresponsibly letting their dogs loose on the water meadows who then attack other (leashed) dogs.

There was a sudden spate of burglaries and an attempted car break in last October/November that appear to be part of a series of crimes around West Norfolk. Nevertheless, Castle Acre remains a safe and peaceful village. Questionnaire respondents described it as 'quiet, picturesque, with local history and historical buildings, natural beauty in the surrounding area...and the village shop.'

It was exciting to watch the rebuilt village shop rise up next to the temporary shop unit last summer, though Highways' three way traffic lights, left on unnecessarily over two weekends, caused much driver irritation. The new building is a great asset to the village and the opening of the chippy on 13 May is eagerly awaited. However, it was disappointing that the promised new bus shelter did not materialise nor that the paper bank was allowed back on the shop forecourt, despite there being an obvious place to site it. While the Parish Council will promote the recycling facilities at the Ostrich carpark, the paperbank's less than central location will inevitably mean a drop in income to the village from recycling credits.

The Parish Council finances remain in a strong position. With careful budgeting and benefiting from the raised Precept to recoup part of the extra cost of pollarding the lime trees on Stocks Green in February 2017, bank reserves grew to £5,300. The Council subsidised the Neighbourhood Plan committee's initial £400 expenses up to when the Government grant was paid. The old 'yellow' street lights continue to fail. Five were replaced this year with the softer and cheaper LED bulbs. 16 out of 34 lights are now LED, while twelve go off at midnight in line with the Council's dark skies policy. Managing the village trees is a constant task and the Parish Council approved a revised Tree Inspection Register under the watchful eye of Cllr Tim Hubbard. The Council budgeted £1,250 for next year in anticipation of more pruning and possible storm damage, as occurred on the playing field last winter. Cllrs agreed to raise the Precept to £13,130, an increase of 3%, in line with inflation and equal to £1.14 on the current £38.20 Band D Council Tax charge.

With assistance from Richard Price, our internal auditor, Linda Roast again did an fine job in balancing the accounts and satisfying, for the last time, the external auditor within the budgeted cost. Under new regulations, Councils with income under £25,000 do not need to do an external audit, providing a summary of their annual accounts are posted onto the village website. This reporting structure was set up on the PC page on castleacre.info and allows residents to see the archives of all the Parish Council meeting Agenda's and Minutes as well as the accounts.

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
10 May 2018