

Chairman's report to Castle Acre's Annual Parish Meeting May 2021

My report covers the 12 months to end April 2021 of the current four year term of Castle Acre Parish Council (PC) that runs to May 2023. At its meeting in May 2020, Cllrs voted unanimously for Martin Hickey as Chairman and Laurie Fisher as Vice-Chairman of the PC. As noted in my last report, Charlie Williams resigned her seat in January 2020 and voting for her successor was delayed by lockdown restrictions until the June 2020 Council meeting. Cllrs are delighted to welcome Liam Manson to the Council.

Perhaps like our government, I naively believed, and reported last time, that Parish Council business and meetings would be back to normal by June last year. While we all enjoyed relatively more freedom then, social distancing rules led our Council to continue our monthly meetings online via Zoom which have continued right through until May 6 2021. Despite some initial misgivings, our PC zoom meetings have worked well and it was good to see Cllrs' happy faces once a month throughout the second and third lockdowns! Probably more residents 'tuned in' than would have attended our public meetings. My thanks to our Clerk, Libby, for skilfully managing the technology!

Cllrs agreed in September to update the Council's Standing Orders which can be viewed at [https://www.castleacre.info/images/downloads/1.%20Council Standing Orders Sep 2020.pdf](https://www.castleacre.info/images/downloads/1.%20Council%20Standing%20Orders%20Sep%202020.pdf) . A printed copy can be sent on request to the Clerk.

For two years, I have confidently reported that the final version of the Castle Acre Neighbourhood Plan would soon be put to a residents' vote. I explained some of the unexpected delays in my last report, then there were issues over potential development land with Holkham, further consultations with stakeholders over the revised Plan followed, and then, finally, the Plan was passed in January to an official Examiner for a six week review. A mixture of lockdown restrictions and personal issues resulted in this examination taking 16 weeks to end April 2021 and still no report in sight. It is all very frustrating when we know we have an excellent Neighbourhood Plan that reflects the wishes of the majority whom we hope will vote in its favour at the public referendum – again at a future date to be set by the Borough Council. This will be nearly five years since I first called a public meeting and set up the Plan's Steering Group. It has been a long slog and I again pay tribute to both the Chairman, Martin Tate, and the Steering Group members for hanging on in there!

Cllrs and residents were delighted to welcome the new owners of Barnfields café, now renamed Wittles, and wish them every success. It was sad to learn of the temporary closure of the Ostrich pub. A new tenant is scheduled to take over this May.

What other achievements and frustrations has the PC experienced over the past twelve months?

Achievements

- Restricting vehicle access across South Acre ford. There was a successful initial public consultation last September on the proposed Traffic Restriction Order (TRO) which gave Norfolk County Council officers sufficient encouragement to proceed to the next legal stage of consultations. Unfortunately this process was again delayed by Covid restrictions but the TRO is still on course to be enforced in the next 12 months.

- Castle Acre Voice. The new community newsletter for Castle Acre residents brought to you by the Parish Council. Our aim is to keep villagers informed, not only of the Council's thinking behind longer term projects and developments, but also of the many other issues that residents tell us matter. Cllrs were pleased with the innovative design and the feedback from residents was positive. Thanks to residents Pearce Marchbank and Chris Whitehorn for their input into the design, editorial and production. The PC plans to distribute the Voice to all households bi-annually.
- Footway down Newton Road. The PC applied to and successfully received a 50% grant from the NCC Parish Partnership Scheme to lay down a basic footpath (trod) along the grass verge from East Green to Sandy Lane (joining the Nar Valley Way). The PC will fund the balance out of a mixture of housing levies and donations. We expect the trod will be in place by this summer. The trod was championed by Philip and Linda Lines. Sadly Philip didn't live to see his vision achieved. The trod will be dedicated to his memory.
- Safety traffic mirror at the Massingham Road/Blind Lane junction. Now in place and should help to reduce the danger of vehicle accidents caused by sightlines blocked by parked cars and lorries. The long standing traffic cones were retired! Highways also painted a bus stop rectangle sign on the carriageway to discourage parking. Ideally, this junction should be marked with double yellow lines as well as a zebra crossing from the popular new play area but prohibitive costs make these a longer term aspiration.
- Surface water flooding. Thanks to Martin Tate's persistent chivvying of both Highways and Anglian Water, progress is being made in identifying the blockages in pipework and the call for remedial work, some of which has already occurred but much more needs to be done. Heavy rains caused particular problems around Jubilee bridge and excessive mud on Blind and Orchard Lanes.
- Supporting young people. As heralded in the Voice, the PC is working with a local resident and the YMCA to find out what local activities kids from age 11 upwards would like to participate in the village – maybe a youth club or different external activities. The PC will be considering the outcomes of the YMCA research at its May meeting.
- Planning applications. Cllrs dealt with 14 applications in the past twelve months, the most controversial being for 14 glamping pods on the land next to the primary school and behind properties in Back Lane. This application is still outstanding after 12 months.
- Highways is due soon to change the directional sign on the A1065 to discourage large vehicles from entering the village via Bailey Street. Those who do, are met by the new PC warning sign not to attempt driving through Bailey Gate which appears to be effective. The portcullis is a further visual deterrent.
- Again, the PC kept to its annual income and expenditure budget and maintained adequate reserves. The PC benefited from transfers of new housing levies (called CIL) which can be spent on new village infrastructure projects. Ideas were recorded in the online February PC Minutes. At their January budget meeting, Cllrs voted to increase the 2021/22 Precept by 3% to £14,625, equating to £1.22 on the current £40.57 Band D rate.

Frustrations

- Castle Acre is a very popular destination for visitors, even during the strict lockdown rules when the castle car park and Pyes Lane still filled up with visitors cars with people anxious to walk around the scenic water meadows. The wonderful new play area opened last September to great excitement, again drawing in visitors from Swaffham and other villages. While welcoming visitors, some behaviours were not – inconsiderate parking, litter scattered, excrement left on the playing field, disposable barbecues dumped in the Nar, dog poo bins filled with disposable/recyclable coffee mugs and so forth. Our volunteer litter team do a wonderful job, picking up over 100 large black bags of rubbish a year, but visitors' poor behaviour is so disappointing to experience.
- Old School. It is regrettable that The Old School remains unloved and uncared for more than five years. Both the PC and the Borough's Enforcement Officer have been in contact with the owner but to date, no progress in either repairing the flint rear wall or clearing and making good the building and its grounds.
- As ever, Highways - with its drawn out way of dealing with our simple requests for road and sign improvements, safety traffic orders, flooding and drain clearance - the speedy response to repairing major potholes being an exception, thanks to determined nagging by the Clerk!
- Not yet reaching a fully satisfactory conclusion in our negotiations with Holkham over public access to their lands around the village, particularly across the water meadows and along the River Nar. Holkham agreed to declare the footpath from Bailey Street across Minns Meadow to the ford as a Public Right Of Way (PROW) – now official - and is giving sympathetic consideration to declaring another PROW from the ford right round to Common Lane as well as guaranteeing no reduction in their permissive paths around the village for the next 50 years. This has been hampered by Holkham's surveyor leaving and then lockdown affecting NCC staff who would process the PROW. A replacement surveyor is now in post and I remain optimistic that the PC will achieve its objectives in the long run while there is goodwill on both sides.

Going but not gone

After eight years as Chairman of the PC, I feel it is time to hand over. I will remain on the Council for the remainder of this term and do my best to assist the new Chairman, Cllrs and Libby to keep the PC running smoothly. Election of Chairman, Vice Chairman and office holders will be decided at the 6 May PC meeting.

Thanks to

- Libby Firth, our enthusiastic and conscientious Clerk.
- Our Borough Cllr, Jim Moriarty, for his continued support and assistance.
- The village litter group for tirelessly collecting litter around the village, putting up dog poo warning signs and generally keeping the PC on its toes!

- Frank Moister for repairing the wooden bus shelter, again. Len Rye, our village volunteer, for painting the bench and litter bin by the ford, repairing damaged verges and gates, painting the visitor's noticeboard on Stocks Green and, above all, for being responsible for the placing and data collection of the SAM2 speed recording unit.
- Gus Stafford Allen for being our 'eyes' at the ford and the Nar, recording traffic incidents and thoughtless behaviour. In particular, monitoring Anglian Waters' earlier scheme to lay a sewage pipe under the Nar and subsequently spotting a sewage leak from the new pumping station.
- My fellow Parish Cllrs.

Martin Hickey - Chairman
May 2021