

Chairman's Report to the Annual Village Meeting 1st June 2015

The past year has been extremely busy with the parish council making improvements itself and campaigning for other organisations, mostly MKC, to make improvements to the village.

This time last year, the big issue was the construction of a wind turbine at Lodge Farm Business Centre. The parish council opposed this on behalf of the village and employed a consultant to represent us at the Planning Hearing. The Inspector refused the application on the grounds of the impact on the two neighbouring properties and also because of the impact on a number of heritage assets around Castlethorpe. The applicant then submitted an application for a solar farm which will not be visible from either the neighbouring properties or from the village. The parish council raised no objection and the application has now been granted. Incidentally, our parish council also sponsored the MKC Planning Guidance that turbines had to be a certain distance from public footpaths and bridleways. The applications for turbines at Haversham and Hanslope were also refused.

Probably the biggest achievement within the village was the redevelopment of the village centre. This was the culmination of several years' work both in design and then in assembling various grants so that the contribution from our precept could be kept as low as possible and was eventually less than £15,000. We have received many compliments on the centre and it is our intention to move to the black and gold design for street furniture at least initially in the conservation area. There is, I am afraid, no news on the pub though the parish council is in regular contact most recently to get an assurance that the building was safe.

Perhaps the longest running project was our campaign to get the flooding resolved at The Dips. MKC have now constructed new concrete culverts to help the water flow away on the south side and two of three dry ponds above Tathall End to control the water flow down to the Dips. A redesign is happening for a third dry pond and alternatives are being evaluated to stop the flow of surface water down the Hanslope Road. Finally, we have asked for some culverts on the north side to help that standing water disperse more quickly.

MKC has outsourced its hedge and grass cutting and Frosts is the subcontractor for north MK. We have had a village walkabout with Frosts and identified some changes that need to be made and we have established a good working relationship with Frosts.

The village hall has been much improved both by the installation of acoustic panels to reduce the echo and also through the purchase of new, more attractive and comfortable chairs. We have also obtained various grants to rebuild the 'leaning bell tower' of Castlethorpe which will be done when the summer school holidays begin in July. There are a number of planned improvements including sorting out the damp wall and new outside lights. At the Village Hall Committee AGM in April, there were no candidates for Chairman or other posts. The parish council has therefore decided to make it a committee of the council co-opting the regular user groups so that they can continue to have their say. This should make administration of the hall a little easier with financial decisions being able to be made directly by the new committee.

At the sports ground, a new floor has been laid in the football pavilion and new exterior lights installed at the cricket pavilion which is now also used for meetings since the installation of heating. The fencing around the pavilion has been replaced and we have obtained a grant to get

the tennis court lights working again and are trying to obtain quotes. We have an issue in that the Valuation Office has decided that we must pay business rates for the Sports Ground. This has a knock on effect at the Village Hall and the result is that we would have to find a further £3,000 a year. We have invited the sports clubs to form an association and lease the ground from the parish council with no change to public access as this would put both the parish council and the sports association below the level at which business rates have to be paid. The only alternatives are unpalatable - increasing the hire charges or the precept quite considerably.

There have been a number of other improvements such as the refurbishment of the War Memorial for the centenary last year, obtaining a grant for the church to rebuild the drystone wall, the renewal of the benches around the village, new trees at the triangle and at The Chequers, a further two dog bins and a new Notice Board on North Street. After a three year fight, we got MKC to grant the first Dog Control Orders in the Borough banning dogs from the Sports Ground and I believe the first prosecution has taken place. We are looking at new signage and part-fencing at the village entrances. This will have the effect of slowing traffic and will look better. We have also installed a junction mirror on the exit from Thrupp Close and we have asked MKC to paint 'dragons teeth' on the Bullington End Rd entrance to slow vehicles as speed tubes indicated a problem there.

We have now moved to using the SIDs, smiley / cross faces, to record vehicle speeds replacing the old Community Speed Watch tripod which was increasingly unreliable. The SIDs also work continuously for about 7 days before the batteries are recharged. Against all our expectations, the SIDs are recording very few vehicles exceeding the speed limit and generally below the police intervention level though the police will be using a speed gun on one hot spot shortly. We are experimenting with different locations for the SID and, of course, vehicles can still be going too fast even if they are below 30mph for example by racing to get through the speed narrows on Station Road. We hope that at least the SIDs will help educate drivers to keep within the speed limit.

As most residents will know, we have had five burglaries in the village since Christmas. This is extremely distressing for those burgled and worrying for all of us. The police are obviously doing all they can and emphasise that residents should report any suspicious behaviour by phoning 101. They would much rather investigate and find everything is alright than miss an opportunity to prevent or catch burglars. Police patrols through the village have been increased and crime prevention advice is on the village website. There has been a Neighbourhood Watch scheme in the village for some years and a new scheme has also been set up. The schemes will be advertised on Noticeboards and on the website and we will also put up some new lamppost notices.

SmartWater is a relatively new way of marking property invisibly with a unique identifier which is stored on a police database. It is normally offered only to burglary victims and near neighbours but the police have offered 50 free SmartWater kits to the village and the parish council has decided to top this number up so that all older or vulnerable residents can have a free kit. The police have offered all residents SmartWater at the cost price of £10. The kits will be distributed with instructions by our local PCSOs. You can order SmartWater kits by contacting our Clerk, Steve Bradbury preferably by email.

In the last year, we have surveyed the village as part of our Neighbourhood Plan and we have now written the first draft which is being revised by our consultants. The survey indicated a desire for more affordable homes in the village. However, already we have 1 in 6 houses as affordable, which is one of the highest ratios in rural MK, and we have a further 9 low cost homes with planning permission in the Station Yard as well as a small number of other sites with planning permission. The Neighbourhood Plan Committee is therefore suggesting that the current policy of development only within the settlement boundary is maintained but the parish council will consider a separate Housing Needs Survey to assess demand in a more structured way and test reaction on specific sites. In addition, the draft Plan suggests making a number of areas 'Green Spaces' to protect them indefinitely. When the consultants have finished their revisions, which put the plan into proper planning speak, it will be submitted to the parish council. There will then be two statutory public consultations, one by the parish council and one by MKC, before it goes to an independent Planning Inspector and finally to a referendum. If more than 50% vote in favour, it will then become planning policy which must be followed in any future planning applications.

Working with the MK association of parish councils, we persuaded the new MKC Administration to reverse their proposed cuts to bus subsidies and we will do this again next year if necessary to protect the 33 service among other routes.

We have been working again for several years with Andrew Geary, one of our Ward Councillors, to get superfast broadband to the Hanslope Exchange which would offer our village speeds of at least 24Mbps and potentially up to 70Mbps. We have been successful in moving Castlethorpe to the top of the rural broadband upgrade list and our cabinet was the first to go live a couple of weeks ago, in fact before the other three cabinets on Hanslope exchange including those in Hanslope itself. BT and the other providers are now taking orders and the first domestic upgrades have already taken place.

You are probably all aware that, from May last year, we have a larger Ward and three Ward Councillors, Andrew Geary, Jeanette Green and Lynn Patey-Smith. Each councillor represents all ward residents so residents should feel free to contact any of them should you need help at MKC.

And at the parish council, we had 'elections' on 7th May. In fact, there were only 7 candidates for the 7 council seats so the election was uncontested, the first for a very long time this has happened in Castlethorpe. 6 councillors offered themselves again for election but the 7th, Julian Presant-Collins, was unable to stand because of a new community role he has taken up. As a result, Russell Forgham offered to stand and has joined the council. Many thanks to Julian for his work on the council and especially for being the parish council 'manager' for the village centre project.

Well, it has actually been 14 months since our last Parish Meeting but I think a lot has been achieved and I know I speak for all parish councillors when I say that we will continue to work hard for the benefit of our village.

Philip Ayles
Chairman, Castlethorpe Parish Council