

Combs Parish Meeting, May 2023

Chairman's Annual Report

People

This year in the life of Combs Parish Council both started and finished with the stepping down of two valued councillors. Happily we were joined in the interim by another who has already contributed his substantial business knowledge to the way we do things.

Back to the start of the year, Councillor Stuart Scarff stood down from his position of Chairman, a role he fulfilled with distinction for 10 years. This included the period that covered the whole of the COVID pandemic through which he led the council with assurance and sensitivity. Thankfully, he continued his work as a councillor and for that the other members were grateful and not a little relieved. Councillor Ian Walker and I (Tony Kitson) were duly elected Chairman and Vice Chairman respectively with councillors Terry Betchley and Suzanne Ottewell working alongside them.

Unfortunately Councillor Walker had to step down almost immediately for personal reasons. I became *de facto* Acting Chairman and the Council, now 4 members from a possible contingent of 7, girded its loins to face the new administrative year. Thankfully we have the expertise of our Parish Clerk Tony Bamber who has guided us – and especially me – through this period of change.

We were delighted to co-opt Alan Tomlinson onto the council in October. Alan is a seasoned businessman who has already contributed much in the way of operational discipline as we face ever-mounting challenges.

We will continue to seek out and encourage further Council participation from residents.

I am able to report that councillors Betchley, Ottewell and I have attended online training courses provided by the Suffolk Association of Local Councils. This comprised 6 modules and fulfilled two purposes: reinforcing our understanding of the duties of our office and, listening to the experiences of some of the other participants, affirming that Combs Parish Council under Councillor Scarff's leadership was run exceedingly well and that we are very well supported by our County and District Councillors Kay Oakes and John Matthissen.

For the record, and possibly for my sins, I was formally elected Chair at the November meeting of the PC.

Finally, Councillor Scarff decided not to stand for re-election to the Council for 2023-24 having completed some 30 years of service to the Parish. He takes with him our profound thanks and respect.

Financial

The key challenge this year has been pressure on the budget due to unexpected increases in the energy bill for street lighting, printing and elevated insurance costs. We re-calculated and agreed to increase our budget by £2,400 in respect of outgoings. The overall budget came to £19,678 and we brought it in at £17,542. This allowed us to carry some reserves over into the 2023-2024 budget and thereby keep our precept at the same level, a small contribution to households in an elevated cost of living climate.

Our total income this year was £23,786, the bulk of which was precept (£9,000), burial ground income (£5,560) and Community Infrastructure Levy and is made up as follows:

Category	Amount
Reclaimed VAT	£599.93
Deposit Account Interest	£0.19
Burial Ground Income	£5,560.00
Precept	£9,000.00
CIL	£8,626.19
Total	£23,786.31
Total excluding CIL	£15,160.12

We took the decision to change our banking arrangements. We were obtaining decreasing levels of service from our incumbent provider and after researching alternatives have identified a new one. My thanks to Tony Bamber and Councillor Ottewell who have steered us through this process and, now we have secured our April precept and CIL payments, have set the necessary wheels in motion.

Donations and Support

We were pleased to be able to provide financial support to several local causes. Oaks Meadow has grown from a glint in Desiree Shelley's eye to a highly impressive village amenity which has attracted attention far and wide. This year the Council was pleased to support the Midsummer's Day event and funded Health and Safety training and insurance. Councillor Betchley has provided excellent liaison between Oaks Meadow and the Council and we intend to continue to support this project.

The Cricket Club at Moats Tye has undertaken a recent refurbishment with new toilet facilities and a veranda. We understand that our support helped to secure other funding streams and we look forward to working with Julia Stephens-Rowe and her team as they grow the club facilities further.

We also provided support to Stowmarket Citizens Advice and the popular annual Bicycle Belles cycle ride (along with our colleagues at Battsford PC.)

Newsletter

Councillor Ottewell has once again driven the thrice-yearly publication of the Parish Newsletter which has proven to be popular with residents. She took the task on at short notice and has impressed us all with her energy and dedication. She collates input, formats and edits the material, arranges for 330 copies to be printed and assigns them to Councillors to distribute. Feedback has been consistently warm and we thank Suzanne heartily for her commitment.

Cemetery

Councillor Betchley and Parish Clerk Tony Bamber have administered dealings with the cemetery with focused sensitivity. They noticed that most of the new plots were sought by people from outside of the Parish and so have designed and implemented a pricing structure intended to deter this practice in favour of our own residents. The cemetery is kept neat and tidy and we thank Hartley's Garden Services for their services.

Platinum Jubilee

Thanks are due to Councillor Scarff and his wife Jill who were the driving forces behind the events celebrating the Platinum Jubilee of the reign of HRH Queen Elizabeth. The Jubilee Beacon lighting on

2nd June was a great success, attended by some 2-300 people who enjoyed a barbeque and refreshments and there was a splendid rendition of a specially written song by a choir put together under very short notice beforehand.

Sadly of course HRH Queen Elizabeth passed away on 8th September. The PC cancelled its usual meeting, instead holding an informal one for urgent and vital business as a mark of respect. The website was reconfigured and a message of condolence posted on the landing page.

Parish Boundaries

There was a Communities Governance Review in August in which Parish Councils were invited to submit proposals for boundary changes. We asked for the inconsistency in Combs Green to be considered as some houses in the road are within the boundary of Combs while others are in Little Finborough. We await a response.

Planning Applications and Development

Councillors considered 19 Planning Applications over the course of the year, supporting those where due consideration to the built and natural environments and neighbourliness had been evidenced.

There has however been considerable disruption resulting from the development on land north of Bildeston Road. We lobbied both our County and District Councillors, Kay Oakes and John Matthissen, providing them with the evidence to take up the cudgels on our behalf. We are grateful to them both: they've obtained two Stop Notices and put the development under condition enforcement. We've also compiled and sent a file of the various problems caused to the owner of the development company and received an apology and a stated aim to reduce disruption.

Christmas Tree Festival

The PC were pleased to procure and decorate a Tree for display at St Mary's Church Christmas Tree Festival, light-heartedly titled 'While Shepherds Washed Their Socks By Night' in line with the chosen theme of Christmas Carols.

ANPR

The Council has applied to have an Automatic Number Plate Recognition device placed at Moats Tye to monitor traffic flow. The device will be able to record the plates of speeding vehicles and for repeat offenders Police warnings may be issued.

Litter Pick

The PC organised its annual Litter Pick on April 2nd. Excellently organised by Tony Bamber and Stuart Scarff, a team of volunteers salvaged nearly 30 bags of rubbish from our road verges.

Parish Infrastructure Investment

Finally, Councillors put not inconsiderable effort into the production of a Parish Infrastructure Investment Plan (PIIP). This maps out a 5 year programme of investment in Parish infrastructure projects and enables us to anticipate and control our Community Infrastructure Levy income and subsequent expenditure.

Anthony (Tony) Kitson

Chair, Combs Parish Council for 2022-2023