Minutes of Combs Parish Council Meeting
Monday 10th March 2025 @ 7.30 pm, Battisford Cricket Club

Present: T Kitson (chairman); A Tomlinson (councillor); K Archer (councillor);) T Bamber (councillor); H Larsen (councillor); C Ratcliffe (councillor); T Betchley (councillor); S Ottewell (clerk); K Oakes (County councillor)

1) Apologies for absence
District Cllr J Matthissen

2) Declaration of Interest/Declaration of lobbying
None

3) Public Forum
None

4) Minutes of meeting held on Monday 9th September
The Minutes for Monday 10th February were reviewed. It was agreed they be signed as a true and accurate record of the meeting by the chairman.

5) Clerk's Report
The Clerk sent out the report prior to the meeting to allow the councillors time to read. No questions were raised (Appendix 1)

6) Action Points review
The action points summary was reviewed and the clerk was updated on progress on outstanding items.
Action Point – Clerk to update summary. All Cllrs to check their outstanding items.

7) Chairman's Report
The Chairman had sent out his report prior to the meeting. No questions were raised (Appendix 2).

8) County Councillor's Report
The county councillor had sent in the report prior to the meeting, stating that it was a lengthy report including updates on devolution and the Suffolk Libraries situation. (Appendix 3)

9) District Councillor's Report
Cllr Matthissen sent in the report prior to the meeting but was unable to attend in person. (Appendix 4)
Cllr Tomlinson reported that he had wanted to ask Cllr Matthissen about various issues concerning the Hubbard's Close development and is waiting for a response to his email; Cllr Ratcliffe referred to the new housing numbers recently announced and wanted to know if proposed numbers were available for Combs.
Action Point – Cllr Tomlinson to chase up on his email
Action Point – Clerk to email Cllr Matthissen regarding housing numbers

10) Planning application
No applications have been received

11) Finance

(a) Accounts review to date and finance approval
All councillors agreed with both the budget analysis/ variance report and the predicted income/expenditure report.

The Clerk reported that back in January 2025 she had submitted the Re-declaration of Compliance to The Pensions Regulator as required but had omitted to report this back to the Cllrs and minute the fact. All the Cllrs accepted the oversight and agreed that it should be minuted in this meeting.

(b) Payments to hand

(i) Electricity for streetlights - Jan (Feb direct debit) – £247.25
Approved, paid by direct debit - Parish Councils Act 157, s.3; Highways Act 1980. S.301

(ii) Electricity for streetlights - Feb (March direct debit) – £213.91
Approved, paid by direct debit - Parish Councils Act 157, s.3; Highways Act 1980. S.301

(iii) Monthly bank services charges - £6.00
Approved – Local Government Act 1972, s111

Invoice expected but not yet received for cemetery maintenance.

12) To review and agree Council Policies

(i) Risk Assessment – agreed and accepted by all Councillors
(ii) Asset Register – agreed and accepted by all Councillors

13) To update progress on "Pride in Your Place initiative"

A detailed report had been sent to all Councillors prior to the meeting covering all the suggestions received for the project.
All Councillors agreed to support the project and the application for the grant can be submitted. If successful, Councillors agreed that the Parish Council would be willing to meet fees involved such as licenses and on-going maintenance.
Action Point – Grant application to be reviewed and submitted

14) To agree the next step for the Neighbourhood Plan project

Following the article for the Community Newsletter, it was agreed that a more detailed letter would be written to Combs residents and that several meetings would be arranged to present project ideas.
Action Point – Cllr Kitson, Cllr Archer and Cllr Ratcliffe to arrange

15) To confirm litter pick arrangements

It was agreed at the February meeting that Combs would be conducting their litter pick on Sunday 23rd March; the Clerk reported that confirmation had been received from the Tannery to use their car park as a meet-up point and that she had contacted MSDC about collecting the rubbish bags after the event. Poster have been placed on the noticeboards, website and in the newsletter.

16) To consider the Clerk's training programme

After successfully completing the ILCA course (Introduction to Local Council Administration) the clerk expressed an interest in continuing with her studies with the FILCA course (Financial Introduction to Local Council Administration). It was agreed by all the Councillors that this would be of great benefit to the clerk and to the council and was approved.
Action Point - Clerk to enroll in FILCA course

17) Commemorative bench request

Following the February meeting, the Clerk confirmed she had informed the applicant that residents and councillors were not in favour of placing the bench at their suggested location. A few other ideas had been proposed to the applicant including Oaks Meadow. Cllr Larsen then suggested the triangle area in Moats Tye as this looks across Combs.
Action Point – Clerk to advise applicant of the Moats Tye suggestion.

18) To consider ideas for a suggested Book Swap facility

A Combs resident had suggested the idea of setting up a Book Swap facility in the bus shelter. This was supported by all the councillors on a trial basis for a few months. Ideas including installing purpose-built shelving in the bus-shelter and running a children's competition would then be considered.

AK

Action Point – Clerk to liaise with resident

19) To update progress on the fence request by the Tannery Road Pond
A resident had enquired whether it would be possible to have a fence installed around the southern edge of the pond to prevent access by small children. The associated land is owned by two parties and agreement would be needed from both on style and location..

Cllr Archer explained that he had seen some plans and photos from before Russet Gardens was developed and that the pond area had been fenced off at this time. He agreed to contact the developers to ascertain reasons for the removal of this fencing. In the original plans, an area of Russet Gardens next to the pond was to be used as an open play area, but it is understood that this had been deemed unsafe due to its proximity to the pond. It was therefore decided to collect more information from the developer and from MSDC. Depending on the outcome, it may then be advantageous to suggest arranging a meeting between both land-owning parties and one or more councillors where mutually agreeable possibilities could be explored.

Action Point: Cllr Archer to contact Russet Gardens developers
Action Point: Clerk to check planning application portal and contact Cllr Matthissen for greater understanding of the developer's obligations regarding pond safety.

20) To update status on the removal of the builder's rubbish at Hubbard Close
Cllr Tomlinson confirmed he had emailed Cllr Matthissen regarding this issue and would chase him up on the matter.
Action Point – Cllr Tomlinson to chase up Cllr Matthissen

21) Correspondence / Items for inclusion on the next agenda
The clerk reported that she had received email correspondence regarding the build-up of rubbish outside 12 Queens Close.
As this property belongs to Mid Suffolk Council, the clerk had forwarded the email to Cllr Matthissen for advice and is waiting for a reply.
A request from Oaks Meadow for funding to cover their insurance policy has been received, which the councillors agreed to in principle – to be added to the April Agenda for discussion.
The clerk also received correspondence from SALC regarding the internal audit. This has now been booked for W/C 12th May 2025.

April agenda to include cemetery maintenance invoice, PiYP, Neighbourhood Plan, Audit and Hubbards Close.

Date and time of next meeting: Monday 14th April 2025 at 7:30pm, Battisford Cricket Club
Meeting closed at 21:03

APPENDIX 1

Clerk's Report March 2025

Planning Decisions Approved
None
Finance
Total balance as at 31st January 2025 £88,031.36

Plus Receipts February 2025

None	0
Less Payments February 2025	
Oaks Meadow – funding	£1,735.94
Domain name subscription	£12.86
Cemetery grounds maintenance	£300.00
Salaries	£4,191.60
Streetlights	£247.25
Bank charges	£6.00
Balance as at 28th February 2025	**£81,537.71**
Current account	£4,072.80
General savings account	£76,960.96
Cemetery savings account	£503.95
Total in Bank	**£81,537.71**

Following a request from a local resident, the garden maintenance contractors have tidied up the old cemetery area behind the church. This part of the cemetery is generally left as a wildlife area and this was taken into consideration; the work undertaken included raising tree canopies, trimming shrubs, clipping perimeter hedges and removing elder, brambles and autumn debris.

With the financial year end looming, the Internal Audit has been booked with SALC for week commencing 12th May 2025. Combs PC have again met the criteria for an external audit, dates to be confirmed.

The March edition of the Community Newsletter is nearly complete with an aim of having it printed on Friday 14th March and distributed thereafter.

I am pleased to report that the damaged road name sign on Park Road mentioned last month has now been replaced by MSDC.

APPENDIX 2

Chairman's Report March 2025

Devolution

Progress has been made since the Government granted permission for Suffolk and Norfolk to form a Combined County Authority. The Mayor overseeing it will be elected in May 2026, this office overseeing areas such as transport infrastructure, health improvement initiatives and economic development. A proposed model of the new set-up will be available around the third week of March with a final business case to be submitted in September.

I've written a brief piece for the Newsletter pointing residents at the associated public consultation.

Joint Local Development Scheme

The Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Development Scheme (March 2025) has been approved by both District Councils. It updates and entirely replaces the November 2023 version and sets out the Councils' timetable for the preparation and adoption of new planning documents which will help guide development in the Districts.

Neighbourhood Planning

We wrote two linked pieces for the Newsletter, my chairman's column leading to a fuller article introducing the idea and promising further contact by means of a letter in late Spring. Our next challenge is to draft and finalise both that letter and the content for and structure of some public engagement events. Thanks to councillors Archer, Ratcliffe and Tomlinson for their work to date.

Neighbourly Contributions

We sent a formal letter to Mr David Thorpe thanking him for the various acts of voluntary improvements he undertakes around the parish.

Pride in your Place

Well done to the residents – including councillors Tomlinson, Ratcliffe and Larsen – who have made such excellent progress under Anna James' leadership on compiling an excellent set of ideas for beautifying the parish. Although this isn't a Parish Council initiative *per se*, I believe it to be wholly worthy of our support.

APPENDIX 3

County Council report – March 2025

Suffolk prepares for another significant solar farm proposal

Suffolk County Council is preparing to respond to another large solar farm proposal, set to cover around 1,500 acres, near Eye.

EcoPower Suffolk is putting forward plans to build a solar farm and battery storage facility, which would impact Yaxley, Brome, Gislingham, Mellis, Eye and Occold, with connections made at the existing substation to the north of Yaxley.

The project aims to deliver around 250 megawatts of renewable energy. At that size, it will be classed as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP), requiring planning approval from the Secretary of State, rather than the local authority.

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reform and NSIPs, said:

"Another NSIP is looking to land in Suffolk and for many of the communities impacted by EcoPower Suffolk's plans, this comes hot on the heels of discussing the Norwich to Tilbury pylon proposals. So, I can fully understand how local communities are wearily bracing themselves for a time-consuming and uncertain road ahead.

"It does feel like a case of 'here we go again', but I am expecting regular, productive engagement with EcoPower Suffolk – not just with the council, but with residents and parishes.

"I trust that their opening words on their website are sincere – they talk about collaboration, and a commitment to community engagement and understanding local challenges and aspirations."

Several consultations, beginning in March 2025, will be held by EcoPower Suffolk as it shapes its final planning application.

The county council will be contributing to these, to support and represent residents, businesses, agriculture, our landscape and ecology.

Cllr Rout continues:

"Suffolk County Council has previously been clear in setting out its views that solar farms in Suffolk should not take our best quality farmland out of food production and that, broadly speaking, solar installations should be rooftop before rural.

"Moreover, the council has the highest possible expectations that any solar developer fully rules out any possible links to forced labour in China or elsewhere in the world."

"Ultimately, any decision to approve or refuse this scheme will be made by the government. The worst-case scenario is that we will suffer a similar farce to the Sunnica project: an incredibly poor proposal, seemingly rushed through on a whim by the Secretary of State, with no interest in the welfare of local communities or the environment. All because the government is hastily chasing an unrealistic target of decarbonising the Grid by 2030."

EcoPower Suffolk hopes that the project will connect to the Grid in 2030.

More information can be found at www.ecopowersuffolk.com

OPINION: Devolution is a win, but myths must be tackled

Column by Cllr Richard Rout, Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reform and NSIPs.

On Monday, I was appointed as Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reorganisation and Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects. This is a new and important role and one that will require hard work to ensure everyone in Suffolk feels they can help shape the future of local government in our county should they wish.

In case you missed it, Suffolk is one of only a handful of areas on the government's new fast-track Devolution Priority Programme. What this means in practice is that Suffolk's 50-year-old two-tier council structure is set to change with the government proposing to abolish all six of Suffolk's district, borough and county councils and replace them with just one authority providing all councils services in an area. It is argued that unitary councils (as they're known) can deliver better outcomes for residents and save money that can be reinvested into public services. They also bring clarity for residents – when I'm out in Bury St Edmunds, local people talk about 'the council', often not knowing or caring which council delivers a given service. Nor, really, should they. Like me, they just want their bins emptied on time, their roads fixed, for support to be there if they or their family need it and for their council tax to be well spent.

The government also intends to create a mayor (covering Suffolk and Norfolk) who would take control over strategic policy areas like transport infrastructure, economic development, health improvement and blue light services – along with devolved government funding to deliver positive change. The mayor will be elected in May 2026.

There are a lot of myths buzzing around about the council restructuring elements of this programme. There is, for example, absolutely no truth whatsoever in the claim that a single remote council will govern all of Norfolk and Suffolk or that all public services in Suffolk would be governed by a new mayor. The mayor would have set responsibilities for strategic areas like transport infrastructure and economic development. Emptying your bins, deciding on planning applications, filling potholes and caring for vulnerable adults and children – these are all services that will remain the responsibility of your local council.

The government is clear that it wants to see unitary councils and has indicated these should represent a minimum population of 500,000 residents or more – unless there is a good reason for smaller councils.

I want our proposal to be evidence-based and focused on the best outcomes for Suffolk's residents and businesses and the best value for money for local taxpayers. This shouldn't be an emotional or ideological decision. I am already checking and testing my own assumptions and encourage everyone else to do the same. This decision is too important for a snap judgement, and this is why the county council will spend the next few weeks assessing the options and evidence before announcing our preferred model ahead of 21 March. A final business case will be submitted in September 2025.

Some people are concerned that larger councils are intrinsically distant from the communities they serve. This can be the case with any sized councils but I for one want this whole reorganisation process to fundamentally improve those connections – whether that's through elected councillors, better community engagement or transparency.

I fear I might have to spend a lot of time dispelling myths in the coming weeks and months, but if that is the case then so be it because residents deserve the facts.

Devolution and local government organisation is a once in several generations opportunity to make positive changes for Suffolk. Our local government structure has been in place for over half a century, and few will disagree that it could be more efficient, simpler and cost effective. This opportunity hasn't happened before in my lifetime and is unlikely to again. It's a chance to improve outcomes, improve services, reduce costs and duplication.

I've been asked several times how people can be part of the decision-making. The government will lead on public engagement and consultation with number opportunities coming forward in the next few months. However, from our perspective, I want residents, businesses, community organisations and public sector partners to be part of this journey and help to shape the future of local government in Suffolk. Everyone has a role to play, and the input of all sectors is vital.

Being on the government's fast-track is a major win for Suffolk and one that will be welcomed by those who want to see efficiency, accountability and streamlined delivery of council services. It is an opportunity to improve our county for everyone in it and move forward with renewed ambition and optimism. The decisions ahead of us as we shape this future may be difficult, conflicting arguments may be put forward, but it is incumbent on all of us to park our emotions and personal ambition and base our proposals firmly in evidence and on outcomes for Suffolk's residents.

Funding made available for safer, healthier and accessible travel around Suffolk

Suffolk County Council has been awarded £3.7 million to continue to encourage cycling, walking and active travel across the county, and making journeys more accessible.

Government has awarded the county council £0.9 million from the Round 5 of the Active Travel Fund, and £2.8 million from the Consolidated Active Travel Fund.

Funds are available to be spent on projects such as:

- Better footpaths and crossing points
- Maintenance of existing walking and cycling infrastructure
- Improved cycle routes
- Traffic calming measures
- Improvements to the Public Rights of Way network
- Rail station access improvements

Suffolk County Council confirms 2025/26 budget

Suffolk County Council has confirmed how it will spend its money in the forthcoming financial year - an £803.7 million plan focused on protecting essential services and supporting the county's most vulnerable residents.

The council's budget for 2025/26 was approved at a meeting of all councillors on Thursday 13 February, with an emphasis on meeting rising demand for children's and adult care services.

For every £1 the council spends in the next financial year, 77 pence will go directly toward services that support the health and wellbeing of people in Suffolk.

The remaining 23 pence will fund other critical areas such as fire and rescue, highway maintenance, climate initiatives, waste management and bus services, as well as the infrastructure, staff, and technology required to keep services running efficiently.

The council's budget will increase by 6.7%, from £752.9 million in 2024/25 to £803.7 million in 2025/26.

Despite a slight uplift in Government funding for local authorities, rising costs and growing demand have required the council to set significant savings targets to balance the books.

The council has approved £10.9 million in new savings, which will focus on restructuring and transforming how services are delivered. This follows £17.5 million in savings approved in the previous year, bringing total savings for the 2025/26 financial year to £28.4 million.

Suffolk County Council's share of Council Tax will rise by 4.99% next year, which includes a 2.99% general increase and a further 2% dedicated wholly to helping meet the rising costs of social care.

This means households will see the following changes in their weekly Council Tax payments:

- Band B property: £24.67 per week, a £1.17 increase from 2024-25
  (Band B properties are the most common in Suffolk)
- Band D property: £31.72 per week, a £1.51 increase from 2024-25.

Suffolk's 45 libraries to remain open and see new investment as Suffolk County Council plans to take service back in house

Suffolk's 45 libraries would remain open, see no change to opening hours and have new mobile libraries and computers as part of a plan to bring the service back into Suffolk County Council.

Subject to a formal Cabinet decision on 18th March 2025, staff running Suffolk's library service – along with their years of experience and love for libraries - will transition to the direct employment of the council on 1st June 2025.

The county council would invest £200,000 in replacing Suffolk's aging mobile libraries with a further £157,000 for new books and to replace public computers in libraries across Suffolk. This is in addition to the £6.6 million a year budget available for Suffolk's libraries.

It follows an attempt to secure an external provider for a new six-year contract (with the option to extend for up to a further six years) which had to be abandoned due to difficulties in aligning submissions with the service requirements and budgets.

Following the end of the procurement process, Suffolk County Council entered negotiations with Suffolk Libraries (the current provider) to reach agreement on a shorter-term contract. The intention was to secure the immediate future of the library service from 1 June 2025, while the longer-term future was considered. However, Suffolk Libraries were unwilling to accept those terms and proposed different terms which were not acceptable to Suffolk County Council and would have breached procurement law.

In addition, serious concerns about the viability of Suffolk Libraries also surfaced. The concerns included their proposal to reduce opening hours by 30% and issues with the financial stability of the organisation. There is also concern about the cost of their head office, including senior managers, which equates to 33% of their annual staffing costs. Suffolk County Council believes that more of the library budget should be invested in frontline services.

Background

- Suffolk's library services have been delivered by Suffolk Libraries IPS since 2012, with the current contract ending on **31st May 2025**.

- Suffolk County Council is the main funder of the service, with an agreed budget of £5.9 million a year. In 2023/24, Suffolk County Council increased the annual budget by £720,000 to £6.6 million a year.

- The contract to operate libraries in Suffolk had to be put out for competitive tender in 2024 as it had reached its maximum legal length.

- The procurement was abandoned due to difficulties in aligning submissions with the service requirements and budgets.

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Suffolk County Council published two open letters explaining its proposal, one to Suffolk residents and the other to Suffolk Libraries staff, volunteers and supporters.

Octopus Energy and Suffolk County Council trial 'Zero Bills' upgrade on existing homes

Octopus reveals first 'Zero Bills' green tech upgrade for existing homes, offering no energy bills for at least 5 years.

- Kicking off trials in Suffolk, with county council offering £15k interest-free loan for residents to kit out their homes with solar panels and a battery
- Octopus Energy estimates 500,000 UK properties built since 2013 could be eligible to be upgraded to 'Zero Bills' standards

Octopus Energy, the UK's largest energy supplier, is taking its world-first 'Zero Bills' initiative to the next level by trialling an upgrade offer for existing homes, allowing more householders across the UK to eliminate their energy bills.

Octopus's upgrade trials will transform existing homes by installing cutting-edge green tech - a heat pump, a battery and solar panels - bringing them up to Octopus' 'Zero Bills' standard, where customers receive no energy bills for at least 5 years, guaranteed.

The energy supplier is kicking off a series of trials in new homes in Suffolk. The company is teaming up with Suffolk County Council to help more local people benefit from low-carbon tech through the County Council's £15,000 interest-free Warm Homes Loan.

The loan covers the upfront costs of installing solar panels and a battery, allowing Suffolk homeowners who already have a heat pump to embrace low-carbon living while unlocking major savings on their energy bills.

Octopus is reaching out to local Suffolk customers with homes built since 2015, offering them a chance to join the revolutionary trial and take advantage of the council's funding.

The energy supplier estimates 500,000 UK properties built since 2013 could be eligible to be upgraded to a 'Zero Bills' home. Octopus Energy aims to deliver 100,000 'Zero Bills' homes by 2030 and has already rolled out the initiative in Germany and New Zealand, as well as the UK.

APPENDIX 4

District Councillor Report: Onehouse Ward - March 2025

<table>
<tr><td>February Council meeting - annual budget</td><td>The Mid Suffolk District Council (MSDC) meeting on 27th February approved the council's annual budget for 2025/26. Details can be found here: (Public Pack)Agenda Document for Mid Suffolk Council, 27/02/2025 17:30
No increase in Council Tax: The council tax bill for a Band D property remains at £175.03. That works out under £3.37 a week to cover all district council services, including waste collection, licensing, planning, public realm and supporting the local economy, culture and communities. (Council Tax overall is expected to rise, however, as MSDC only sets and receives a small portion, with the bulk going to the County Council, plus Police and parish precepts.)
Capital programme agreed: The Council committed to a capital programme of £36.3m (£26m committed, with another £10m proposed 'capital ambition' projects), partly funded from reserves.
Among other things, expenditure includes:
investment in sports and health facilities in Stowmarket and Stradbroke
investment in the new Skills and Innovation Centre
£1.5m fund to support High Street regeneration in Stowmarket
£300k per year funding pot for projects in other market towns and rural communities
investment in cycling and walking infrastructure
an increase in the Locality Award to £10,000 per Ward,</td></tr>
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Local Government reform	The government has announced major changes to the way local government is organised. This includes the creation of new mayoral authorities, and the combining of District and County Councils into unitary authorities. In January, Suffolk County Council voted to apply to the 'fast track' version of these changes. The government accepted this, resulting in the cancellation of the May 2025 County Council elections. **Mayoral authorities – the government has opened a consultation until April 13th.** To share your views, see: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/norfolk-and-suffolk-devolution/norfolk-and-suffolk-devolution-consultation It is clear there will be an election for Mayor of Suffolk + Norfolk in May 2026. **Creation of unitaries:** • Initial plans are to be sent to the government by 21st March 2025. • MSDC is concerned about the lack of public consultation on this aspect of the reforms. • An Extraordinary meeting of Mid Suffolk and Babergh Councils to discuss the issues was rescheduled from Feb 10th to April 10th to allow more time to review emerging details.
Planning Policy updates	Joint Local Plan (JLP) for Babergh and Mid Suffolk is being reviewed, to make sure it stays compliant with the government's increased targets for housebuilding and end date 2044. The timeline for this work was approved at the February Council meeting. Further information can be found here: babergh-and-mid-suffolk-joint-local-plan-review The Cabinet member for Heritage, Planning and Infrastructure, Cllr Andrew Stringer, has highlighted the importance of Neighbourhood Plans, which form part of the District's local plans.
Funding for community projects	Details of Mid Suffolk Council's community funding can be found at: www.midsuffolk.gov.uk – click on the 'Access community funding' button. For advice or further information, please email the grants team at: BMSDCgrants@baberghmidsuffolk.gov.uk

Councillor John Matthissen 07976 308128 councillor@matthissen.net