

COMBE PARISH COUNCIL

Report of the Annual Parish Meeting held on Wednesday 14th May 2025 – Approved

Present

Parish Council: Deborah Phillips– Chair, Peter Sloan– Vice Chair, , Michael Green, Alan Revell, Cllr Graham, Cllr Sumner, Julia Sharpe – Clerk

Village Representatives: Rachel Joannou – Combe School, Andrew Hobson – Church and The Hub, Dave Lee – VH&RG, Celia Adamson – Combe Charities, Sally Purssell – Combe Pre-School and After School Club, PS Purple – Thames Valley Police

Speaker: David Gasca, Head of Natural Capital, Blenheim

Members of the Public: 16

David Gasca spoke about Blenheim's plans for the restoration of Combe Marsh and other environmental management plans. A copy of his presentation is available on request.

1/25 Apologies

Elena Softley, Denise Cripps, Cllr Early

2/25 Report of the 2024 Annual Parish Meeting

The report of the 2024 APM was circulated prior to the meeting and there were no questions arising.

3/25 Parish Council Report – Deborah Phillips – Chair

Potholes and verge damage: The condition of our local roads has proved an ongoing challenge this year. Tackling the never-ending potholes, damaged verges and drainage issues occupied a lot of our time and energy over the winter months. Thanks to Councillor Andy Graham for lobbying on our behalf for carriageway repairs, and to both our FixMyStreet Super User volunteer and David O'Brien for their dedicated reporting on FixMyStreet. There are still some significant verge and road surface repairs to be undertaken, especially once the major renovations of Combe House are complete in the autumn, but we are making progress on repairs to the stretch of road between the railway bridge and Swan Hill bridge.

Speeding: Despite the introduction of a 20mph speed limit, speeding traffic remains a local concern. Our Speed Indicator Devices allow us to monitor the volume and speed of traffic on Akeman Street and Stonesfield Road, but the results are disappointing. A high proportion of vehicles are exceeding the speed limit, some excessively. Further discussions on possible traffic calming measures are underway.

On a more positive note, we continue to support active travel, and Councillors Denise Cripps and Elena Softley have been working with the Village Travel Network (VTN) to help open cycling routes. A good news story is that, after much lobbying, Blenheim have agreed to open up commuting routes through the park at certain times.

Pub: Disappointingly, our village pub remains closed and is in a poor state of disrepair. Despite our best efforts, we did not manage to open a dialogue with the owners over the past year, and have reported our concerns to the District Council. We are nevertheless very pleased to report that the registration of the pub as an Asset of Community Value has been successfully renewed.

Combe community events: We had another successful bonfire night. Thanks to Don Slatter and his team for organizing the display, and the tenants of Alma Grove for the use of the field. Unfortunately, the traditional annual Combe Feast fair has been disappointingly small in recent years. The Parish Council therefore met with William Hebborn of Hebborn Amusements to discuss ways of promoting this event more effectively, and encouraging more showmen to attend. We are grateful to Councillor Andy Graham for funding to help with advertising for August 2025.

Further afield: The Parish Council has been responding to consultations on the proposed Botley West Solar Farm. The Parish Council has not adopted a formal position to support or oppose the project, but we have registered as an Interested Party and will continue to raise concerns about aspects of the proposals, as appropriate.

In addition, we continue to monitor flight paths over Combe and aircraft noise associated with Oxford Airport. The data show that there was a general increase in air movements between 2023 and 2024, but no significant increase in flights over Combe.

Routine council business: The Council deals with lots of busy work, including, for example, reviewing and responding to planning applications, dealing with parking issues, tenders for grass cutting, gully clearing, the maintenance of our village trees, reminding householders about overhanging hedges etc. The Parish Council is also responsible for the general upkeep of the playpark, which continues to be very popular.

Thanks: I'd like to thank all our parish councillors, who give so freely of their time and work well together as a team. Thanks also to Councillors Andy Graham, Tim Sumner and Genny Early for their hard work at the County and District level and for their contributions to the life of Combe. And I'd like to extend very special thanks to our excellent parish clerk, Julia Sharpe, who is constantly on the front line, responding to the day-to-day concerns of residents. She has a great wealth of local knowledge, makes wise decisions, and handles everything efficiently, all with good grace.

Finally, I'd like to thank our many active citizens in Combe, who contribute in various ways. Thanks to those who participated in the village spring clean, and to those who report potholes and drainage problems via FixMyStreet, regularly pick up litter, and do their bit to keep our village looking its best throughout the year.

4/25 Report from County Councillor – Cllr Andy Graham

Cllr Graham outlined Oxfordshire's current plan for local government restructure which proposes replacing the existing six councils (Oxfordshire County Council, Cherwell, Oxford City, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, and West Oxfordshire) with either three, two, or one unitary councils. The proposals are:

Three unitary councils - A unitary city council on expanded boundaries, and two additional unitary councils in the north and south of the county, potentially including West Berkshire or

Two unitary councils - A north Oxfordshire council (combining Cherwell, Oxford City, and West Oxfordshire) and a Ridgeway Council (combining South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, and West Berkshire) or

One unitary council - A single council for Oxfordshire on the existing boundaries of Oxfordshire County Council.

Throughout the year Cllr Graham has supported gulley and Blenheim clearing of ditches by the railway bridge to mitigate some flooding and a further road surfacing is now scheduled in 25/26.

Site visits to investigate the impact of Combe House renovation with verge restoration needed when the work is completed.

He concluded by thanking parish councillors for all their efforts and the clerks who have done a first-class job in supporting me and the OCC staff in the last year.

5/25 Report from District Councillor – Cllr Tim Sumner

Since this is the Annual Parish Meeting I am going to give a brief overview of the year

Believe me when I say, West Oxfordshire is a good place to live. The more I become aware of problems facing other districts and counties the more I value the work of Combe PC, the ability for us three Councillors to represent you at District and County level and the determination of WODC to do what is best for this village

And there is a lot going on - There is an intolerable pressure on the countryside with planning proposals and targets, council funding from Central Government was being reduced year on year, facilities were under threat but through the last couple of years all of us – residents & councillors have fought for the best.

I have the Exec portfolio of Leisure Centres, car parks and major projects in West Oxfordshire – all of which impact the residents of Combe.

So, for example, I am pleased to report that we have undertaken major renovations on our leisure centres plus a move to decarbonise them and turn them into Wellness Centres, the simple innovation

of cold-water swimming at Woodstock outdoor pool meant we could extend the season and it has proved very popular.

That just one area where an effort is being made to improve the quality of life for us all as we work and relax around the district.

So, there are always problems to be solved but I am here to work on your behalf to do what is best for this village not what is best for outside interests be they political or commercial.

Thank you for attending this meeting – involvement is important

6/25 Combe School Report — Rachel Joannou

There are currently 107 children on role. The children are split across 4 classes (Year R/1, Year 1/2, Year 3/4, Year 5/6).

There are 16 members of staff, including many part-time staff. In September 2024, we welcomed a new teacher, Megan May, to Combe School. She works 2 days a week. We have also welcomed two teaching assistants this year, Katherine Carroll and Ella Tompkin. We are grateful to staff for their ongoing commitment to the school.

The school currently has 13 governors who oversee the strategic direction of the school. We are thankful to them all for carrying out this vital role voluntarily.

September 2024 admissions – We welcomed 16 new Reception children to the school this year. 6 children had siblings at Combe and 10 children are from new families to the school. Only 4 of these children live in Combe, most others coming from surrounding villages.

July 2024 Leavers – Our 16 Year 6 pupils left Combe School at the end of July 2024, moving to a variety of schools including The Marlborough, Bartholomew School, St Helen's and St Katharine's, Summerfields and Abingdon School.

Achievement – Statutory assessments took place in Summer 2024. We were pleased that 94% of Year 6 pupils reached the expected standard in maths (national average is 73%), 88% in the reading (national average is 74%) and writing (national average is 72%).

In Year 1, 100% of pupils passed the phonics screening check (national average is 80%).

In EYFS, 79% reached the expected 'good level of development' (national average is 68%).

After School Club – In September 2024, After School Club moved from Combe Preschool to Combe School. This has been a positive change for parents and pupils and is going well.

After School Activities – The children have been offered many extra-curricular after-school activities this year, including musical theatre and many sports clubs such as martial arts and netball.

We are grateful to Christine who continues to run our school choir. This year, the choir have performed at school, church and in Christ Church Cathedral.

Friends of Combe School – We are grateful for the ongoing support of FoCS. This year fundraising events included the Summer Fete and Christmas Lights, including a raffle. The money raised by FoCS funded the installation of a trim trail in the school playground.

Visits in and out of school – Trips are an important part of our school life. In the last year, there have been two residential visits (for Year 5/6 and Year 2) and 17 class trips (which include visits to theatres, museums and places of worship). There have also been a number of trips for smaller groups, including to sporting events.

In addition to trips out of school, workshops at school, led by visitors, have included Opera, history and animal handling.

Community Events – Events have included:

Services in the church were held at Harvest, Christmas and Easter, The annual silence at the memorial on Remembrance Day, May Day celebration on the village green, KS2 Concert and KS1 Nativity Performance

Developments to building and site, including a focus on sustainability – Refurbishment of boys' toilet, Replacement of a classroom carpet, Replacement of the school hall floor. Balancing spend on the building is a challenge. Our school only receive £5000 towards major building works each year. Other works, maintenance, and rents come from our delegated budget, which reduces the funds then available to spend more directly on the children's education.

Pupil Leadership – We encourage pupils to take on leadership roles and be advocates for change.

Recently our youngest pupils held a peaceful protest march through the village about plastic pollution. Our eco council have been working hard, running a 'make a birdhouse' competition and have also created and planted out two additional raised beds in the school garden.

Our wellbeing committee have focused on a range of pupil events, including celebrating World Mental Health Day and regular wellbeing activities.

The pupils continue to organise charity fundraising events, including for Young Minds, Christmas Jumper Day, Children in Need and WWF.

7/25 Combe Reading Room – Deborah Phillips (on behalf of Roger Pursell)

2024 is best categorised as a typical year for the Reading Room. All in all it was a pretty stable 12 months with the usual range of activities taking place.

The trust's financial position, so commendably overseen by our treasurer Jean Richards, remains healthy. Income was £13,100, a welcome increase if modest increase of £1,400 on 2023. The main contributors were coffee mornings up £300 at £3,300, and room hire up £1,000 at £5,800. The latter is particularly pleasing as it represents the continued increase in popularity of the Reading Room as an event venue.

Our expenditure actually decreased by £800. There were the expected increases in the usual areas, council tax and insurance. These and other smaller increases were, however, more than offset by a reduction in spend on building works and general maintenance. Although even within this we were able to undertake a number of smaller projects. Sound deadening panels were installed from the main room ceiling, the dead cherry tree was replaced and the stump ground out, the long room guttering was replaced and we contributed to the village diversity plan with the installation of boxes for bats and hedgehogs, an insect hotel and the planting of insect friendly plants. We also used an eco-friendly spray when combating the threats to our box hedge.

The balance of the foregoing was an excess of income over expenditure of almost £6,000, an annual improvement of £2,200. The balance sheet looks very healthy at £32,000. This, however, should be viewed in the context of the need to provide monies against the anticipated cost of roof repairs, which could be in excess of £100,000. This represents a formidable challenge ahead of us and one which is proving rather difficult to meet as our qualifications for the receiving of substantial grants are limited.

The bedrock that underpins the effective running of the Reading Room is its board of trustees. We, and in particular myself as Chair, are extremely fortunate to have had, and still have, the backing of a dedicated group whose professionalism and commitment are the foundation of our success. On my behalf, and indeed that of the village, I would like to publicly thank them for all that have done and continue to do in ensuring the smooth running of the Reading Room. We are very sorry to be saying goodbye to our long standing, hardworking and very effective treasurer Jean Richards. She has been a trustee since November 2008 and for most of that time our financial custodian. Thank you most warmly Jean, you will be missed. We are, however, most fortunate and delighted that Gini Beavis has kindly agreed to take on the role. Thank you, Gini.

None of the effective and smooth running of our wonderful village amenity would be possible without the tireless commitment of our lovely caretaker Sue Golder who has been our cornerstone since 1994 and to whom we owe a deep debt of gratitude. Lastly but fundamentally, we are indebted to the lovely community of Combe for the unstinting support we receive year in year out, thank you.

8/25 Village Hall and Recreation Ground (VHRGC) Report – Dave Lee

I would like to start by explaining what the 'Village Hall and Recreation Ground Committee' does. We look after the playing fields at the heart of the village, together with the pavilion, which is also Combe's official Village Hall. Different clubs and individuals then use our facilities – primarily the football club in winter, and the cricket club in summer; Michelle Eeley runs regular exercise classes in the hall throughout the year; people drop in to use the basketball hoop and skate bowl; and others hire the hall or the field to stage one-off events, for example weddings.

We see our mission as maintaining a beautiful village amenity, and facilitating activities that improve the health of the local community and offer opportunities for people to meet and enjoy each other's company.

In this light, looking back on the last year we can point to a number of successes. There has been plenty of sporting activity: a range of youth football teams, from Under 6s to Under 15s, run by Chris and Jo Drinkwater at Combe Junior Sports; 'All Stars' beginner's cricket sessions for children, organised by Margaret Moore and parent coaches on Friday evenings in the summer. We are also delighted to see Lizzie Combe now organising weekly sessions for a hard-ball youth team and a women's team, and we hope they will grow and flourish. The men's cricket team enjoyed a full season last year and have started their campaign again this season. Unfortunately, the men's football team had to pull out of the league after running out of players, and we believe is unlikely to restart next season. A local running club also use us as a base for two race events each summer – a regular fixture for the last few years, and due to return in a few weeks' time.

Aside from sport, over the past year we also played host to a range of community events – from the School Fête and the Village Summer Party, to our own fund-raising Euros Sports Bar, which enabled villagers to meet and watch the Euros football tournament together. The pavilion has also hosted a number of birthday parties, and last year's primary school leavers enjoyed an end-of-term campout on the field.

We are extremely grateful to a number of people not on our committee who help us out in various ways - Paul Williams who has taken on various jobs around the field, from bringing in his cutting technology to get on top of the long grass after a rainy Spring left the bank too muddy for our mower to navigate, to tackling the runaway brambles around the edges; Paul Brown and Don Slatter, who took multiple shifts mowing the grass throughout the summer and have been out again this year; and Paul Bowerman whose expertise is often called upon to maintain our ageing mower.

We have had our challenges along the way. Our storeroom was flooded in the heavy rains back in September, which put the hall out of action while we dried it out. We also continue to have problems attracting volunteers to join our committee and share the workload of maintaining the pavilion and playing field. There are currently only five of us, which includes me, Ian Ashcroft, Nadine Wyatt, Jo Drinkwater and Alan Revell, our representative from the Parish Council. Jo joined this year and has already added a huge amount of energy and enthusiasm. Nadine our Treasurer has done a great job getting our finances in order over the last few years, but is due to leave us soon, which will bring our number down to 4. The low number of committee members is a concern, placing a greater burden as it does on each member, and preventing us from achieving more long-term goals, for example investigating and applying for grants for much-needed improvements.

In terms of finances, due to our strenuous efforts at fund-raising through our barbecues and sports bars last summer – and a big thank you to Danny Maher who has since retired from the committee for his help with that - over the last year we were able to raise over £3,000. We are also very grateful for the Parish Council's donation of £800.

Our total income over the year to 31 March 2025 was £14,749, and with total outgoings of £10,162, we were able to put aside £4,586. This is an improvement on last year and means that we now have total savings of around £19,000. However, looking to the future, this is not nearly as much as we are going to need in the next few years. We foresee a number of large-cost items coming down the line. For example, we need to add a layer of gravel to our carpark at a cost of £1,000 after wear and tear from the wide range of people who use it; we are in need of a replacement mower which even second-hand will have a price tag of £10,000; we would like to replace our heaters with more energy efficient models; we need to re-render parts of the exterior and replace rotten woodwork; the skate bowl is in need of attention to repair multiple

cracks and clear the drainage; and our changing, toilet and shower facilities are tired and in need of improvement, as is our kitchen. As a result, we estimate that over the next 10 years we may need to expend up to £100,000 to achieve these goals.

In brief, to ensure our future, we need a few more people to help us. If anyone here knows anyone who might be interested, do let us know.

Can I also plug that on Sunday 25th May we are organising a 'Clean up the Pavilion Day' – inviting volunteers to help us paint the walls, do a tip run to clear out unused items, and generally give it some TLC. Meet at 10am. We are offering bacon rolls to anyone who comes down, and a beer for those who stay long enough. Hope to see you there.

9/25 Combe Charities Report – Celia Adamson

Combe Charities exists to help those in our community in financial need. It is an historic charity with reference to a bequest in 1636 and the interest from the fund was distributed by the church wardens. It is connected to the Church in so far as the incumbent or rector is a trustee, but the recipients of the fund do not have to have any connection with the Church.

The charity has made six donations this year amounting to £1543.

We work closely with Combe School and the pre-school helping with expenses, such as pre-school fees, lunches, and school trips for pupils at school whose families need some financial help. We, of course, help others and older members of the community too.

This year our fundraising tea made £258.00 with an extra £55.80 from the sale of cards produced by Sue Goodman and Mary Denham. The Combe Feast open air service raised £257.50 in the collection for Combe Charities. We have just received a bequest from a recent resident in his will. Earlier in the year the Combe Celebrations Committee dispersed and the charity received a payment of £100. Other donations throughout the year have been received and bank interest totalled £69.36. The balance of the bank accounts on 31 March 2025 was £3489.66.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the people who help considerably and willingly with the charity. A special thanks to Tom Digweed who checks the accounts and to Julia Sharpe who has taken over the finances this year and has already made an impressive difference for which we thank her so much.

We ask that villagers remember this is the community's charity, and they direct people to it whom we might be able to help.

10/25 Parochial Church Council Report – Andrew Hobson

2024 has been a year of consolidation for St Lawrence. We rely on the voluntary contribution of a variety of people across the parish including those who sing in choir, play the organs, work on All Age Worship and Sunday School, ring the bells, prepare the flowers, clean the Church, read readings, undertake prayers, fill the Church Offices, do the endless paperwork, run the house group and prepare our special events such as the Advent Adventures series and the various other regular and one off specials mentioned below.

Attendance at services remains strong as ever. The growth of family attendance generally and particularly at All Age Worship and Sunday School has been maintained and we continue to welcome new families to the Church.

The Tuesday morning coffee morning, continues to be popular with all ages and we regularly see new faces. We remain indebted to the volunteers who conceived it and run it and we receive a modest grant from the deanery to assist with the cost.

The Rector has maintained his work with the school regularly taking assemblies and in his role as a governor. We are delighted that the school uses the Church for services at Christmas, Easter and Harvest and the school choir have continued to attend occasional services, where they are always a great success. We hope to strengthen ties with the school further over this year.

We were pleased to be able to have once again our Feast Day service on the green which was well attended, as later was a more solemn event on Remembrance Sunday, both of which attract a wider congregation than regular Sunday worship.

For 2025 we are marking the 700th Anniversary of the completion of the Chancel with a series of lectures and a concert (kindly underwritten by the Parish Council). The first two lectures by George Speake and by Alison Ray the archivist of Lincoln College have both been well attended and stimulating.

Financially the church has fared reasonably well, despite the sudden loss of our treasurer Bill Andrewes. Unlike last year it has been necessary to draw on reserves to meet Parish Share demands of the Diocese, but the excess of expenditure over income was manageable.

11/25 Combe Community Hub Report – Andrew Hobson

In my last report to the Parish Council, I reported the Hub had had an uneventful year and I am pleased to do so again. Eventful years are not really what one wants to be reporting for an organisation like the Hub. In the last year we have lost Amanda Ford as a volunteer to her work but gained Debra Wilkes who along with her husband and Aidan Coates have proved a formidable team in sorting out day to day maintenance challenges.

We had a successful repainting session on the main room, which takes quite a battering.

As well as hosting the preschool we have continued to host the Cinema Club and the Live at the Hub concerts, as well as our other regulars, Brian's classes, Craft

The planned bin store to tidy up the front of the property that I hoped last year to be reporting on today has to wait until we sort out new refuse arrangements as producers of commercial refuse.

Our porch has now been renovated inside and out to finish the repairs and we hope will give no more trouble.

Financially we have continued to show a surplus despite increases in costs all round. This has enabled us to continue to pay off the generous loan that helped us acquire the property back in 2017. We have received a grant from Blenheim to uprate the heating, which project is ongoing.

We are very conscious of the challenges facing the preschool with the National Insurance raid and the Minimum Wage hike and are working with them keep both our shows on the road.

Thanks go to our volunteers and directors and the many who give their time and expertise to help us run the facility.

12/25 Pre-School and After-School Club Report – Sally Pursell

Achievements:

1. Successful introduction of woodwork for children
2. Regular cooking sessions and yoga sessions offering challenge and variety to our provision.
3. Regular 'Woodland Walks' sessions where all children spend approximately 2 hours in the local woods and fields, making the most of our unique location.
4. New wooden outdoor play equipment bought with a grant from Blenheim. (climbing and role play)
5. Training two apprentices 'on the job' – both studying for a level 3 qualification with Eden training.
6. Successfully supporting two children with significant additional needs.
7. Moving to a full day offer for children from 2 to 4 years olds, 8.50 – 6.00pm Monday to Friday. (Afterschool club for school aged children is now run by the Primary School at school)
8. Re-launch of a high-quality toddler and baby group in the Hub, staffed by experienced early years practitioner.
9. We have 30 children on roll, 8 of whom are 2-year-olds. (15 children will be leaving us in July)

Challenges:

1. National insurance contribution increases, and the new minimum wage increase (6.7% in 2025 on top of 9.8% in 2024) have put pressure on finances – (130%).
2. Recruiting enough staff to provide full time 1:1 support for specific children.
3. Recruiting new committee members, and succession planning for a new chair.
4. Looking at ways to provide an earlier start, and some holiday provision, so that we can better meet the needs of working Parents.

5. Looking at ways to increase our numbers by advertising our unique selling points and updating our website

Financial position:

1. This year we are on track to have an in year small surplus of just under £1,000, so our income matches our expenditure.
2. We have reasonable reserves that will see us through an anticipated quieter Autumn term 2025.
3. We operate a budget forecast spreadsheet that allows us to keep on top of our financial position month by month.
4. We are always vulnerable to fluctuations in demand caused by new settings opening in the area, fluctuations in birth rate, and the government policy of allowing Primary Schools to take 2- and 3-year-olds. In Woodstock for example the Nursery Class at the Primary School is doubling its intake of three-year-olds from September, and a new Nursery, Park view Childcare, has opened this year.

We are extremely grateful for the continuing support we receive from the Village in so many ways, including supporting our fund-raising events, making donations and volunteering to help.

13/25 Police Report – Report provided by PS Miriam Purple

Members of the Woodstock Neighbourhood Team – Sgt Miriam Purple, PC Charlie Dent and PCSO Helen Duffield. The Community Team covers Woodstock and the surrounding areas providing a community focused approach to policing with the objectives of building trust, preventing crime, and engaging with the community. The key benefits are visibility, problem-solving and partnership working. The local priorities have been ASB and drug misuse in Stonesfield, ASB and retail crime in Woodstock and theft from motor vehicles across all areas. Combe has had 27 occurrences across the year 11 of which were recordable crimes. Overall Combe is a safe place to live with low reported incidents and crimes.

14/25 Any Other Business

Concern about proposed alternative traffic calming measures – assured that there would be full village consultation prior to any decisions being made.

Concern about the re-instatement of the village green – assured that the Parish Council are actively working with Carl Vine.