

ROBERT COURTS MP

Working hard for Witney & West Oxfordshire



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1. Good afternoon from West Oxfordshire!

I am writing to you this week from my home here in Bladon. Parliament is on Easter recess and so I have had a fantastic week here in West Oxfordshire, fitting in many visits and meetings. As the days grow longer and the weather is beginning to improve, I have been as busy as ever. I hope you all have a pleasant and peaceful Easter.

2. Westminster Attack



On Wednesday 22nd March, I was in the Chamber preparing to vote on the Pension Schemes Bill, when suddenly everything changed. A man had driven over Westminster Bridge, hitting pedestrians, and had charged onto the Parliamentary estate, killing a police officer.

It is something I will never forget. How quickly a day can change in a few moments, by the actions of one man. I think of those on Westminster Bridge, taking pictures of the iconic buildings; of PC Palmer who was carrying out his shift guarding the entrance to the Palace Estate. All those

affected had their normal life ripped away from them in an instant, for no reason, at the whim of an individual driven by a perversion of an honourable religion.

It is sometimes easy, in the cut and thrust of politics, to lose a sense of perspective. MPs – even new ones – are used to receiving abuse, even threats. It is not, after all, so long since the tragic murder of Jo Cox MP. But this was a very different attack. It was on innocent bystanders, including children, and an officer doing his duty. Citizens of ten countries – our friends from all over the world – are in a critical condition. The noise and storm of political strife are stilled; what does all that matter to those who lost everything on this day?

As I come into work every day, I nod and say good morning to the officers I pass, who are always courteous and professional. Even in my short time in Parliament, I am acutely aware that every day the staff of the Palace and the police do an incredible and often unsung job. They are all there to ensure that myself and colleagues are able to do the job that you have sent us here to do. PC Palmer's sacrifice was the epitome of duty and professionalism. The Palace was defended; the attacker did not get more than twenty yards into the Estate before he was stopped. My thoughts are with his wife and family who he has left behind.

In my maiden speech, I quoted Winston Churchill, born and buried in West Oxfordshire, on the nature of what Parliament is about: "to substitute argument for fisticuffs". It is tragic that an individual cannot accept that principle. But those of us entrusted to represent you will not be cowed. We continue with our business. The next day, I spoke in a debate about Equitable Life pensioners. The Prime Minister spoke with cool, calm defiance. Our work, and our democratic traditions, will continue.

As I left Westminster that week to return to Witney, the flags outside my office were flying at half-mast on Whitehall, on the Palace and on the Abbey. London is mourning, but there is a calm mood of defiance and steadfastness. Come what may, the UK's democracy has been here before. We have prevailed. We will prevail again. Democracy remains safe.

I wrote my monthly column in the Witney Gazette on this subject, which you can read in full, [here](#). But may I take this opportunity to thank all of you who have written to me, from across the political spectrum, to express your sympathy and thanks for the work MPs do. I am here to serve you all, regardless of your vote, and am grateful for your good wishes.

3. Meet your MP event

After a very successful event in Bampton last week, I will be hosting a 'Meet your MP' event on 27th April at 7.30pm, at the Oxfordshire Yeoman in Freeland. Please come along to have a chat with me about any issues, local or national. I want to get to know as many constituents as possible and understand the issues that are important to you.

There will be other events in other parts of the constituency in the coming weeks!

4. School Visits



I have had the pleasure of visiting several fantastic schools in the constituency over the past two weeks. I greatly enjoyed meeting pupils and teachers from: Combe, Wood Green, Hailey, Madley Brook, Great Tew, Hanborough Manor, Brize Norton Primary and Witney Community Primary. I always enjoy meeting these different schools filled with talented teachers and enthusiastic children; creating wonderful atmospheres to encourage learning and creativity, which were a pleasure to visit.

I made education one of my [top priorities](#) on being elected as your MP. To do this, it is essential to meet schools in person to see all the great work they are doing, and understand the challenges they face.

I wrote to all headteachers in the constituency in February about the proposed Schools National Funding Formula, pointing out my concerns and asking for their feedback. This enabled me to raise their points directly with the Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb, when I met with him personally. All the points raised by schools about the formula contributed to my response to the public consultation. Meeting teachers in person underlined the need for the changes I suggested, such as for a baseline level of essential funding needed by all schools regardless of size. Read about everything I have done on the National Funding Formula [here](#).



Many of the schools I visited have already come here to Parliament, and I always enjoy meeting with constituents when they do. If you are arranging a visit to Parliament, please [contact me](#) if you would like to go on a tour or watch the House of Commons when it is sitting, and I know my office will be happy to assist. You can find more information about visiting Parliament [here](#). Specifically for school visits, I would definitely recommend [the Education Centre](#) as a way for pupils to learn more about our democracy.

5. Thriving West Oxfordshire businesses



I greatly enjoyed attending the [2017 West Oxfordshire Business Awards](#) last Friday, and celebrating the successes of West Oxfordshire businesses. After this year's hotly contested awards, I am sure that no one is in doubt that West Oxfordshire is firmly open for business.

I am pleased to say that I have already had the pleasure of visiting many of this year's winners. I visited [Bridewell Organic Gardens](#) in December, and was pleased to see that they won the Charity Award. I am also extremely lucky that just outside my Witney office, I have the winner of the

Cally Robson Award - [Ue Coffee Roasters](#) - and the winner of the Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism Award, Employer of the Year Award and West Oxfordshire Business of the Year - [Huffkins](#). I know myself and my staff are grateful for their delicious products which keep my office going! I look forward to meeting with other winners and nominees in the future.

The Government and I are working hard to promote small businesses in places like West Oxfordshire. For example, DEFRA have launched their [RDPE Growth Programme](#), for projects in England which create growth and jobs in the rural economy. I am keen to help local businesses access funding to enable them to get started and contribute to the local area; please [contact me](#) if you would like to know more.

6. Working hard to build more homes in West Oxfordshire

Since being elected, I have met many businesses who have chosen to base themselves in West Oxfordshire and demonstrate exactly why we have a climate which allows them to grow. Last week, I visited [Stewart Milne](#), whose award-winning factory is based here in the constituency. The company provides timber systems for private and social housing with a huge capacity for housing delivery, and at an affordable cost.

During my visit, I was able to see first-hand how they are providing innovative solutions to tackle the current homes shortage. Stewart Milne's offsite construction of timber frames is a great example of how more affordable homes can be built quickly. I will be contributing to the Government's housing white paper, using as many of your helpful comments as I can. I look forward to working closely with Stewart Milne and other similar companies, to see what changes can be made to encourage further progress in this area.



I also visited the Home Farm development in Bladon, to see the great work they are doing to build more affordable homes in our area. Any development must be in keeping with the rest of the area, with appropriate access to roads and facilities. It is essential to build properties that can become people's

homes. Home Farm is an outstanding example of this. I shall continue to press for the right kind of development to ensure that vital homes are built in West Oxfordshire, for the benefit of the whole community. Read more about this visit [here](#).

7. Deer Park Medical Centre update



I have today learned that the Independent Reconfiguration Panel (IRP) have passed their advice on the decision to close Deer Park Medical Centre to the Secretary of State for Health. As soon as I learn of Jeremy Hunt's decision I will update those who have contacted me about Deer Park, and update [my website](#).

As the IRP are independent, I cannot, and should not, interfere with their decision-making process. The reason for the Secretary of State asking the IRP for advice is to receive an unbiased, neutral opinion on the matter. That is the purpose of the system.

Since the official closure of Deer Park Medical Centre, I have been pressing Oxfordshire Health bosses (the CCG) to ensure that patients are supported in their transition to a new practice and to provide emergency care for Deer Park users who have not registered, which they have agreed to do. I shall also be meeting with the heads of other local GP practices to understand how any other changes to services such as this could be better handled in the future.

As many of you know, Deer Park has rightly dominated my diary and postbag since October and I have made this issue a [top priority](#), pursuing every option open to an MP. I am supremely disappointed that the CCG made the decision without any consultation, including with Witney's former MP, David Cameron. Announcing a major closure at the start of a by-election hugely disadvantaged Witney's residents. The decision is one that they have taken and been determined – against all arguments and evidence – to sustain.

Since my election, I have met with: [Virgin](#), the CCG, [the PPG](#) and [Ministers](#). I escalated this further, meeting with the Secretary of State for Health [in person](#), arguing the case for Deer Park. I have written many times to Jeremy Hunt and raised this with him [directly in the House of Commons](#). I have further raised the profile of the proposed closure on local media, including radio, television and print. I have spoken with the Patient Participation Group regularly, in person, by telephone and email, and have carried out every action asked of me.



The democratic oversight for medical services lies with the Council's Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee. I [urged HOSC](#) to refer this matter to the Secretary of State; I am pleased that they agreed with me and did so. I then pressed Jeremy Hunt [in person](#) and [in writing](#) to refer this to the IRP for a full investigation. Again, I am pleased that my pressure worked.

I have exhausted all avenues to try to keep this essential practice open and I will continue to do everything possible for Deer Park patients, and patients at other GP practices in the constituency. This is shown by the emergency cover that Oxfordshire Health bosses have arranged - at my request - with the Nuffield practice for any Deer Park patients who have not re-registered, to ensure continuity of care.

8. In Parliament



In Parliament, I have spoken in a number of important debates and raised a series of constituency matters with Ministers. As a resident of Bladon, I am fully aware of the daily misery felt by many when commuting to work via the A40. I [raised this in the House of Commons](#) with the Transport Minister, asking what is being done to reduce congestion. This is a long-term issue in West Oxfordshire which I shall be working hard to tackle in the coming months.

I further spoke in the debate on Animal Welfare, an issue which many of my constituents have written to me expressing concern. The motion called on the Government to increase the maximum penalty for animal welfare offences. I suggested that a national register should be created to go some way to ensure that those who have mistreated animals before do not do so again. Read this exchange in full [here](#).

You can read all the debates I have spoken in [here](#).

9. Work Experience

For the past two weeks, I have enjoyed having a work experience student helping out in my office. I am happy to help constituents gain a valuable insight not only into Parliament and the work of an MP, but also the day to day workings of an office.

I do receive a large number of applications for work experience and so cannot, I am afraid, help everyone - but will always try to accommodate you if possible. If you would like to spend some time working my office, do please [email me](#) and we can discuss further.

10. Want more?

This update contains just a snapshot of my work locally and in Westminster; I am of course very aware you will have big issues in your area (or on your mind) which I haven't covered and hope you know you can get in touch at any time. Much more also exists on [my website](#) and [YouTube](#).

For those wishing to share or print this newsletter, you can download it [here](#).

11. Get in touch!

You can also follow me [on Twitter](#) for instant updates on my work or find me [on Facebook](#) and join that community.

For any casework queries please email me at robert@robertcourts.co.uk

You can also take a look at [my columns](#) written exclusively for the Witney Gazette.

Hope you are all doing well and I look forward to updating you on my work in my next newsletter.



Robert Courts

MP for Witney

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