

ROBERT COURTS MP

Working hard for Witney & West Oxfordshire



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1. Good afternoon from Westminster!

The past few weeks have been as busy as ever. Parliamentary February recess meant that I spent a full week in West Oxfordshire, fitting in as many visits and meetings as possible, on top of my regular constituency days and responding to constituents' letters and emails.

2. Local Council Tour, discussing transport and housing



I used my week in West Oxfordshire to continue my tour of all 81 parishes in the constituency. In the New Year, I launched my tour to visit all Parish Councils and Parish Meetings in our area, to hear from them first-hand about the concerns in their communities.

Over the course of the week, I met with Charlbury and Wychwood, Standlake, Tackley, South Leigh, Heythrop, Enstone, Fifield and Wootton representatives. All gave a fantastic insight into the specific issues faced by different communities, all over the constituency.

Councils particularly raised the issue of transport around West Oxfordshire, including both access to public transport and large vehicles driving through villages. I am very aware of how important it is to have good transport infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, which is why I have made better transport one of [my top priorities](#).

Other issues raised include the need for more affordable housing to buy and rent in rural parts of West Oxfordshire. This is an issue nationwide and it is so important that young people are able to buy a property in the area where they have grown up, near to their family and support network.

The Government's recent [housing White Paper](#) acknowledges that the housing market is broken: over decades housing has become less and less affordable, something particularly felt in high-demand areas such as West Oxfordshire. I also made affordable housing one of [my top priorities](#). I continue to work hard in Parliament to ensure that homes are built faster, the housing market becomes more competitive and that there is help for people now.

West Oxfordshire is such a large, diverse area and it is important for me as your MP to understand all issues facing my constituents. Transport and housing are some of the most important infrastructure we all use and need. In West Oxfordshire, these issues take on particular importance due to the rurality of the constituency. That is why both are two of my top priorities and I will continue to work hard to ensure vital progress is made.

Parish Councils are an important third tier of government and I am here to help in any way I can. I have many more meetings in the diary, and I am determined to visit all 81!

3. Consultation on future of Oxfordshire Healthcare

On Thursday 16th February, I attended the second public consultation meeting held in the constituency, in Witney, to discuss phase one of the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group's Big Health and Care Consultation, on the future of Oxfordshire's healthcare.

Although I am glad that the CCG are holding meetings around the county, I used my first question in the meeting to highlight that this phase does not address the issues important residents of Witney. It does not discuss the proposed closure of Deer Park Medical Centre nor the future of Witney Community Hospital. [You can read more about this meeting here.](#)



I have been [strongly against](#) the splitting of this consultation. It is impossible to look at these services in isolation and not consider the consequences of these changes.

You will also know that I raised strong concerns about the lack of appropriate consultation taking place in Chipping Norton, with one meeting being held in the afternoon on a Thursday - hardly a great time for residents to attend, truest for young mothers who would be most affected by the changes.

I am therefore very pleased to inform you that, after offering to host a further meeting myself, the CCG have decided to hold a further official consultation in Chipping Norton on Thursday 9th March at 6-8pm, held at St Mary's Church. I would urge as many people as possible to attend this meeting and respond to the consultation, which you can do [here](#).

4. MyStore



It was a pleasure to visit MyStore Self Storage, a thriving, innovative, new local business. MyStore have their headquarters in Charlbury and opened the first purpose built storage facility in September in 2015 – officially opened by my predecessor. You can read more about their work [here](#).

I greatly enjoyed the chance to visit a growing business here in West Oxfordshire. I made supporting local businesses one of [my top priorities](#) and I will continue to work hard to encourage measures which will enable these to prosper.

5. Helen & Douglas House

I recently visited Helen & Douglas House, a local charity which cares for terminally ill children, young adults and their families through exceptional hospice care. By providing medical, emotional and practical support, they help families to make the most of their time together. It costs £5.5 million a year to run their two hospice houses and provide their outreach nursing service.

It was so humbling to meet with staff and service users. Having a charity providing this service so near to West Oxfordshire is a great help to local families in requiring this kind of care. I pay tribute to the work of staff at Helen & Douglas House to make this a supportive, calming atmosphere for families. You can read more about their work [here](#).



6. Kubota and rural crime



To promote awareness of Thames Valley Police's Rural Crime Week, I visited Carterton Police station to see their new Kubota all-terrain vehicle.

Thames Valley Police are the only force in the UK to have the Kubota in operation. The vehicle is highly agile, allowing for it to reach the most rural of destinations, wherever it is needed. West Oxfordshire in particular benefits from the Kubota and enables the force in Carterton to access rural crime scenes, help vulnerable persons and attend call outs all over our constituency.

I chose specifically to visit during Thames Valley Police's [month of action on rural crime](#) to draw attention to the particular challenges police face here in West Oxfordshire.

Although crime rates in the area remain low, TVP want to reach out to rural communities to try to prevent the particular crimes which these residents are vulnerable to. This might include oil theft or theft of farm equipment.

I greatly valued the chance to discuss and understand the particular policing issues in our area. It is fantastic to see that police forces are creating innovative ways to tackle the specific challenges to West Oxfordshire, both in relation to rural crime and the safety of individuals.

7. Deer Park update

Further to the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee's vote on 2nd February 2017, this matter has now been officially referred by the Committee to Secretary of State for Health.

I have written to the Secretary of State asking him to look into this matter urgently due to the time pressures involved. It is so important that a timeline is established, so that patients have security and stability.

Keep up to date with any further progress on this matter [here](#). I would also be very interested in residents completing [my local health survey](#), to better understand residents' specific concerns about healthcare in West Oxfordshire.

8. Revaluation of business rates

I would like to reassure constituents in the strongest terms that I am doing everything possible as their MP to ensure that the impact of this revaluation is not unfairly shouldered by small businesses. This is an issue of huge importance for the people of West Oxfordshire, a thriving area with many successful small businesses.

I have received lots of correspondence about this and have been working hard on this subject over the last few weeks and months. As you may know, business rates are based upon property values. It has been seven years since they were reassessed; the data upon which the rates are set is therefore out of date and has to be, at some point, brought up to date. For some businesses that will see a decrease in payable rates, for some, an increase.

However, the effect upon the small, high street businesses that make up the lifeblood of West Oxfordshire is, in some cases, significant. There has been plenty of coverage in the national media about the actions of my colleagues and I, who have regularly met with Ministers to lobby for the interests of our small businesses. One of my top priorities is ensuring that West Oxfordshire businesses continue to thrive, and that the UK has a climate which encourages individuals to set up their own business.

The Government has already announced £3.6 billion of transitional support to help those companies facing increased bills. The Prime Minister has asked the Chancellor and the Communities Secretary to work to ensure that there is appropriate relief in place for the hardest cases. Whilst they cannot confirm or deny what would be in the Budget this far in advance, I continue to lobby my colleagues at DCLG and Treasury in the strongest terms to see the help that we need for our businesses.

You can read more about this [here](#).

9. Employment figures

I welcomed the news that employment across the UK has reached its highest rate since records began, and that unemployment remains at its lowest level for 11 years – down over 900,000 since 2010.

This is great news, particularly in Witney and West Oxfordshire. The number of people claiming key out of work benefits has fallen by 693 – a 65 percent drop – since 2010.

These figures also show wages continuing to grow strongly, the youth unemployment rate at its lowest since 2005, the rate of women in employment at a record high, and the number of disabled people in work up by nearly 600,000 over the past three years.

This is great news for our country and for local people, with the number of people in West Oxfordshire relying on the key out of work benefits down 65 percent since 2010, while the employment level nationwide has hit a record high.

It shows that our on-going welfare reforms are working – continuing to incentivise work and making sure the system is fair to all those who need it and those who pay for it.

Conservatives have made real progress creating a strong economy and helping people into work, and we will continue that work as we build a country that works for everyone – with more people sharing in our country's prosperity.

10. Fair funding for schools

As you many know, the Government is currently consulting on its proposals to create a National Funding Formula for schools. I have received a large amount of correspondence about this matter and I want to assure you all that I am fully aware of the potential consequences of the proposed changes and am actively lobbying the Education Minister, pointing out flaws in the funding formula and asking for West Oxfordshire's excellent schools to have the funding they need.

The principle behind the Government's proposals is to ensure that every school and local area, no matter where they are in the country, will be funded fairly according to need. This means areas with the highest need will attract the most funding and ensures that all children get access to the education they deserve. A single national funding formula for schools will remove the role of the local authority, meaning pupils with similar needs will attract the same level of funding to their school, and will also give headteachers far more certainty over future budgets.

However, under the current proposals, around half of schools in West Oxfordshire would see their funding reduced, and the other half would see their funding increase or stay the same. Although there has been a change to the proposed formula, aimed at helping rural areas such as West Oxfordshire which have historically lost out to larger towns and cities, this has not eased the challenge.

The proposals are for consultation at this stage. I will be meeting with the Minister for Schools at the Department for Education where I will be discussing what changes could be made to ensure a better outcome is achieved, which does not leave rural schools worse off. Ahead of this meeting, I have already written to the Minister outlining the impact this will have on West Oxfordshire and my

suggestions for how to change these proposals, which would enable our schools to receive the level of funding they need.

I have further written to every school in the constituency urging them to engage fully with the consultation process, which closes on 22 March 2017. For those concerned, I urge you to do the same by completing the survey [here](#). I have invited headteachers to give me their opinions on these changes, and I will continue to fight on their behalf by lobbying the Government about this matter.

A final word on our village schools. These are vital to our communities in West Oxfordshire, and I agree with the County Council's policy to try to keep as many open as possible. Being able to send your children to a schools in your village means parents are not face with the extra time and cost of transport to school. Schools provide a hub for the community and are a centre of village life. I will continue to do all I can on this matter and will of course update you all on any further progress.

11. APPG for Small and Micro Businesses



I am proud to have been elected as the new chair for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Small and Micro Businesses. This group does great work in researching the interests of and lobbying on behalf of small businesses. With over 6500 small businesses in West Oxfordshire, and having made promoting our local businesses one of [my top priorities](#), I will be making the most of this opportunity. I will be working closely with the [Federation of Small Businesses](#) going forward, and I will keep you all up to date with the work of the group.

12. APPG for the Armed Forces

As a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Armed Forces, I was invited as part of a parliamentary delegation to Scotland to see the new Queen Elizabeth Class of aircraft carriers under construction.

These will be the biggest and most powerful surface warships ever constructed for the Royal Navy and will represent a step change in capability, enabling the delivery of increased strategic effect and influence around the world. This will include the HMS Queen Elizabeth and the HMS Prince of Wales, which are due to being sea trials later in 2017.

This was a fantastic chance to see first-hand to result of investment in our defence facilities, keeping the UK at the cutting edge of naval technology. The Armed Forces have such a strong presence here in West Oxfordshire, I am proud to support their work in my role as MP in other parts of the country.

You can read more about this project and keep up to date with progress [here](#).

13. In Parliament



Parliament was on recess for part of this month, however earlier in February I spoke in a number of important debates. I spoke on the debate on unaccompanied child refugees and praised the excellent work carried out in West Oxfordshire to settle six Syrian refugee families and make them feel a welcome part of the community.

I further spoke about the ties between New Zealand and the UK. The UK's withdrawal from the EU gives us a fantastic opportunity to strengthen our ties to other nations. Having spent time working in New Zealand myself, I wanted to raise this matter with the Secretary of State for International Trade. You can read all of my contributions to Parliament [here](#).

I have also concluded my work on my first bill committee, which scrutinised the Pension Schemes Bill, a process where I worked with Parliamentary colleagues to go through the Bill line by line. This is a vital part in the process of making legislation and I was proud to be a part of this, and I look forward to my next committee. Of course, I remain a member of the Backbench Select Committee, where I help decide which topics proposed by backbenchers should be debated in the Parliament. One such example is the debate on unaccompanied children in Greece and Italy, which took place on 23rd February. You can read this debate [here](#).

14. 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](#).

15. 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.courts.mp@parliament.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.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Courts".

Robert Courts
MP for Witney

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