

ROBERT COURTS MP

Working hard for Witney & West Oxfordshire



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1. Good afternoon from Westminster!

As the weather is beginning to warm, it has been another interesting two weeks in Parliament. I have been very busy in the House of Commons: speaking in the chamber and meeting with Ministers to raise issues of key importance to West Oxfordshire. As ever, I have had two jam-packed constituency days and continue to correspond with constituents about important issues.

2. Deer Park Medical Centre



With the closure date now imminent, I am pleased that the Secretary of State for Health has agreed with me that the decision by OCCG not to retender services for Deer Park Medical Centre should be referred to the Independent Reconfiguration Panel (IRP) and has now done so.

However, I immediately wrote again to the Secretary of State expressing my concern that OCCG are not being told to stop closure proceedings. Also, the decision from the IRP is due in April, after the proposed closure date at the end of March, which would make the whole situation academic. Read my letter in full [here](#).

I raised this matter with the Secretary of State during Health Questions in Parliament on 21st March 2017. I once again pressed the urgency of a decision by the IRP, which you can read in full [here](#). I emphasised that this is a vital community asset; it is important for patients to know the outcome of the IRP's investigation to enable them to make an informed decision about where they choose to be registered.

On 6th March, I met with the Secretary of State, Jeremy Hunt, and stressed to him how important Deer Park is for the people of Witney. I was impressed with his knowledge of the matter from my earlier correspondence, and was crystal clear as to the urgency of the matter, with OCCG threatening closure at the end of the month.

I met the Patient Group last week to discuss the latest developments. Keep up to date with the latest Deer Park news [on my website](#). I will post any information as soon as I can.

Many people have been asking me for news and for whether they should re-register as OCCG say. This is a difficult matter for me to help with: clearly on the one hand I do not want people to be left without a doctor, but nor do I wish to help OCCG close the practice by default. What I suggest is that for those with ongoing medical concerns, it is important for you to have continuing access to medical care. At this stage, you might want to think about moving practice, at least as a short term measure.

I am frustrated on behalf of those patients who have been left in limbo for too long, concerned about the impact this will have on their healthcare. I am disappointed by OCCG's handling of this matter; from an announcement of closure without consultation, to a closure forced through while the matter is being independently reviewed. This is not the way that the residents of Witney expect their local health services to be handled.

3. Schools National Funding Formula

The National Funding Formula for schools is still open for consultation. As you will know from [my last newsletter](#), I have received a lot of correspondence about these proposals and I am fully aware of the potential consequences and I am actively lobbying the Government about this matter.



Earlier this month, I met with the Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb, to discuss the impact of the proposals on West Oxfordshire's schools. I pressed upon the Minister the need for all West Oxfordshire schools to [have the funding they need](#), particularly those in rural areas which might be most seriously affected.

I discussed with the Minister the details of the funding model and changes which might help local schools. I proposed my idea of an essential funding level to be guaranteed for all schools, to cover key costs associated with running a school of any size in any location.

I fully agree with the principle behind the Government's proposals, which aims to ensure that every schools and local area regardless of location, are fairly funding according to need. However, due to the rural nature of the area we live in, I am concerned about the impact this will have on West Oxfordshire's schools.

As West Oxfordshire is fortunate to be a relatively affluent area with low levels of deprivation, its level of funding is impacted. The area is most affected by many of our village schools not being rural enough to qualify for sparsity funding. All of these factors receive a certain weighting in the formula, which is why I have pressed for further amendments to be made.

I continue to champion the opinions of headteachers in West Oxfordshire, stating the concerns they raised in correspondence with me. I made better education one of my top priorities when I was elected and I fully intend to fulfil this promise, by making positive suggestions as well as fighting for the funds our schools need.

Read about all my work on this issue [here](#) and I would ask all interested parties to take part in the consultation [here](#), which **closes on 22nd March 2017**.

4. Local Government Reorganisation

I have been contacted by many of you about Oxfordshire County Council's 'Better Oxfordshire' proposal and other options for the future organisation of local government in Oxfordshire.

Truly local government is critical to West Oxfordshire's future. Various suggestions have been put forward, which it is my duty as your Member of Parliament to consider carefully. Indeed, it is important that all of us do so. I want us all to have the chance to engage fully with any consultations.

I am interested in any rigorously thought-through proposals to save taxpayer's money, or improve local services and infrastructure.

However, it is important that in seeking this, we do not lose what makes West Oxfordshire special, or our control over decisions that affect our daily lives. Nor should we assume that there is only one way to achieve such improvements.

I want any proposed change to protect West Oxfordshire's unique values. This would include preserving the benefits we have, such as free parking, low council tax, local control of housing and development, as well as the nation-leading efficiency measures delivered by West Oxfordshire District Council.

Perhaps most importantly, I want to see truly local democratic representation, ensuring that decisions affecting West Oxfordshire are made with West Oxfordshire's interests foremost in mind, by Councillors who know and understand this uniquely beautiful rural area.

Unless I can be assured that those interests are protected, it would be difficult for me to support any proposal as being in the interests of my constituents.

At this stage, I remain open to discussion with all parties.

5. The Budget



This is a very important Budget, which I welcome. It covers a number of factors which are important to the people of West Oxfordshire: schools, business rates and broadband.

We have many small villages in rural West Oxfordshire which struggle to access high speed broadband, and I was pleased to see the Chancellor announce a £200m fund to bring forward local projects, such as using public sector facilities to connect residents and businesses. I continue to work hard to improve broadband in West Oxfordshire, and am encouraged by these provisions in the Budget, which I will scrutinise for effect.

I welcome the introduction of technical 'T' levels which will enable young people to study towards technical qualifications, receiving the same recognition as academic ones. Local businesses are vital to West Oxfordshire, and young people need this education to continue to keep our area thriving hub for business. The importance of this is demonstrated through my visit to Darke & Taylor, which I speak about in more detail later in this newsletter. I also welcome the announcement that there will be £300m to support STEM education – another great investment to continue to support our highly technical business in Eynsham and Carterton, such as Siemens and Airbus.

The revaluation of business rates has been a particular concern in West Oxfordshire, due to our aforementioned thriving number of small businesses. I have worked very hard on this issue, lobbying the Chancellor and colleagues to provide relief for small businesses, so that they do not unfairly shoulder the burden. I am pleased that he has introduced a £300m discretionary relief fund to assist

those most affected. Further, as people lose small business rate relief, there will be a transitional relief fund as well. I am pleased that the Chancellor has listened to the concerns I and others have raised, and I will continue to work hard to ensure that our high streets continue to thrive - an issue I have made one of [my top priorities](#).

On the proposed changes to National Insurance Contributions for the self-employed, I fully appreciate the implications that these would have had having been myself self-employed until a few months ago. As a member of the Federation of Small Businesses and the chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Small and Micro Businesses, I welcome the decision by the Chancellor not to go ahead with these changes. In Witney and West Oxfordshire, nearly one fifth of constituents are self-employed and I fully appreciate the concern raised by these proposals. I [raised this matter in the House of Commons](#), asking the Chancellor for more detail on his review which he will undertake in the summer. This will focus on the discrepancies between benefits for employed and self-employed, including parental benefits. I shall continue to follow this matter closely and scrutinise any developments.

6. Apprenticeships at Darke & Taylor

I recently visited Darke & Taylor, an electrical contractor based in Long Hanborough, as part of National Apprenticeships Week.

Darke & Taylor offer an Apprentice Initiative Scheme which has become a cornerstone of the business and a vital part of their business model – with over 20 percent of their workforce engaged in this initiative and a large number of senior employees having progressed through the scheme.

I was interested to see all of their work and to celebrate their success. Alongside the introduction of T-levels announced in the Budget, apprenticeships provide valuable, hands-on skills and experience that lead to a clear career. I will continue to champion businesses in West Oxfordshire who are working with young people, so that both the business and the employees can grow and have every success.

The Government is working hard to promote apprenticeships to build and encourage schemes such as the one in place at Darke & Taylor. It has already overseen the biggest ever boost in apprenticeships with over 2 million apprenticeship starts since 2010, aiming to achieve 3 million by 2020. There will also soon be an Institute for Apprenticeships (IFA), a new public body with responsibility for assuring the quality of apprenticeship standards in England, to ensure that apprenticeships remain a respected, high level qualification. Alongside this, the Government taking measures to ensure that more businesses are encouraged to support apprentices: it will pay 100 percent of training costs for employers with fewer than 50 employees who take on apprentices aged 16 to 18. I will support further such measures which seek to enable more young people to obtain this important work experience and skills.



7. School Visits



On my most recent constituency day, I had two fantastic visits to [Abingdon and Witney College](#) and [Woodstock Primary School](#). Both visits were a great chance to meet with pupils and talk about my work as a Member of Parliament.

I thoroughly enjoyed visiting Woodstock Primary. The school has done an amazing job in becoming a great example for other schools, shown through it recently becoming a teaching school. I was impressed by the new facilities at the school, in particular its new dining room. It is important for pupils to have a hot, nutritious meal at the

middle of the day which helps to keep them energised and ready to learn. I also enjoyed walking through the school's 'forest' and seeing their mud kitchen!

At Abingdon and Witney College, I met with teachers and students and toured the school. I was particularly impressed with the radio and music studios – I had great fun having a go on couple of the College's guitars! I found it interesting to discuss the benefits of making academic subjects, such as Maths and English, more practical and engaging for students. Visits such as this are certainly helpful to see first-hand potential changes to made in education and I will look into this going forward.

I always enjoy meeting with schools in Parliament. It so important for students to have the opportunity to learn about the centre of government in the UK and I greatly enjoy the chance to meet with them and answer questions. Should any schools wish to visit Parliament, please [email me](#) and learn more about the Parliamentary Education Centre [here](#).

8. 'Meet your MP' event

I will be hosting a 'Meet your MP' event on 6th April at 7pm at the Horseshoe in Bampton. Please come along to have a chat with me about any issues, local or national. I want to get know as many constituents as possible and understand the issues that are important you.

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

9. In Parliament

In Parliament, I have spoken in a number of important debates and raised a series of constituency matters with Ministers. [I made a speech](#) on the resolution in the Budget, focusing largely on the investment being made in skills. As we look at Britain's place in the world outside of the European Union, it is right that the Budget focused on enabling our high-level technical businesses to thrive. In West Oxfordshire, we are fortunate to have a number of world-leading companies in their field, including Siemens and Polar Tech in Eynsham, as well as others who base



themselves here, including Airbus, Boeing and Thales in Carterton. I welcome the measures in the Budget which invest in training our young people for careers in these highly technical industries, as well as investing in research and development to ensure that we remain at the cutting edge of technology.

I have also raised a number of matters with Ministers to ensure that constituent concerns are being heard at the highest level. I have been in correspondence with Carterton constituents about the cancellation of the e-bluey contract for communications with serving personnel. I have put both a [written](#) and [oral question](#) to Ministers to ensure that they continue to invest in other methods of communication with those on the front line. It is essential that serving personnel are able to communicate with their family and friends when posted far from their home in West Oxfordshire.

I have further raised important West Oxfordshire issues, such as [rural buses](#) and [house building in Carterton](#). Read all of my contributions to the House [here](#).

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

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