

ROBERT COURTS

**District Councillor, The Bartons Ward, West Oxfordshire District Council
Cabinet Member for Housing & Communities**

Monthly Report - March 2016

February has been a particularly busy month at the District Council, with two major announcements for me to report to you.

District Council

Budget - A modest council tax rise has been agreed to protect services. An annual increase of £5 for West Oxfordshire District Council tax payers will protect frontline council services, allow free car parking to continue and provide ongoing grant support for valued services provided by the voluntary sector.

This will be the first council tax increase in West Oxfordshire since April 2010 and will place an annual charge of £86.63 for a band D property, equating to £1.66 per household each week for all district council services.

Describing the budget setting process for 2016/17 as “the most difficult in recent years”, Sir Barry Norton, Leader of the Council explained that the Council would be balancing the budget with around £131,000 from its General Fund reserves and continuing with its efficiency savings programme. He said, “It is as well that we put money into reserves in last year’s budget when we foresaw that things were not likely to be as rosy in the years ahead. The strength of our long term financial planning comes to the fore in difficult times like this.”

Sir Barry Norton added, “Our council tax charge represents continuing excellent value for money for residents and ensures that they benefit from our determination to use as little of taxpayers money as possible.

“I am confident that we will continue to have the second lowest council tax of all Shire district councils in England and one that is less than half the national average.”

West Oxfordshire is the lowest levying of all five district authorities in Oxfordshire and charges less than some local parish councils.

During 2016/17 the Council has pledged to:

- PROTECT frontline services– despite significant cost pressures, it is committed to delivering first-class services for residents.
- CONTINUE supporting key voluntary sector organisations –a reduction in grant funding has been deferred for the fifth year running.
- MAINTAIN free car parking across West Oxfordshire - the Council’s free parking policy will continue across all its public car parks and on-street parking. This is seen as helping the economy and communities to thrive
- SECURE full superfast broadband coverage – it is investing in the rollout of high speed broadband for all properties, including those in hard-to-reach rural areas.
- DELIVER further efficiency savings and continue to build upon the success of shared working – sharing services remains a central part of the Council’s efficiency programme. Savings of almost £9m have already been achieved between West Oxfordshire and Cotswold District Council. A further £1.5m is planned for 2016/17.

Summary of budget finance

For 2016/17, the Council will be balancing its budget by using around £131,000 from its General Fund Reserves.

The latest Local Government Finance Settlement has signalled a reduction in core funding of some £1.3m (or 15%) for West Oxfordshire.

In addition, changes to New Homes Bonus will give the Council a major challenge over the next few years, because of changes to allocations made by government. The government is seeking to protect certain services such as adult social care which has come under significant demand pressure and they will finance this from reductions of New Homes Bonus to districts.

To finance the Council's revenue expenditure and capital programme, it is utilising the flexibility offered to all District Councils by the Secretary of State of a £5 a year increase. This benefits West Oxfordshire who, like many rural councils, have consistently been underfunded by the formula grant system in comparison to urban areas.

West Oxfordshire's annual council tax charge will rise from £81.63 for a Band D property to £86.63. This is a weekly cost rise of 10p (from £1.56 a week to £1.66).

The council tax increase will generate a little more than £200,000 in additional income for the Council.

This £200,000 sum is not enough to cover both the cost pressures faced from the County Council of around £300,000 and the cuts in Revenue Support Grant of £500,000. However, it is enough to protect key services, when combined with the savings from the Council's shared services efficiency programme and with the addition of £131,000 from its General Fund Reserves.

Simplification of local government proposed to support Devolution Deal

Five council leaders are proposing a ground-breaking plan that will revolutionise public services in Oxfordshire and neighbouring areas. The plan would see the abolition of Oxfordshire County Council, with its functions transferring to four new Local Unitary Councils working together in partnership with the National Health Service, Police and the Local Enterprise Partnerships. These changes would simplify local government in the county and bring about significant savings that could be reinvested in public services.

Oxfordshire District Council Leaders are asking government to agree their plan for the creation of new Local Unitary Councils and to support an ambitious Devolution Deal for Oxfordshire. The devolution deal would bring in significant investment in roads, schools and public transport.

The new proposals introduce joint working with the National Health Service to pool budgets and to commission health and adult social care in a way that improves service quality and deals effectively with increasing demand.

Speaking on behalf of all of the Districts, Cllr Matthew Barber said,

"This devolution deal is a fantastic opportunity for Oxfordshire and we believe we should do everything possible to secure much needed investment for the benefit of residents, businesses and communities.

Local Unitary Councils working together through a Combined Authority offer the best solution for the people of Oxfordshire. It will allow decision-making and service delivery to better reflect the different challenges and priorities of the people we serve. It will also build on the District Councils' strong track record of sound financial planning and efficiency that are at the heart of good governance and effective service delivery.

It is important to establish from the outset that we do not support a 'lift, shift and divide' in terms of County Council services as this would simply move financial burdens from one organisation to another. As districts we have spent the past years delivering increasing efficiencies, transforming our services, creating shared teams, adopting flexible structures and a commercial approach. Simply dividing up county council services would not allow us to achieve the transformation needed. We will form new Local Unitary Councils and introduce new models of commissioning and delivery to transform public services for the better."

Dr Joe McManners, Chair of Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group said,

"We support the ambition of the councils to bring health and social care closer together as this will improve outcomes for patients. We will wish to work closely with them in developing these plans."

This proposal recognises that greater efficiency and co-ordination is needed than currently exists; for example, better planning for transport and housing delivery, skills development and a more joined up approach to health and social care; would benefit all residents of Oxfordshire. At the heart of the proposals is the creation of a Combined Authority. This means that Leaders of all councils in Oxfordshire will work together in the interests of their own areas and the county overall. It will also mean better coordination and greater efficiencies for services that need to be delivered across the county.

In view of the successful partnerships and close working relationships that already exist in the north and west of the county, the Oxfordshire District Leaders have agreed to explore a Unitary Option that includes both Cotswold District Council and South Northamptonshire Council.

The Councils are now commissioning independent experts to work with them and other stakeholders in producing detailed, costed plans that will ensure the best and most cost-effective solutions are identified. Detailed proposals will be considered by each of the Councils prior to public consultation in the summer.

The preferred option is for four local unitaries:

- A new Southern Oxfordshire Unitary Authority would cover the area currently administered by Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils
- An Oxford City Unitary Authority would be formed in the centre of the county, covering the area currently administered by Oxford City Council
- A West Oxfordshire-Cotswold Unitary Authority covering the area currently administered by West Oxfordshire District Council and Cotswold District Council
- A Cherwell-South Northants Unitary Authority covering the area currently administered by Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire Council

See the Oxfordshire Vision website here for more details: <http://www.oxfordshire.vision>

Oxfordshire County Council's response can be found here: <https://goo.gl/3trzAC>

A news report giving the details of our local MP's response can be found here: <http://goo.gl/sHxbUC>

Community Safety Partnership - on 2nd February I chaired the regular meeting of this important local group that brings together all the agencies charged with keeping West Oxfordshire a safe place to live and work. Important local issues including tackling Child Sexual Exploitation, local crime figures, and progress by local intervention groups.

Locally

Broadband - Cotswold Broadband, providers of the WODC scheme, state, "Since our last newsletter we have been working with our contractor to complete the high level network design for the West Oxfordshire Superfast Broadband programme and we are now in the process of completing the detailed design work that will produce the schedule for delivery across the District. You can check our parish maps, showing whether your property will be served by our infrastructure or BT's and others on the 'Who's Doing What' page on our website: <http://www.cotswoldsbroadband.co.uk/who-is-doing-what/> This will be updated with more information about when and where once the network design is complete."

Pc Mick Anderton from Chipping Norton **police** included the following section in the most recent update which has relevance to our area:

"Overnight on the 10-11 January numerous vehicles were broken into in the villages of Enstone, Little Tew and Ledwell. Various items were stolen including power tools, personal belongings and clothing. Please ensure you lock you vehicle when it isn't in use and try and park it where it can be seen, in a well-lit area.

"There has been a spate of car wing mirrors being damaged in Middle Barton. Two youths were seen late in the evening of 20 January in the Holliers Crescent area. We would like to speak to these individuals to rule them out of the investigation. The damage occurred overnight on the 20-21 January. If you have any information please contact us.

"Throughout the policing area there is still the problem of sheds and garages being broken into. Please ensure the locks, doors and windows are secure and in good condition. If you do have valuable items or power tools stored within them, make a note of any serial numbers and consider taking photographs of them."

My **surgery dates** for 2016 continue on 19th March at the **Carpenter's Arms**, and thereafter on the 2nd April and 7th May.

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