

ROBERT COURTS

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

Monthly Report - June 2016

Locally

Bus - everyone will of course be aware that the Our Bus vehicle arrived in mid-May. This is a massive step forward and I congratulate everyone involved. There is however very much still a need for help to ensure the success of this vital community project: if you can offer any expertise please let the team know: contact Martin Roberts (347188) or email martin.roberts47@btinternet.com

Traffic - heavy goods vehicles travelling through the Bartons in violation of the airfield traffic routing agreement continue to be a concern. Please can I ask residents to take note of number plates (if possible,) but company names otherwise. If you can report the specific vehicles to me, then I can take matters up with the firms responsible.

Broadband - residents living in West Oxfordshire villages considered too remote by broadband suppliers will soon start to see the first physical signs of superfast broadband coming to their communities. Cotswolds Broadband has started work across the district to install 14 concrete plinths to house fibreoptic cables that will form the backbone of a new superfast network. The plinths mark the first stages in a programme of works which contractors will accelerate over the coming months. Investment is coming from West Oxfordshire District Council, BDUK (who oversee the Government's rural broadband programme) and private investors. The Cotswolds Broadband scheme will offer superfast broadband to the 12 per cent of homes and businesses in West Oxfordshire who were not covered by the Better Broadband for Oxfordshire project, ensuring that 100 per cent of the district will be able to access the high speed network.

I have seen work being carried out myself in Sandford St Martin and am delighted that this vital work is underway, and especially that this nationally-leading plan is being rolled out by your District Council. This is great news for all those living and working in our rural areas. Investing in our communities and our local economy has always been a priority for the Council and we believe that West Oxfordshire will be one of the first wholly superfast broadband-connected districts in the UK.

Cotswolds Broadband will soon be in touch with everyone who will be connected to its network informing them of the building schedule. For further details and to sign up for Cotswolds Broadband's newsletter, visit www.cotswoldsbroadband.co.uk

Sandford St Martin fete - this event was, as always, very well-attended and was very enjoyable. Sadly my prowess at "Splat the Rat" does not increase from year to year!

District Council

There is a **new leader at WODC**: James Mills, who takes over from Sir Barry Norton who retired at the election on grounds of ill-health. James was elected leader of the Conservative group of District Councillors at a meeting on Tuesday 10 May and unanimously elected as Leader of West Oxfordshire District Council at the Annual Meeting on 18 May. James has set out his vision for the future of the district including key areas which he sees as priorities for residents during the coming year. These include:

- Overseeing the completion and implementation of the Local Plan
- Ensuring contract negotiations, such as waste and recycling and leisure, deliver the best value
- Working to create as near 100 per cent superfast broadband coverage as possible
- Continuing the development and roll-out of the 2020 Vision programme to provide the most advanced shared services programme of any council in the country
- A guarantee that the "flagship policy" of free parking will continue throughout the district to the benefit of residents and local businesses

At the meeting James paid tribute to his predecessor, Sir Barry Norton, saying: “Barry has left a fantastic legacy which I hope with all of your help we can build on because we have a very big job to do over the next couple of years.

“In everything I do I will put the residents of West Oxfordshire first and foremost because we all have to remember that we are working on their behalf”

Please see here for more details: <http://goo.gl/fCuW17> , <http://goo.gl/2g5piZ>

Personally, I remain with the same Cabinet responsibilities of Housing & Communities, and remain on the same outside bodies as before. I have however accepted James’ invitation to become Deputy Leader of the Council, which is a very great honour and with a very big job to do in the important years to come.

The Bartons is therefore in the interesting, and perhaps unique, position of being represented by the Prime Minister at Parliament, the Leader of the County Council at County level, and the Deputy Leader at District level! I am sorry to let the side down and deny residents a hat trick, but I assure everyone that in James Mills they have an outstanding District Council leader.

More broadly, the wide range of **election results** can be seen here: <http://www.westoxon.gov.uk/news/general/election-results/>

The Bartons was only affected by the **Police & Crime Commissioner** election, which saw the Conservative incumbent, Anthony Stansfeld, re-elected to the post.

Voting for the EU Referendum - Anyone who was already registered to vote for the elections taking place on 5 May will also be registered to vote at the EU Referendum and eligible electors will be able to cast their vote, unless in the meantime they have moved or applied to register elsewhere. If you are not registered but would like to vote at the EU Referendum on 23 June 2016, the deadline for making your application is Tuesday 7 June. In the meantime, polling cards have been posted out to residents. Anyone who has not received a card by 25 May is recommended to call 01993 861410 or fill in the general inquiry form online to check whether they are registered.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the **devolution and local government** proposals, and the latest can be seen here: <http://www.westoxon.gov.uk/unitary>

Following the recent elections, Oxfordshire’s District Council Leaders have reconfirmed their ambitions to simplify local government and give more power to the people of the county.

As part of this, they have decided collectively with Cotswold and South Northamptonshire Councils to rule out cross-county boundary options as part of their devolution plans. The decision by District Council leaders is as a result of PwC’s early conversations with senior civil servants. The District Councils appointed independent advisers PwC last month to investigate the full range of unitary options available to deliver devolution in our area. Early findings are that cross-boundary unitary options are too complicated at this stage, and will result in lengthy delays to the devolution process.

The determination of Oxfordshire’s District Councils to find a devolution model that will reflect the diverse communities of Oxfordshire and bring real power to the people of the county for the first time has not changed. District Council proposals would replace the current County and District Councils with new District Unitaries. Responsibilities currently administered by the County Council would be devolved to the new District Unitaries. Where strategic decisions that require coordination across Oxfordshire are needed – such as key transport planning, economic development and social care – the elected leaders of the new District Unitaries will work together to agree solutions. This would give residents of each District Unitary a real say for the first time in the full range of services that affect them. The new District Unitaries will be able to tailor more services to their residents’ needs.

The devolution plan would also unlock over a billion pounds of government money, which will enable each district to build new houses, new roads, new business space and new local facilities for residents. PwC’s study is well underway and is investigating all the options available with the current county boundaries for the future of local government in Oxfordshire.

At **Cabinet on the 25th May** I proposed approval of a grant of £200,000 to **Young Dementia Homes UK** to go towards the building of purpose built accommodation at Forest Road, Charlbury. There is currently a significant under provision of specialist accommodation for adults with dementia in West Oxfordshire, and this grant is an opportunity to alleviate this problem, by providing twelve units at affordable rent. I am pleased to support and announce this assistance for such essential space.

Helping hand for new Universal Credit claimants - With the roll out of Universal Credit underway, West Oxfordshire District Council is providing extra help and support for benefit claimants getting to grips with the new system. Applications for Universal Credit and reports of changes in circumstance can only be made online and so, to help customers, the Council has installed self-service computers at their main reception points in Witney. Council officers will be on hand to assist customers to set up and manage their own online accounts and they will also help anyone wanting to make job searches and complete online job applications.

The move ties in with the Councils' 'Default to Digital' initiative which encourages more online transactions. The new computers are funded by the Department for Work and Pensions. Claimants unable to access the Council's Elmfield Reception in Witney or its Town Centre Shop, can use computers at Jobcentre Plus offices or at some local libraries.

My **surgery dates** for 2016 continue on 6th August at the **Carpenter's Arms**. I have decided not to hold a surgery in July, I am afraid, as my wife is expecting our first child on what would be my surgery date, and I fear that I may be expected to put that first! Of course, as always, if anyone needs to speak to or see me, they need only ring or telephone, and not wait for a surgery date.

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