

ROBERT COURTS

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

Monthly Report - September 2016

The major news this month is of course that David Cameron has resigned as the MP for Witney; there will be a **by-election on 20th October**: <http://tinyurl.com/hjy3hd5>

Locally

Our Bus Bartons - I congratulate the whole team on the inaugural launch of the community bus service on the 30th August; this is a very special achievement by a wonderful group of hardworking people who have done so much to help the villages. I urge everyone to support the bus by taking a ride, or offering some time if you can. Our service is the leader in Oxfordshire, and everybody looks to them for an example. An extraordinary achievement.

HGVs - I am compiling a list of the relevant routing agreements in order to ascertain when lorries driving through the village are ones that ought not to.

Dog mess - there appears to have been a rise in the amount left on the streets. There are bins around the villages; if anyone can think of a location for a new one, please let me know.

Horton Hospital - the proposed changes have of course been of great concern to local residents; our local MPs have been closely involved in making representations.

Broadband - I am told that the fibre is going to be installed imminently. Those who are going to receive a fiberoptic service will be connected first, then others further away. They will be received fiberoptic to the door, rather than to the exchange and thereafter copper, which will give a faster speed than the regular BT service.

Middle Barton School - I congratulate our wonderful school and all the staff and pupils on the 150th anniversary.

District Council

Homeseeker Plus - A major new online system is being introduced to allow anyone on West Oxfordshire's housing register to apply for vacant Housing Association properties themselves.

The scheme, Homeseeker Plus, will list vacant houses across the District for rent online. Prospective and existing tenants will be banded according to their individual needs and can then 'bid' for properties suited to their circumstances.

Starting in September, it will replace the current Housing Waiting List which is based on a points system. Those who have been on the Waiting List will need to register again with Homeseeker Plus.

Properties will be advertised weekly. When the advertising period ends the Council will offer the property to the most appropriate bidder.

The aim is to match tenants with the best properties for their needs allowing them more choice over where they want to live.

Cllr Robert Courts, Cabinet Member responsible for Housing, said: *"I am delighted to introduce this new system which is a huge upgrade to West Oxfordshire's housing processes.*

"It gives tenants more choice about where they want to live because they will be able to select properties most suitable for them and there will be total transparency as everyone will be able to see what is available, where and at what times."

The new system will save time for the Housing Associations and the Council ensuring officers can spend longer helping people rather than allocating homes. It also helps ensure vacant properties do not stand empty for long but are re-let quickly.

Cllr Courts added: *"I very much hope everyone will quickly get used to the new system and find it a major improvement to the way Housing Association properties are let."*

Homeseeker Plus will include all the Registered Social Landlords (Housing Associations) operating in West Oxfordshire.

Click (<http://tinyurl.com/zq2hgtv>) for how to register for social housing.

Anyone requiring help with the new process including those concerned about using computers should contact the Housing Team on 01993 861000.

You can see my interview and public statements on this important issue here:

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/aAGbY6DEnlo>

<http://www.westoxon.gov.uk/news/aug/homeseeker-plus/>

Oxfordshire Unitary Government Study published

Below is a joint statement issued by all the Oxfordshire District Council Leaders and the Oxford City Council Leader

Matthew Barber, Leader at Vale of White Horse

John Cotton, Leader at South Oxfordshire District Council

James Mills, Leader at West Oxfordshire District Council

Bob Price, Leader at Oxford City Council

Barry Wood, Leader at Cherwell District Council

"As Leaders of Oxfordshire's district and city councils we are pleased to jointly release our proposition for public service reform and the future of local government in Oxfordshire.

"The two studies – carried out by the district and the county council respectively - show that there are different alternatives for how local government is organised and there are different views on these options. The work by the district councils favours three unitary councils working together through a combined authority. The study by the County Council concludes that a single county unitary would be the best option. Following discussions with civil servants, it is clear that the new government's priorities in this area have changed and they are looking to councils to develop consensus about governance arrangements to support a devolution deal. There are also many commonalities in the findings of the two studies and it is important that all councils now take some time to fully consider all of the evidence and how this might fit with the government's priorities as they emerge over the autumn.

For more information, and to read the reports, see <http://www.westoxon.gov.uk/news/aug/unitary-report/>

Waste & recycling calendars online from mid-Sept

Annual waste and recycling calendars, starting from October 2016, will be available to download from mid-September.

These calendars will remind you which bins to put out on what days and are especially helpful to find out any changes over the Christmas period and Bank Holidays.

Alternatively, sign up to receive FREE email updates about your property direct to your inbox including:

- weekly bin reminders
- Bank Holiday bin reminders
- nearby planning applications.

To do so, or to sign up, please visit: <http://www.westoxon.gov.uk/news/july/updated-waste-and-recycling-calendars-available-mid-september/>

Views wanted on proposed changes to Council Tax support - West Oxfordshire District Council is consulting with residents about amendments to its Council Tax Reduction Scheme which, if agreed, would come into effect from April 2017.

The scheme supports working age people on low incomes by reducing their council tax payments.

The proposed changes would bring the scheme in line with Universal Credit and Housing Benefit whilst ensuring it remains fair for everyone and encourages unemployed people to seek work.

The maximum amount of Council Tax discount in West Oxfordshire is 91.5% and this will not change.

Cllr Toby Morris, Cabinet Member for Resources said: "Our proposed changes will make the scheme easier for claimants to understand as the principles will be similar to Housing Benefit and Universal Credit. I can assure residents that the level of support given by the Council to those on low incomes and in the greatest need will remain the same."

Residents identified as vulnerable or in receipt of a state pension will not be impacted by any of the changes:

Changes proposed include:

- limiting the number of dependent children within the calculation to a maximum of two
- reducing the period a person can be absent from Great Britain and still receive a reduction to four weeks
- reducing backdating for new claims from six months to one month.

The consultation is open to everyone and details can be found on www.westoxon.gov.uk/news.

The consultation deadline is 28 October 2016. A report will be considered by councillors in January 2017.

The **annual electoral canvass** - is carried out each autumn. We send a compulsory 'household enquiry form' to every property in West Oxfordshire to find out who needs to be added to, or removed from, the Register of Electors.

This form lists everyone currently registered to vote at the property, giving you the opportunity to add any new names or remove any out of date information.

This is NOT a voter registration form and we will follow up on any changes you make as necessary.

What you need to do. It's a legal requirement to respond to this form and you need to reply each year as this confirms who is living at your address.

You need to: confirm that the details of those living at your address and registered to vote are correct, add anyone new (including anyone aged 16 or 17), delete anyone no longer in the household

It's quick and easy to respond. Anyone in the household can respond and details of how to reply are given on the household enquiry form, and can be filled in here: [http://www.westoxon.gov.uk/news/aug/annual-electoral-canvas-\(redirect\)/](http://www.westoxon.gov.uk/news/aug/annual-electoral-canvas-(redirect)/)

Grant funding available for community projects - Community projects looking for a cash boost to develop their plans are being urged to apply for a special grant.

The Community Facilities Grant offers up to £50,000 that can be applied to a wide range of projects including village halls, outdoor play areas, sports facilities and heritage sites.

But applicants only have until 20 September to ensure their application is considered.

Power cut helpline - You can now report a power cut quickly by calling 105 - the new national helpline number. Many people don't know who to contact during a power cut and wrongly call the electricity supplier shown on their bill. By calling the helpline, householders will be put through to the company that repairs local power networks and restores power. The 105 number is available to electricity customers in England, Scotland and Wales and can be accessed from most landlines and mobile phones. The number is jointly funded by electricity network operators - the companies that manage the cables, wires and substations that bring electricity into homes and businesses. Network operators can also be contacted directly by phone or via their website, and most network operators can be contacted through social media too. The public can also call 105 if they spot damage to electricity power lines and substations that could put them, or someone else, in danger. If there's a serious immediate risk, the emergency services should also be contacted. Visit www.powercut105.com to find out more about the new 105 telephone number and electricity network operators.

My **surgery dates** for 2016 continue on 8th October at the **Carpenter's Arms**.

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