

DISTRICT COUNCILLORS' REPORT



Parish Council Report for July 2020

Cllrs Linden and Stewart (West Berkshire Council, Tilehurst Birch Copse Ward)

West Berkshire Council

Webcasting of Council Meetings

All of our public meetings are broadcast live on YouTube and recorded so that they can be viewed later - see <https://www.youtube.com/c/westberkshire>.

Executive Meeting

The Executive met on 16 July via Zoom and covered a number of items:

Financial performance for 2019/20

West Berkshire Council has seen a strong financial performance for the 2019/20 financial year, including a net revenue budget underspend of £1.5m.

Papers discussed at Executive gave details of the outturn underspend, which has been delivered through a careful monitoring of the Council's financial position as well as a fall in demand for, and efficiencies in, Adult Social Care services. It represents just over 1% of the overall budget and, of course, will flow through to this year's budget.

The papers also contained details of some of the initial impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Council's finances, with a small impact on the revenue budget being reported as at the end of the last financial year. Unsurprisingly it is expected that Covid-19 will have a far greater effect on the budget for 2020/21.

Excluding the paused property investment portfolio, 70% of the Council's capital programme (including plans to invest in priority service areas including education, highways infrastructure and flood prevention works) was spent, with £14m of investment being carried over/re-profiled into the current financial year. This will allow the Council to continue to deliver key projects.

Recovery Strategy

West Berkshire Council has published its [Recovery Strategy](#), which outlines its priorities for the district's recovery from Covid-19.

The Strategy sets out the areas the Council will focus on to help the community recover as quickly as possible from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is structured around three core elements: health, education and the local economy, and gives details of how the council and its partners aim to improve the quality of life of all of those who live or work in the district. Further, in line with the council's commitment to enhanced community engagement, there is a strong emphasis on plans to inform, consult and involve local residents in the development and delivery of these local recovery plans.

The council has also published a Recovery Action Plan as an appendix to the Strategy, providing information about what has been done to date to support the local recovery in each of the three priority areas as well as further planned actions. [Environment Strategy](#)

The Executive have approved the Council's [Environment Strategy 2020-2030](#) following a public consultation.

The Strategy outlines the steps the Council and its partners intend to take in order to reach the district's target of carbon neutrality by 2030, and its delivery has been accelerated as a result of the priorities outlined in the Council Strategy 2019-23.

As previously reported, in developing the strategy the Council held a series of public engagement events including the first ever Climate Conference in October 2019 at Newbury College, and a number of workshops where parish councils and public were invited to give their views. Drop in sessions were also held in district libraries.

The online public consultation received over 500 responses from town and parish councils, community groups and individuals across the district and all of these were considered during the drafting of the final strategy.

The strategy's vision is based on the five principles of mitigation, restoration, protection, partnership and integration. It contains a number of initiatives and projects that will contribute to the target of carbon neutrality by 2030; whether through infrastructure improvements, support for industry, investment in active lifestyle opportunities, or enhanced community engagement.

Among the proposed actions set out in the strategy are:

- The launch of a first of its kind Climate Bond to finance green infrastructure projects;
- A series of Solar PV projects, ultimately supplying a significant proportion of the District's electricity needs;
- Further investment in electric vehicle charging points;
- Natural carbon reduction measures;
- The establishment of wild flower verges;
- Support and incentives for new and existing green businesses.



West Berkshire Community Climate Bond

West Berkshire Council is the first in the country to launch a [Community Municipal Investment](#) offering residents and community groups a unique way to invest in West Berkshire, funding green projects to help the district become carbon neutral by 2030.

Investments start from as little as £5 and will earn a return of 1.2 percent over a five year term, with capital returned in instalments across the investment term.

Residents Survey Results

West Berkshire Council undertook a survey of residents in late May to understand how communities were feeling about the impact of Covid-19 on their health, finances, on the environment and on the wider community. Almost 3,300 residents from across the district responded and the council has already used the preliminary data collected to inform its Recovery Strategy, referred to above.

Questions ranged from the health and wellbeing, to the economic and social impact of Covid-19. The survey also asked respondents whether they had volunteered in their community as a result of the pandemic, as well as whether they intended to in the future.

Among the key findings were:

- Awareness of the Community Support Hub was high, at 72%;
- Almost all respondents who were able to work from home intend to continue to do so and even more in the future;
- Just under half (46.9%) of respondents expressed an intention to travel on foot more as a result of Covid19;
- 28.7% of those surveyed felt that the Covid-19 pandemic would enable them to make a positive impact on the district's aspirations towards carbon neutrality;
- 70.8% said they have volunteered during the pandemic and 78.2% of these intend to continue doing so;
- 86.5% thought the council's response to Covid-19 was either excellent, good or fair as opposed to 4.7% who judged it to be poor (8.8% didn't answer);
- 31.9% reported a fall in household income;
- 63.7% indicated they intended to visit local high streets either the same as before, more or much more, when allowed to do so;
- 15.3% of respondents believe that someone in their household has been infected with Covid-19;
- 18% of respondents reported high or very high anxiety levels the days before they completed the survey.

This survey was the first of what will be a series of resident engagement exercises planned by the council as part of its Covid-19 recovery work.

As well as undertaking further surveys to track the ongoing impact of the current situation, the council intends to produce and implement a new Engagement Strategy aiming to involve the community in the development and delivery of recovery initiatives.

Local outbreak control planning

As reported last month, local authorities have to develop Local Outbreak Control Plans (LOCP) to prevent and control local outbreaks of the Coronavirus and WBC has published its [LOCP](#),

summarising how we will seek to protect our residents and communities by minimising further spread or recurrence of Covid-19 across West Berkshire.

The Local Outbreak Engagement Board has now held two meetings – one in private and one public (the intention is to intersperse public and private meetings) and the public meeting can be viewed via YouTube (see above).

Education

Extra funding to provide laptops for disadvantaged students

West Berkshire Council has received funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to provide laptops for children and students with a social worker, and disadvantaged Year 10 students. This is part of a Government initiative announced in April called ['Get technology support for children and schools during coronavirus \(COVID-19\)'](#) that will help them with their studies during lockdown.



West Berkshire's Virtual School had already purchased 30 laptops for looked after children using Pupil Premium funding and the DfE's money has allowed them to buy a further 34 laptops for this group. However, requests for laptops far exceeded the allocation.

A particular request by the Hungerford Isolation Group, who made a strong case for support in their community, showed how strong the demand was for IT devices. In response, the Council has approved a further £20,000 from their Covid-19 Government grant to ensure that disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils whose needs were not covered by the DfE scheme can now be met.

Free summer school for disadvantaged pupils

Disadvantaged pupils in West Berkshire have access to a world-class online summer school this summer.

West Berkshire Council has teamed up with Brockhurst and Marlston House Schools in Hermitage to allow pupils to access their pioneering programme. The course is open to pupils in Year 2 (age 7) to Year 8 (age 14) and covers Years 3 to 8 in English, Maths, Science and Humanities with lessons available online and available from any device. There is also live support available each week for pupils who want to speak to a tutor.

Children eligible for free school meals can enrol for free on the [summer school website](#), and anyone not eligible is still able to access the programme at a cost of £50 per week.

Adult Social Care

Visiting care homes

Having closed the WBC Care Homes to all but essential visitors in March, we are now taking steps to permit families to once again visit their loved ones safely and in accordance with current Government guidelines.

Visiting brings comfort both to those who are visited and to those visiting. Some Care Home residents are living with dementia and have a limited understanding of events, including the COVID-

19 pandemic – they may experience distress and confusion, which can be modified by the presence of familiar faces. Visits can also have a positive effect on diet and nutrition, and is a fundamental part of the care of each resident.

We have published a [Visitor Protocol](#).

The West Berkshire Lottery celebrates one year since its first draw

With a global pandemic putting a stop to normality since March, charities have seen a significant increase in the number of volunteers coming forward to ensure the vulnerable and elderly are being looked after.

However, many good causes have also seen a decrease in funds to stay operational due to cancelled fundraising events or people donating less money.

To date, there are 118 local good causes signed up to the West Berkshire Lottery and over 1,000 players currently supporting the lottery each week.

So far, the lottery has paid out nearly £20,000 in winnings and has recently celebrated the third £2,000 winner!



Culture and Leisure

Lido

Despite the Government announcing that outdoor pools could open from Saturday 11th July necessary repairs to the Newbury lido before it could reopen were delayed by Covid-19.

After a soggy winter, ground water levels needed to fall sufficiently to allow the pool to be emptied without risk to the structure but they didn't recede until June. Because of the Covid-19 lockdown, specialist contractors were not available to carry out the work until August. Given that the work would also take two to three weeks to complete and then a full ten days is required to fill the pool the Lido only contracted to remain open until the first weekend in September.

Guidance for swimming has been developed around social distancing, but natural bottlenecks will occur, for example, in changing rooms and at access points to the outdoor area.

The opportunity to open in 2020 was very limited and so after much deliberation, the council and Legacy Leisure have reluctantly agreed not to open the Lido this year but work to achieve maximum availability of the leisure centres as quickly and as safely possible and focus on the Lido being ready for the 2021 season.

Details of how [Legacy Leisure](#) will re-open the leisure centres and when new activity is available will be made available in due course and on their website.

Waste Services

Garden Waste Collection



Subscriptions for the 2020/21 garden waste service are now open for West Berkshire residents.

The 2020/21 garden waste service subscription period runs from 1 September 2020 to 27 August 2021. The subscription fees remain the same as last year with the service charge for the first bin costing £50.

A reminder email or letter is being sent out to all current subscribers inviting them to renew their existing subscription.

For more, visit www.westberks.gov.uk/gardenwaste.

Household Waste Recycling Centres

The booking system at the HWRCs seems to be proving popular amongst residents and the team at West Berkshire Council are currently seeking the views of visitors to the Newtown Road and Padworth as to whether to keep this arrangement permanently.

Support for local businesses and residents

Social Distancing

Whilst community transmission rates are comparatively low, as lockdown is eased and those in the shielded and vulnerable groups are able to leave their homes (if they so wish) it is as important as ever that social distancing is observed.

The Government is regularly updating its [advice](#).

Other WBC Matters

Chat Bot named



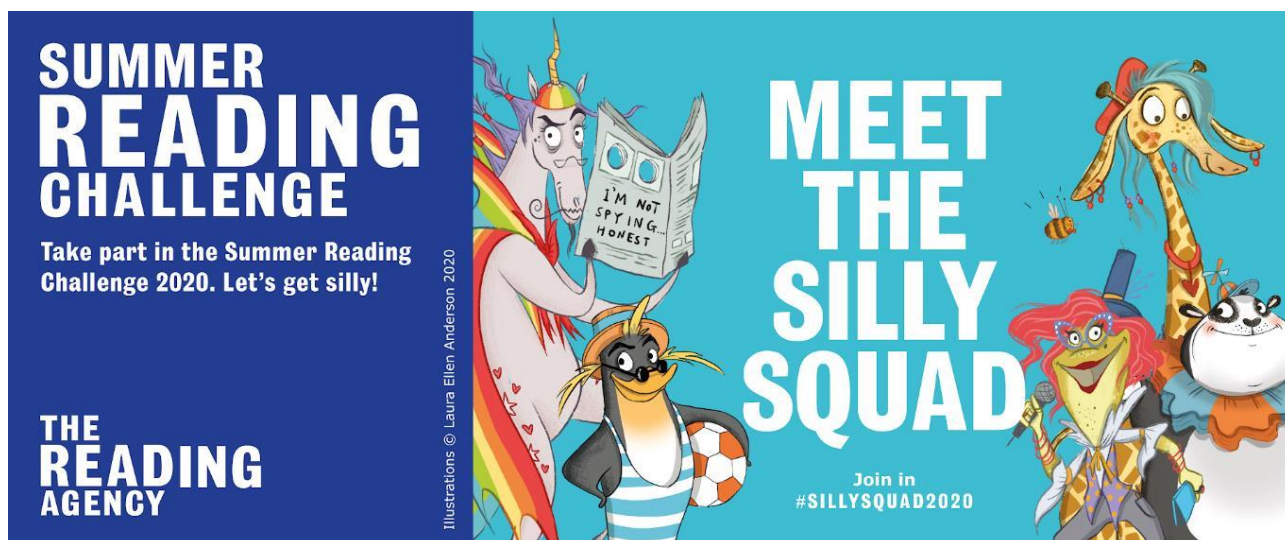
The Council Advice Bot was created in partnership with We Build Bots Ltd (WBB) and has been working with the Council's Customer Service Team since April to answer questions and signpost customers on the Council's website to the latest Covid-19 information.

Many thanks to everyone who took part in our Name that Bot Survey! A whopping 46% of you voted for Berkley over Berkshire Bot and Ask

Gertrude. Further work is now taking place to further Berkley's education to answer a number of the most popular Council related requests, for example, waste and highways queries.

Summer Reading Challenge

West Berkshire Libraries are delighted to introduce this year's digital Summer Reading Challenge, **Silly Squad**; a celebration of funny books, happiness and laughter.



The Summer Reading Challenge, which launched in June runs into September, and is the biggest children’s reading for pleasure programme in the UK. Last year over 700,000 children and their families took part. This year, while libraries across the country remain closed to the public in accordance with government guidelines, the Challenge has moved online and is launching earlier than usual.

You can take part [online](#) and unlock digital rewards, activities and video content as rewards for your reading – all for FREE.

Children can set their own reading goal (we recommend at least six books) and may read anything - from library to school books, including e-books and e-audio. A certificate is available to download for free when the Challenge has been completed.

Rogue Trader sentenced to 66 weeks custody

Ruben William Reed, a Director of Warm Roof Group Ltd, Warm Systems Group Ltd and FDG Associates Ltd, at the relevant time of the offences with which he was charged, was sentenced at Reading Crown Court on 26th June 2020, after pleading guilty at Reading Crown Court on the 20th August 2019 to six offences between February to November 2018.

The offences consisted of 4 charges under the Fraud Act 2006, and 2 charges under the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations.

The convictions followed an investigation conducted by [the Public Protection Partnership \(PPP\) Trading Standards Service](#) working with the PPP Joint Case Management Unit and West Berkshire Legal Services. The investigation, was commenced following the receipt of complaints from Berkshire residents.

The victims were five elderly and vulnerable homeowners who were cold called in their own homes. Mr Reed purported to offer professional property services at a competitive price, and persuaded the victims by offering additional services for free if they were to agree to building work, or by reducing the cost if they allowed him to use their property to advertise his company.

Work was started within days of the first approach. Once work had already commenced on the victims’ properties, Mr Reed soon identified further remedial work. The victims felt pressured to accept these quotes due to their concerns about their properties and as the work had already begun. He quoted unreasonably high sums for the additional work, and, often some form of instant

payment was required. In each case the work was found by an expert to be of poor quality and the victim was significantly overcharged.

Mr Reed has paid £44,177 to West Berkshire Council which includes £33,432 in compensation and prosecution costs of £10,745. He was sentenced to immediate custody for a period of sixty six weeks and has been disqualified from being a director for a period of five years.

Parish Matters

Planning

The service is looking at ways in which planning site visits can be carried out by Members, whilst still socially distancing. Parish Council and Public participation in Planning Committee meetings is constantly under review, West Berkshire Council is adhering to Government guidance and until we receive the go-ahead to recommence public participation, meetings will continue to be held via Zoom.

Returning to school in September

All our schools are planning for a full opening for all pupils in September. There may be some staggered starts for year groups from 2 September, following an INSET day, but as things stand today all children will be in class from the following Monday. Primary schools have mainly chosen to use class bubbles, with many adopting a 'desks facing forward' approach and other measures such as staggering starts, lunches and breaks. Secondary schools are largely opting for year group bubbles and all schools will have extra hygiene measures and will apply limits on visitors.

Litter Picking

We're aiming to restart litter picking in September in line with the Great British September Clean which is running from 11th to 27th September, and following any social distancing guidelines at that time. If you have an idea in mind that could do with a clean-up get in touch with Cllr Jo Stewart.