

Parish Council Report for December 2019

Cllr Graham Bridgman (West Berkshire Council, Burghfield and Mortimer Ward)

Reflections on 2019

Happy New Year!

Following the 2018 Local Government Boundary Commission for England review of West Berkshire wards, the district elections last May saw a reduction in council seats from 54 to 43, and changes to the number of councillors representing wards in some parts of the district.

A consequence of the reduction in elected members has been to reduce the membership on some committees, and change some advisory groups and panels. These changes, alongside the necessary representation on outside bodies, mean that all members have the opportunity to be close to the delivery of WBC services.

Personally I sit on the Executive as Deputy Leader of Council and the portfolio holder for Adult Social Care. As a member of the Executive I also sit on the Budget, Operations and Corporate Programme Boards as well as attending the Strategy Board and Senior Management Seminar. I am a member of the Health and Wellbeing Board, the West Berkshire Locality Integration Board (which seeks to align NHS and local authority services) and the Berkshire West Safeguarding Adults Board. I chair the Constitution Task Group and am a member of the Licensing Committee. Externally I am a WBC appointment as a member of the AWE Local Liaison Committee, a Governor of the Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and a Governor of the Royal Berkshire Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.

Despite the run up to the Christmas and New Year break, December has been a busy period within the Council timetable, complicated by the calling of the General Election which utilised a considerable amount of Council strategic resource. 2020 looks equally demanding with a very full forward plan.

As we move towards the second year of this session of Council, many of the 2019 Conservative Manifesto pledges are being translated into strategy consultations and delivery plans.

The budget for the coming year, whilst still under pressure, has been considerably less painful to build in comparison to previous years – for the first time in a long while WBC will not have to consult externally on service reductions or changes. Rather, with announcements about additional funding for Adult and Children's Social Care, and Education, proposed changes to the budget have avoided major public facing savings.

As referenced in previous reports, with a wider political representation in the Council Chamber we have seen some vibrant exchanges and debate (you are of course very welcome to attend meetings as observers)!

The environment was probably the most talked about issue in 2019 and this will also be a very significant topic going in to 2020 and beyond. The Climate Conference in October was the first stage in a series of conversations relating to the Council's response to the declaration of a climate emergency. We can expect this conversation to continue as we will all need to play our part in delivering the route to carbon zero over the coming decades.

This district, like many others also has issues of the delivering the right housing solutions for people of all ages, as well as caring for our growing elderly populations and vulnerable residents. Having said this, West Berkshire is a vibrant and economically active area within a beautiful location, with excellent transport links and very strong employment.

All these things make West Berkshire a place to be proud of and we can all look forward to 2020 positively.

West Berkshire Council

Council Meeting

As reported last month, the next Council meetings will take place on 9 January (a special meeting to appoint honorary alderman, followed by an ordinary meeting to consider various items including the draft Minerals and Waste Local Plan (more below) and a Revised Statement of Community Involvement).

Papers relating to the agenda items for the main meeting discussed further below can be found at <http://decisionmaking.westberks.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=116&MIId=5159&Ver=4>.

Honorary Alderman

At the special meeting referred to above, we will be conferring the title of Honorary Alderman on some of the district's long serving former Councillors including, I am very pleased to say, Mollie Lock (and Keith Chopping who represented Sulhamstead). I very much look forward to speaking at the meeting.

Minerals and Waste Local Plan

The proposed Minerals and Waste Local Plan will be discussed at the ordinary meeting. The draft plan sets out the policies to guide minerals and waste development across the district, and includes site allocations for mineral extraction. Locally a minerals (sand and gravel) site at Tidney Bed - on the A4 near the Ufton Nervet rail bridge - is proposed. These documents and supporting papers can be found in the Council Agenda.

Plastics Recycling petition

We will also debate a petition seeking that WBC recycles more types of plastic than currently. This has also been the subject of much local discussion on the MVP Facebook site, that I have engaged in.

The background paper in the agenda pack makes interesting reading – to quote from it:

- *It will cost the Council up to £1m in capital investment to make necessary modifications at the Council's materials recovery facility at Padworth, so that additional plastic stream can be sorted, plus ongoing annual revenue cost of c £100k to collect this material;*
- *Collecting the materials is relatively easy compared to securing a viable recycling destination for the materials in the UK. If exported overseas as done by many of the UK authorities who collect these additional plastics, then the Council will have limited control over what happens to the waste (whether it is effectively recycled or ends up in landfills/rivers).*

I await the debate with interest.

Executive meetings

Due to purdah a full agenda for the Executive meeting on 19 December couldn't be published in time for the ordinary, scheduled, meeting, so we had an extraordinary meeting at shorter notice (including a Part II agenda). Then an item got missed off that agenda, so we needed a second extraordinary meeting. So, we ended up having the ordinary meeting, followed by the first extraordinary meeting, then the exclusion of press and public for the Part II meeting, then everyone back for the second extraordinary meeting. All good fun!

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

At the main extraordinary Executive meeting the Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2020-25 was adopted. It articulates the core priorities for the next five years with a focus on enhanced prevention and early intervention to address homelessness and rough sleeping and an increased range of housing options and even stronger partnership working (see https://citizen.westberks.gov.uk/media/48320/Preventing-Homelessness-and-Rough-Sleeping-Strategy-2020-2025/pdf/Homelessness_Strategy___Delivery_Plan_v2.pdf?m=637124412041870000).

Climate Change Investment Bonds

We also agreed this scheme, subject to due diligence.

A Community Municipal Bond (CMB) is a bond or loan mechanism issued by a Council directly to the public via a Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) regulated crowdfunding platform (WBC is considering Abundance Investment as a provider). CMBs can be used to supplement, diversify or replace sources of borrowing to fund specific infrastructure projects, or to refinance existing debt. They can also be issued as Green, Digital or Social Housing Bonds if the proceeds are being earmarked for specific suitable projects.

Although the bonds could be used to deliver a wide variety of infrastructure projects, WBC intends to prioritise projects which support its recent declaration of a climate emergency, and the Environment Strategy referred to above.

Individuals (whether West Berkshire residents or not) will be able to invest from £5.00 upwards to support specific projects such as solar panels or tree planting. In return, they will receive Climate Change Bonds and a yield on their investment. This scheme has great potential and could enable the Council to take on important green projects – if our communities invest, it would provide the Council with a cheaper alternative to conventional sources of funds and reduce the overall cost of borrowing to all taxpayers across the district. Keeping the administration as simple as possible is why the Council is seeking to pilot this scheme with an outside organisation.

Subject to completing due diligence on the scheme, which will be funded through the pilot by external funding, the Council hope to launch the scheme to investors in the middle of 2020.

Environment Strategy consultation (from 9 January to 21 February)

As I reported last month, following the declaration of a climate emergency in July and the Climate Conference in the autumn, which was the next step in the public engagement process, WBC has been working on a draft Environment Strategy with input from the Environment Board and Environment Advisory Group.

The draft strategy covering the period 2020-30 goes out to public consultation on 9 January and provides six weeks for responses. The consultation will be published on the Council's website as well as being highlighted via email and through media and social media channels to those groups and individuals who are particularly engaged in the district's consultation process. Comments on the strategy are welcomed from a wide range of respondents so please do highlight this consultation amongst residents.

This is a significant consultation and the Council also intends to hold a short series of community conversations and focus groups in February before the consultation period closes. It is anticipated that, early in the new year, towns and parishes will be invited to send a delegate to discuss how Parish Councils and Town Councils can get involved in the delivery of the strategy and help motivate communities to play their part in the district working towards carbon-zero by 2030 (these groups will be held at Shaw House).

Representatives from the district's other interested parties such as our young people, environmental lobbyists, climate conference participants, residents and West Berkshire Council staff will also be invited to discuss the draft strategy in a variety of conversations held across the district. We also intend holding meetings with representatives from neighbouring Councils to engage in the wider conversation about how we can work together for the best results for our region.

Adult Social Care Budget 2019/20

Further to my comments about the budget in the introduction, the ASC budget is currently predicting an underspend for 2019/20, which is hugely encouraging considering the relentless financial pressures on this demand led service. Although it is the single biggest Council service budget, the enhanced

financial modelling is proving reliable and provides us with useful data to help predict the spending requirement for service users in both the immediate and mid to longer terms.

Having said this, to highlight how a very small change in numbers can have a massive effect on the end result, after much argument five ASC clients are now having their needs paid for by the NHS through the Continuing Health Care system with a total saving to the ASC budget of £0.6m. To put this into perspective, £0.6m is approximate to a 0.5% increase on council tax.

Housing in West Berkshire

WBC's commitment is to make sure that there are homes available in West Berkshire for all stages of our resident's lives. The focus will continue to be on the delivery of affordable housing in the district and is carried through to the new Council Strategy 2019-23 'Building on Our Strengths.'

One of the six priorities for improvement in the strategy relates to housing to 'Develop local infrastructure, including housing, to support and grow the local economy.' Additionally, the West Berkshire Vision 2036, specifically commits to delivering a West Berkshire Housing mix with something for everyone.

Item of note include:

- Key regeneration schemes such as Market Street, Newbury which is currently under development for completion by 2021;
- Our Local Plan to 2026 which sets out our planning policies based on 551 dwellings per annum. We are delivering 109% of our target according to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government;
- We currently have a seven year housing land supply which has been accepted by planning inspectors at appeal (this will be tested again in the Land at junction of Clayhill Road and Sulhamstead Road appeal);
- Our development programme currently has over 800 affordable homes approved with additional units on the horizon;
- Our Equity Loan Scheme, First Steps Next Steps, has enabled 35 homes to be purchased by local residents;
- We have launched the Housing Service Improvement Plan that will secure more private rented accommodation through a rent incentive scheme, develop a Landlord Forum and an Registered Provider Forum to increase opportunities for growth in housing;
- WBC is nearing completion on a joint venture with Sovereign Housing that will increase the number of homes in the district;
- We are we are investigating setting up a Local Housing company;
- Our housing team has also done some outstanding work with both families and rough sleepers:
 - We have purchased 18 units of temporary accommodation with a further two under offer. As a result there are no longer any families in B&B accommodation;
 - 33 rough sleepers have been supported to move on from sleeping rough, with current numbers down to 10

Future consultations

There are a number of consultations and delivery plans coming forward in the next quarter which you may wish to respond to:

- Council Strategy Delivery Plan;
- Playing Pitch Strategy;
- West Berkshire Cultural Heritage Strategy;
- Housing Strategy;
- Local Transport Plan review.

Local Matters

Thirty Year Transport Strategy consultation (ends 10 January)

People and businesses in West Berkshire are being asked to comment on a proposed thirty-year transport strategy for the South East which aims to improve journeys, boost the economy and protect the environment.

The strategy outlines how, with the right investment in the region's transport network, the South East's economy could more than double by 2050 to between £450bn and £500bn per year – creating an additional 500,000 jobs, boosting the quality of life and access to opportunities for all, and helping cut the South East's carbon emissions to net-zero. It has been produced by Transport for the South East, a partnership bringing together local authorities, business leaders and transport organisations to speak with one voice on the region's transport priorities.

A major focus of the strategy is reducing reliance on private cars; to reduce congestion, cut carbon emissions and improve air quality (cars account for 70% of all journeys in the South East, compared to 4% by rail and 5% by bus).

To read the draft transport strategy and take part in the consultation, go to tfse.org.uk/transport-strategy. The deadline for responses is Friday 10 January and the final transport strategy is due for publication in April, with a strategic investment plan planned for publication in 2021.

M4 Smart Motorway project

There are two full weekend closures of the M4 coming up early in the new year, between junctions 6 and 8/9 over the weekend of 17-20 January and between junctions 4b and 5 over the weekend of 14-17 February. For more info go to <http://www.highwaysengland.co.uk/m4j3to12>.

Royal Berkshire NHS Trust – Governor Elections

The Royal Berkshire NHS Trust has announced elections for Public Governors, including two for West Berkshire & Borders, one to July 2021 and the other to July 2022. Nominations close at 17:00 on 16 January and information for prospective applicants and the nomination forms are/will be available on the Trust website - <https://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk/open-elections.htm>.

Parishes

Burghfield

James Lane

Please see comments under Wokefield.

Stratfield Mortimer

Library

A recommendation for WBC to work with SMPC to negotiate a 99 lease of the building and a joint user agreement so that SMPC can take over the library building will be coming to the Executive on 16 January.

Phone Box

Following the recent debate at SMPC, this from the WBC response to the BT consultation:

“At its meeting on the 14th November the parish (sic) Council formally resolved that the above box met the “reasonable need” criteria on all accounts and therefore should be retained.

The phone box is close to the centre of Mortimer and as such has at least the requisite 500 households within 1 kilometre. It has also had 12 calls made in the previous 12 months and it is the only public phone box in the area.

Therefore, the Council respectfully asks that it be retained.

However, in the extremely unlikely event that the phone box appeal is not successful then the Parish Council has requested that they be given the opportunity to adopt the telephone box.”

Wokefield

James Lane

James Lane will be closed from 6 to 24 January from The Mearings to Goring Lane for Thames Water to lay a new mains supply, with an official diversion via Goring Lane, Hollybush Lane, Reading Road, Hermits Hill, and vice versa (residential & blue light access to be maintained throughout – a plan of the closure can be found at <https://one.network/?tm=115871143> and any enquiries should be made to KCD on 07939 977827).

I suggested that this might be combined with some of the pre-patching work scheduled for the next maintenance cycle, but this proved impossible.

Graham Bridgman

3 January 2020