

Parish Council Report for May 2020

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

West Berkshire Council and Coronavirus / Covid-19

Council meetings

We have now held a number of Council meetings (full council, committees, Executive, etc) via Zoom, with live broadcasts via YouTube. Agendas are published in advance on our website and each contain the link to view the meeting in question (go to <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/committees>).

The scheduled meeting of the Executive on 11 June has been cancelled as there were no formal decisions needing to be taken. Full Council will meet on 9 July where, amongst other matters, the Environment Strategy is due to be discussed.

West Berkshire Residents Survey

If you haven't already done so, please take 10 minutes to complete our Residents Survey which is open until midnight on Sunday 7 June. The survey includes important questions around volunteering which will help to inform our local recovery plan.

You can access the online survey at <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/residentsurvey-covid19>, and hard copies are available for those without internet access. Please contact the Community Support Hub to request hard copies for your community or use the online link.

Additional Funding for addressing the Covid-19 pandemic

The Council received an additional £3.4 million from the second government funding announcement, bringing the total received to £7.6m. In addition we have had various ring-fenced tranches, for example £1.4m (from a national funding of £600m) to address infection control issues in care settings.

This funding has been provided to assist with the financial impact of dealing with the pandemic and addressing costs such as additional PPE for our care homes, supporting our most vulnerable residents, as well as providing accommodation for rough sleepers and the homeless. It also helps bridge the cash flow of lost income from fees and charges etc.

Recovery Strategy

Whilst as a nation we are not yet anyway near putting Covid-19 behind us, WBC has nevertheless started discussions internally about the steps needed to begin the recovery process from the emergency measures put in place.

Part of this is to do with the practicalities of bringing staff back into the workplace and ensuring that any return is safe, and restoring some of the activities that were put on hold, or took a back seat, during the initial stages of lockdown.

Part is also to do with a desire to retain some of the learning, particularly as to how we build upon the immense community spirit that has been displayed, and recognise some of the pros and cons of the way we have been operating during the pandemic. In particular, we are discussing how we can support our communities and businesses as everyone takes the first delicate steps towards a new normal.

Community Support Hub

Business as usual

As part of the council's Local Recovery Plan, the Hub is moving into a new phase, to take us to the end of the year. The following changes will ensure that we can meet the needs of the community while continuing with our other work:

- From now on, and due to a lack of demand, weekend staffing of the Hub will cease, although there will still be provision for out of hours emergencies;

- The Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) has recently been dismantled, and the Hub has moved to a new location in the council offices;
- New generic email addresses for the hub are to be introduced – these will be circulated to various contacts (including parishes) shortly;
- New staffing arrangements have been introduced.

Food distribution for shielded and self-isolating

After the initial urgent response to provide food parcels/ensure supplies to our shielded, self-isolating and vulnerable residents, a review will be undertaken shortly, seeking to eliminate duplication and to ensure that nutritionally balanced food is provided.

Education, Museums and Libraries

Planned return to school

Head teachers across West Berkshire have been working exceptionally hard in the background to fully understand the large volumes of guidance for the wider opening of schools that has been published by central government.

Recent announcements have focussed on welcoming more children back into schools, colleges and early years settings from 1 June, if it remains safe to do so, whereas for some this might be from a later date.

Throughout the period of lockdown, council officers have maintained a constant dialogue with head teachers, both supporting current limited opening arrangements, and thinking through how schools might safely open for more children in the year groups specified by the Prime Minister.

It is worth noting that 80% of West Berkshire primary schools have been open throughout the lockdown for children of key workers and vulnerable children.

The government has also announced plans for more face to face time with selective year groups in secondary education from 15 June.

Libraries

The library service is making preparations for re-opening shortly. They are currently carrying out risk assessments but are considering an online/telephone booking system for a 'click and collect' and drop-off service.

Customers who are not already a member of the library, can join online giving you free, instant access to the e-library. For details visit www.westberks.gov.uk/libraries.

Newbury Museum

The museum is working towards re-opening in July but other heritage events are currently on hold pending appropriate government guidance.

Shaw House continues to be closed to the general public.

Waste Services

Waste Collection

Kerbside waste and recycling collections are continuing as usual.

Household Waste Recycling Centres

A booking system is now in operation at the Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) at Padworth (and at Newtown Road in Newbury). Apart from a few issues, things appear to be working pretty well.

Bulky Waste Service

Bulky waste collections restarted in April – there is a charge for collecting bulky waste, and all collections need to be booked in advance by calling the Customer Services secure payment line on 0330 131 9742 (WBC is unable to arrange collections via email).

Mini Recycling Centres – glass collection

Due to a sub-contractor is withdrawing from the service on financial grounds, glass banks have been removed from mini recycling centres, including the one at the Willink School (this glass would have gone to a different destination to the glass collected from the kerbside).

Fly-Tipping

Please use the WBC online service to report instances of fly-tipping and provide as much detail as you can (<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/article/27751>). WBC is continuing to monitor our environment and take enforcement action against perpetrators of fly-tipping.

Support for local businesses and residents

Free resources available to West Berkshire businesses

West Berkshire businesses can access posters and advice to help them to re-open safely.

The resources, which have been created by the council's Graphic Design team and the Public Protection Partnership, will ensure that businesses have clear and consistent advice and signage available to them as they begin to welcome customers for the first time since they were advised to close in later March. They can be found at www.westberks.gov.uk/covid19-businesspack.

The council has also issued an order to close parts of Newbury Town Centre to traffic temporarily in order to assist with queuing and safety for pedestrians and cyclists in the town centre. The Network Management Team will be contacting parish and town councils to review whether similar arrangements are necessary in other parts of the district.

These two initiatives form part of a comprehensive package of support to West Berkshire businesses which includes over £23m of Central Government funding, a business rates deferral for all businesses in April and May and fully-funded advice which available through the Berkshire Growth Hub.

Details of the Berkshire Growth Hub can be found at www.berkshirebusinesshub.co.uk.

The Network Management Team can be contacted at trafficandroadsafety@westberks.gov.uk.

Discretionary Scheme for Businesses

WBC has launched a new £1.225m discretionary business scheme, funded by Central Government and following the previous Small Business Rates Grants and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants scheme. Under the previous scheme, launched in April, WBC distributed over £24.6m to almost 2,000 local businesses (placing it in the top 10% of local authorities in the country by percentage of eligible businesses paid).

The new scheme is aimed at businesses who have ongoing property costs and have experienced a significant fall in their income due to Covid-19. It is open for applications and will close when the council has distributed its allocation of funding on a first come first served basis.

Other Covid Measures

Newbury town centre temporarily pedestrianised

Newbury town centre has been temporarily pedestrianised – WBC has issued a temporary traffic order which will see the north end of Bartholomew Street, Northbrook Street and the Market Square closed to traffic for 24 hours a day until further notice.

The order is to help town centre businesses and shoppers to comply with social distance guidance as it will make additional floorspace available for queuing outside of shops and businesses who choose to re-open.

Track and Trace

As everyone will be aware, HMG has launched a new NHS Test and Trace service across England to help identify, contain and control coronavirus, and reduce the spread of the virus.

What is not so obvious from the title of the scheme is the integral role that first tier local authorities, including WBC, will have. The key message received from the Minister of State recently is that Test and Trace is very much a local response and that WBC will be responsible for 'hunting down the virus' and managing local outbreaks. The council is to be the 'frontline' of attack in control going forward for foreseeable future.

There will be a new 119 number for all to report symptoms, followed by: test arranged > 14 day isolation > contract tracers to call and identify all those in contact > individuals contacted and asked to self-isolate for 14 days (regardless if they have symptoms).

The very clear message is that this should be a local response, sitting with a new locally led Board that will link to the existing emergency response structure within the council and thence to the Local Resilience Forum.

There is more in the government's press release <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-nhs-test-and-trace-service>.

Socially distancing

A reminder to:

- Stay at home as much as possible;
- Work from home if you can;
- Limit contact with other people;
- Keep your distance if you go out (two metres apart where possible);
- Wash your hands regularly;
- Self-isolate if you or anyone in your household has symptoms.

Other issues arising from Covid-19

Rough Sleepers and Homeless

All individuals known to the Council are being accommodated in hotels and being provided food and support from our housing team. A number of residents in Two Saints have also been moved in to separate accommodation where they shared rooms with others to ensure social distancing can be observed. The Council is now reviewing how it can provide a more cost effective solution.

Car parks

WBC is starting to reintroduce charging again as the restrictions on lockdown are starting to ease, allowing more people to go to work if they can and for visitors to venture out to the towns and villages across the district.

It should be noted that Pay by Phone is available in all Council Car Parks and recommend, particularly where contactless payment is not available (WBC is working with suppliers to add further contactless options in more car parks).

Other WBC Matters

West Berkshire Wild Flower Verge Trial Spring/Summer 2020

The WBC plan to line rural roads with wild-flowers is set to become a reality - a trial to encourage this along sections of the A4 has started, and is the first stage of a larger project to create more wild flower verges in certain locations across the district.

This project forms part of the delivery plan for the emerging Environment Strategy – apart from being attractive to road users it is hoped that there will be significant ecological and environmental benefits, with support for crucial pollinators and biodiversity, and the protection of species threatened by climate change and habitat loss.

In the first year, the council will monitor growth on the A4 verges to assess where there are existing natural areas of wildflower populations and which areas have the potential to be managed more appropriately to promote wildflowers.

The trial will follow the format of other successful road verge projects and adopt mowing regimes recommended by expert organisations such as Plantlife (see http://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/OjnpCG5xKf16qY4cKcy_y?domain=track.vuelio.uk.com).

For further information about the wildflower verge project please email countryside@westberks.gov.uk.

Heatwave warning

The district has now entered Level 1 Heatwave and Summer Preparedness and this will continue to 15 September, in line with the national Heatwave Plan.

This seeks to encourage people to be alert and to prepare in case of a heatwave occurring - preparation primarily involves sharing information.

The evidence about the risks to health and excess deaths from heatwaves is consistent around the world. Respiratory and cardiovascular diseases are the main causes of illness and death, with temperatures in excess of approximately 25°C being associated with excess summer deaths and the rise in mortality that can follow very sharply (within one or two days of the temperature rising). The window of opportunity for effective action is very short, with advanced planning and preparedness essential to reduce the health impacts of exposure to excessive heat.

Parish Matters

Neighbourhood Action Group

Unfortunately the B&M NAG meeting held remotely on Monday (1 June) was inquorate, so matters progressed as a discussion and the AGM has been put back to later in the year.

General

There is nothing specific to parish councils to report – I have progressed queries from various individual residents (tenancy issues, planning queries and objections, tree protection, highway and footpath issues, etc) but nothing of wider import.

Graham Bridgman

3 June 2020