



Parish Council Report for June 2021

Councillor Clive Hooker - Downlands Ward

West Berkshire Council

Another month has gone by and much has been going on at WBC which is covered in my below report.

I have had a lot of complaints regarding the overgrown grass and vegetation along our roadsides and hopefully our contractors will be out shortly to address the particularly hazardous areas soon and the remainder as the cutting programme evolves. I would like to thank those residents who have taken it upon themselves to cut back the grass along stretches of footpaths to make them more accessible especially in the Parish of Farnborough where it is most evident and the contractors have also made a start on cutting back footpaths in other areas. Local involvement is always appreciated but please do not cut back highway verges as there is a risk of endangering oneself due to oncoming traffic.

As Chairman of the Council I have attended a number of events including the launching of two new Handybuses to celebrate 35 years' partnership between Newbury District Council and West Berkshire Council with Handybus (covered in more details below). I opened a small housing estate in Kintbury, which I was pleased to see all the houses are to be heated by air heat pumps; I visited the Waterside Youth Centre to see the refurbishment being carried out prior to its opening in September and when completed, I thoroughly recommend going into the café there for coffee and light refreshment whilst sitting on the bank of the canal. I attended the Newbury Mayor Making Ceremony at the Corn Exchange where I saw Council Billy Drummond being made Mayor of Newbury whilst experiencing British pageantry at its best. I also produced two videos for social media, one for Armed Forces Day and the other for the country's first ever National Thank You Day. Events going forward into the remainder of the summer are looking encouraging and I look forward to going out and about and meeting more residents of West Berkshire.

Meetings and Media

Council

A full Council meeting was held on 8 July at 19:00. It was the first physical full council meeting held since March 2020 (but see more below about its hybrid format).

Executive

Amongst other things, the WBC [refreshed Recovery and Renewal Strategy](#) was considered by the Executive when it met on 10 June – [available to watch again on YouTube](#)

Ask Lynne

Council Leader Lynne Doherty ran another Facebook Live on the theme of West Berkshire's recovery and renewal from the coronavirus pandemic. Lynne spoke about her plans and answered questions on 15 June on [WBC's Facebook Page](#) – follow WBC to be the first to know when the next of these sessions are scheduled.

Hybrid Meetings

With the delay to the lifting of Covid restrictions, more meetings have been held with some Members in the Council Chamber and others, officers, members of the public, etc, joining virtually. Given the restriction on

the number of individuals able to meet in the Chamber in a Covid-safe manner, the Council meeting on 8 July was held in a hybrid format.

Transport news

Handybus

The recent launch of two new Handybuses marked 35 years of Newbury and Thatcham Handybus' partnership with WBC.

Handybus is one of the district's community transport services supporting older people and those with disabilities who would otherwise struggle to get out and do their own shopping. The service enables people to maintain their independence and engage in social interaction, helping to reduce isolation.



The service started in 1986, with Newbury District Council (forerunner of WBC) first investing in community transport and establishing a partnership with what was then the local charity Newbury Volunteer Bureau, and is now Volunteer Centre West Berkshire (VCWB).

The Handybus service now undertakes around 10,000 passenger trips each year, with the mini-buses being driven by volunteers from VCWB.

Cllr Clive Hooker, Chairman of the Council, recently met passengers, a volunteer driver, and the council officer (since retired) who instigated the programme. Click on the [video link](#) to see what they all had to say about Handybus and its 35 year anniversary.

Culture news

Let's get active

WBC has partnered with Greenham Trust to offer the Let's Get Active Fund (LGAF) to improve access to physical activities in West Berkshire. [Applications](#) are now open as part of the district's recovery from Covid-19.

The £33k+ pot is available to community groups, organisations, social enterprises, charities, profit-with-purpose businesses and schools in West Berkshire.

Lido

Berkshire's largest open air pool, the lido at the Northcroft Leisure Centre in Newbury, opened for the season on 21 June.

As many will know, significant work is needed on the Lido and consultations will be running very soon so that the community can help us decide the future of the pool.



Enjoy water safely



WBC have supported Drowning Prevention Week (19-26 June) launched by the Royal Life Saving Society UK (RLSS UK).

RLSS UK fears that with lockdown restrictions lifting, families will flock to beaches and inland water locations this summer without considering the potential dangers, putting themselves and others at risk.

Residents are encouraged to access the charity's [free online resources](#) to ensure their children have the skills to enjoy a lifetime of fun in the water.

Libraries

Don't forget that it's FREE to join and borrow books from West Berkshire Libraries and to use library computers. WBC also have a great range of online study resources available for members and you can download and read e-newspapers and e-magazines as well as e-books and e-audiobooks – which are all available for free.

WBC make some charges for services such as borrowing DVDs, for printing and photocopying, and for the late return of items or for borrowing books from outside of West Berkshire - you that you can pay for these with a bank card or by mobile phone in any of WBC's libraries.

Shaw House

Theatre

WBC are celebrating the return of open air theatre with a bumper programme for all of the family - on Sunday 11 July Kennet Opera will perform a sure to be stunning outdoor concert of arias and choruses 'Opera Unlocked'.

Multi-award nominated Immersion Theatre presents an unforgettable adaptation of William Shakespeare's iconic 'Romeo & Juliet' on Sunday 25 July. For the summer's grand finale, they bring their trademark energy to their wildest show yet, a brand-new musical adaptation of the Rudyard Kipling family favourite, 'The Jungle Book' on Monday 9 August.

West Berkshire Historic Environment Record (HER)

WBC's HER was audited by Historic England for 2020-21 and has obtained the highest and second highest ratings in all four of its service areas. Historic England's final report stated that the West Berkshire HER shows strengths in every area of the audit assessment, and the record is of good quality and incorporates a wide variety of data.

The HER is the primary source of information about the physical remains of past human activity in West Berkshire. The HER is a register of all known archaeological and historical sites in West Berkshire. Some of the buildings, monuments and places are designated as being nationally important or locally significant, but all elements make an important contribution to the story of WBC's past.

Digital Innovation award

WBC is proud to have won a national award for Digital Innovation and Technology at the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Places and Transport (ADEPT) President's Awards.

WBC and partners received the accolade at the virtual ceremony in recognition of the success of the Thames Valley Berkshire Smart City Cluster project. The project's new developments included an app to tackle social isolation, a device to monitor and minimise electricity consumption, a chatbot which answers frequent resident website enquiries, and sensors to prevent falls among elderly people living in supported accommodation.

West Berkshire Directory

The West Berkshire Directory is the one-stop shop for services and help for local residents. The directory provides information on services from local community groups and leisure activities to mental health services, financial guidance and help for unpaid carers. You can search the directory alphabetically or see the information under the categories of adults, families or special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

As services restart after lockdown restrictions ease, WBC are keen to ensure that all the information in the directory is up to date and local groups are not missing, particularly any services which may have started up during the pandemic.

If you belong to a local organisation please check that the information included on the directory for your service is up to date - both contact information and details of any services and activities you offer. See: <https://directory.westberks.gov.uk>.

If any updates are required please email directory@westberks.gov.uk.

Environment news

Environment News Bulletin

WBC recently announced new electric vehicle charge points, an air quality and anti-idling campaign, an update on WBC's wildlife projects, and more. For details, please check out [WBC's latest environment news bulletin](#), and sign up on the page to receive future monthly updates.

Respect our Parks and Open Spaces campaign

Since the first lockdown in March 2020, more visitors than ever have been using West Berkshire's parks, town centres, and other open spaces for recreation. This is a good thing - but it has led to an increase in the amount of waste being left behind.

WBC has launched a new campaign to encourage everyone to enjoy WBC's open spaces, respect other users, and take their rubbish home rather than leave it by an overflowing bin (the same goes for dog poo - if there aren't any dog waste bins or if they are full, please bag it and either put it in a litter bin or take it home and bin it).

You'll see more about this campaign on WBC's [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) channels. Also keep a lookout for the colourful banners coming soon to parks and playgrounds near you.

Composting



If you have the space, home composting is the most eco-friendly way to dispose of kitchen and garden waste. It produces excellent, nutrient-rich compost which helps reduce the need for fertilisers, as well as helping you save money. [See information about home composters.](#)

To receive more environment-related ideas and updates please sign up for WBC's [monthly Environment News Bulletin](#).

Big Community Switch

West Berkshire residents are being invited to sign up for the West Berkshire Collective Energy Switch and save on their energy bills.

The scheme runs in partnership with Big Community Switch and offers a no-obligation collective energy switching scheme giving people the opportunity to group together and pay less for their energy. All energy will be 100% renewable and will be available for both electric and dual fuel tariffs.

Overall, over £690k has collectively been saved for West Berkshire residents since the scheme began. New figures published by Energy UK's Energy Switch Guarantee at the end of May also revealed that customers in West Berkshire were in the top ten for energy switching in Great Britain during 2020.

You have until 6 July to register and/or accept your personal offer.

We're one of the top ten councils in the country when it comes to switching



Covid Support

Help for people who are struggling to pay Business Rates or Council Tax

Now that Covid-19 restrictions are easing, businesses have reopened, and people are able to get back to work, WBC will be issuing letters requesting payment of outstanding Council Tax and Business Rates.

WBC recognise that some people are still being affected by loss of income due to the pandemic and may struggle to make payments, and plans have been put in place to help people manage this debt. For example, they could be entitled to apply for benefits or reduced payments for a period of time.

If you are approached for advice, please ensure there is no delay – anyone in arrears and struggling to pay should contact the Council Tax or Business Rates Teams as soon as possible – by phone: 01635 519520 or email: counciltax@westberks.gov.uk or businessrates@westberks.gov.uk.

Housing

WBC's Housing Team have been proactive in preparation for the lifting of the eviction ban by working with landlords and lettings agents to seek to prevent homelessness.

The Team can provide advice and support to access financial support depending on individual circumstances and if anyone is concerned or has been affected by the lifting of the eviction ban or is experiencing financial hardship, there are a range of Government financial packages available. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme will continue until 30 September as well as the uplift of £20 per week for Universal Credit to support those who have been financially impacted.

To obtain advice this affected and email housing@westberks.gov.uk or contact the Duty Housing Team (01635 519530, option 2, or option 1 for a general housing enquiry).

Education news

Language courses

The Educafe Job Support Club is offering a free, six week course for non-native speakers looking to start or return to work, or volunteer in West Berkshire. The sessions will include work skills workshops and language support for job hunting, writing CVs and practicing interviews. The sessions will run from 10.00 to 13:00 every Friday until 16 July at Newbury Town Hall. [See information and register](#).

Childcare support



HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is reminding working families in the South East that they can use Tax-Free Childcare to help pay for their childcare costs over the summer.

Tax-Free Childcare – a childcare top-up for working parents – can be used to help pay for accredited holiday clubs, childminders or sports activities. This gives parents and carers that extra peace of mind that their child is having fun during the school summer holidays and it can save them money.

Tax-Free Childcare is available for children aged up to 11, or 17 if the child has a disability. Parents and carers can check their eligibility and register for Tax-Free Childcare via GOV.UK on: gov.uk/tax-free-childcare.

They can apply for an account at any time and start using it straight away. By depositing money into their accounts, families can benefit from the 20% top-up and use the money to pay for childcare costs when they need to, for example, during the summer holidays.

School cycle storage upgrades

WBC has allocated £140k from its capital budget to upgrade storage for cycles at some of the district's schools.

The Willink, The Downs, Denefield, Kennet, Little Heath, Westwood Farm, Calcot, and Hungerford will all benefit from the new secure and covered cycle storage units.



Cycling is a great way to start the day, boosts wellbeing and helps the environment too. WBC hope the new storage will make this active travel choice easier.

All upgrades are expected to be completed by September in time for the new school term.

Summer Reading Challenge

West Berkshire Libraries will be again working with national charity The Reading Agency during the school summer holidays to bring children a Summer Reading Challenge.

Primary age children will be challenged to read up to six library books between now and 15 September, and to collect incentives from their local library for their achievements as they read. Invitations to take part in this year's challenge are being sent out to schools.

There will also be challenges for adults to join in the fun as well.

Stay up to date on the Summer Reading Challenge news by signing up for WBC's monthly West Berkshire Libraries newsletter (if you aren't already a subscriber). You can also visit WBC's West Berkshire Libraries [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages.

Health and Social Care news

Birchwood Care Home rated as 'Good' after recent CQC inspection

A report issued by the Care Quality Commission on 4 June, following an inspection at the Birchwood Care Home in Newbury, has rated the home as 'Good.' The report also provides positive feedback on the high standard of care provided by experienced and knowledgeable staff at the home. Birchwood is one of three care homes that WBC run.

WBC executive member for Adult Social Care, Cllr Jo Stewart said: *"I am thrilled to see the report from this inspection and hope that this reassures residents and families of our commitment to the highest standards of care. I would like to thank all the staff for the efforts they put in day to day to provide excellent care for all our residents, particularly given the challenging circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic."*

Review the draft Health and Wellbeing Strategy

Residents of West Berkshire are being invited to review the [draft Berkshire West Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2021-2030](#).

The draft strategy aims to drive positive change to tackle the underlying causes of poor health and wellbeing. It sets out how health and social care professionals, together with other partners, will work to improve the health of people living in West Berkshire, Wokingham and Reading over the next ten years.

The proposals focus on addressing the top five priorities identified by respondents from a previous public consultation that ended in February 2021, namely:

- Reducing the differences in health between different groups of people;
- Supporting individuals at high risk of bad health outcomes to live healthy lives;
- Helping children and families in early years;
- Promoting good mental health and wellbeing for all children and young people; and
- Promoting good mental health and wellbeing for all adults

The survey is open until midnight, 4 August.

Carers' Week

Between 7 and 13 June WBC celebrated the work unpaid carers do in West Berkshire and sought to raise awareness of the support available. WBC also asked people who spend time looking after family members or friends, and who may not think of themselves as a 'carer', to consider if they are getting the help they need and to get in touch to find out what support is available. See: <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/carersinfo>.

TuVida www.tuvida.org/berkshirehub also provides free, confidential and personalised information and support to unpaid carers in West Berkshire. West Berkshire Young Carers now have a newsletter to help you stay up-to-date with everything that is happening with young carers in the district. [See latest edition and subscribe to the newsletter.](#)

Events

Cycling & Wellbeing Festival



This free event will be taking place in Holybrook Linear Park between 10:00 and 15:00 on Saturday 10 July for people to explore ways to be more active – there will be something for everyone, whether they are interested in cycling, walking or just generally getting active.

There will be a BMX stunt display team, opportunities to have your bike ‘MOT’d’, to enjoy a guided ride, or have bikes security marked - plus lots more to get everyone active.

Covid guidance will be followed to ensure the safety of all - staff, exhibitors and volunteers will have undertaken a lateral flow test (rapid Covid-19 test) and visitors are also encouraged to take a lateral flow test before arriving (more information on WBC’s [lateral flow testing webpage](#)).

Community Cafes

Educafe is launching weekly free cafes that will be taking place at different places across West Berkshire, starting with Newbury on 7 July.

The purpose of the Community Cafes is to bring people together in safe, friendly spaces to eat, learn and make new friends.

The Community Cafes will feature:

- an opportunity to meet the Educafe team
- a chance to find out more about services from local providers
- confidential help desks
- ethnic market stalls for ethnic enterprises
- weekly activities and learning opportunities, including English conversation practise

Educafe is extending a warm invitation to its first Community Cafe on Wednesday, 7 July from 11:00 to 15:00 at the Global Indoor Garden in Newbury. There will be free tea and cake for all.

Consultations and Plans

Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan



Last month WBC ran a consultation to find out what matters most to residents for West Berkshire's Public Rights of Way – the paths that anyone has the legal right to walk on, and sometimes can also be used by cyclists, horse riders or motorists.

The survey has now closed and feedback will help WBC to [plan how to improve the district's Public Rights of Way](#) so that they can be fully enjoyed by all.

Walking and cycling plan for West Berkshire

The [Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan](#) for West Berkshire has now been approved, following public consultations. The overall aim is to improve facilities and opportunities for active travel and increase the amount of people walking and cycling as part of their daily routine.

This plan will provide a long term, strategic approach to identifying cycling and walking improvements for the district.

WBC thank all members of the public who took part in the consultations; their local knowledge provided valuable feedback to enhance the plan.

Other Matters

Emergency Alerts

HM Government's new Emergency Alerts system will enable people to be contacted via their mobile phone when lives are in danger. It will be used to warn of emergencies such as severe flooding or terror attacks.

Emergency Alerts are sent to all compatible mobile phones within an area of risk. They don't track location, need your phone number, or collect personal data. Only HM Government and the emergency services will be able to send them. If you don't have a mobile phone, you'll still be kept informed through other channels.

If you get an Emergency Alert on your phone, you'll hear a loud, siren-like sound. A message on your screen will tell you about the emergency and how best to respond. You'll be able to check an alert is genuine at gov.uk/alerts.



To ensure the system works effectively, the government and mobile phone operators be carrying out a series of tests – the first local one was in Reading on 29 June.

If you received a test alert last week, please complete the user survey at gov.uk/alerts so the Government can gather and respond to feedback and make improvements to Emergency Alerts.

To find out more about Emergency Alerts, visit gov.uk/alerts.

Newbury Town Centre Vision

WBC has been working with HemingwayDesign, NEW Masterplanning, UrbanMovement and GL Hearn to prepare the new Vision, and since December 2020 meetings and workshops have been held with a range of businesses, residents' groups, students, and other stakeholders. The initial public survey received over 4,000 responses, and there are now proposals which reflect those responses.

A new has commenced to get further thoughts and feedback on the draft 'Vision for Newbury Town Centre' available to view in full [here](#).

AWE plc

The new AWE PLC Board, in place from 1 July when AWE became an arms' length body owned by the Ministry of Defence, has been announced – including Sir John Manzoni as Chair and Alison Atkinson as AWE Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director (as she had been with AWE plc).

Covid-19 Vaccine effectiveness

A recent report ("*Effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines against hospital admission with the Delta (B.1.617.2) variant*") has indicated that the Pfizer vaccine is 96% effective, and AstraZeneca 92% effective, against hospitalisation with the Delta variant of Coronavirus.