



Annual Council Report for Municipal Year 2025-26

Written by your local Conservative team to keep you up to date.

Councillor Clive Hooker Downlands Ward

West Berkshire Council

Local Government Reorganisation

Where we are now?

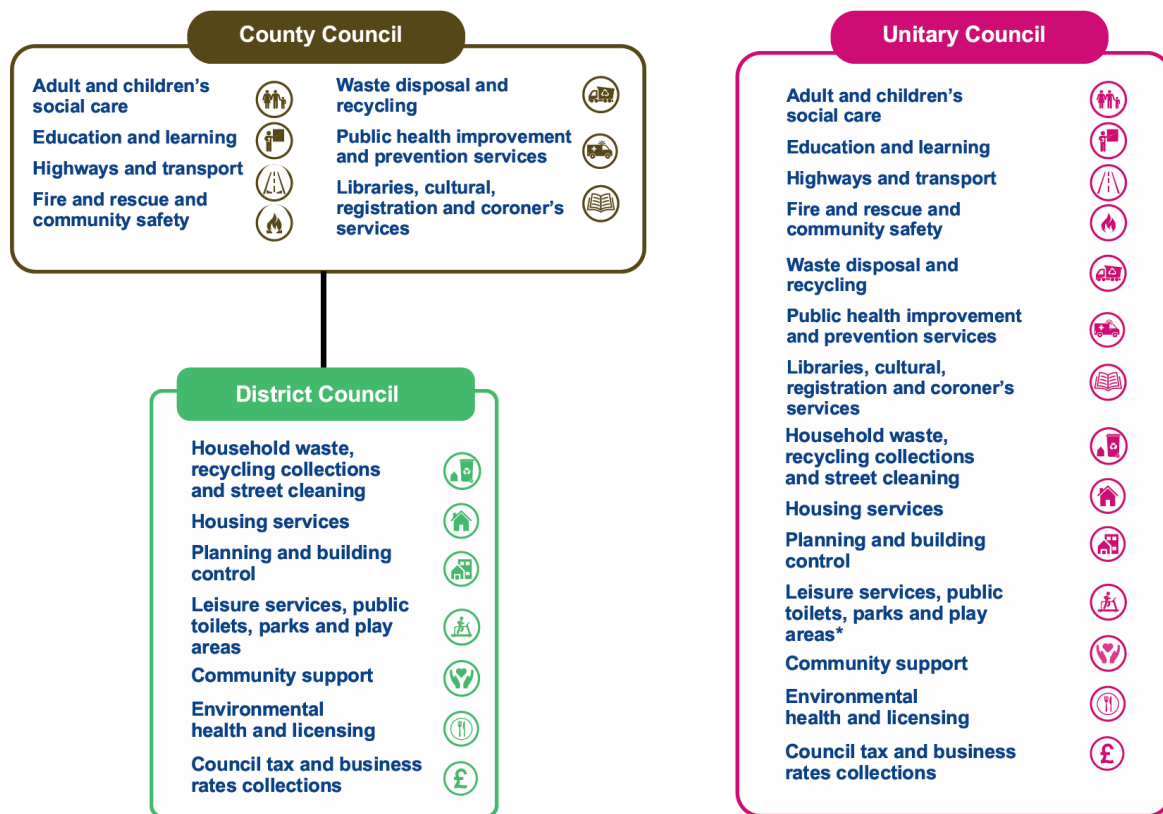
Local Government Reorganisation is probably the biggest thing going on in Local Government at the moment, affecting many different council areas.

Whilst West Berkshire isn't in one of the immediate areas for reorganisation, we are interested in a proposal which involves us as part of the Oxfordshire reorganisation.

The consultation has now closed and the responses are being reviewed by HM Government. We are expecting to know their decision by summer, but no firm date has been given and other councils have experienced delays and changes as instability in the Ministry has had effects on work progress.

What is changing?

The move is in response to a government invitation following its [announcement in December 2024](#) to end two-tier authorities like those in Oxfordshire. As part of the shake-up of local councils, the government has also indicated all unitary authorities will need to serve around 500,000 residents or more, which will require West Berkshire Council - which covers around 170,000 people - to merge with neighbouring councils.



What are the proposals?

The government asked the existing councils to develop proposals for them to consider. There were three proposals submitted to government:

- A single county unitary that covers all of Oxfordshire.
- Two unitary councils that cover Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. One covering the existing council areas of Cherwell, Oxford City and West Oxfordshire. One covering the existing council areas of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire.
- Three unitary councils that cover Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. One covering the existing Oxford City council area but with expanded boundaries. One covering the remaining existing council areas of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire. One covering the remaining existing council areas of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire.

Why is this important to businesses in West Berkshire?

Councils have a significant impact on local businesses from strategic work like driving economic growth and housing growth through to provide support to individual businesses and managing town centres. The choice made by the government could impact all of these services for decades to come and so making the right decision for West Berkshire businesses is important.

What do the current councils think is the best option?

Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse, West Berkshire and West Oxfordshire overwhelmingly support the two unitary option. 142 out of 158 councillors in attendance at those councils voted to support submitting the two unitary proposal including councillors from all political parties.

Oxfordshire County Council support their single unitary proposal and Oxford City Council support their three unitary proposal.

Why does WBC support the two unitary option?

WBC believes that the two unitary proposal is the only one that will deliver improvements to council services, will be financially sustainable, will be responsive to communities and will deliver economic growth.

WBC believe this about creating councils of the right size – not too big that they are distant and ineffective, not too small that they aren't financially viable. When councillors considered the proposals they felt the two unitary was the one that best met the government criteria and would deliver the best outcomes for West Berkshire businesses.



Want to find out more?

Each proposal has its own website with more information:

- [One Council - Oxford County Council](#)
- [Two Councils - West Berkshire, Vale of the White Horse, South Oxford, Cherwell District Council, West Oxford District Council.](#)
- [Three Councils - Oxford City Council](#)

Financial Troubles

Last year, West Berkshire Council requested Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) to help balance its budget. This was granted, and part of the agreement for the EFS was for the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) to investigate the Council's spending.

The CIPFA report was damning and strongly criticised the Liberal Democrat administration's financial management. This report's findings were rejected by the Leader and Executive.

This year, the Council is still in difficulties and, having rejected the findings, needed to ask for another bailout from HM Government.

At the Council meeting on 29 January, the Liberal Democrats proposed a motion to ask the Liberal Democrat Leader to write a letter requesting help, but in doing so continued to ignore the CIPFA findings and blamed HM Government for the mess they are in.

The Conservative group chose not to attend this meeting. Antagonising HM Government when another bailout is needed seems a silly idea, not to mention that the Leader does not need permission from Council to write a letter asking for help – which comes at an additional cost to the taxpayer.

Read more here: <https://www.newburytoday.co.uk/news/tories-to-boycott-west-berkshire-council-budget-meeting-9450864/> and <https://www.newburytoday.co.uk/news/council-in-cash-meltdown-as-redundancies-are-on-the-agenda-9451022/>

Upgrading Schools

Falkland Primary School construction work progressing well

Work at Falkland Primary School is continuing at a good pace, despite some disruption from the weather. Since November, persistent rain has caused around three weeks of delay, but good progress has still been made.

The foundations are now complete, along with the base floor and timber frame. This means the building is really starting to take shape, and you can now walk through it and see how the rooms will be laid out.

Over the next few weeks, steel columns will be put in place, the roof covering will begin, and work will start on the internal floors and staircase.

To help make up for time lost to the rain and keep things on track, there will be some limited weekend working. This will help ensure the building is finished and ready for people to move in before the Autumn Term starts in September.



32 new SEND places at Castle School

The expansion of The Castle School in Newbury is now nearing completion. This is a major milestone in ongoing investment in high quality learning environments for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).



The brand-new Barbury House, named after an Iron Age hillfort in Wiltshire called Barbury Castle, will provide 32 vital SEND places for pupils aged 2 to 19 with complex needs. This expansion not only increases capacity but also enhances the school's specialist offer, with thoughtfully designed breakout spaces and group rooms to better support tailored learning, wellbeing, and care.

By creating more SEND places locally, the new building will also deliver significant financial benefits. Each placement at Barbury House is estimated to save around £80,000 per year compared to an out of district alternative, ensuring that more West Berkshire children can receive the support they need close to home.

Delivering for the Environment

Bee Bus Shelters

Bus Passengers across West Berkshire are beginning to benefit from new bus shelters being installed, helping to improve the Public Transport experience. WBC have provided funding to town and parish councils who are responsible for maintaining shelters.

Many of the shelters have green roofs helping to contribute towards efforts to tackle the climate and ecological emergency. It follows feedback from bus surveys, where residents said the condition of bus stops influences how they travel.



These improvements are made possible by funding from HM Government, given to the Council after submission of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP).

Electrical reuse scheme launches at recycling centres

WBC have teamed up, in partnership with Veolia, with Green Machine Computers to launch an exciting new electrical reuse scheme at both Household Waste Recycling Centres in Newtown Road and Padworth.



Residents can now drop off used mobile phones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers at dedicated collection points at either site, giving their old devices a new lease of life.

Once collected, Green Machine Computers will securely remove any data before passing reusable items to The Tech Hub in Hungerford. From there, they will be made available free of charge or at low cost to charities and

people in need, ensuring technology reaches those who need it most.

Changes to Bin Collections

The Liberal Democrats made a change to black bin collections in West Berkshire. From last year, black bins are now collected every three weeks instead of every fortnight.

It's important to note that these changes will **not** affect:

- Households with communal bin stores (e.g. flats)
- Weekly food waste collections; and
- Fortnightly recycling and garden waste collections

At the end of last year, there was a consultation in which most people voted [against](#) the change to reduce black bin collections to once every three weeks instead of every fortnight. Despite clear opposition, the administration decided to press ahead with the changes.

Residents who have a large family and/or have someone in the home who has a medical condition that generates a significant volume of unrecyclable waste, can [apply for extra rubbish capacity here](#).

U Turn on Resource Centres

The Liberal Democrats announced that they are uturning and now plan to continue to run the Resource Centres directly, following pressure from residents and opposition councillors.

To ensure long-term sustainability, they will be co-locating complementary services within the same buildings - keeping services affordable, connected, and close to home.

It is hoped this decision will ensure residents receive high-quality, accessible, and cost-effective support.

Continuing Successful Projects

The previous Conservative Administration of WBC (Pre 2023) started a number of schemes and projects which we are proud are continuing with success and providing benefits to local residents and their communities.

Bikeability

WBC are continuing to run Bikeability training courses during school holidays for children and sometimes adults too.

All courses are run by DBS checked, fully-qualified Bikeability instructors and currently cost £25 per course. The child's bike must be fully road-worthy and the right size. The instructors have the right to refuse training if the bike is deemed unsafe.

More information and how to book is available [here](#).

Soil Conditioner

WBC have now held eight soil conditioner give-aways on where residents could collect free, peat-free, PAS 100 certified soil conditioner produced locally from West Berkshire's garden waste.

No appointment is required to attend these give-away events, just proof of address, such as an ID card or recent utility bill, to confirm they live in West Berkshire.

The soil conditioner is provided loose, for residents to fill into their own bags, boxes or containers.

This is always a popular event so with many queues during busy periods and short delays while containers are refilled.

Home composting is a simple, cost-effective way to turn garden and kitchen waste into nutrient-rich compost for plants. By composting at home, residents reduce the amount of waste sent for disposal and create a natural soil improver that helps gardens thrive. Most garden waste, fruit and vegetable peelings, tea bags, coffee grounds, and even shredded paper can go into a compost bin. Avoid cooked food, meat, and dairy, as these can attract pests.

With the right mix of "greens" (like grass cuttings and food scraps) and "browns" (like twigs and cardboard), healthy compost will be ready in a few months.

1. Reduce waste and save money

composting diverts food and garden waste from your black bin saving vital space for non-recyclable items it's a free alternative to paid garden waste services, turning your waste into a valuable resource

2. Create free fertiliser

compost is rich in nutrients and improves soil structure, moisture retention, and plant health use it in your garden beds, pots, or as mulch - no need to buy chemical fertilisers

3. Help the environment

it supports biodiversity by improving soil health and feeding beneficial organisms

4. Easy to start

you can compost using a bin, a pile, or even trench composting directly in your garden West Berkshire residents can buy compost bins from the [Get Composting website](#)

[Recycle Now](#) provide great tips and useful advice to get your compost bin started.

Holiday Activities and Food Programme

The Holidays Activities and Food (HAF) programme offers free holiday club places for children and young people eligible for free school meals.

The activity sessions are run during school holidays at no cost to parents, and include:

- Sports, music, arts and crafts
- Outdoor and indoor play, gaming and other exciting opportunities to learn and develop skills
- A nutritious meal each day
- Nutritional resources to keep
- Fun workshops and visits at selected venues

To find out if a child is eligible, please contact their school or [WBC's HAF Coordinator](#).

Free Bus Schemes

A double decker bus at full capacity can take over 2km of cars off the road, and the free bus travel has helped promote local businesses and encourage more sustainable transport. By helping more people to access buses and encourage people out of their cars, the amount of congestion on our roads has reduced and the air quality improves.

These happen regularly now, particularly around holidays when more people are looking to get out and about, as well as on days such as World Car Free Day, where a wider campaign is involved.

Streatley Footpath 21 officially open

After 20 years of anticipation, WBC are delighted to share that Streatley Footpath 21 is now open for everyone to enjoy!

Originally established in 2004 as part of planning permission for The Swan Hotel, the footpath remained unusable for many years due to challenging terrain, including drainage ditches, dense vegetation, and persistently wet ground.

Over the past five years, Countryside and Public Rights of Way Teams have led a series of improvements guided by ecological recommendations. These included safety tree work supported by bat surveys, vegetation clearance, water level studies, and the installation of two bridges.

A big thank you to all those involved in making this happen including: Mid and West Berkshire Local Access Forum, Mend the Gap, The Swan Hotel, the Berkshire Ornithological Club, the Mobility Issues Group for Goring and Streatley (MIGGS), and neighbouring landowners.

Cllr Clive Hooker

Clive.hooker@westberks.gov.uk

07798 920981