

Parish Council Report for June 2020

Councillor Clive Hooker (West Berkshire Council, Downlands Ward)

West Berkshire Council and Covid-19

I am sure that many of you will be relieved that the lockdown measures have been relaxed somewhat and that life is slowly resuming to some normality with our local public houses and eateries opening in a controlled manner. On Saturday it was good to see so much activity at these places with social participation being enjoyed with responsible social distancing being adhered to.

Much of my time last month was taken up with planning and speeding matters. Speeding in and through our rural villages is becoming an increasing problem, several Parish Councils are in discussion with WBC to request that it conducts traffic surveys and trains residents in the operation of speed indicator devices so as to build a better understanding of the excessive speeds occurring and when they take place. Due to the commitment of our Parish Councils to ensure the safety of their residents and the results from the Council surveys we may be seeing more speed camera devices on the approaches to our villages.

Planning application submissions across the District are generally down in number due to the Corona Virus situation and although many of the Planning Officers are working from home, the change has been seamless and efficiency of the service is unchanged.

Council meetings

Last month the WBC Executive meeting on 11 June was cancelled as there were no formal decisions to be taken. The full Council meeting on 9 July has now also been cancelled for the same reason. The Executive will next meet on 16 July.

The latest HMG guidance (published 30 June) on the use of council buildings, makes reference to physical meetings: "We continue to recommend that where meetings can take place digitally, without the need for face-to-face contact, they should do so" (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-council-buildings>).

So, for the time being, Zoom will be our method for meetings and engagement. Meetings of the Council, Executive and Committees will continue to be viewable online live and also recorded for later viewing. Agendas are published in advance on the WBC website and contain links to view the meetings: <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/committees>.

Recovery Strategy

The Executive will be considering the draft Recovery Strategy at its meeting on 16 July. The immediate focus in the strategy is on health, education and economic recovery; three areas that are fundamental and that have been considerably impacted by Covid.

Additional Funding for addressing the Covid pandemic

There have been indications that further Government funding to address Covid is imminent and we await an announcement.

Regarding funding generally, WBC recently issued a media notice, recognising that it had been widely reported that councils across the UK were struggling to manage the additional demands on their services, and that some were considering issuing a 'Section 114 Notice' (where the Chief Finance Officer judges that the council is unable to set or maintain a balanced budget), but reassuring residents WBC is not in that position and that it currently has the funds in place to deal with the financial impact of Covid (both in terms of additional costs and reduced income).

Local outbreak control planning

You will have seen a considerable amount in the news about this recently, in particular (currently) in relation to Leicester.

As part of the next stage of the national response to the Covid pandemic, local authorities have to develop Local Outbreak Control Plans (LOCP) to prevent and control local outbreaks of the virus. We have worked with partners to publish our LOCP - see <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-locp>.

The plan summarises how we will aim to protect our residents and communities by minimising the further spread or recurrence of Covid across West Berkshire. We know that Covid is likely to be with us until better treatments and/or a vaccine is available, and it is therefore important that we all play our part in remaining vigilant and follow national and local guidance to keep us all safe.

The key aims of the plan are to detail roles and responsibilities in the prevention and management of Covid, to recognise and respond to outbreaks, and to prevent the further spread and recurrence of infection. Coordinated communication with the public, partners and the media will also be an integral part of the LOCP.

We have also formed a Member-led Local Outbreak Engagement Group (linked to the Health and Wellbeing Board) and parishes can expect to hear more about the LOCP and other Covid related issues as things progress.

Adult Social Care

Supporting the market

Thus far WBC has received claims from care providers for £0.5m+ in Covid related costs (most claims are to the end of May), with more to come, and in addition we have paid out approaching £1.4m from a ring-fenced infection control fund (75% to care homes, with the balance split between support for Infection Control Nurses within the Berkshire West Integrated Care Partnership, Domiciliary Care and Extra Care providers).

PPE

PPE doesn't appear to be an issue. Generally providers buy it and then claim, but they can come to WBC if it's an emergency.

Assurance report

It is now an HMG requirement to have a care settings assurance report showing every care home's position (RAG rated) relating to a number of factors, eg testing, PPE, completing NHS Tracker (shows capacity to deal with Covid, outbreaks, etc), workforce, etc. The WBC report is nearly all green with very few current issues.

Visiting care homes

We are looking to reintroduce visiting at WBC care homes (with strict guidelines) as soon as we can do so safely, and are awaiting Public Health guidance.

Community Support Hub

The Hub has now moved into its new format as anticipated in last month's report.

Education

Planned return to school - Summer/Autumn Term

Children have been gradually coming back to school and by mid-June all schools were open for wider year groups (although some schools have found it difficult to accommodate all of the children whose parents want them to return; for example one school was already full with vulnerable groups and key worker's children).

The education service is working with head teachers to find ways to increase capacity to particularly support the Autumn Term beginning in September.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged children have been supplied with devices to allow them to access remote learning via their schools and BBC Bitesize. Further, the DfE has announced that they have signed a contract with BT to deliver 200k broadband connections to some homes.

Culture and Leisure

Leisure Centres

At the time of writing government guidance for the reopening of indoor leisure venues is awaited.

West Berkshire Museum and Shaw House

The Museum and Shaw House will be reopening to the public in July.

Staff have been working hard to make sure that they can offer visitors the same social and cultural experience that they've enjoyed in the past, but within a slightly reduced capacity. To ensure that it is safe for visitors to return, the Council's Culture service has made changes in line with government guidance on managing the risk of Covid.

Both venues have been deep-cleaned, have reception screens in place, hand sanitiser and hand washing facilities. Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) has been supplied for staff to use when necessary and have social distancing, queuing and one-way systems in place.

The **Museum** will reopen on Wednesday 15 July and will then be open each Wednesday to Friday from 10:00 to 16:00. Museum staff will ask visitors to queue at a designated entrance and leave via a separate exit. There will be a one-way system to allow visits to all of the galleries and exhibitions (unfortunately, the museum's library will not be available in this phase).

The gift shop, accessible toilet and baby changing facilities will be open, but the café and standard toilets will remain closed for the time being.

Shaw House will reopen for visits to the house and grounds on Saturday 18 July and will then be open from 11:00 to 16:00 every Saturday and Sunday until the end of the summer season on Sunday 27 September.

Again, staff will ask visitors to queue to get in to the building and direct them along a one-way system which runs throughout the House and will include the exhibition rooms where they can visit the new 'Dressed for Battle' civil war display.

During the school holidays visitors will have access to the grounds only which will be open Monday to Friday, 11:00 to 16:00. Unfortunately, the garden games will not be available but visitors are welcome to take their own along with a picnic. Dogs on leads are also welcome.

The toilets and shop will be open, along with the café which will be running a take-out service (indoor seating will not be available, but there are plenty of picnic tables outside).

At both venues the children's activities, interactive interpretation and dressing up will not be available in this initial phase but there be a variety of free trails to enjoy, along with regular digital activities which will continue throughout the summer holidays, plus a new short story competition - www.westberkshireheritage.org/life-long-learning.

For more news and event updates visit www.westberkshireheritage.org.uk.

Libraries

Re-opening

The Council has announced plans for restoring the library service to the public in phases to keep everyone safe.

The first stage from the 13 July will be to open Newbury, Hungerford and Thatcham Libraries for book collections during limited opening hours. We aim to open our other libraries on the same basis the following

week. In order to ensure that it is safe for customers to return, customers can expect changes which are in line with government guidance on managing the risk of Covid; all buildings have been thoroughly deep-cleaned, and have reception screens in place. We are asking all customers to use hand sanitiser which is provided on entry to the library, and also to observe social distancing requirements.

Customers will be able to use the normal reservation service for specific titles, or the new **Order & Collect service**. No overdue fines are currently being charged.

Book orders can be placed online at <https://westberks.spydus.co.uk> or by telephoning your local library.

Customers should be aware that there will be no access to any areas of the library apart from a collections desk and that enquiries should continue to be sent by email or telephone. There will be no toilets, baby changing facilities, seating areas or public PCs available at this stage.

West Berkshire Libraries have already resumed their **At Home service**, which delivers books to housebound users. This service is a vital link for customers who aren't able to visit libraries due to age, disability or other special circumstance, and the library team are now planning to expand the service to those who are vulnerable and self-isolating due to Covid. If you would like to find out more about the At Home service, please telephone 01635 519827 or email library@westberks.gov.uk.

The **Mobile Library service** remains suspended. We plan to restore it in a further phase of service recovery when it is safe to do so.

Volunteering

The Library Service has a plan to welcome volunteers back if they want to return and will do that in phases guided by risk assessments to ensure the safety of those who are potentially vulnerable. There will be more and new ways for people to volunteer while minimising contact with the public for the time being.

Request for financial contributions in financial year 2020-21

Following the library service review (early 2017) the Council made the following proposal to town and parish councils:

- the library service has an annual budget shortfall of £150k to deliver the service – eight libraries, plus the Mobile and At Home services, and the e-library;
- parish contributions are sought based on £1 per parish resident;
- because this would be a voluntary donation/contribution, not a grant, it is compliant with s.137, LGA 1972 (WBC can provide legal advice to confirm) – WBC is not delegating any part of its statutory duty to provide library services or levying a charge on parishes;
- contributions are ring-fenced for the aspects of the service that the data shows are most used by parish council residents – for example, a particular branch library, and WBC will provide each parish with annual data about library usage by their residents;
- the Library Service welcomes participation in library working groups to increase community engagement and feedback.

Waste Services

Household Waste Recycling Centres

The booking system introduced for residents to book a slot to visit the Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRC) at Newtown Road (Newbury) and Padworth has been working well. Indeed, WBC has been singled out by the Government as an exemplar – <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safer-public-places-urban-centres-and-green-spaces-covid-19/6-additional-communications-technology-and-regulatory-considerations>.

This from the Manager of the WBC Waste Team: “A key part of our traffic management and customer demand management plan has been the use of a booking system. The booking system - together with traffic management schemes and effective communications - has helped us to avoid traffic congestion on local roads

and achieve safe operations on the sites. Initial customer feedback on the visit experience has been overwhelmingly positive and a large proportion of customers have indicated they have been happy with the use of a booking system. Booking slot availability has been good and customers have always found slots within a few days at the time of checking”.

Some statistics (both sites combined) to the end of June: 22,687 appointments were booked out of 23,480 available. There was a daily average of 482 visits compared to 1,047 for the same period last year – a 46% reduction.

Fly-Tipping

Please use <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/article/27751> to report fly tipping with as much detail as can be provided. We are continuing to monitor our environment and take enforcement action where possible.

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 key messages continue to be not to leave home if anyone in your household has symptoms, and:

- 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.

The new rules from 4 July

For details of the changes being introduced at the weekend, please visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do-after-4-july>.

Temporary Licenses for Additional Tables and Chairs (“Pavement licences”)

Hospitality businesses in West Berkshire will be able to apply for additional outdoor seating to allow them to welcome customers back safely.

Pubs, cafes, restaurants and hotels across England have been closed since late March but received confirmation on 23 June that they would be allowed to re-open on 4 July whilst adhering to social distancing guidance.

As social distancing restrictions will mean less available space, the Council is inviting businesses to submit proposals for additional outdoor seating. The proposal was originally launched on 23 June but has been amended to reflect new Government guidance.

Pre-Covid, businesses would usually only be issued a pavement café licence once planning approval had been granted. However, the new application process allows for a licence for up to 12 months to be issued, without the need for planning permission as long as the proposal is judged to be safe for pedestrians and road users. Whereas the usual charges for a year’s licence start at £227, businesses are being offered them for £100.

Once this 12 month period has expired, a licence application can be made and issued once evidence of planning approval is provided.

Other issues arising from Covid

Rough sleepers and the homeless

The WBC Housing Team has been working closely with those individuals who were accommodated in hotels as lockdown began. They have successfully moved on and secured accommodation for 14 out of 60 individuals with a further 10 awaiting moving in dates for social housing tenancies.

As part of the recovery process there has been a review of procedures to assist those facing homelessness via the Homelessness Strategy Group. A peak in homelessness applications is anticipated when the current ban on evictions is lifted and the Housing Team is ready to seek to prevent evictions with a range of financial resources and advice.

Opening of outdoor playgrounds and outdoor gyms

Following the Prime Minister's recent announcement, outdoor gyms and outdoor playgrounds will be allowed to open from 4 July if they can do so safely.

WBC has published guidance to provide the owners and operators responsible for outdoor playgrounds and outdoor gyms with practical advice on how these can be reopened and managed effectively to enable their use while minimising the transmission risk of Covid.

The guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-playgrounds-and-outdoor-gyms/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-playgrounds-and-outdoor-gyms>.

Communications Channels

As well as Twitter there are also a number of Facebook pages which the Council uses, for example:

- West Berkshire Council;
- West Berkshire Community Support Hub Group;
- West Berkshire Libraries.

The WBC website also contains more about the CSH and useful information for residents and businesses:

Residents <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-residents>

Business <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-business>

Community hub <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-communityhub>

Linked to all of these initiatives is the WBC Customer Service telephone line: 01635 551111.

Other WBC Matters

West Berkshire Energy Switch

A reminder that this, free to join, scheme gives residents the chance to see if they can make savings on their fuel bills. Since 2016, 724 households have switched supplier, saving over £160k between them.

A one day reverse auction was held in May, with all winning suppliers providing 100% renewable energy; registrants already signed up are now receiving their personalised offer for consideration.

To register or find out more, visit www.westberks.gov.uk/communityswitch.

Emergency Active Travel Fund

WBC has been awarded £124k by the Department for Transport to help us introduce pop-up and temporary interventions to create an environment that is safe for both walking and cycling.

The allocation is part of the Government's emergency active travel fund and Phase 1 measures include:

- additional cycle parking in a number of our towns and villages;
- temporary road closures and parking suspensions to enable social distancing in town centres;
- temporary exemption for cyclists in one way streets;
- widening of footpaths at busy bus stops;
- permanent conversions of temporary cycle ways.

Please see <http://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/n48pCvo5JI7lnq7tQg0tZ?domain=track.vuelio.uk.com> for full details - Phase 2 funding is anticipated later in the summer and we will be seeking further funding of £495k towards more permanent measures to encourage active travel.

M4 Junctions 12 (Theale, West Berkshire) to 15 (Swindon, Wiltshire) – Weekend Closures

According to Highways England, resurfacing work along the M4 between junctions 12 and 15 is ongoing and progressing well.

In July weekend closures along the M4 are required as some sections of resurfacing will replace all layers down to the foundations. To allow time for the materials to harden the M4 is to be closed over entire weekend periods.

The first weekend closure is scheduled to take place from **21:00 on Friday 3 July to 06:00 on Monday 6 July 2020**, and will be a closure of the M4 westbound carriageway between junction 13 and junction 14.

Further weekend closures have been scheduled for the following dates, but are subject to change:

- **Friday 4 to Monday 7 September** – M4 westbound between junction 13 and junction 14
- **Friday 11 to Monday 14 September** – M4 eastbound between junction 15 and junction 14
- **Friday 2 to Monday 5 October** – M4 eastbound between junction 13 and junction 12

Significant delays are expected during these weekend closures and drivers are asked to plan essential journeys to allow extra time or avoid this route if possible.

For more about the work, email info@highwaysengland.co.uk or call 0300 123 5000.

PC Harper murder trial resumes at the Old Bailey

The trial into the death of PC Andrew Harper has restarted at the Old Bailey, having been halted due to the pandemic. Mr Justice Edis has recognised the significance of the case and it is encouraging that this is one of the first jury trials in the country to begin as the lockdown restrictions have begun to be relaxed.

Virtual policing and crime discussion event

Matthew Barber (Thames Valley Deputy Police & Crime Commissioner) will be holding an online discussion about the big issues affecting policing and crime across Thames Valley and the role of the Police and Crime Commissioner in delivering an effective and efficient police force. This will be on Monday 20 July from 19:00 to 20:00 via Zoom and registration is at <http://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/n48pCvo5JI7lnq7tQg0tZ?domain=track.vuelio.uk.com>.

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