



Parish Council Report for February 2021

Cllr Ross Mackinnon, Bradfield Ward

West Berkshire Council

Meetings

Council

Council met on 2 March to consider a number of things, but principally the Revenue Budget (and thus level of council tax), and the Capital Strategy and Programme, for the financial year 2021/22.

There is more about both below, but the headline news is that (excluding parish, Fire and Police precepts) council tax will increase by 1.99% and there will be no Adult Social Care precept in 21/22. According to the [Daily Mirror](#), this makes WBC one of only five councils in England limiting rises next year to less than 2%. So far as the other unitary authorities in Berkshire are concerned, one is increasing council tax by 3.49% and the remaining four by 4.99%

Executive

At its meeting on 11 February, as well as considering the budget papers on their way to the council meeting referred to above, the Executive considered and approved a (cost neutral) restructure in the Strategy and Governance Service which will see 7.5 posts added to the staffing complement (21.5 posts are being created with 14 deleted).

The next meeting of the Executive will be on 25 March.

Remote Meetings

Links to all agendas and public meeting papers are [here](#), and all WBC public meetings are broadcast live on YouTube and recorded so that they can be viewed at leisure - [West Berkshire Council YouTube Channel](#). Guidance for anyone attending a remote public meeting (eg a parish representative at a planning committee) is [here](#).

With regard to remote meetings generally, The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 cease to have effect on 7 May. There is a debate in local government legal circles about what “place” means in respect of place of meeting in Schedule 12, LGA 1972. There has been (or will be?) [an application to court](#) for a declaration that the existing legislation (ie once the meetings regulations fall by the wayside) allows for remote meetings without further primary legislation. WBC is currently looking at how hybrid meetings might be held.

The Budget

The WBC Revenue Budget and Capital Strategy for 2021-22, passed at the council meeting on 2 March, sets out the planned investment in the district within the context of the current pandemic.

As detailed above, the council tax increase has been limited to 1.99% without any increase in the Adult Social Care precept, and also without any cuts to essential services.

The budget treads a careful path between affordability, core infrastructure, and new investment to support our council strategies - the decreased (immediate) demand for adult social care services, due to Covid-19,

alongside the extensive financial support from central government and the continued strong financial control of the council, means that we are able to support our residents' finances as well as investing in vital services.

WBC has received significant Government support during the pandemic, meaning that there can be continued investment in services, promoting the priorities set out in the Council Strategy, with key investments outlined in the budget including:

- £12.5m investment in the WBC Environment Strategy;
- £900k to introduce separate food waste collections;
- £40m investment in the People Directorate with a focus on Education projects;
- £11.9m for the Highways improvement programme;
- £500k allocated from Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to fund 16 community bids for improvements, including a new Multi Use Community Hub in Calcot, a pond restoration in East Ilsley and several new and enhanced community halls.

Covid-19

The Roadmap Out Of Lockdown

With the early signs of spring beginning to show, residents are no doubt heartened by the Government announcement setting out the roadmap for the easing of lockdown, and the prospect of a summer with greater freedoms.

Whilst it is natural for us to wish to see normality returning with eagerness we must never the less continue to observe the current rules until the gradual relaxation commences which starts with our schools from 8 March. Meanwhile, and until a larger number of the adult population has been vaccinated we must all continue with Hands, Face, Space, to help protect others. Better days are coming...

The Government has outlined the four tests of Pace, Efficacy, Pressure on the NHS, and Risk of Variants - further information about the easing of lockdown can be found in the [Four Step Plan](#).

Local Infection Rates

West Berkshire is seeing a sharp decline in infection rates although there remain a number of new cases being reported daily. The current rolling weekly rate is now down to just over 60 per 100,000 but is hoped to continue to decrease significantly over time.

As previously referred to, Berkshire local Covid information about the daily reported cases in the district (and across Berkshire), and the weekly per 100,000 rate (one of the principal factors in any decision making) can be accessed from Berkshire Public Health [website](#).



Vaccinations – Local Position



The Covid vaccination rollout is now being handled in two tranches – cohort 6 (those aged 16-64 with underlying health conditions) are being called to the PCN (Primary Care Network) hubs at Newbury Racecourse and Pangbourne, with cohorts 5 and 7 receiving NHS letters to go to the mass vaccination centres, such as the one that opened at the Madejski Stadium on 22 February.

It is anticipated that all over 50s will have been offered their first vaccine by the end of April, alongside the delivery of second doses within twelve weeks of the first.

If the pace and supply can be maintained the remaining adult population will have been offered vaccinations by the end of July. Further information regarding vaccination can be found on the Berkshire Public Health website [here](#).

Vaccinations – National Position

Weekly reports on the vaccine rollout are being published by NHS [here](#), giving data at an Integrated Care System (ICS) level – in our case at the level of the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West (“BOB”) ICS. Additionally, Government data can be found [here](#).

Community Testing

Rapid widespread testing – also known as lateral flow testing or community testing - is a key tool in the fight against Coronavirus. Lateral flow testing can identify people who don't have any Covid-19 symptoms (referred to as asymptomatic) and may be spreading the virus without knowing it.

During February the district has opened four sites where tests can be carried out for key workers, these can be found at Highwood Copse Primary School, Thatcham Rugby Club and sites at Hungerford Rugby Club and Burghfield Community Sports Association.

Around one in three people who are infected with Covid-19 have no symptoms and could be spreading the disease without knowing it. Broadening testing to identify people showing no symptoms will mean that positive cases can be found more quickly, helping to break the chain of transmission.

Testing is available to critical and keyworkers and those who have to travel for work or care for others. However the Council is also inviting the self-employed and those in small businesses to get tested as well. Testing is only for those without any symptoms - anyone who does have symptoms should book a test at www.nhs.uk/coronavirus, or by calling 119, or at [Lateral Flow Testing - West Berkshire Council](#).

Community Support Hub

Our [support hub](#) can still be contacted on 01635 503579 if needed.

Local Outbreak Engagement Board

The Local Outbreak Engagement Board meets on alternate weeks in private and in public. Thus, each fortnight, there is a live broadcast meeting to update residents of the current activities relating to Covid-19 in and around the district (and beyond). Public meetings are available on the Council's YouTube channel and further information about the Board can be found [here](#).

Covid Marshalls



In addition to Marshalls stationed at local testing centres (see above), six WBC Covid Marshalls started work across the district during February.

The Marshalls will undertake a range of duties including advising and supporting members of the public and businesses to follow social distancing rules.

They travel across the district, working in shifts to cover seven days a week, using their local knowledge to cover priority areas such as supermarkets and other shops, markets, parks and open spaces. The cost will be met by

Covid-19 funding provided to the Council by central government.

Coronavirus Information On The WBC Website

The Council keeps up to date information for residents and businesses on the [website](#).

Winter Hardship Grant Scheme

Support continues to be available for residents who are in need of help with food, utility bills and other essentials - for more information and applications, go [here](#).

Financial Support for Businesses

West Berkshire Council is administering a further series of grant schemes to support local businesses that have been affected by the national coronavirus restrictions (and details of the new grant for Early Years Education Providers are set out below).

Information about eligibility, and how businesses who have not received support previously can apply, can be found [here](#).

'Surviving to Thriving' - £200k Covid-19 Mental Health Fund

WBC and Greenham Trust have each pledged £100k to set up a joint fund to enable voluntary and community sector organisations in West Berkshire to apply for grants of between £500 and £30k to fund projects aimed at helping improve the mental health and wellbeing of local residents impacted by Covid-19.

Requests for grants made via The Good Exchange (Greenham Trust's online funding and fundraising platform) will be reviewed weekly so organisations are encouraged to apply as soon as possible.

This partnership initiative is designed to enable not-for-profit organisations to carry out small, meaningful projects that can help mitigate the impact that Covid-19 has had on mental health and wellbeing in the district. It also means that smaller organisations will also have the opportunity to apply for funds to carry out their activities (possibly online), one-off purchases or new initiatives.

Education

Back To School

In line with the Government's recent announcements regarding the first stage of easing lockdown, schools will open to all pupils on Monday 8 March. As ever, safety is paramount and WBC is working hard with schools to ensure that appropriate measures and testing facilities are in place (see above on Community Testing).

The reopening of schools will be welcomed by children and parents alike, and a huge tribute needs to be paid to all the parents, grandparents, other carers and teaching staff who have worked tirelessly educating children at home and in school through the variety of teaching methods.

Young People Not In Education, Employment Or Training (NEET)

Young people have been among the hardest hit by the economic impact of Covid-19, but in West Berkshire the number of those counted as NEET remains low - with 97.5% of all of our young people in education, employment or training our figures are not currently only the highest in Berkshire but the highest in the whole of the South East.

Grant for Early Years Education Providers

Grants of up to £3k are available to Early Years education providers to help them with the challenges of the pandemic – all providers will have been contacted by WBC with details of the application process

Adult Social Care

Care Home Visiting Policy

Following the announcement that, from next Monday (8 March) every care home resident will be allowed one regular indoor visitor, permitted (subject to having a negative lateral flow test) to hold hands with the resident, WBC Adult Social care is awaiting publication of the full guidance in order to re-publish its [visiting policy and guidance](#).

Walnut Close Care Home

All the residents from Walnut Close have now moved to their new surrounding (see November's report), with most moving into WBC's Birchwood care home, and Walnut Close has closed.

Leisure and Culture

Newbury Sports Ground

The consultation referred to last month has now closed and there will be a report to the Executive later this month.

A summary of the responses and details of any decision taken will then be posted on the WBC website. If further steps to develop the new sports ground are then to be taken, there will be a need to apply for planning permission, in turn open to scrutiny and comment.



Libraries

West Berkshire Libraries are anticipated to reopen on 12 April subject to the Government's lockdown easing tests being met.

The easiest way to continue to borrow titles is via the apps BorrowBox and Libby, which can be downloaded from the Apple app store and Google Play store, and anyone with a Kindle tablet can download the apps from Amazon. Anyone who has these apps can then search for West Berkshire Libraries and login using their library card number and PIN (members can reset their library PIN [here](#)). Customers who need help with this can drop an email to the library, where staff will be happy to help: library@westberks.gov.uk.

Customers who are not already members of the library can join online to get free, instant access to the e-library by [registering](#).

Residents are encouraged to check out the extensive programme of activities for children and adults, which will continue online, and follow the library Facebook, Twitter or Instagram pages (@WBerksLibraries).

West Berkshire Lottery's Community Fund Awards Nearly £14k To Twelve Local Charities

WBC has announced that the West Berkshire Community Fund, standing at £13,957 as at January 2021, is being distributed to twelve local charities registered with the West Berkshire Lottery following application bids from these organisations. The awards were determined by an independent panel who meet annually to consider applications from eligible causes.

All of the successful bid applicants to the Fund are undertaking vital work for the community, including young people and the disadvantaged. The independent judging panel was delighted to award the community funding to these deserving organisations to support their services or facilities to improve the lives of others, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The successful applicants in the January 2021 round have been awarded as follows:

- 1st Theale & Calcot Scout Group - £1,500 in running costs, including the national scouts membership fee, to continue to offer participating children a varied programme of events and badges.
- Action for Pangbourne Toilets Charitable Trust - £500 to maintain the building and help towards the cost of the contract cleaners.
- Citizens Advice West Berkshire - £750 to continue providing Spending Diaries and financial capability support to clients who are now faced with a much smaller income due to the pandemic and desperately in need of budgeting advice.
- City Arts Newbury - £500 to offer free-to-access activities for children as part of its developing Community Outreach programme.
- Home-Start West Berkshire - £2,140 towards a new project called Preventing Poverty. This project will help enable a Family Coordinator to support 20-25 volunteers who are helping families to alleviate the stress that come when they can't make ends meet.
- Love Lane Pre-School, Donnington - £2,000 to develop further the school's outside learning area with the installation of an awning to protect the children from sun and rain as they learn and play outside.
- St Mark's Church of England Schools Association - £1,000 to provide the school with laptops to benefit all pupils and support them in reaching their full potential when used in the classroom environment.

- Swings & Smiles, Thatcham - £947 to help fund a tactile wall panel for children with special needs.
- Thatcham Park School Parents and Friends Association - £1,000 to fund a ramp from the school's main playground onto the playing field.
- The Downs School, Compton - £1,500 to create a therapeutic garden for pupils to meet with teachers and support workers in a safe open space, when feelings become too overwhelming and a therapeutic approach is required.
- Time To Talk - £2,000 to use towards a digital transformation project to enable the charity's mental health counselling services for young people to continue to expand and become increasingly more efficient.
- West Berkshire Therapy Centre - £120 towards an annual Pro license for Zoom Conferencing to allow trustees to meet to discuss support the development and executing plans for trust members.

Local, not-for-profit organisations or groups who would like to sign up to raise funds for free through the West Berkshire Lottery are invited to visit [West Berkshire Lottery](#) for further information and to register.

Transport and Countryside

Active Travel

WBC has launched a set of draft measures to help the public safely make walking or cycling part of their daily travel choices, and is inviting feedback from the community to help shape these plans. The public consultations can be found at [Active Travel Consultation](#).

Designed to encourage 'active travel' by introducing more walking and cycling opportunities throughout the district, the draft proposals include:

- West Berks Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). This emerging draft transport policy is about making streets work for everyone, thus helping to make West Berkshire a better place to live, work and visit.
- Crown Mead Cycleways. The emerging LCWIP has identified the A4 as a primary route with high potential for increased cycle trips if appropriate infrastructure were to be provided.
- Western Avenue Cycleways. The A4 Western Avenue in Speen, Newbury has been identified as a high priority corridor for cycling and walking routes. The plan proposes permanent measures to create and improve travel routes for cyclists and pedestrians.
- West Berks Active Streets. These are various smaller scheme draft plans to help improve facilities and grow walking and cycling opportunities in West Berkshire including proposals for restricted access on Lawrence's Lane and Deadman's Lane in Thatcham and Theale respectively. In addition, if any resident would like to submit a specific walking and cycling proposal of their own, or comment on a location which falls outside of the currently identified schemes, they can do so via the Active Travel Heat Map within the West Berks Active Streets section of consultation portal.
- Calcot Schools Streets. This pilot School Zone/School Street Scheme is designed to make the streets around the schools safer and suitable for more walking and cycling, as well as improve the air quality.

The Crown Mead Cycleways and Western Avenue Cycleways proposals are each open for consultation until on Friday, 9 April. The remainder are eight week consultations that will finish on Friday 23 April.

With the exception of the LWCIP, the implementation of the Active Travel proposals will be funded through the £495,000 award from the Department for Transport's Active Travel Fund, following the Council's bid to further develop a lasting, safe environment for walking and cycling.

With their emphasis on promoting health and wellbeing, maintaining a green district and enhancing sustainability, the proposals support the WBC Council Strategy, Environment Strategy, Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Local Transport Plan and Covid-19 Recovery Strategy.

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>

Broadcast meetings [West Berkshire Council YouTube Channel](#)

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

Other Matters

Census - March 2021

A reminder that the Census will take place on 21 March and that it is a statutory obligation to complete it.



The Office of National Statistics is leading the planning and delivery of the Census, with local authorities such as WBC being key beneficiaries of the resulting data.

WBC will be supporting the work to ensure that the Census 2021 is a success (defined by achieving a 95% response rate nationally whilst ensuring that no local area achieves a rate below 80% and, for the 2021 Census, to receive 75% of responses on line).

May Elections

Elections for the Thames Valley PCC and for town and parish council vacancies are to be held (delayed due to Covid-19) on 6 May 2021:

- Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner;
- Lambourn Parish Council (one seat in the Lambourn Ward and one seat in the Upper Lambourn Ward);
- Stratfield Mortimer Parish Council (three seats);
- Newbury Town Council Clay Hill Ward (one seat).

Polling Stations will be subject to stringent Government Covid safety measures to ensure electors can vote safely.

However, WBC is aware that many people will prefer to vote by post, particularly if they are vulnerable or shielding. [Applications for postal votes](#) must be received at WBC's Market Street office in Newbury by **5pm on Tuesday 20 April**.

If residents haven't registered to vote (eg if they have recently moved to the district) they will need to do so [here](#).

Residents can ensure that their electoral details are up to date by emailing vote@westberks.gov.uk