

West Berkshire Council - Review of 2020

Councillor Lynne Doherty, Leader of West Berkshire Council

A Year of Caring for our Communities, Public Engagement, Action, Supporting, Consultation and Strategies, and Achievements, all whilst dealing with a Global Pandemic!

Caring for our Communities

In partnership with Greenham Trust and the Volunteer Centre West Berkshire we launched the Community Support Hub to respond to community needs to COVID-19. Within a month of the first Lockdown we had 89 Community groups and upwards of 3000 volunteers who had stepped forward to support their local communities.

Our new digital platform allowed us to track volume and types of enquiries in more detail and in real time and when necessary respond to any gaps in provision of support.

The council made available a £500 community float to groups and organisations providing shopping support to people identified as 'vulnerable' under COVID-19 government guidelines.

We put a 'local heroes' webpage on our website to give recognition and celebrate the work of our communities.

Our Giving Tree annual Christmas appeal was moved online (for victims of domestic abuse).

We launched a Community Santa appeal which had a superb response from the public with over 200 gifts being donated for those in our communities who have had a particularly difficult year, whether from shielding, bereavement or loneliness.

Christmas cards sent by public to those living in our care homes to lift the spirits of residents and staff.

Our Public Protection Team worked hard to protecting residents from known scams and rogue traders through awareness raising and prosecutions.

Individuals in receipt of Council Tax Support, were given an automatic grant of up to £150 applied to their accounts.

Covid Winter Hardship Grant – in addition to grant received we topped up financial support to almost £500,000 to provide a comprehensive package of financial support to those in economic hardship, including Free School Meal Vouchers for holidays.

Public Engagement

An advice leaflet for West Berkshire residents seeking extra support was made available to our Parishes and Community Groups for distribution.

We distributed 750 printed copies of the advice leaflet and activity sheet created by our public health colleagues, many of which were distributed with food parcels.

We posted out to every house in the District three COVID-19 leaflets specific to West Berkshire.

We conducted a Residents Survey to learn more about our communities' needs. We had 3,300 responses that helped to shape our Recovery Strategy.

Through the introduction of an email news bulletin we have been able to provide a weekly news update to our residents and hub volunteers. We have 40,000 subscribers who are able to get this direct to their inbox.

There has been a huge increase in our social media output on all available channels.

Going digital – the first ever Facebook live session in May with the Leader of the Council, followed by another three to date and a plan to continue this as a medium of communication.

These sessions aim to answer questions that our residents wanted to raise about COVID-19, the first one generated 4,000 views.

Our public meetings have moved online and been broadcast for the first time since May. To date we have had 11,000 views on YouTube.

We implemented a Local Outbreak Engagement Board so the public can be kept informed about COVID-19 Cases here in West Berkshire.

Launched the 'Berkley' Chat Bot – an interactive customer service via our website

Action

- Local Contact Tracing implemented
- Local Outbreak Plan agreed and implemented
- Covid Safe work undertaken by Public Protection Partnership
- Infection Control Measure work with Care Homes
- Kick Start scheme launched
- Reopened out HWRC with successful appointment system
- Reopened libraries in September
- Supporting our homeless into 'move on' accommodation
- Flood defence work in Thatcham completed
- Leisure centres reopened in late July/early August
- Recovery Strategy written with 3 Key Priorities for future, Education, Local Economy and Health

Supporting

£91m in Government Support received to date for all of COVID-19 response work.

£29m for first round of Business Support Grant (in the highest quartile in the country for distributing in a timely manner).

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).

Home to school transport refunds done quickly to avoid hardship.

Extra funding provided by WBC to provide laptops for disadvantaged students.

WBC has prioritised the launch of the new £1.2m discretionary business scheme, throughout we have worked to get the support to those that need it as quickly as possible.

Issuing of Pavement Licences to support hospitality businesses during the summer.

Phase 1 Active Travel implemented with view to encourage greater use of walking and cycling routes. Phase 2 currently out to consultation.

Central Winter Hardship Grant of £279k received for anyone experiencing extreme hardship, topped up (as above) and made available from 1st of December.

New Community Fund - A bidding process will be put in place to encourage communities to come forward and set out opportunities for the £500k set aside from CIL to be spent on local infrastructure (on top of the 15%/25%). The intention is to provide a wide range of infrastructure to supports the specific needs of communities across the district, encouraging more local schemes to support.

Rough Sleeping – funding has enabled us to reduce rough sleeping in district and huge amount of work done with move on accommodation.

Consultations, Strategies, Reviews and Achievements

Reviews and Strategies

- HELAA (Housing and Economic Land Area Assessment)
- DEPZ - new emergency planning zone around AWE.
- Environment Strategy - 300 LAs have declared a climate emergency we are one of the few that have actually published our strategy.
- 1st LA in Country to launch Municipal Community Bond. Chewing Gum Machine for Newbury. Recycling Trials.
- Economic Development Strategy – including support for EDC and work with LEP.
- Playing Pitch Strategy
- Housing Strategy
- Culture Strategy
- Leisure Strategy
- Digital Strategy -to further improve service delivery and pave the way for 5G, ultrafast broadband and full fibre connectivity across the district
- Ultra Low Vehicle Emissions Strategy (ULEV)

... and more consultations under way ...

- LRIE Consultation
- Minerals and Local Waste plan consultation
- Newbury Town Centre Master Plan
- Local Plan

Reviews

- Peer Challenge review
- Independent Remuneration Panel review
- YOT (Youth Offending Team) – Outstanding

Achievements

- Willows Edge Care Home rated Good by CQC
- Theale Primary School opened
- Highwood Copse finished
- Family Safeguarding model
- Trinity School Expansion Project
- West Berks found by Plan UK to be 6th best place in Country to grow up as a female.
- Newbury is named as one of the top European Cities of the Future in a new report by the Financial Times.
- Green Flag Awards for Northcroft & Goldwell and Holybrook Linear Park
- First anniversary of West Berkshire Lottery supporting local good causes.