

7th August 2020



Chief Executive

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Good afternoon,

We first started writing these week-notes in March, two weeks after we received confirmation of the first case of Covid-19 in West Berkshire. At that point, coronavirus was gathering pace and the momentum of the response to the pandemic was beginning to build. We didn't know how things would unfold but we knew it would be significant and that communication with our communities would be a vital part of our response.

Here we are now, on our 20th week-note and with an awful lot having happened in the 147 days since confirmation of the first case. First and foremost, we want to remember the people in West Berkshire who have died as a result of this virus. There have been 131 deaths in the district and each one serves as a reminder to us of just how serious the threat from Covid-19 is. We keep them in our thoughts and send our condolences to their families and friends.

We have a lot to be proud about, and we are thankful to our communities during this time. In our first week-note we wrote about the new Community Support Hub, which then was in its infancy. It grew to become an important resource for the community, helping to harness the groundswell of support from local communities and providing a coordinating role which allowed the community groups to do what they do best – helping others. This response came to be relied upon by a great many people and particularly those who were shielding and needed help. It was set up quickly, but we hope its legacy will endure. We are looking at how we can retain this support for the local community and voluntary sector beyond the end of the year.

It was not just support for the most vulnerable that we provided, and the Council quickly adapted across all its service areas. From pausing car parking fees in support of key workers, to launching a new helpline for young people anxious about Covid-19 to the use of virtual and live-streamed meetings - the response has been magnificent.

The impact on the local economy has been particularly significant and we've worked hard to support local businesses wherever we can. We know it was a challenging time for many and we wanted to make sure as many as possible were able to re-open for business when it was safe to do so. From deferring business rates and offering advice and a toolkit for reopening, to the pedestrianisation of Northbrook Street in Newbury we've done our best for them. We're particularly proud of our track record distributing more than £28m in grants to more than 2,200 businesses – one of only 41 Councils to pay out 100% of the grant. Every pound we received to support small businesses has gone to them and we have heard first-hand about the difference these grants have made.

The response phase has now passed and we have moved into recovery – although we are not complacent and stand ready to respond should there be a second wave of the virus. Last month we adopted a new Recovery Strategy to guide the Council, and the district, in bouncing back from Covid-19. It focuses on three key themes:

- The health of our population
- The educational success of our District
- The economic success of West Berkshire

These three areas will act as a guide for us as we move forward through recovery and to whatever the 'new normal' looks like. It's clear that coronavirus will be around for some time to come and we are working hard on our local outbreak plan. From preventative measures, to responding to an outbreak and informing our communities we take our responsibilities towards the health of our communities extremely seriously and we are ready to respond should an outbreak occur.

As you can probably tell, this 20th instalment of the week-notes has left us in a reflective mood but also with a feeling of cautious optimism too. The response and recovery has been done hand in hand with our communities and we have felt and valued your support over the past few months. We couldn't have done it without such strong links between the Council and the communities we serve, and with communities which themselves have an inner resilience.

Please, please do keep it up – keep looking out for each other and look out for yourselves too. Social distancing is as important now as it ever was, and face coverings are really important in keeping us safe and each other too. We've seen what can happen elsewhere, so while cases here are still relatively low there is no room for complacency – following the guidance will help us keep it this way.

Stay safe, look after each other and enjoy the good weather we have on the way. We will see you next week.

Yours sincerely,



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