

20th November 2020



Chief Executive

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Good afternoon,

Earlier this week we were delighted to announce that a brand new primary school, which had been delayed by the pandemic, has now been completed.

At the start of April, work on Highwood Copse Primary School in Newbury had to be put on hold due to restrictions introduced in response to coronavirus. Work resumed when it was safe to do so, and we're pleased to say that the school has now been completed. It is a fantastic space, and we look forward to working with the Newbury College Academy Trust who will be taking on the running of the school and preparing it to receive reception pupils next year.

This is the second new primary school that has opened in the district this year, following hot on the heels of the new Theale Primary School which opened a couple of months ago. We have invested more than £16m to deliver these two new schools, as part of a broader £43m capital programme to improve our schools over the next three years and help children across the district to achieve their full potential.

Helping young people reach their potential, as well as ensuring they are protected and cared for is an important strand in our Council Strategy. As part of this we have been piloting a new way of supporting families over the past couple of years, with the recently published findings showing the trial has been a huge success.

Called the Family Safeguarding Model, the new approach builds on a successful model developed by Hertfordshire County Council. To see if it could be rolled out more widely, we were one of four councils chosen by the Department for Education (DfE) to further test the model. Two years on and the results are in – with the DfE evaluation showing it has been effective at preventing children from becoming looked after (where that is safe and appropriate) and has reduced the number of children on Child Protection Plans. It is a model that other local authorities are encouraged to consider adopting and we're proud to have helped lead the way.

The programme brings groups of professionals together under one roof to provide intensive support to parents whose problems with substance misuse, mental health and domestic abuse put their children at risk of harm. It is very much about working with families and empowering them to identify what they would like to change and how they can achieve this. Importantly, feedback from the families we work with has been positive and they feel their chances of making lasting, beneficial changes has improved as a result of this approach.

Here in West Berkshire we saw the number of children entering care drop by 40% across the two years – that's 34 fewer children going into care. Reports of children going missing also dropped by a quarter. Whilst our priority has been to ensure that families get the most appropriate help, it is also a more cost-effective service with this new way of working saving us up to £1.5m a year.

Elsewhere we continue to focus on supporting local communities through the pandemic. In the past few days there has been speculation in the national media about what happens at the end of lockdown and in particular how families can celebrate Christmas together. We wait to hear what those arrangements will be, but plans are already in place for university students to return home.

The Government has announced that students living away from are able to return home at the end of term. Students are asked to travel during a 'travel window' between 3 and 9 December, which will allow students to complete any self-isolation required and still be home in time for Christmas. No doubt families with young people away at university will be looking forward to having them home – but do please encourage them to travel safely and follow the guidance.

Schools continue to remain open, and will be until the end of term. Each of our schools has robust arrangements in place for minimising the risk of Covid in these schools – with pupils put into 'bubbles' and with appropriate social distancing arrangements in place. We know some parents continue to be anxious about the risk of Covid in schools but the precautions are in place, and where there are cases of Covid the schools are taking the appropriate steps to manage this.

What we would ask is that parents continue to observe social distancing at the school gates to help keep Covid out of our school communities.

Looking ahead to Christmas we know that this will be harder for some people this year due to the effects of Covid-19. We've launched a Christmas giving campaign to make things a little bit brighter for people who have been affected. Our Community Santa initiative gives residents the chance to donate gifts to people experiencing hardship through Covid and who have been nominated by their communities to receive a gift. The annual Giving Tree campaign also returns again this year to find gifts for people who have had to flee domestic abuse at home.

If you want to donate a gift and let someone know you are thinking of them visit <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/Christmas>

Finally, a new leaflet will be landing on doormats across the district from next week. Please look out for it and when it arrives keep it somewhere safe. It's packed with useful information, advice and support to help you through the pandemic now and in the coming months.

Yours sincerely,



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