

30<sup>th</sup> October 2020



**Chief Executive**

West Berkshire Council  
Council Offices  
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Berkshire RG14 5LD

**Our Ref:** nc/rab

**Your Ref:**

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Good afternoon,

There has been a lot of conversation this week about the issue of holiday hunger and the support available to families struggling to put food on the table. Everyone agrees that these families need support but what has been discussed and debated – nationally and locally – is how best to help them. The bottom line is that no child needs to go hungry in West Berkshire.

Much of the conversation we've seen has focused on free school meals, and calls for this scheme to be extended to cover school holidays too. Not everyone is entitled to free school meals, however, and focusing our help in this area risks missing other people who are facing financial hardship. Instead we have put in place a holistic approach which helps everyone in need – those who receive free school meals and those who do not.

Our starting point is always to assess the needs of each family to ensure that the right level of support is offered. Circumstances vary between families and a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Sometimes support will be offered by the Council directly and on other occasions it will be provided by one of our partners. It really depends on what help is needed and who is best placed to provide it.

This support may be direct access to food through our partnership arrangements, information on welfare and benefits, support with Council Tax Relief, signposting to other relevant council services and external support. We've already paid out £28,000 through our exceptional hardship fund, and we've also committed £103,000 to an emergency grant for food and essential supplies. This grant is being distributed by Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) on our behalf, with a variety of professionals across the district able to refer people they think need help. Payments have already been made through this scheme. CAB are working in collaboration with the Newbury Community Resource Centre and the Food Bank to support local people. As part of this partnership approach, we're about to provide the Resource Centre with funding to purchase white goods. These can be provided to applicants of the emergency grant, if this is something the need.

It's not just about supporting people in hardship, but preventing people from getting into difficulty in the first place. Throughout coronavirus we've been supporting businesses and people who are self-employed to protect livelihoods and by extension household income. So far we've paid out more than £28.8m in business grants and £37.9m in business rate relief to support employers and in turn protect local jobs.

Last week we received an additional £964,000 of funding to support our response to Covid-19 and we will look at how we can best spend this money to support our communities. How we might use it to provide support over the Christmas period is something we are actively looking at.

As a Council and through our work with partners we have good links into our communities and to families in need. We believe we know who the families are who need – and are receiving – our help. However, situations can change quickly and if families need assistance they can contact our Community Support Hub on 01635 503579 for help. This help will be there beyond half-term.

Our Community Support Hub has received around 37 calls so far this week, including some from people wanting half-term support with regards to food. They are being supported by local foodbanks – who we are in contact with and who tell us they are coping well. We are grateful to the foodbanks and all the partners we have – they do amazing work and are a credit to the District.

Elsewhere we are gearing up to begin supporting the national test and trace effort next month. Responsibility for test and trace remains with the NHS but there will be a local team working in the area to locate people the national system hasn't been able to reach.

Local contact tracers will be calling from a local number to encourage residents to answer their phone and, if necessary, will also try and find alternative ways to reach them. As well as reminding residents of their duty to self-isolate they will ask for details of close contacts and provide information about help and support in the area.

We'll join more than 100 other local authorities who are providing localised support to enhance the national efforts around track and trace and ensure we are all doing our bit to reduce the transmission of coronavirus.

Here in West Berkshire we remain at medium alert, but cases are rising and we all need to continue doing our bit to keep the virus at bay. It's important and it does make a difference. Remember, you can find out what the local advice is here: <https://www.gov.uk/find-coronavirus-local-restrictions>

Yours sincerely,



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