

19<sup>th</sup> June 2020



**Chief Executive**

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Good afternoon,

**Open for Business.**

This has been our mantra for a while now and is one of six priorities in our Council Strategy. This week it feels particularly apt as we see our town centres open for business again after being shut for some time. In recent weeks we've been busy supporting our centres to reopen – not only in Hungerford, Newbury and Thatcham but also in our smaller towns and villages. Local businesses are important to our economy here in West Berkshire but for many people they are part of the fabric of the community and have been sorely missed. It's great to see them opening their doors to customers again.

At the start of the crisis we worked hard distributing more than £26m in small business grants and funds to support our small businesses, and our retail, hospitality and leisure industries. More recently we have held a webinar and provided information packs and social distancing materials to help those that can reopen to do so. This week it has been non-essential retail and we look forward to hospitality and leisure beginning again soon – and not forgetting hairdressers too!

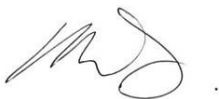
As much as it is welcome news that businesses are beginning to reopen, they continue to face some difficult months ahead. The situation remains uncertain with social distancing likely to be in place for some time and as we wait to see if, or how, consumer behaviour has changed. Tough though it has undoubtedly been for many businesses, we have also seen how resilient they have been throughout, and the proactive and responsible approach that has been taken towards putting in place the measures needed to open up safely. We are proud of the way our local businesses and shoppers have adapted and we continue to stand ready to support them in the coming months, and to make sure residents know our shops, and our district, is open for business.

We recently surveyed local residents about the impact of coronavirus and how it has changed their lifestyle – for better and worse. This included questions on the impact on our town centres. This week we started to analyse the results and we'll be talking more about this in a future blog. What is clear from the initial data is that people have been affected differently – some people have more money to spend while others have less, and some people are exercising more and others less so. These are just two examples. It's crucial that we know how people are affected and that we work hard to reduce the negative impacts of coronavirus. To do this properly we need to understand the impact on all our residents. It was clear from the survey that we need to do more to hear from 18-24-year-olds in the district, as well as our BAMER communities. We will be looking at ways to make sure all voices are heard and help to shape what we do, and how we do it.

Inequality is something which has been under the spotlight recently with a national conversation taking place about how we remember the past, and make sure society is fair for everyone today. At West Berkshire Council we are committed to equality, diversity and inclusion within our workplace and within our communities.

The different cultures and communities we have in West Berkshire make an important contribution to the district socially and economically, and help make the district a great place to live. We want to be clear that there is no place for racism in West Berkshire, and we will continue to play our part in making sure we have a fair, friendly and equal society.

Yours sincerely,



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