

West Berkshire Liberal Democrats Covid Response

Introduction

The last few months have been some of the most challenging times we have faced here in West Berkshire. Much normal social and economic activity has ceased and we have been separated for prolonged periods and not been able to support those closest when loved ones have passed away. Many people have had financial worries about household budgets and within the economy more widely, with a large part of the work force being supported by central government schemes.

A significant number of excess deaths have occurred, in West Berkshire as well as across the rest of the country, particularly amongst the elderly and in care homes, and widespread fear has persisted throughout the population of catching and transmitting this deadly virus.

As the crisis developed, there has been unclear advice given by central government at different stages, with poor examples being given by those involved in the decision making, leading to further ambiguity.

There is also a significant threat of further deadly outbreaks of the virus, with any recovery needing to minimise the risks of more people catching the virus.

Yet despite the challenges and concerns we have responded in mass numbers, and communities have been brought together in a way never seen before. Volunteers have helped to get meals and medicine delivered, have offered a kind ear to those isolated and many other practical types of support. To everyone who has stepped up, whether they be Council staff, health and care colleagues, or volunteers we want to say thank you, your actions have made a difference.

The challenge of COVID19 has seen wide-scale shutting down of services across all sectors and as we enter a new phase in our response to COVID19 we now need to be ready to help shape the 'new normal'.

As the official opposition group at West Berkshire Council we want to act as a critical friend to ensure that the administration's actions are tested from every angle in the support of West Berkshire's residents and businesses.

We will approach the task group guided by the following:

- **Ensuring Public Safety**
- **Protecting the most vulnerable**
- **Maximising public involvement in local democracy**
- **Support policies that create long term positive environmental change.**

This document sets out 3 areas that we believe need to be included in recovery plans, and we offer a view of our preferred direction of travel and suggest some opportunities that the council may wish to pursue.

- **Strengthening local decision-making, driving engagement and participation**
- **Building resilience in our communities**
- **Rebuilding the local economy**

We will also propose through the task group a number of specific proposals that we have on individual items.

As the official opposition group at West Berkshire Council we want to act as a critical friend to ensure that the administration's actions are tested from every angle in the support of West Berkshire's residents and businesses.

We also welcome the invitation from the Administration to take part in the Recovery Planning Task Group and that the importance of wide spread Councillor involvement from across different groups has been recognised here in West Berkshire.

We accept that current government guidelines may not allow for certain actions to be implemented straight away but we believe working towards these views will

ensure that our 'new normal' can make the Council, and community and local economy stronger.

We have learnt a great deal already, utilising technology, providing services in different ways and working with our partner agencies. There are many good things that have been created that we should look to keep when moving forward, some of these are also reflected in our thoughts below.

Strengthening local decision-making, driving engagement and participation

Early on, WBC recognised that maintaining Council meetings and the democratic involvement of members in decision making is key to local democracy.

The initial proposals for running online meetings sought to balance the role of members, the involvement of the public and the real-life experience and knowledge of working in an online environment.

We have now held the full range of Council meetings using Zoom and we believe that with a relaxation in public movement, we can start to plan and proceed to a more inclusive protocol that allows for:

- Members of the public to attend the chamber to ask planning questions, utilising Council IT equipment across the district to broadcast and question online and allow for supplementary questions.
- Allow members of the public ask questions verbally online for Full Council and Executive and also allowing for supplementary questions.
- A Hybrid meeting style so Councillors that are shielding can still attend online and vote.
- Once all COVID19 restrictions have been removed, still maintain an online meeting broadcast and public question facility with supplementary questions to make it easier for the public to engage with the Council in the format that works best for them.
- Develop a MyWestBerkshire smartphone app so community messaging, council service updates, business information, cultural and leisure service

updates etc... can be easily and quickly pushed out across the District so residents have the information to make informed decisions.

Building resilience in our communities

Our local response to any crisis is determined by our resilience as a community so focussing on strengthening our resilience should be a key component of our recovery planning.

The community response to COVID19 has been overwhelming with members of the public volunteering for a wide range of roles. From our work with the shielded groups and co-ordinating activities, we now know, better than we ever did, those people within our communities who need support and we have an even better understanding of their needs. Because of this, we strongly believe that the Community Hub concept should be maintained going forward, and extended so all parts of the district are covered.

The situation has taken a toll on people's mental health: from key workers on the front line, those suffering domestic abuse, to those who are self-isolating alone at home. We need to ensure we have in place the support to help people recover.

To increase resilience long term we need to help build a community that is fair. With disadvantaged children being adversely affected with the school closures we need to make sure that we put in place additional learning opportunities. The lack of STEM but also those subject that haven't been taught, music, art, PE, and along with lack of social interaction will mean that our most vulnerable children will need us to step up to this challenge.

The Community Hub could harness and co-ordinate the huge number of volunteers that have come forward to assist in building this resilience.

Rebuilding the local economy

The impact to the local economy of COVID19 will be felt for many years and national intervention will be needed to continue for business to recover. How we perform locally will be in part driven by national issues, however we also have the opportunity to offer support to get our own local economy up and running in a safe manner.

All economies are based on confidence and the best way to build confidence during recovery from this crisis is to establish a solid test and trace system.

We support the involvement of the Local Authority in this, and also see the Community Hub being able to play a major role in it. With solid evidence and the ability to spot local outbreaks, the local economy will be able to take targeted action as required.

Rebuilding our economy shouldn't only be about starting up only what was there before. The damage done to our economy by the coronavirus crisis has been stark, but it will pale into insignificance compared to the likely damage caused by the climate crisis. We need to progress quicker to a green economy. For many this has been a time of discovering the joys of walking or cycling in a less polluted environment. The Council must take urgent action to maintain this upsurge in active travel by supporting greener ways to move around the District and embedding it within our planning policy requiring new developments to be ever more energy efficient. We can create a Green economic zone focussing investment into technologies here in West Berkshire that will help bring about positive differences to the climate.

It has become clear that more prosperous countries and communities with better general health have suffered less severely from Covid.

We should look to use our purchasing power to support local suppliers, and we should also act as a facilitator for business. From supporting PPE provision, using licensing powers to allow more open area events, to allowing Council owned land to be used to expand the amount of space available for businesses to operate in, there are many practical steps we can take.

We should also use our collective voice to ensure government support is continued, with unspent grant being released so we can help those business most in need.

Without public spaces being safe, the public will not feel confident in our recovery. From testing to social distance to how we travel there are many issues that need addressing that can help create a safer environment.

The Council has a key role in driving this agenda with its influence and ability to deliver highway programmes, environmental street works and support through incentives safe ways for us to commute and enjoy our public spaces.

With changes in ways of working, shopping habits and commuting, we must be ready to work with our communities to transform our town centres, creating a sense of place that is better balanced.

Ensuring our rural communities can stay connected we should work with partners and suppliers to bring about cheaper connection to the fibre network. But we must also protect our rural communities and beauty spots by ensuring they can be enjoyed in a safe way, with regular and frequent rubbish clearance, and clear information about public conveniences. Since the initial easing of the lockdown, as people have made more use of our parks and open spaces, there has already been a significant increase in the amount of littering and fly tipping, causing anguish to other more conscientious members of the community.

It is important too that the council plays a role in supporting job creation by championing apprenticeships, while those still in school who are the most disadvantaged should receive support from the council to help with home learning, i.e. through provision of IT equipment.

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