

24th April 2020



Chief Executive

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Good afternoon

Last week we thanked the people in the community who are going above and beyond to help others in need. It is clear from the wonderful feedback we are receiving about the work done by residents, staff and community groups that this is making a huge difference. Our strong community here in West Berkshire is key to our response so once again- thank you.

We would first like to take the opportunity to offer you all some reassurance about our local response to Covid-19. As you will all know, there continues to be a high number of deaths from the virus each week. Locally, we have seen West Berkshire residents affected, including residents in our own care homes. There have been deaths and we would wish to pass on our sincere condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of those who have suffered a loss. This is a worrying time for us all, so it is important that we let you know that West Berkshire Council and our colleagues in the NHS are well-prepared to support the community.

We have received financial support from central Government to help us coordinate our local response to the current situation. Very early on, we were given over £3m in funding, the majority of which we have used to fund Covid-19 related pressures in social care. We also used some of this to set up our new Community Support Hub (CSH), ahead of the enhanced social distancing arrangements that came into place on 23rd March. Through it we have already helped almost 90 community groups to support hundreds of vulnerable local people across the district.

In addition to this money, we have been provided with up-front grant payments to support cash flow, a Council Tax Hardship Fund, additional funding for the cost of providing support to rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping during this time, and £29m to support eligible local businesses, of which more later. Please rest assured that while we respond to Covid-19 we are also continuing to focus on the delivery of the other services that the community needs.

The safety of those working on the front line in our communities is at the forefront of many of our minds, which is made clear at 8pm every Thursday when we clap for our carers and keyworkers. We can confirm that front line colleagues, including in our care homes, GP surgeries and at the West Berkshire Community Hospital, have the personal protective equipment (PPE) that they need as we are receiving regular deliveries of what they need to keep themselves safe. We are in a position to offer testing to key workers, which will help to protect them and the community they serve.

In a similar vein, we can assure you that our local hospitals, testing facilities, surgeries and the new Primary Care Hub at Newbury Racecourse are coping with the demand placed upon them. If you are in need of medical attention, please call 111 or go to <https://111.nhs.uk> to seek the help you need, unless it is an emergency, in which case you should call 999.

We understand from our colleagues in the NHS that there is a concern that A&E visits have fallen significantly since the coronavirus outbreak. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has placed some very useful information about this subject on its website. To be clear, if you need to visit A&E, please do so as you could be putting your health at risk if you do not.

https://issuu.com/joballrcpch/docs/covid19_advice_for_parents_when_child_unwell_or_in

Our local economy has historically been very strong and we know that this situation has hit many businesses hard, with some unable to trade and others having to furlough staff. We are working hard to distribute the £29m grant received from government to support small businesses and have already, as of 23rd April, sent out £13.5m of this to 1040 local firms. We will continue to distribute grants over the next week. We have taken a decision, as we did in April and in addition to the support announced by central Government, to defer all business rate payments in May in order to assist with cash flow. We hope this support will go some way towards helping those who are struggling at this time.

In this week's letter, we also feel that it is important to focus on what is available to anyone who is struggling to cope with social distancing. It has been over a month now since the new guidance emerged and we know that it is taking its toll on many of us. Our Public Health Team has put together a great deal of information on our website about what to do if you are finding times particularly difficult, much of which comes from mental health specialists. This ranges from what do to if you can't sleep to how to look after your own mental health or support someone who is drinking more alcohol. This can be found here:

<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-residents-health>

Many of us have had to adapt to a new way of working due to social distancing. For some of us, this hasn't been difficult whereas for others, particularly those with small children, this is very challenging. Our Public Health and Communications Teams have worked together to publish a guide for those who are new to working at home. In this guide, we provide links to mental health services, learning resources for children and tips on healthy workstations, among other things. We hope this is useful to many of you.

<http://info.westberks.gov.uk/article/37015>

The impact of the current situation is not only felt by adults in the community as we know many young people will be feeling it too. Our Emotional Health Academy has launched a helpline specifically for young people who are experiencing emotional difficulties as a result of the current situation. This is in addition to the statutory support we have in place to safeguard our most vulnerable children. This service can be reached on 01635 503587.

As we say every week, we hope you and your families are safe and well at this difficult time. You will have seen that the Government is unlikely to ease social distancing guidance for some weeks yet, which will be challenging for us all. We are grateful to you, as always, for doing your bit to keep our community safe.

Yours sincerely,



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