

30th April, 2021



Chief Executive

West Berkshire Council
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Good morning,

Next week is our annual council meeting and the start of another year for West Berkshire Council.

Council meetings take place around five times a year with all 43 elected members invited to take part. The meeting in May is the first of the municipal year and will see a new Chairman elected, as well as the appointment of councillors to sit on committees. These committees make important decisions on behalf of the Council and they are crucial to an effective, open and local democratic process.

For the past year the Council has met virtually, but unfortunately Tuesday's meeting will be our last virtual meeting for the time being as legislation that waived the requirement to meet in person, runs out and will not be renewed. It worked well for us, ensuring that Council business could continue with minimal disruption, whilst making meetings more accessible for local residents. It's extremely disappointing that the legislation was not extended - but we are determined to make it work. We are planning for our future - and are committed to continuing to stream meetings to ensure that decision-making and accountability remains as open as possible.

As well as taking care of the administrative business for the coming year, the Council will also be reviewing the delivery of the 2019-23 Council Strategy. We are now at the half-way point so it's a good time to take stock of what we have achieved so far, and what is still to be done. We have also taken the opportunity to adapt the strategy in order to address the many changes that have come about since the strategy was first adopted in 2019, the changes in our operating environment and the subsequent impact on the lives of local residents. The two most significant changes have been the Council declaring a Climate Emergency in 2019, and the Coronavirus Pandemic. The former was a natural evolution of the Council's identification of needs and our plans, including prioritising the environment in the Council Strategy and through the Environment Strategy and associated delivery plans. The latter was unexpected but the pandemic has highlighted new needs with regard to responding to the impact of Coronavirus on the health and well-being of our residents, society and the economic development of the district.

The [refreshed Council Strategy](#) will show that we are doing well in terms of advancing towards the goals set out in our priority areas and delivering our core business. Councils provide services which permeate through the district and the lives of local residents, and the Strategy highlights just how diverse these services are. Our achievements over the past couple of years range from being in the top 20% of councils for the quality of our road network, placed in the top 25% for the percentage of 16 to 17-year-olds in education, employment or training and providing long-term care for more than 1,600 vulnerable adults and older people.

We've delivered this alongside a local response to a global pandemic which has had a seismic shift on our lives over the past year. We're proud of how the Council has worked to support local communities – but you don't have to take our word for it. A survey we conducted last summer found the majority of residents were satisfied with how the Council is run.

The challenge now is to rebuild and recover from the pandemic and particularly the inequalities it has highlighted. Our strong local economy, the natural environment and the resilience of our residents, are all factors that helped ensure that the impact of the pandemic in West Berkshire, was not as significant as in other parts of the country in terms of the economic impact- so we start from a better place than some districts.

Among the areas of focus for the next two years are education, strengthening policies to support economic development, increasing employment opportunities, developing more sustainable transport solutions, promoting active travel, future proofing our town centres, and addressing future needs of digitisation and digital infrastructure. We know also that the pandemic has affected mental health and this will be a priority for us. To give you one example from the Strategy, together with the Health and Wellbeing Board we will be implementing the [Prevention Concordat for Better Mental Health](#). This is a programme which aims to facilitate local (and national) action to prevent mental health problems and promote good mental health.

This refreshed Council Strategy, together with a revised Recovery Strategy, to be published in the next couple of months, will bring us closer to achieving our Vision to make West Berkshire an even greater place to live, work and learn.

- The annual council meeting begins at 7pm on Tuesday 4 May. You can [watch the meeting live on YouTube](#). You can [read the agenda and reports for the meeting here](#).
- Residents can ask questions at Council, Executive and Health and Wellbeing Board meetings. These should be submitted in advance through the [West Berkshire Council website](#).

Yours sincerely,



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