

West Berkshire Council Update – Services During Covid-19

As we come to the end of a difficult week, both in West Berkshire and across the country, we thought it would be useful to write to you to give you a rundown of the communications activity we have undertaken this week. We hope that this will be useful to you and your communities as we respond to the impact of Covid-19.

Our Community Support Hub is up and running. This is being organised by our excellent Building Communities Together team in partnership with Volunteer Centre West Berkshire and Greenham Trust. The Hub will offer guidance and help coordinate organisations representing their communities. If someone you know needs help or you would like to volunteer, please contact us on: 01635 503579 or:

westberksbct@westberks.gov.uk

Our designated page for residents provides vital updates on our services, of which more below, as well as support that is available, such as assistance for those struggling to pay their council tax. This can be found here:

www.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-residents

We are also working hard to support our businesses. We announced this week that on top of the support outlined here by national government:

<https://www.businesssupport.gov.uk/coronavirus-business>.

We will also be offering all businesses in West Berkshire a business rates deferral for April 2020. This puts vital cash flow into the pockets of businesses when they need it most, which is key to the economic success of the district. For more, go to:

www.westberks.gov.uk/coronavirus-business

The Council Offices are now closed to public in accordance with Government advice. We will review this as that advice is updated. However, officers are still working where possible, albeit from home in many cases, and are available to assist residents and communities in need of help. Please get in touch if you need us.

Our Household Waste Recycling Centres, Libraries, Leisure Centres and Family Hubs are now closed and bulky waste collections have been suspended in line with national social distancing guidance. We would encourage anyone who comes across workers from our contractor, Veolia, to respect the important job they are doing.

Car parking charges have been suspended in all of our surface car parks. This is to minimise the burden on key workers at this difficult time and will also assist everyone to comply with social distancing guidance.

There have been changes to some bus routes across the district. Local bus services 5, 5a, 5c, 41, 44, 47 and H1 operated by West Berkshire Council are suspended until further notice. As of next Monday, the JetBlack1 will also be reduced to an hourly service, and the 1a/1c will be withdrawn. Keyworkers who require assistance with essential travel can contact us for help on 01635 551111.

The team has been busy producing an advice leaflet that will be going out to every household in the district. This outlines the support available from West Berkshire Council. In line with national guidance, we are encouraging residents to 'Stay at Home'.

This is vital as we seek to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on our community and we are grateful for the cooperation of people across West Berkshire in this. We appreciate that this is a big ask, particularly in terms of mental health and for those who live alone, so the Public Health Team has put together some tips and advice for coping with self-isolation which will be updated as the situation progresses.

These can be found here: <https://info.westberks.gov.uk/publichealth>

We hope you, your families and your communities are staying safe throughout this time. I would emphasise again that West Berkshire Council is here to help and if you are struggling, we will do all we can.

Yours sincerely,

Lynne Doherty

Leader of the Council

Nick Carter

Chief Executive

[Closing borders](#)

During the crisis so far the EU has battled to keep its belief in open borders as law around the EU. The member states have taken a different attitude.

The EU says "A crisis without borders cannot be resolved by putting barriers between us". It has despite this allowed or encouraged tougher border controls around the EU as a whole whilst wanting to avoid all controls at borders between member states.

Instead Germany has imposed border checks against Austria, France, Luxembourg and Denmark for the movement of people. France has imposed checks on Germany,

Belgium and Spain.

In the UK there have been criticisms that the government did not impose stricter controls on people entering through our airports and ports. I currently get complaints that there are still lots of planes flying into Heathrow. I have to explain that some are planes bringing UK nationals home from holidays and stays abroad, and many are freight planes. Some are passenger planes that have been adapted to carry more freight. Passenger services have traditionally also carried some freight in holds as part of our complex supply system.

The EU, realising that countries do wish to impose checks on people at their national borders, is now trying to protect the idea of a barrier free single market for goods. They state "All internal borders should stay open for freight". Regardless of this some member states are diverting export goods for home consumption and inserting their own rules. France and Germany for example are keeping various medical supplies for home use.

This crisis is putting the world trading system under new pressures. In a world of lock down there is more attention to the local and national. Countries are seeking to increase their own productive potential in shortage areas like tests, protective clothing and other medical supplies.

Dear Constituent

I am writing to update you on the virus crisis, and the damage to jobs, incomes and lifestyles that the virus response is causing.

The government has taken advice from epidemiologists, based on worldwide work through the World Health Organisation. This work concludes that because there is no current cure nor vaccine to prevent the spread of Covid 19, and because people with severe versions of the illness die, tough action has to be taken to slow or stop the spread of the disease. As it appears to be easily caught, this requires as much separation between people as possible.

The UK has adopted a range of measures similar to those in Italy, Spain, France and Germany who also have bad attacks. The measures are a bit less severe than those adopted in China, which claims to have tamed the virus, but more severe than the Swedish approach. The USA seems to be moving to join us with more severe measures as it spreads rapidly there.

I have constantly pointed out to the government that closing down more than a third of the economy for an unspecified period will put many people out of work, bankrupt many businesses and create hardship for people who lose their income. I suggested a number of measures to offset some of this damage. I am pleased to report that the government has announced a scheme to enable companies to furlough their staff, keep them on the payroll when not

working, with the government paying 80% of the cost for the period of shutdown up to an individual pay ceiling. It has announced a similar scheme for many self employed people. It has also offered state guarantees for commercial banks to lend to keep companies with much reduced turnover going through the difficult period.

I welcome this big response, but do not think it goes far enough. I am trying to persuade the government to underwrite more jobs and incomes, and to make the payments earlier. Only if we keep company workforces in being can we be ready for recovery as soon as the restrictions are lifted.

I am also about to tackle the government on the all important timing of exit from these emergency measures. I understand cautious advisers wanting to stamp out the disease want maximum isolation for the maximum number of people for as long as possible. They are worried that if we lift the bans early with numbers ill falling there could be a second wave. The government, however, has to balance this risk against the undoubted substantial extra damage to jobs and incomes if we keep the closures in being for too long.

As capacity builds in the NHS to handle high numbers with pneumonia like symptoms, and as more people get the mild version of the illness and gain some immunity, so it should become easier to relax the tough economic sanctions against normal business activity. We clearly need to keep in place strict safeguarding measures for the ill and vulnerable whilst medical research works on treatments and vaccinations.

I am also conscious of continuing shortfalls in on line food delivery services, where I have proposed measures to harness volunteers and use delivery services from companies previously supplying non essential items. There is plenty of food but still problems with switching items like eggs from large catering packs to retail packs, leading to some empty shelves. Again I have proposed some measures to deal with this backlog.

I hope you and yours are keeping well and are managing in these difficult circumstances. I would like to say a big thank you to all of you who are going to work to maintain our essential services, ensure there is food for our tables, and to care for others. I am working from my home in Wokingham Borough, and doing as much as possible of my job on the phone and on line.

Yours sincerely

John Redwood

[Getting eggs into boxes](#)

Today I joined the MP call to the Cabinet office to provide feedback on virus related problems. One of the issues I raised was the continued empty shelf

problem for a few products. I took the case of eggs as an example.

There are still the same number of eggs being produced as before the clampdown came into effect. Apparently there are plenty of eggs, but a large number are available in catering packs which are far too big to sell in supermarkets. According to the BBC Radio 4 Farming programme big caterers are more than happy to transfer their egg contracts temporarily to the supermarkets, but the eggs need to be packed in retail packs. There are few manufacturers of the egg boxes, with a main producer in Denmark said to be closed for virus reasons.

I suggested the Cabinet Office/DEFRA help the private sector come up with a solution to a shortage of retail egg packs. UK packaging firms may be able to respond to the need quickly. Retailers might be able to buy in the catering packs and let people buy loose eggs, as we buy loose vegetables, for those who keep their last egg box and take it back to refill. That would take some pressure off.

There are a few other lines in common short supply where there can be fixes.

I am also sending these thoughts to DEFRA, as filling all the shelves again would reassure the public and remind people who are thinking of hoarding they have no need to hoard.

[Help for the self employed](#)

Yesterday I sent the letter beneath to the Chancellor:

Dear Rishi

Thank you for developing and announcing a scheme to ensure many people currently self employed will receive an income top up from the state during a period when many of them are not allowed to work or are experiencing a big decline in activity over the virus restrictions. I am pleased you settled on ensuring 80% of past income up to a ceiling.

There are, however, some people in need that your scheme does not help at all. Will you please ensure that someone who has set up a self employed business more recently and who depends on that income is also covered? They should be paid on the basis of what they were earning on average per month in the period after start up, if the start up was before the beginning of 2020 and the start of the virus.

There are self-employed people who run their own small companies and paid themselves in dividends. Where they do not have other material accessible assets and are clearly living on the income from their self employment, they too should be able to claim assistance.

I understand your concern to avoid fraud. In these cases I suggest self certification in the claim, to be followed later after the immediate crisis by HMRC random sample testing of the sound basis of claims and of course follow up by HMRC in specific cases where fraud is suspected. HMRC should be able to impose tough penalties and to publish fraudulent conduct as a further penalty for the few cases where crooks abuse the system.

Yesterday's scheme is also delaying payments until June. Many self-employed people on modest earnings do not have large cash buffers waiting to pay all their family bills for three months. One of the main reasons given for the delay was the need to allow more self-employed people to submit tax returns. It seems unfair on the large majority who have done so to hold everyone up for this, so why not get on with dealing with all of those who have filed and give them earlier payments.

I do not agree with you about the possible need to tax the self employed more when this is over. Self-employed do not get the same benefits as employed. Giving them a scheme now for these quite unprecedented and we hope not to be repeated circumstances does not equalise their treatment generally. At a time when we wish to care for people being put through extreme financial distress by government actions taken on health grounds, they as taxpayers have as much right to help as anyone else.

Your general statement of aims and your understanding of the importance of the self employed was great. Please persuade your officials to make the scheme friendlier to the sector as a whole which serves us well and will be needed again soon.

Yours

John