

WORKING DRAFT for producing a first version of the Council Strategy for public consultation

Forward Together- Council Strategy 2023-2027

Foreword

West Berkshire is a great place to live, work and learn. It is an area in which I am fortunate to serve as Council Leader and I am proud that in the past four years we were able to make such a positive impact on the district.

When we put together our Council Strategy 2019-23, none of us could have predicted the challenges we would face during this time. A global pandemic and a number of international humanitarian crises, which led to significant rises in the cost of living, meant that we had to step in to protect our community while delivering good local services and exciting new projects which enhanced the lives of local people.

The overarching theme of this draft strategy is 'Forward Together', which is the Council's motto. At no point since West Berkshire Council was formed in the late 1990s has it felt more appropriate to look to this motto when developing our Council Strategy. Without a doubt, the four years behind us have been tough for all of us and we must now focus on rebuilding some of what we have lost while reinforcing what we have gained. To help us in doing so we have community links which are stronger than ever and a shared sense of purpose to drive us.

I hope you will take the time to look at the outcomes we have developed using the feedback we collected from the community and give us your views on them.

Cllr Lynne Doherty, Leader of West Berkshire Council

Introduction: Forward Together towards a new Council Strategy

A Council Strategy is a business planning document that sets out our future priorities and planned outcomes. We produce one every four years to correspond with our election cycles using analysis of the evolving needs of our residents, feedback received from our Residents Survey and additional engagement with residents, as well as the information we have about the outcomes delivered against the objectives in our Council Strategy 2019-23 and the West Berkshire Vision 2036. The Council Strategy is the Council's overarching strategic document which impacts and is supported by a range of more specific [strategies and policies](#) (e.g. Adult Social Care Strategy, Environment Strategy, Economic Development Strategy, Housing Strategy, Communication and Engagement Strategy, Medium Term Financial Strategy etc.).

Why do we need a Council Strategy?

- A clear Council Strategy ensures that the Council manages its resources effectively, setting the direction for all services to work together and follow.
- It ensures that projects can be delivered by the Council's services and that enough capacity is available to deliver them.
- It provides a focus for the Council's Executive to plan its work.
- It provides the framework for evaluating the Council's performance.

We have produced this draft document which proposes the outcomes that we will focus on delivering for local people in the next four years. They have been informed by the evidence we gathered and the need to respond to the challenges resulting from the aftermaths of the Covid-19 pandemic, the socio-economic impacts of the conflict in Ukraine and our ongoing efforts in response to the Climate Emergency, which was declared in 2019.

We have grouped these proposed outcomes into five priority areas:

- Providing opportunities for all and more help when you need it
- Protecting and enhancing our environment
- Stronger communities
- Great place to live, learn and do business
- Building public services for the future

The information that follows explains why we have selected the priorities and outcomes we have and we invite you to give your views on them. These views will then inform the final version of the strategy which will be considered for approval at the Council's meeting in May 2023. We look forward to hearing from you.

Key facts about our district

- West Berkshire has an estimated population of 161,400 in 2021, which is an increase of 4.9%, from around 153,800 in 2011. This is lower than the overall increase for the South East (7.5%) and England (6.6%).
- In 2020, for every resident aged 16-64, there were on average 1.1 jobs in West Berkshire. This is higher than the South East and Great Britain.
- A vibrant economy with 8,345 businesses, an increase of 6.9% since 2012.
- Healthy life expectancy at birth at 70.1 years for females and 69.4 for males are higher than the England average (2018-20).
- Similarly, life expectancy at birth, at 84.4 for females and 80.2 for males is higher than the national average (2018-20).
- Access to Heathrow Airport in less than 60 minutes and good connectivity North to South (A34) and East to West (M4).
- West Berkshire covers an area of 272 square miles which is over half of the geographical area of the county of Berkshire.
- Nearly three quarters of West Berkshire is classified as part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

- The total number of households (in 2022) is estimated as 66,700, an increase of 7% since 2011. It is expected that households will become smaller, with one person households increasing by an estimated 21.9% by 2043.
- 166 Children in Care were receiving services, which is below the England average (as a rate per 10,000 children) (Mar 2022).
- 273 Children in Need (including those subject to a CP or in LA Care) were supported, which is slightly above the England average (as a rate per 10,000 children) (Mar 2022).
- West Berkshire has 51 sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and 3 Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), which are of national importance for animal and plant life.
- 85.2% of 16 to 64 year olds are economically active (people that are not retired, a student, a carer or unemployed). This is higher than the South East and Great Britain averages (June 2022).
- In 2020/21, there were 617 net completions of dwelling units. 73% of residential completions were on previously developed land. Since 2006/07, an average of 504 new homes have been built each year.
- Highly qualified workforce, 71.5% of 16 – 64 year olds living in the area qualified at level NVQ3 and above or general education equivalent. Better than South East (63.8%) and Great Britain (61.5%) (Dec 2021).
- At 28.85 the rate of violent crime per 1,000 population, is slightly higher than that for Thames Valley overall (27.74)
- The district has 27.7 miles of motorway, 78.5 miles of A roads and 782.4 miles of minor roads.
- West Berkshire has approx. 1,900 Listed Buildings, 90 Scheduled Monuments, 53 Conservation Areas, 39 Locally Listed Heritage Assets, 14 Registered Parks and Gardens and 1 Registered Battlefield – all these heritage assets contribute to the sense of place of the district.
- 1,792 older people and vulnerable adults were accessing long term support (Sep 2022).
- As of 2021, West Berkshire is the ninth least densely populated of the South East's 64 local authority areas, with around two people living on each football pitch-sized area of land.

Priority area: [Providing opportunities for all and more help when you need it](#)

West Berkshire is a great place to live, which is reflected in the fact that local people benefit from good health, educational and employment outcomes. The district is among the top 15% of local authorities in England for population health (ONS 2022), which means that residents have a good quality of life.

Local young people achieve well in education, in particular by the end of secondary school (GCSEs & A Levels) (KnowledgeHUB Nov 2022) thanks to the very high proportion of Good or Outstanding Ofsted-rated schools, our investment in building new schools (e.g. Highwood Copse School and the Theale Primary School) and expanding existing ones so parents have opportunities to secure a school place of their choice. We are ambitious for all young people in West Berkshire and our

continued commitment to offering an excellent level of education from a young age will open up opportunities for them to achieve the best they can.

Those who are most in need of our support are also well-served by our Children and Family Services, which are rated as 'Good' by Ofsted, and a wide range of Adult Social Care settings, most of which are judged as 'Good' or better by inspectors. Our challenge is that we have an ageing population (ONS Census 2021), a high proportion of people living in single occupancy households and some people, including children, facing the long term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. These are some of the factors which will result in increasing demand on social care, mental health and housing services.

We are better placed than most areas to face these challenges due to successful preventative work (for example, supporting nine in every 10 adult social care service users in the community and working with children and families at the early stages of their difficulties through our Early Response Hub, Family Safeguarding, Family Support and schools-based Mental Health Support Teams). Harnessing these preventative approaches and working in partnership with our residents and other organisations will help to further improve the range of services we offer so that our residents can achieve even better outcomes.

CASE STUDY – MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TEAM

In 2020, the Council launched a Trailblazer Mental Health Support Team (MHST), providing support to 27 schools in West Berkshire. Following its successes, a further MHST has launched in September 2022, supporting an additional 25 schools. These teams have provided support to residents, including:

- **Brief individual and group**, low-intensity, **support for children and young people** (CYP) who are experiencing anxiety, low mood, friendship and behavioural difficulties.
- **Family interventions, supporting parents and carers** of children and young people who are experiencing mild to moderate mental health difficulties, including issues around conduct disorder, communications difficulties and anxiety.
- **School staff support** working with schools at a whole school, strategic level. This involves working with the Senior Mental Health Lead and existing service providers, **to map what provision is already in place and where the gaps are**. Addressing the gaps often leads to the delivery of **staff training** along with support and consultation to **monitor whole school well-being**.
- **Regular liaison with the Senior Mental Health Lead** in school **to work with specialist CYP MH services to ensure that children and young people receive appropriate support** as quickly as possible. This includes more specialist NHS mental health support and our support also ensures a smooth **transition back from specialist services**.

As a result, over 1100 children and young people have had early access to support and interventions which improved their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

What you have told us so far

The engagement work we have done with local people shows that residents have good levels of life satisfaction and happiness, and a strong sense of belonging to the local area. It also told us that housing, care and health, and access to leisure activities are services that residents would like to prioritise. In addition to this, further engagement work with seldom heard residents highlighted good schools and education as important enablers for them to achieve the outcomes they want.

Draft Outcomes for 2023-2027

We have considered the evidence and developed the following draft outcomes:

- Good education attainment results, exceeding National levels
- Good and Outstanding schools (Ofsted rating)
- Good or better adult and children social care services (Ofsted and Care Quality Commission ratings)
- Vulnerable children and families supported at early stages to prevent the need for more critical or statutory social services
- Solutions are identified to prevent homelessness and avoid rough sleeping
- Residents are supported to access the mental health services that they need
- Residents facing the greatest challenges are prioritised by wellbeing and social care services
- People living with dementia will experience joined up support from our social care services and our health partners

Priority area: [Protecting and enhancing our environment](#)

One of our greatest assets in West Berkshire is our natural environment, with almost three quarters of the district sitting within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Protecting and enhancing our environment remains a priority for us, reaffirming the commitment made by the Council in 2019, when we unanimously declared a Climate Emergency. We agreed to work towards achieving carbon neutrality for West Berkshire Council and enabling and encouraging residents and other stakeholders to make as much progress as possible towards carbon neutrality in the district by 2030.

In recent years, the Council has been installing electric vehicle charging points in car parks and on selected residential streets. We have implemented measures to increase the district's resilience to flooding, drought and other impacts of climate change. Over 600 additional properties are now protected as a result of new flood alleviation schemes implemented in the lifetime of the Council Strategy 2019-2023. We have also provided good local waste services, including a new food waste collection service, which have led to higher recycling levels in the district when compared to the national average.

In addition, we have invested significantly in our local infrastructure, including roads, footpaths and digital communications, to support our residents to travel around sustainably, explore the district using active travel and to benefit from good physical and virtual connectivity.

The main areas we must continue to focus on are related to the climate emergency. We will need to build on the successes achieved in the last four years through our Environment Strategy to further expand opportunities to generate and use renewable energy, to increase the district's resilience to the impacts of climate change (e.g. flooding, droughts) and to work with residents and communities to respond together to this emergency. In addition, we must support local people to recycle and reuse more; maintain good quality roads and transport infrastructure; and protect, enhance and ensure accessibility to our local public natural spaces.

To do this, we must build on the new, creative ways we have been involving our residents in over the past few years. One such example is our multi award-winning Community Municipal Investment Bond which raised £1m to fund our environmental projects, including Solar PV installations, active travel infrastructure improvements and tree planting.

CASE STUDY- [Community Municipal Investment](#)

West Berkshire launched the United Kingdom's first Community Municipal Investment, or community bond, in late 2020. This ground-breaking bond was the result of months of hard work and was a genuinely innovative approach to delivering social value through finance.

Through this project, the Council was able to fund £1m worth of projects within the Environment Strategy using invested funds from individuals across the country to derive social value while also securing a return for investors.

The project has since won a number of awards including a Public Finance Award, has featured on the inaugural Net Zero 50 list and been shortlisted for two Local Government Chronicle Awards.

What you have told us so far

The majority of our residents told us that they see protecting the environment as a priority and that they would be taking their own action to achieve carbon neutrality ([Residents Survey 2021](#)). They reported that the quality of our roads and waste management, in particular better recycling and public space cleanliness, should be areas of focus.

Draft Outcomes for 2023-2027

We have considered the evidence and developed the following draft outcomes:

- Carbon neutrality achieved by West Berkshire Council by 2030
- Residents and businesses are enabled and encouraged to act on what they can do to contribute to carbon neutrality
- Installation of more renewable energy capacity
- Additional electric vehicle charging points installed, both in Council car parks and on residential streets without off-street parking

- Biodiversity net gain (including natural carbon reduction solutions) to offset new housing developments
- Our land's natural beauty is conserved and enhanced by integrated working with other local authorities, AONB and the Government
- Increased resilience to climate change by expanding flood prevention and minimising impacts of droughts
- Increased level of waste reused, recycled or composted
- Our primary, secondary and local road networks are maintained in a good state of repair
- Better travel options available to our residents including in rural areas
- Sustainable building, ensuring the right homes and the right jobs are in the right place
- Facilitate all residents' access to public open spaces
- Effective deterrence of fly-tipping

Priority area: [Stronger communities](#)

The Council does not work in isolation and has always looked to develop partnerships which enable residents, businesses and voluntary and community sector organisations to help themselves or receive help when needed. To support this, we have significantly enhanced our communication and engagement with residents through the use of newsletters, panels, webinars and events to involve local people more in our work. This was all the more important during the response to Covid-19, when our work with our communities, Town and Parish Councils, voluntary and other partner organisations was key to our response to, and recovery from, the pandemic.

By conducting public consultations, undertaking two Residents Surveys and engaging with seldom heard residents through outreach work, we have increased opportunities for a wider range of views, from people and communities across the district, to inform our strategies and plans (see further details on our [Consultation and Engagement Hub](#)). We value such contributions and are committed to do more in this area with an even greater focus on ensuring the voice of our younger residents is captured.

We have transformed the way in which residents access health and social care services, by strengthening our partnership working with the NHS, Town and Parish Councils, voluntary and community sector organisations and other key partners so that we can best respond to their needs. This helps us to offer the best possible support to our residents and businesses, which in turn boosts the district's resilience to economic, environmental or social challenges.

This joint working has made it possible to help our community through difficult circumstances by supporting our most vulnerable residents during Covid or offering a safe place for people displaced from their countries such as those from Afghanistan, Ukraine and Hong Kong.

CASE STUDY- Working with our communities

In March 2020, as communities across West Berkshire 'stood up' in response to the emerging Covid Challenge, the Council, in partnership with Greenham Trust and the Volunteer Centre West Berkshire, created the Community Support Hub to help coordinate the incredible 'community response'.

The Community Support Hub provided coordination, information and advice to community groups and individuals throughout West Berkshire, which enabled them support those who needed help.

Although the Community Support Hub fulfilled a pivotal role, it was the groups and individuals across the district that provided important and often essential help to those who needed to 'Shield' or who were finding it difficult to carry out everyday tasks.

During the response to Covid there were nearly 90 community groups and over 3,000 volunteers involved in helping others.

The Council has subsequently used the 'Hub Model' and enduring support from Greenham Trust and the Volunteer Centre West Berkshire to create a Homes for Ukraine Support Hub and most recently a Cost Of Living Support Hub.

The Council will seek to continue to work *with* residents and communities, to help themselves and others.

What you have told us so far

Our residents play an important role in making West Berkshire the great place that it is with around one in three residents reporting that they volunteer in their spare time. The main reasons for volunteering mentioned by residents were that they wanted to do good for others and the community (77%), followed by just over a quarter (28%) stating they wanted to feel more of a connection with their local community and that it would help with their mental health and wellbeing.

The great community spirit in West Berkshire was particularly prominent during the pandemic when local people stepped up to help others in the community at a time of crisis.

Draft Outcomes for 2023-2027

We have considered the evidence and developed the following draft outcomes:

- Children and young people will be better heard to influence change in their area
- Closer and more effective working with our communities and partner organisations (including Town and Parish Councils and the private sector commissioned service providers) so residents achieve the outcomes that they need

- Improved health and wellbeing of our residents by working with Health and Wellbeing Board and other partner organisations
- West Berkshire continues to be a safe place
- Maximised engagement with the culture, arts and heritage offer
- More people enabled to be physically active in the district
- Reduced isolation (including rural isolation and young people isolation)

Priority area: Great place to live, learn and do business

West Berkshire's strong local economy is another reason why it is a great place to live. Our district is part of the successful Thames Valley economy, which showed strong resilience to the impacts of Covid-19 when compared with other parts of the country. During and since the pandemic, the Council has supported employees, self-employed residents and businesses by promptly distributing financial help, by providing advice and assistance to safely reopen once lockdown restrictions had been lifted, and continuing to offer advice and support for start-ups and companies wanting to expand. West Berkshire continues to maintain a strong labour market, including high employment levels, with the number of jobs exceeding the number of residents aged 16-64.

West Berkshire is amongst the top 10% of the most prosperous districts in the country. The local economy has the opportunity to employ residents with higher qualifications compared to other areas, with average wages above the regional and national levels. As the available jobs in the district are primarily in the Trade, Information and Communication, Manufacturing and Administrative domains, some of them with quickly evolving technologies and specialisations, it is important to maintain the focus on the continuous development of skills for all our residents through formal learning and education, but also by building on our successes achieved through Kick Start apprenticeship schemes, support careers fairs and work experience opportunities.

2021 Census data shows that the district has an ageing population which brings the challenge of making the district more attractive for our young people. This is exacerbated by the rurality of the district – over a third of the population living in rural areas – therefore, in addition to targeting opportunities in our town centres and working with the main employers in the district, we must also further develop our rural centres of excellence (horse racing industry, viticulture, tech etc.).

Our strong economy is supported by excellent physical and digital infrastructure. The district has excellent roads and rail transport infrastructure, links with other main economic centres such as London, Bristol, Oxford or the port cities in the South along the M4 and A34 corridors. Digital connectivity is vital for ensuring higher economic productivity especially following the change to a more remote working pattern since the pandemic. The Council has also completed a programme to ensure businesses and over 98% of people in West Berkshire are able to access ultrafast broadband ensuring the district has one of the best digital connectivity in the country.

A strong and resilient local economy requires continuous, long term prioritisation to ensure it withstands the impacts of international shorter or longer term challenges, such as the economic impact of the pandemic or of the conflicts impacting energy prices and the cost of living.

CASE STUDY- Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) COVID SUPPORT AWARD

West Berkshire Council prioritised supporting its businesses through the pandemic. This included deferring business rates for the first few months of the pandemic, providing businesses with a wide range of advice and resources to support them to reopen, holding a number of business-focussed webinars and distributing millions of pounds in government grants.

The Council also created a unique local scheme called the [Additional Restriction Grant \(ARG\) Challenge Fund](#) which offered upfront grants for projects or investments that would support businesses' innovation, recovery and growth. The scheme with 'Green Growth' and 'Digital' innovation at its heart proved very popular with 130 applications and 44 grant awards being made to local businesses. These efforts resulted in the Council winning the South Central Federation of Small Businesses Local Government Award for Covid-19 Support in 2022.

What you have told us so far

Nine in every ten residents reported that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their local area as a place to live with around three quarters saying that they had high levels of satisfaction with their life. Feedback from the seldom heard groups highlighted the importance of making our urban centres attractive and vibrant including for young people. They also highlighted the importance of education at all stages to be prioritised.

We engage extensively with the business community, including in our rural areas, and we recently held a Rural Business Forum to hear their views. We also seek the views of a wide range of businesses through the Quarterly Business Survey undertaken by the Chamber of Commerce. This informs our priorities for supporting businesses, including how to use Government funding such as the Rural Prosperity and UK Shared Prosperity funds. Feedback from our rural businesses suggests that they want to diversify to increase jobs and skills in our rural areas, and would benefit from financial support to achieve this. Recruitment and inflation have also been raised as concerns from surveyed businesses across a range of industries.

Draft Outcomes for 2023-2027

We have considered the evidence and developed the following draft outcomes:

- New skills acquired by residents through lifelong learning
- Routes to employment are enhanced, including by supporting schools to encourage [T Levels](#) qualifications and further education

- Residents benefit from apprenticeships, a Council work experience programme, career advice and our support at careers fairs
- Investment in the district secured, from a range of businesses to remain competitive through a mixed economy
- Local economy benefits of a sustainable workforce (retention of professional jobs, placements for social care students from the university centre at Newbury College)
- Increased productivity in particular for rural based jobs by exploiting our existing rural clusters (viticulture, horse racing, tech, traditional farming) and supporting the environment around centres of excellence
- Local economic growth supported by infrastructure developments
- Vibrant local town centres
- Opportunities are created for young people to live, learn and socialise in the district, including by focusing on their needs when delivering town centres place making strategies
- Residents access more work, learning and leisure opportunities through increased digital connectivity

Priority area: Building public services for the future

We are proud of our strong record of delivering good local services while managing our budget and resources well. Our efforts have seen us being recognised as having among the best value for money council tax in the country and good levels of resident satisfaction. (LGA Value for money profiles)

Over the last few years, we have focused on prioritising the services that our residents needed the most and reviewing all our services to identify transformation opportunities to deliver outcomes for residents and communities in the most effective and efficient way. This focus placed us in a good position when we had to completely change our ways of working in order to respond to Covid challenges at local level. For instance, we were among the first local authorities in the country to adopt virtual meetings for our decision making bodies (Council, Executive and other Committee meetings) which increased the accessibility of the democratic process.

During the pandemic, residents, council employees and partner organisations, all experienced new ways of receiving and providing services. Enhanced communication and better use of digital technology have been vital for service delivery and helped a better, more visible and closer relationship with those who use our services. Similarly, closer working with Government departments allowed us to identify and offer local solutions to support our residents, such as Covid grants' distributions and hosting displaced Ukrainian families etc. The Council will explore further devolution initiatives from Government for the benefit of our residents.

Our residents have provided positive feedback about how the Council runs services and about the Council's response to the pandemic. As customers' expectations and the ways of delivering services are evolving to a new, post-pandemic normal, the challenge remains to assess and continuously improve what we do to ensure our services remain effective and relevant for the future.

CASE STUDY- Household, Waste and Recycling Centre (HWRC) Booking

In early spring of 2020, many of the Council's facilities were closed as a response to the pandemic, including its HWRCs. The Council's Digital Services Team worked with the Waste Management Team and its booking platform supplier at pace during the first week of May 2020 to deliver a solution to manage demand for HWRCs, both so they could be operated in a Covid secure way, and to ensure queueing traffic would not become dangerous given the expected high demand when they reopened.

HWRC Booking was launched on 13 May 2020 with customers able to use the Click and Tip service online or phone the Contact Centre to book an appointment, allowing customers to choose their engagement channel.

During the first 18 months from the launch of the service, over a quarter of a million appointments have been made, with 97% of customers using Click and Tip and 3% using a phone to make their bookings..

Three separate customer surveys were undertaken between June 2020 and June 2021. Of the 3000+ respondents 79% expressed the view that the Council should keep the booking system, with 90% saying they had a positive experience of using it.

What you have told us so far

The majority of our residents gave us positive feedback about how we manage local services, the way in which we act on their concerns, and how effectively we keep them informed.

Some areas for attention are ensuring residents are clear how their Council Tax is being spent, how they can become further involved in our decision making and how we can make our services even more accessible.

Draft Outcomes for 2023-2027

We have considered the evidence and developed the following draft outcomes:

- Good quality public services for all (compared to all local authorities in England)
- Residents are more aware of the Council's services and how well we are performing
- Strong budget management (compared to all local authorities in England) and initiatives to generate financial efficiency
- Residents more engaged with the decision making processes about the services that impact them
- Continually improving customer experience and enable digital access option to services for the residents that want and can access them in this way
- Successful implementation of our new Customer Charter