

10th July 2020



Chief Executive

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Good afternoon,

Since the lockdown was eased last month we have all been adjusting to a new way of life. What was once new to us all has quickly become an everyday reality – facemasks, screens in shops and social distancing are just some of the things we have had to become used to. As we adapt, we have this week seen some of the biggest changes since the lockdown ended.

Restaurants, pubs, hairdressers and hotels are some of the businesses now allowed to open, with community centres and playgrounds also reopening. The impact of Covid-19 continues to be felt, and the Government has announced more support for businesses and communities – ranging from an Eat Out to Help Out scheme which will benefit our hospitality industry to funding for culture, heritage and the arts which we hope will reach venues in our district.

There was good news for councils too with another £500 million to provide local authorities with reimbursement for lost income and to allow longer for business rates tax deficits to be repaid. With income making up a good proportion of the Council budget and areas such as car parking impacted by Covid-19 this is welcome news and will make things a little easier for us in the coming months.

For our part, we are working to reopen our libraries soon - although this will be on a phased basis and things won't return to normal immediately. Newbury, Hungerford and Thatcham Libraries will open from Monday (13th July) for book collections during limited opening hours and under a pilot 'order and collect' service. Our 'At Home' service continues to be provided for residents unable to travel to a library and is always well received by those who rely on it for their library loans.

As well as changes to what can open, things have moved on too for people who were being shielded. After months spent at home they are now able to meet in groups of up to six people and to form support bubbles if they wish. This is undoubtedly good news for the residents affected and we don't underestimate the impact this prolonged period at home will have had on them. As shielding is relaxed, and eventually phased out, our Community Support Hub stands ready to support them if they need help or if, through track and trace, they are asked to shield themselves again.

Covid-19 has impacted daily life for all of us here in West Berkshire and we were keen to ask residents about this so that we could understand what their individual experiences have been.

We ran a survey recently and were pleased to have received almost 3,300 responses from local people.

Some of the things we've been told by residents are very positive, particularly around their appetite to volunteer, help others in the community and to support local businesses on the high street. Other responses are quite worrying, particularly with a third of those surveyed reporting a fall in household income. Through our recovery work, we will look at how we can get those who have been most affected back on their feet and will offer all the support we can.

We're also very aware that some groups who are particularly vulnerable to the impact of Covid-19, such as young people and those from the BAMER community, are under-represented among the respondents and we have employed a new Equality & Diversity Officer to look at how we can engage them more effectively. We'll be running the survey regularly to understand how the impact changes over time and, when the time comes, we hope that residents will once again give us their views.

In a week in which we have seen more of our high street businesses open up, we are of course very disappointed to hear of John Lewis' decision not to re-open its At Home store in Newbury. The store has been a key part of the Parkway development since it opened in 2011 and we will be sad to see it go. We have been in contact with Parkway Shopping, which houses the store, since the announcement was made and have offered our support to them.

The list of closures includes stores across the country, including in UK's second largest city, so we don't feel that this decision is a reflection on Newbury so much as on the national, and indeed global, picture in retail. That said, as part of the recovery work we are undertaking, we will be engaging with residents and businesses about the future of the town centre and considering how we can enhance the town's offer to include more experiential destinations alongside more traditional retail outlets.

Although this is undoubtedly a blow, there is reason to be optimistic with 85% of Parkway's tenants having re-opened and those who have are trading well. We know footfall last weekend was at 80% of pre lockdown levels, which is well above the current national average of around 60%. Thank you to everyone who has been supporting our high streets and our local businesses over the past few weeks.

Yours sincerely,



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