31st July 2020

Chief Executive

West Berkshire Council
Council Offices
Market Street Newbury
Berkshire RG14 5LD

Our Ref: nc/rab
Your Ref:

Please ask for: Nick Carter
Direct Line: 01635 519101
e-mail: nick.carter@westberks.gov.uk

Good afternoon,

Four months ago the most vulnerable residents across the country were advised to stay at home and wherever possible avoid coming into contact with others. Since then these residents have been shielding from coronavirus to keep themselves safe. From tomorrow, 1st August, shielding will be paused and residents can go out to more places and see more people.

The pausing of shielding has left us reflecting on the fantastic work done to support the shielded over the past few months. Although this was done in collaboration with the Community Support Hub it was very much community groups who were leading the charge and making a difference. When we reflect on all that has gone on it makes us proud of the way people across West Berkshire have responded, collectively and individually,

We recently conducted a survey of around 90 groups who have been working with the Community Support Hub. Nearly nine out of ten groups were quickly formed as a direct response to the Covid-19 outbreak. The remainder coming from existing voluntary and community groups who themselves had to quickly adapt to meet local needs. Common tasks for them included collecting prescriptions, doing shopping, befriending someone who was isolated and delivering food parcels. Volunteers even got involved in things as simple as walking the dogs of people required to stay at home and they did all of these things whilst balancing their own work and family commitments.
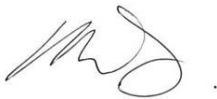
In a recent survey of 3,300 local residents a quarter said they had volunteered during Covid-19 and almost 80% of these intend to continue. They told us they did so for a number of reasons including wanting to do good in their community and feel more of a connection to it, because they had more time and thought it would be good for their wellbeing. We've seen the benefits of a strong community response and the challenge for us now is how we harness this effort to continue it over the coming months and years.

The Community Support Hub has been really important for us in supporting this community work and we're now looking at how we can adapt it so it is focused not only on Covid-19 but working with residents on a broader spectrum of activities. It is our intention to do this with our partners but most importantly led by our communities and our community groups. It is local residents who will know what the priorities are in their local areas and what the right solutions are, we will continue to work with them. Whatever we do next will help support them in achieving that.

For now, we want to say a huge, and heartfelt thank you to everyone who has been supporting others through shielding. Shielding is pausing, not ending, and whilst this will change what help is available to residents it's important they know help is still available. We have recently written to people who are being shielded to let them know what is happening and where they can still get help, and our Community Support Hub remains open during the week to support people in significant difficulty.

Throughout Covid-19 we've been working hard to ensure our communities know what has been going on – with shielding advice, the latest social distancing guidance as well as changes to council services. We've spoken previously about our focus on communication and engagement with residents and it was rewarding this week to hear we are one of eight councils to work with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to help develop a new 'Community Engagement Playbook.' It will provide a practical guide for other local authorities to use and we're pleased to be able to work with others to bring together this learning and for others to use.

Yours sincerely,

Lynne Doherty
Leader of the Council
lynne.doherty@westberks.gov.uk

Nick Carter
Chief Executive
nick.carter@westberks.gov.uk