



West Berkshire
Conservative
Manifesto
2023



 **Conservatives**



89
community groups

3,000
volunteers

£500K
to support families

£110M
in government grants

Dear Resident

How things have changed since I became Leader of West Berkshire Council in May 2019! While we were working hard to meet the commitments to you that we set out in our last manifesto, the Covid-19 pandemic brought us challenges that I never expected we would have to face.

And face those challenges we did. I am proud to say that your Conservative-led council worked in partnership with residents, parish councils, schools, health services, businesses and community groups to help everyone we could.

During the first lockdown in 2020 we set up the Community Support Hub which was a huge success. It co-ordinated the efforts of 89 community groups and over 3,000 volunteers who came forward. This meant that people isolating at home received the vital supplies they needed. Later, we set up a fund of £500k with government and council money to support families and the vulnerable through the winter as well as giving free holiday food vouchers to children.

The council led in co-ordinating the efforts of partners such as local health trusts, police, public health and our own services to respond to the developing pandemic. We monitored Covid case numbers and made sure that the vaccination programme reached all our residents.

We supported the Test and Trace initiative and rolled out testing capacity across West Berkshire.

We gave schools across the district the advice they needed to control the spread of the virus. We helped them to establish remote learning and we made sure every child had access via laptops and internet devices. And during this time we were able to open two brand new primary schools in Theale and south Newbury, Highwood Copse.

It soon became clear that the pandemic had affected the West Berkshire economy badly and over the next two years we distributed more than £110m in government grants to support businesses and community groups. We were one of the best authorities in the country in making sure that people received their grants promptly and we also prevented some serious frauds.

On a smaller scale and just as helpful to communities was the £500k fund we set up to consider bids to create new local infrastructure. Many were successful and the fund has gone to a range of initiatives aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of residents who have been affected by Covid-19, such as new community spaces and sports facilities.

Last year it became clear that high inflation was hitting disposable incomes and that many people were finding it hard to make ends meet. We took the lessons we learnt from the pandemic and set up the Cost of Living Support Hub to help residents who were struggling with their bills.

These are just some of the things that my Conservative team and our council officers faced through the period of the pandemic and beyond. However, I was determined not to forget the commitments we made to you before the last local elections in 2019. As a Conservative, there is one thing above all that I care about and that is rigorous management of our finances. If we don't balance the books and spend our resources effectively then we cannot provide the vital services that so many of us depend on, especially our most vulnerable. Our record shows that we have done so in every year of Conservative control of the council, while keeping council tax rises low, and this has been recognised by successive independent reviews. In a recent survey of 304 local authorities across the country, West Berkshire was seen as being in the top ten for value for money and the best for overall performance.

Our schools continue to perform highly and 94% of them have been rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted. Consistently, parents are able to send their children to schools of their choice. Over the last four years we have resurfaced 93 miles of road and spent £57m on improvements to our highways. Last year we began the development of the Newbury Sports Hub which will provide modern playing pitches and facilities for both rugby and football.

I made sure that the council continued to look to the

future and in 2020 we published our Environment Strategy, which called for our whole community to work towards carbon neutrality by 2030. We now have an agreed delivery plan which sets out how we will meet our objectives. We are moving ahead with the Newbury Town Centre Masterplan and we are building more flood defences to protect even more homes.

At the time of our last manifesto, West Berkshire had already seen the resettlement of a small number of Syrian families. Since then, we have welcomed families from Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Ukraine, fleeing persecution and war at home. We have greeted them all with kindness and generosity, especially those young people who reached our shores unaccompanied by adults.

Now I want to turn from our past successes and present this manifesto for the next four years. As a Conservative-led council, our objectives are aimed at recovering from the pandemic and rebuilding our economy to deliver the goals you can read about here. Some of these will be about transforming services and some will be exciting new plans. Together, we will make sure that West Berkshire remains a great place to live and grow, work and learn.

Lynne Doherty
Leader of West Berkshire Council



£57M
We have resurfaced **93 miles** of road and spent **£57m** on improving our highways

Our record for the last 4 years

We asked people how they wanted West Berkshire to be seen and these are some of the words they used:

Safe, Welcoming, Prosperous, Green, Fair, Generous, Cultural and Historic

These words reflect our Conservative values and many of our achievements over the past four years support them.

Safe & Welcoming

West Berkshire is a low crime area with high levels of employment. Most of us have easy access to green spaces and the countryside. During the past four years, 426 affordable homes have been built here and we have little homelessness. In 2022, we reduced rough sleeping to zero.

Our Highways teams worked hard to keep our traffic moving and they spent £27m to repair potholes and resurface roads. Improving our road network is a priority and Highways spent a further £30m on new schemes across the district.

Road safety initiatives included a School Streets pilot in Calcot to improve children's journeys to and from school. We funded three new Handybuses to provide transport for residents who are less mobile. We successfully bid for government grants of £900k to fund walking and cycling improvements, including £280k for a new route along the B4000.

The health and wellbeing of all our residents is a key priority and in 2021 the Berkshire West Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2021-2030 was agreed. Later the same year, we published our delivery plan which sets out how we will ensure different groups of people enjoy the same high levels of health, promote good mental health and wellbeing for all and help families and children in their early years.

In January 2022, we held the West Berkshire Health and Wellbeing Conference which focussed on some of our biggest health challenges, such as helping people live healthy lives and promoting good mental health for everyone. We have introduced Healthy Living kiosks in our libraries, hosted a Cycling and Wellbeing Festival and created a new Safer Streets Champion role. We set up a new integrated drug and alcohol dependency service, delivered by leading charity WDP.

Refugees continue to arrive in West Berkshire, including unaccompanied minors and we have greeted them all with kindness. With government funding we have given them shelter, helped them to settle and opened our schools to them. In the past four years we have seen arrivals under government schemes from Syria, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and most recently from Ukraine. Our communities have embraced and supported them.



£900K
We successfully bid for government grants of **£900k** for walking and cycling improvements





94%
of our schools
are good or
outstanding



98%
of our children
go to a school
of their choice



Prosperous & Green

West Berkshire is a prosperous district by national standards and we enjoy a beautiful rural setting alongside our towns. Council promotes the district as open for business with considerable success.

Under a government funded project, led by West Berkshire Council, superfast broadband has been rolled out across Berkshire and here 99% of our district now has access to superfast data speeds or higher. In partnership with Virgin Media Business we are leading a £1.7m project to bring full-fibre connectivity to more than 80 locations such as schools, doctor's surgeries and public libraries across Berkshire.

During the lockdowns, we supported businesses by distributing £91m in government grants quickly and effectively. A further £5m in grants helped businesses to recover from the effects of the pandemic.

We supported business in other ways too. We ran webinars to introduce the government's Kickstart scheme, which creates jobs for young people on Universal Credit. The scheme led directly to the recruitment of 25 people in West Berkshire last year and we sponsored the Rebel Business School to offer free training for business start-ups.

Footfall in Newbury Town Centre has returned to 2019 levels and under our refreshed Economic Development Strategy we launched consultation on a Masterplan for the centre. The plan was adopted by council last year and government funding has been allocated to work on a new public events space at the Wharf.

High standards of education are essential to the prosperity of West Berkshire and we see that year after year, parents are able to send their children to the schools they choose. 98% of children go to a school of their choice here and 94% of our schools are rated

good or outstanding by Ofsted. Since our last manifesto we have built and opened two new primary schools with investment of £16m to make sure that places are available in future. Early years capacity is equally important and we opened an early years building at Speenhamland Primary School. We agreed to invest a further £40m in new and improved educational facilities across the district.

Last year saw the return to formal exams for our students and their results showed increases on the 2019 pre-pandemic figures, which was welcome given the disruption that the pandemic brought about. We have the lowest number of young people who are not in education, employment or training in Berkshire and the seventh lowest in England.

We have started to deliver against our Environment Strategy. Having completed a major flood alleviation scheme in Thatcham, we began the process to go further with another scheme to the northeast of the town. Since we reopened our recycling centres after lockdown, we found more ways to increase levels of recycling in West Berkshire and a new service was introduced to handle paper containers that use metal, such as those for nuts, hot chocolate and other products. In October last year, we launched our weekly separate food waste collection service.

Many residents want to use public transport to minimise their carbon footprints and we reviewed our Bus Service Improvement Plan which aims to deliver cheaper and more reliable services, give residents better access to key facilities and reduce the environmental impact of travel. Highways have introduced a new, carbon-neutral road resurfacing project.

In partnership with Greenham Trust, we supplied 2,500 trees to 67 charities during the 2022 planting season to form part of The Queen's Green Canopy.



£279K
Winter Hardship Fund



Fair & Generous

We want everyone in West Berkshire to be treated fairly and generously and to have the same opportunities. The new Keevill Unit at Speenhamland Primary School was opened which provides improved facilities for children with disabilities.

Work started on the old Theale Primary School site to provide specialist education facilities for secondary-age children who have particular needs and disabilities. Planning has started for a similar provision for primary-age children at Kennet Valley Primary School.

Both of our special schools, Brookfields and The Castle School, retained their outstanding Ofsted rating. Castlegate, our respite provider was rated good, as was the specialist education provider Engaging Potential.

In 2022, our Children and Family Service was inspected and rated good by Ofsted, with recognition that "Leaders in West Berkshire demonstrate strong political and corporate commitment to achieving the best outcomes for children and families". Our Family Support Model was praised and the inspectors said that kindness was a thread that ran through the service.

The pandemic brought unexpected pressures to families and households that still affect them. During the lockdown we set up a Winter Hardship Fund of £279k to help people and we made sure that all children in our care had laptops so that they could access remote learning from home.

During holidays, some of our more deprived families struggle to provide meals for their children and to keep them occupied, especially through summer. With government funding we set up Holiday Activity and Food programmes (HAF) which were delivered by schools and youth activity providers. HAF is free for deprived families and others may participate if parents want to pay. The programmes give children and young people great ways to keep active and to have fun with their friends.

The increase in inflation and in energy and fuel costs hit some families hard. Government funding allowed us to help residents who contacted our Cost of Living Support Hub through energy rebates and council tax reductions. The Hub also provided help through our Household Support Fund and by April we will have distributed over £10m.

Berkshire Youth run HAF programmes from their Waterside Centre in Newbury. We were pleased to support them with funding of £250k that let them complete the refurbishment of the centre and they reopened in 2021.

Our Willows Edge Care Home was rated good by CQC.



£10M

We will distribute £10m to
vulnerable households through our
Cost of Living Support Hub

Cultural & Historic

West Berkshire has a wealth of history in its buildings and in the countryside and we have a rich and diverse range of leisure and cultural offerings across the district. In 2020 we launched our Cultural Heritage Strategy 2020-2030, with its emphasis on health and wellbeing, sustainability and access. The delivery plan for this is well under way.

Last year, we agreed to spend £12m on upgrading our leisure facilities and we consulted on the redevelopment of Newbury's iconic Lido. Work has started on this and we expect it to reopen in July this year with new facilities and enhancements that will allow it to stay open for longer each year. Northcroft & Goldwell and Holybrook Linear parks were both granted Green Flag awards in recognition of the quality of their facilities, ease of access and their upkeep. We opened a new full-size 3G playing pitch at Denefield School which can be used by the local Tilehurst community. In Newbury, work has started on a new Sports Hub at Monks Lane that will offer playing pitches for football and rugby.

Our 740 miles of footpaths, bridleways and other public rights of way are much loved and our latest improvement plan will help to keep them open and accessible.



740
miles
of footpaths, bridleways
and other public rights



Our Pledge

Conservative-led West Berkshire Council is a high-performing local authority which delivers the services that residents need. Our financial record shows that we have done this year after year while keeping Council Tax low without overspending. We manage services well and keep costs down while ensuring that quality is high.

We adopt a strategic approach to running the council, planning for the long term as well as addressing today's challenges. We manage risk carefully so that when events occur that are beyond the usual expectations we can react and adapt.

Meeting the needs of the most vulnerable people in our communities is important to us and we always allocate resources to help the elderly, deprived and disadvantaged. We help people to help themselves and when they are unable to or they need more help, they become our priority.

We seek continual improvement and as demands and expectations change over time, we change the way services are delivered. We are always as open and transparent as we can be with our residents and we respect and listen to their views and feedback.

As Conservatives, we pledge that we will always:

- **Deliver services well**
- **Focus on residents' needs**
- **Balance the books**
- **Be responsible**
- **Prioritise our vulnerable**
- **Be honest**
- **Consult on issues that affect communities**



Our commitments for the next 4 years

Our record shows that we consistently meet the commitments we make to the people of West Berkshire. And we have shown that with Conservatives running the council we can respond successfully to unexpected challenges.

We will focus on the things that are most important to our residents and we will make sure that we have the resources and plans that we need.

These are our priorities:

- **Caring for our vulnerable people**
- **Protecting our environment**
- **Strengthening our communities**
- **Open for business**
- **Services for the future**



Caring for our vulnerable people

Ensure children in our care receive high levels of support

When children need help or when home life is not safe for them they may need to be looked after by the council and we have 191 children and young people in our care. We will ensure they are healthy and safe in their new homes and that they can thrive. We will monitor their progress in schools and colleges and make sure they have the same chances as other children.

Help our older people to remain in their homes

We will bring forward a delivery plan to set out how we will meet our commitments to residents in our Adult Social Care Strategy 2022-2026. Many older people want to continue to lead independent lives for as long as possible. We will work with partners to provide care services for them in their homes, as their needs change. We will support those who care for them and we will help people living with long-term health conditions.

When our older people are no longer able to live by themselves, we will support them in our own care homes. We already provide homes for 115 older people and we will invest £5m to create a brand-new facility in West Berkshire for the care of the growing numbers of people with complex health needs.

Give practical help to disadvantaged families

Our popular Family Hubs provide a wide range of support for all families and especially those with young children. We will ensure that all families in West Berkshire can find places in early years settings if they choose. We will target specific support for our most vulnerable families.

Act early to prevent homelessness

Homelessness levels are low in West Berkshire and we will continue to improve the supply of affordable housing locally. We will intervene as soon as possible to prevent people falling into homelessness by helping to negotiate on behalf of households to let them remain in their homes, advising tenants of their rights and securing safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse.

Minimise youth offending

Our Youth Offending Team is rated as outstanding and we will do all we can to maintain that. We will work with partners to prevent offending by young people and to keep their re-offending low, as set out in the Youth Justice Action Plan which is renewed annually and is closely monitored.

Reduce rough sleeping

We will maintain minimal rough sleeping numbers through our Housing First strategy which provides shelter for anyone who needs it, including those with challenging and complex needs. We will continue to provide shelter during times of severe weather when those who choose to sleep rough can be in danger.

Protecting our environment

Deliver against our Environment Strategy

We will complete the actions set out in our published Environment Delivery Plan that has set us on the path to reach carbon neutrality by 2030. We will report regularly on progress. We will work towards making the Council's own operations carbon neutral by, for example, replacing boilers with heat pumps in schools, leisure centres and council offices. We will roll out more solar panels and we will replace council vehicles with zero emission models.

We will roll out more electric vehicle charging points and re-insulate homes suffering from fuel poverty. We will set significantly higher standards for heating, insulation and energy use in new houses.

Work with partners to care for and preserve our countryside

Tackling the environment is a huge and complex challenge and we will only succeed by working with others, as in our Natural Solutions Delivery Partnership, where we will bring improvements to our countryside and rivers. We will work closely with Parish and Town Councils, Newbury College, Thames Water and other organisations to protect and improve our natural environment.

Review and maintain our flood defences

We will protect our communities against flooding. We have already delivered three major flood alleviation schemes in Thatcham and we will complete two more in the northeast of the town. We will complete the actions set out in our Local Flood Risk Management Strategy 2022-2027, which will strengthen protection for homes across the district.

Improve public transport especially rural routes

We will support bus routes and promote increased usage of buses. We will seek innovative solutions such as our new Liftshare service and the West Berkshire Car Club to improve both rural and urban travel, cut down emissions and help people with mobility issues. We will implement our Bus Services Improvement Plan.

Maintain footpaths

We will publish and enact our updated Rights of Way Improvement Plan which will set out the programme of works that ensure our 740 miles of footpaths, bridleways and other public rights of way remain open and accessible.



Prevent fly-tipping especially when it is organised

We will continue to tackle fly-tipping through more enforcement activity against perpetrators and we will work with residents to remove litter from areas which are not normally covered by our street cleaning teams. We will partner with landowners and Keep Britain Tidy to reduce this pernicious criminal activity.

Invest in cycle routes

We will encourage and enable more walking and cycling as healthy alternatives to car travel. Cycling infrastructure in and between our urban centres will be improved through investment of £850k.



Strengthening our communities

Ensure places for all in good schools

Through planning and investment of £40m over the next four years, we will provide sufficient places in early years, primary, secondary and special needs settings, such that parents are able to send their children to schools of their choice. We will give advice and support to schools to assist them to gain and retain Ofsted ratings of Good or Outstanding.

Improve physical and mental health where that is needed

We will promote and improve awareness of physical and mental health through the leadership of Berkshire West Health and Wellbeing Board and in partnership with health partners and charities. We will support the maintenance and upkeep of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment that underpins the work of the Board. We will ensure that our services are delivered with the wellbeing of our residents in mind.

Provide the infrastructure that communities need

We will support and advise parishes and towns in the production of Community Plans, which allow them to have control over how they want their communities to develop and which can unlock grant funding. We will offer funding to support communities in their plans to provide and improve local facilities.

Continue to consult with residents on the local plan

We will seek the views of residents and communities at every stage of our current Local Plan Review, so that we have the necessary land, housing and infrastructure to meet the changing needs of our population. The new plan will set high standards for insulation, heating and energy use in new housing developments.

Provide adequate affordable housing

We will enable every resident to live in a home that meets their needs. We will work with developers, landowners, housing associations and other partners to ensure that the right homes are built in the right places.

Deliver against our Leisure Strategy

We will complete the £5m refurbishment of Newbury Lido and reopen it in the summer this year which will provide a high quality, sustainable leisure experience. The world class Newbury Sports Hub will open for football and rugby in the 2023/24 season. More pitches will be completed in line with our Playing Pitch Strategy, including one at John O'Gaunt School in Hungerford. We will invest in our leisure centres across the district to maintain and improve facilities.



1.7%

The number of young people not in employment, education, or training in West Berkshire is now at **1.7%**, lowest of all Berkshire authorities



Open for business

Invest in the rural economy

We will protect and develop our rural economy, helping businesses to start up, develop, adapt and diversify.

Continue with town centre regeneration

We will drive the development of Newbury Town Centre in line with the exciting Masterplan we adopted last year. Work has started on the new public events space at the Wharf and we will bring forward further proposals to bring the vision of the Masterplan to life, including developing parklets along Northbrook Street and Bartholomew Street and enhancing the green space alongside the canal.

We will deliver regeneration plans for Thatcham, Theale and Hungerford, to understand local needs and ambitions of our residents and to improve and refresh our town centres for the years ahead.

Identify innovative transport infrastructure plans

We will encourage the use of greener modes of travel such as cycling and walking, by promoting active travel in planning consultations and connecting to Thames Valley LEP's Berkshire-wide connected travel plan. We will encourage the take-up of emerging transport technologies through collaboration with technology companies and government trials.

The quality of our road network remains vital to our economic well-being and we will invest £38m in maintaining and developing our roads and local infrastructure. We will deliver upgrades to Newbury and Theale railway stations in partnership with Network Rail and GWR, improving accessibility and making rail travel more attractive to residents.

Roll out ultrafast broadband and eliminate mobile data not-spots

We will work collaboratively with the other five Berkshire unitary authorities via the Berkshire Digital Infrastructure Group to achieve the target of 95% coverage of full-fibre, gigabit-capable broadband by 2025, to deliver the benefits of ultrafast data speeds to homes and businesses.

We will continue our work to eliminate mobile data 'not-spots' in our rural villages to ensure that all residents have access to a reliable mobile network and harness fully the benefits of being connected in this digital age.

Maintain focus on jobs and skills for local people

We will identify critical skills gaps in our working population and work with partners and training providers to address these. We will support the development and delivery of a Berkshire-wide Skills Strategy and work with the Berkshire Growth Hub to assist those who want to re-enter the workforce by starting a new business.

The number of young people not in employment, education or training in West Berkshire has fallen over the last four years and now stands at 1.7%. This is in the top 20% of all local authorities and is the lowest of all Berkshire authorities. We will keep this figure low by staying in close contact with our young people, seeking to understand their challenges and barriers and supporting them to identify and take up opportunities.

Services for the future

Seek innovative investment opportunities to generate income

We will continue with our plans for the regeneration of the London Road Industrial Estate. Construction and infrastructure works in the earliest stage will start this year for completion and occupation by 2025. Long term benefits will be significant increases in jobs and income to the council.

Review and refresh our Waste Strategy

Our waste strategy has undergone many changes since its inception in 2002 and we will undertake a comprehensive review. We will consider the expectations of our residents, changes in technology, financial constraints and the future of our waste contract.

Extend sharing of services with neighbouring authorities

We will remain fully committed to providing the highest quality services for West Berkshire residents at costs we can afford. We will seek opportunities to share services with neighbouring authorities, as we have done so well with the Public Protection Partnership, to bring about efficiencies and savings. We will also share services where we can exchange expertise and best practice, create greater resilience, eliminate duplication and reduce costs to the benefit of West Berkshire residents.

Review Devolution Possibilities

We will review our Devolution Programme to help sustain locally led service delivery and the devolved management of community assets. We will explore all possible opportunities for greater devolution in West Berkshire and increase our engagement with town and parish councils in community led solutions which will benefit all residents.





 **Conservatives**

