



Council Report for February and March 2025

Written by your local Conservative team to keep you up to date.

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West Berkshire Council

Council

Council met on 27 February to discuss:

- Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 - 2028/29 (C4633)
- Investment and Borrowing Strategy Financial Year 2025/26 (C4634)
- Capital Strategy - Financial Years 2025/26 - 2028/29 (C4632)
- Revenue Budget: 2025/26 (C4631)

Papers and a recording of the meeting can be found [here](#).

Council also met on 27 March to discuss:

- Hungerford Neighbourhood Development Plan
- Statutory Pay Policy 2025/26
- Constitutional Changes
- Member Development Programme
- Leaders Update on Membership of Executive

Papers and a recording of the meeting can be found [here](#).

The next meeting is on 1 May (Extraordinary Meeting).

Executive

Executive met on 13 February to discuss:

- Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 - 2028/29 (C4633)
- Investment and Borrowing Strategy Financial Year 2025/26 (C4634)
- Capital Strategy - Financial Years 2025/26 - 2028/29 (C4632)
- Revenue Budget: 2025/26 (C4631)
- Capital Financing Report Financial Year 2024/25 Quarter Three (EX4515)
- 2024/25 Revenue Financial Performance Quarter Three (EX4516)
- Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (EX4659)
- Companion Bus Passes (EX4642)
- Response to the Scrutiny Commission Task and Finish Group Report on Covid and Recovery (EX4638)
- Carers Strategy 2025-2028 (EX4617)

- Bespoke Full-Time Educational Provision for Pupils with SEMH needs who have EHC Plans (13-19 years) (EX4656)

Papers and a recording of the meeting can be found [here](#).

Executive met in a special meeting on 19 March to discuss:

- Replacement Finance System Direct Award
- Ridgeway Council

Papers and a recording of the meeting can be found [here](#).

The next meeting is on 3 April.

Budget

Budget Passed for the next year



WBC's spending plans for 2025/26 have been unveiled - setting out how WBC will spend £187m delivering services across the district and £73m on capital projects.

The plans contain a range of commitments focussing on the delivery of core infrastructure across the district, enhancing schools and other education facilities and developing provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

The capital programme will see £73m invested in the district to deliver infrastructure improvements.

Capital Budget

A £73m capital programme will see projects delivered across the district, including:

- £18.6m delivering a new solar farm at Grazeley
- Improvements to local roads and pavements including:
 - £12m on highway improvements
 - £400,000 on pavement improvements
 - £300,000 on bridge maintenance projects
- Improvements to local schools including:
 - £2.3m replacing eight classrooms at Falkland Primary School which are currently in old, pre-fabricated modular buildings
 - £1m providing two additional classrooms at Brookfields School
 - £886,000 on four new classrooms at The Castle School
- £2.4m on a nutrient neutrality programme to develop and deliver projects to reduce the nutrients entering the River Lambourn
- £50,000 to provide real-time passenger information and other public transport infrastructure

Exceptional Financial Support Requested

WBC has been successful in its request to HM Government for Exceptional Financial Support (EFS).

A letter was sent in January 2025 to request an emergency bailout of £16m, with the budget papers showing they urgently need support or they will need to issue a s114 notice, the Council equivalent of bankruptcy.

The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government has now confirmed that the request has been granted.

The Exceptional Financial Support will be allocated to the Council's year end 2024/25 general reserve fund and to support the 2025/26 budget.

Local Government Reorganisation

West Berkshire considers options for a new unitary authority

WBC started discussions with neighbouring local authorities to inform proposals on the future of councils in the area.

It followed an announcement by HM Government in December that will see two-tier councils (county and district councils) abolished and replaced by unitary authorities. It will also look for unitary authorities to provide services for a population of around 500,000 people. With West Berkshire Council - already a unitary authority - covering around 170,000 residents, this means the Government will be looking for us to join with other councils.

Councillors and council officers are currently in discussions with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils, and the other five Berkshire unitary authorities, to look at different options to deliver local government reorganisation. These discussions included the possibility of a new unitary council combining West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse, and exploring options for unitary councils within the county of Berkshire.

Ridgeway Council

As a result of these discussions, an initial proposal has been submitted on behalf of West Berkshire Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and Vale of White Horse District Council for the creation of a new unitary council that would see the three areas combined. At their Executive and Cabinet meetings last week, members from all three councils agreed to support the submission of the interim proposal. The proposal is being developed under the title 'Ridgeway Council' - named after the famous 5,000-year-old trail that travels through the heart of the three council areas.

The government has set a deadline for final submissions for unitary council proposals no later than 28 November 2025. In the meantime, the councils will continue to develop the proposals along with a programme of communication and engagement to ensure local voices and community needs are reflected in the [proposal](#).

The Leader of Reading Borough Council, and the MP for Reading West and Mid Berkshire, have expressed the view that eastern parts of West Berkshire Council should be moved into Reading. HM Government is yet to publish its response to the proposal, which should be released soon.

Education

Revamped outside space at Keevill Unit officially open

The newly revamped outside space at the Keevill Unit at Speenhamland School, Newbury was officially opened by former student Andy Stevenson last week.

WBC provided funding to enable the school to build the outdoor space project which includes a sensory outdoor class, wheelchair-friendly track and 'story throne' area.



Andy was part of the Keevill Unit between 1985 and 1992. He has gone on to work as a TV Presenter and Radio Reporter, including covering the Paris Olympics and Paralympics for BBC TV and American broadcaster NBC.

New classrooms for Castle School, Newbury

Work is underway on a brilliant £2.6m project at the Castle School, Newbury that will provide thirty-two new places for pupils aged 2-19 with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), many of whom also have physical disabilities and sensory needs.

The project, which was given planning approval in July 2024 will provide four new classrooms with break-out and small group rooms and associated welfare facilities, including a full wet-room. It will be sustainably heated via Air Source Heat Pumps and has been designed to meet BREEAM 'Excellent' in line with the Council's Zero Carbon 2030 targets.

EW Beard Construction has begun preparing the site for the build which is due for completion by early December 2025. Specialist equipment will be fitted ready for the first students in early January 2026.

Leisure and Culture

New play equipment for Calcot

A new free-to-use Big Rig, cardio combo and resistance shoulder press has been installed by Tilehurst Parish Council at the recreation ground in Calcot.

The equipment, which cost around £20,000, was paid for in part by West Berkshire Council's Community Infrastructure Levy Fund (CIL) – a charge paid by developers which goes towards local infrastructure. It was match funded by Tilehurst Parish Council.

Similar equipment installed at Turnham's Farm recreation ground in 2023 has been well used by a wide range of ages and abilities - and has prompted similar equipment to be installed at Calcot.

Shaw House Tudor Garden now open

The work on the Tudor Garden at Shaw House is now complete. The project, led by West Berkshire Council's Community Services was made possible through funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Designed by horticulturist and designer, Andrea Fearon from Ivy Hill Garden Design, this unique community space has been created with relaxation in mind and is perfectly placed to enjoy views of Shaw House.



Andrea kindly volunteered her time to construct the garden with a thoughtful approach to the historic setting, the environment and local wildlife. While the plants are all true to a Tudor period garden, the style in which they have been planted offers a contemporary interpretation; with ornamentals, herbs and vegetables being mixed in the borders rather than separated into dedicated spaces.

The garden is now open for visitors to enjoy, but as the planting took place during the winter months, it may be best to return during the summer months to see the garden in full bloom. Shaw House is open to the public every weekend 11am – 4pm until the end of September, and Monday to Friday 10am – 4pm during school holidays.

Talk: The archaeology of Compton

The Domesday settlement of Compton is referred to as two places, Westcumpton and Estcumpton from 1241. East Compton was the area around St Mary and St Nicholas' Church, and West Compton was the larger hamlet despite formerly been called Compton Parva, meaning minor or little!

Find out more and meet members of West Berkshire Council's Archaeology team as they delve into the parish's historic environment and share some of the fascinating artefacts found there by members of the public.

West Berkshire Museum | Wednesday 23 April | 7pm | [£5](#)

Northcroft Lido open for 2025



Northcroft Lido reopened its doors for swimmers to jump into the 2025 Spring/Summer season from 2 April.

The heated, Olympic-length pool is ideal for some 'al fresco' lane swimming during the spring and summer months, while the interactive splash pad and 6-metre spiral flume offers the perfect opportunity for families and friends to have fun in the water. Outdoor swimmers and families can also enjoy the popular decking area of the lido where people can relax next to colourful beach huts that create a seaside feel.

The iconic 150-year-old outdoor facility underwent a £5million refurbishment in 2023 to provide an enhanced experience and its popularity among locals continues to rise.

Open until the end of September, Northcroft Lido will be hosting a variety of events over spring and summer. Visitor numbers are limited, and booking is essential to avoid disappointment. Under 8s must be accompanied by an adult.

3G pitch coming to Cotswold Sports Centre

A 3G artificial playing pitch will be installed at the Cotswold Sports Centre in Tilehurst.

Funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the project will redevelop the multi-sport courts situated behind the sports centre.

The development will include a 3G surface with suitable fencing and goals to be primarily used for football, although the space will be available for residents to book and use for a range of sports.

The new pitch will be the same size as the existing courts, allowing for small-sided match play and will be used for a mix of social and formal sport for local clubs and teams to book as a training space, but also for parties and activities.

As part of the sports centre offering, Everyone Active will run an exciting and varied programme at the facility, on behalf of West Berkshire Council. Work starts in Spring for completion early Summer.

Goodbye to the Mobile Library

There has been a mobile library service in this district for at least the past 40 years and at the height of its popularity there were three library vehicles operating in West Berkshire. Over the years, staff have been there for residents in rural areas, offering books, advice and friendly words to their customers who waited regularly for the Mobile Library to arrive throughout all seasons.

Due to diminishing numbers of customers using this service in recent years and the fact that the one remaining vehicle had reached the end of its working life, WBC said goodbye to the Mobile Library at the end of March 2025. Without doubt, fond memories of the service will remain for many years to come.

Looking Forward

Although the Mobile Library will be missed, West Berkshire Libraries will continue to work hard to bring books to those who can't get to their local library and serve customers in rural and isolated areas:

At Home Library Service

For instance, for residents who find it difficult to visit their local library because of age, disability, lack of access to transport or caring responsibilities, WBC will bring the library service to them. They will match each person with a DBS-checked library volunteer, who will find out about their reading tastes and then choose and deliver books to them at their home every three weeks at a pre-arranged time. Favourite authors or

particular titles can be requested. Please ring 01635 519827 or email library@westberks.gov.uk to find out more.

Pop-up Libraries and Community Bookshelves

WBC are also working with town and parish councils to set up regular pop-up libraries and community bookshelves at locations of their choice, according to local need; and are delighted to link in with existing events such as village hall coffee mornings and community cafes. Pre-ordered book reservations can be dropped off to residents at these locations at a time to suit the local community.

Environment

Project Groundwater Innovation Fund opens

Funded by Project Groundwater, the Innovation Fund is dedicated to empowering local communities to address groundwater flooding, funding projects that seek to improve flood resilience in West Berkshire.

Residents can apply for up to £20,000 to support the local community in flood resilience schemes.

More information is available [here](#)

Community

Fire and rescue service recruiting for summer internship



Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service is now accepting applications from young people in Berkshire to join the service's Summer Internship Scheme.

The internship aims to encourage 18-year-olds from backgrounds that are underrepresented within the service to explore some of the many roles available to them in the fire and rescue sector.

Each intern will have the opportunity to gain valuable real-world work experience and transferable skills working alongside teams within the Service. During the scheme, the interns will participate in learning and development workshops, as well as visits to several fire stations across Berkshire.

The service is looking for four interns to join the scheme for five weeks in the summer, from Thursday, 4 July to Friday, 9 August. As part of the internship, each successful applicant will be paid an hourly wage of £10.66.

Fire and Rescue Service safe and well visits

Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) want to check in on people who may struggle to get out of their home in an emergency.

When a smoke alarm goes off, most people can get out of their homes and call 999. Most, but not all.

Can you think of anyone that doesn't have an alarm, might not react to an alarm, or can't easily evacuate their home if their smoke alarm was to activate?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes, please [visit the RBFRS website](#) to help keep communities safe. Residents can also call the freephone 0800 587 6679 between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday, or use the answerphone available outside of these times.

Transport

Cycle signs keeping you on the right path

West Berkshire Council has installed new cycle direction signs between Newbury and Thatcham town centres.



The new signs have the local 'Linkways' branding, which is gradually being rolled out to identify main routes for cycling.

The signs also show average cycling time in minutes to destinations such as the Nature Discovery Centre.

Encouraging and enabling active travel fits with the Council Strategy Priority of tackling the Climate and Ecological emergency, by offering many residents an alternative for some or all of their local, shorter-distance journeys.

Talk: A hundred years and more of cycle clubs in Newbury

Newbury Road Club will be celebrating its centenary in 2025, but cycle clubs have been busy in Newbury for many more years. This talk will give a short history of cycling clubs in Newbury with particular emphasis on the Newbury Road Club from its formation by the Bance brothers to the active and busy club it is today.

West Berkshire Museum | Wednesday 23 April | 1pm | [Free](#)

Current Consultations

- [Berkshire Digital Infrastructure Group \(DIG\): Residents' Survey 2025](#) – Closes 16 April 2025
- [Proposal to introduce a new Public Spaces Protection Order \(PSPO\) in Pangbourne Meadows](#) – Closes 30 April 2025
- [Draft Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy 2025-2030](#) – 18 May 2025
- [Springfield Primary School - School Streets Scheme](#) – Closes 18 May 2025