

District Council Report to Theale Parish Council

8th March 2021

Council Tax

West Berkshire Council will be increasing their element of the council tax by 1.99% - the maximum amount allowed without holding a referendum.

Councils are also allowed to charge a 3% Adult Social Care precept spread over 2021/22 and 2022/23. West Berkshire are not charging the precept this year. However, their Medium Term Financial Strategy assumes that they will charge it in full next year, together with another 1.99% on council tax.

Budget

The council's budget for 2021/22 assumes that this year's budget will be underspent by around £3.4M, mainly due to Covid-19. The council has received many Covid-19 related government grants and Adult Social Care is underspent by around £2M. The latter is mainly due to the number of Adult Social Care clients who have died due to the virus. 39% of those who died from the virus were in care homes, compared to a national average of 30%.

One Theale-related item in the budget is £35K for security at the old primary school. This seems a very large amount, especially as the only security I've seen (apart from boarding-up) is a 5-minute visit by a security firm. I will be making enquiries about it.

The budget "debate" at the council meeting last Tuesday was a farce. Despite an agreement on how much time each speaker could speak for, it became obvious that the meeting was unlikely to finish by 10:30. This was due to a poorly managed meeting and a number of points of order raised by Conservative councillors. Despite offers from the Liberal Democrats to reduce the allowed speaking times, the administration closed down debate when only two of the five Lib Dem spokesman had spoken. The Lib Dems therefore left the meeting. The Greens, faced with a similar close-down, did the same.

Local Plan

The council is drawing up revised settlement boundaries. They are proposing a major change to Theale's boundaries to accommodate the proposed housing allocations, though these will be reversed if the housing allocations are not included in the Local Plan version submitted to the Secretary of State. Parish Councils will be consulted on these changes in the coming weeks.

Railway Track Replacement

Network Rail have given notice that they will be replacing the railway track between the Wigmore Lane pedestrian level crossing and the eastern end of Theale Station in April. This will be noisy at times and much of the work will take place overnight. The pedestrian crossing will be closed at times during the work. They will be using the old builder's yard at

the end of Wigmore Lane as a base. Preparatory work on that will take place from the middle of this month.

Pincent's Hill Planning Application

This application for 265 homes is now likely to be determined by the Eastern Area Planning Committee in April. It was originally scheduled for 10th March but has been delayed while officers consider the over 1,500 objections raised.

Alan Macro

7th March 2021