

Approved response of Thatcham Town Council to the Consultation by West Berkshire Council on its Draft Council Strategy 2023-2027

This draft strategy document contains a plethora of laudable objectives. All of the forty-four proposed outcomes are worthy, and the Town Council does not disagree with any of them. However, they do not give any sense of vision for the future development of West Berkshire, or the role that West Berkshire Council envisages it will play in shaping this.

The Town Council particularly welcomes the objective of “Closer and more effective working with our communities and partner organisations (including Town and Parish Councils ...) so residents achieve the outcomes that they need”, and we look forward to this being realised in the coming months and years.

However, a strategy requires more than just a list of outcomes. It must also describe the actions needed to deliver them – and those actions are totally absent in this document.

For a strategy to drive change and improvement, its outcomes should be ‘SMART’ – i.e, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound. If the outcomes are not ‘SMART’ it is impossible to measure progress and prioritise resources:

Specific: all of the proposed outcomes in the draft strategy are defined in very general terms

Measurable: None of these outcomes have any measurable criteria for achievement.

Achievable: These outcomes are generally achievable – but only because they are so general that almost any improvement can be deemed to be a success.

Relevant: These outcomes are relevant to the duties of a Local Authority

Time-bound: None of the outcomes define any timeframe (except presumably for the end of 2037). However, the timeframe for achievement of an outcome is only meaningful if the outcome is measurable.

The outcome “Carbon neutrality achieved by West Berkshire Council by 2030” is clearly not measurable within the 2023-2027 timeframe, so intermediate objectives need to be defined towards the outcome for 2030.

The ‘outcomes’ focus almost entirely on the ‘revenue’ activities of the Council, but capital projects are generally more strategic in nature. Many of the outcomes will require investment in infrastructure, but the only specific mention of future infrastructure in the document is for an unspecified number of “Additional electric vehicle charging points”. There is one very general mention of “Local economic growth supported by infrastructure developments”, but infrastructure is also needed for other reasons, such as the wellbeing of residents and for extra capacity to accompany new housing.

The current Local Plan in Policy ADP3 states that: “Thatcham town centre will be a focus for regeneration, enabling the town to fulfil its role within the District’s Hierarchy of Centres by improving the retail offer and enhancing the streetscape. The provision of leisure and community facilities for all ages will be improved and encouraged within the town centre.” The specific infrastructure projects in this policy to achieve this include redevelopment of the Kingsland Centre and an expansion of the range of leisure facilities within Thatcham, utilising those at the existing Newbury Leisure Park on Lower Way.

It is imperative that this regeneration is achieved before any further housing is built in the area of Thatcham – such as is proposed in the draft Local Plan for 2024-2039. They will therefore need to be delivered by 2037. The regeneration of Thatcham and its town centre should therefore be a specific ‘outcome’ in the West Berkshire Council Strategy for 2023-2037.