

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council

20th March 2020

Agenda item 3: Coronavirus (COVID19)

The situation in relation to Coronavirus is changing on an hourly basis and your officers have been considering the Council's response across its operations. The pace of change is such that this paper would have been different only a few days ago. I have listed below some of the matters for us to consider and some thoughts.

The priority is to

- (i) keep Council services running as normally as is possible;
- (ii) be responsive to changing circumstances;
- (iii) be available to other authorities as appropriate.

This report focuses on Town Council democratic/ administrative matters and service delivery of Town Council services. It is not intended to consider wider community and public health issues.

Note that this report is not in a priority order.

Members are requested to work through this paper as a basis for making decisions on the various items detailed.

Overall:

- Have regard to official government and local advice.
- Some decisions will be taken out of our hands e.g. in case of complete lock-down.

Democratic procedures

Meetings and delegation

With meetings being cancelled due to the requirement for social isolation it is important that arrangements are made for decisions to continue to be made.

Law does not allow official Council meetings to be conducted by Skype, Zoom or similar although it is understood that emergency legislation may be brought forward to allow this.

The current assumption is that meetings will be suspended for a period. If this is done then the only practical way to then expedite decisions is have a delegation to the Town Clerk in consultation with Members.

The Council should consider approving the following as a resolution:

- (i) To temporarily suspend all meetings of the Council and its committees.
- (ii) To delegate Council decisions to the Town Clerk during any period of restricted activity declared by the Government in respect of the COVID-19

pandemic, such delegation to enable the Council to fulfil its responsibilities to its residents. That should the Town Clerk become unable to fulfil his role then he then delegates this function to another officer who can at that point perform this function, with the ability then to resume his role if or when he is able to;

- (iii) In exercising the delegation at (ii) and whilst Council and its committees are suspending, that the Town Clerk consult with an Emergency Consultation Panel comprising
- (iv) That these decisions are documented and regularly reported to Members.
- (v) That should legislation come forward to allow for “virtual meetings” then the Town Clerk, in consultation with the above members, decide to recommence meetings.

In relation to planning matters, we are continuing at present to receive applications electronically; the Vale have suspended paper copies. I would suggest that in line with the above resolution, a new system come in place to consult with Members sending what would have been on the agenda together with the list of planning applications to Members with timescale to respond. Authority then to Town Clerk in consultation with Chair/ others? Local members?, to then respond.

Approved absence from Council duties

Section 85 (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 requires a member of a Local Authority to attend at least one meeting of that Authority within a six-month consecutive period, in order to avoid being disqualified as a Councillor. This requirement can be waived and the time limit extended if any failure to attend was due to a reason approved by the Authority, in advance of the six-month period expiring.

It is therefore recommended

- (i) That any Member who now does not attend at least one meeting in a six-month period, for reason of illness, has the requirements of section 85 (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 waived and the time limit extended.
- (ii) That the matter then be reviewed at the next meeting of the Town Council.

Annual Meeting of the Council

Mayor making/ Annual meeting 6th May 2020. Either scale back, i.e. simple business meeting with no ceremonial or push back. Law requires meeting by end of June 2020 so could postpone but would have to decide according to emerging circumstances.

- There might be some legislation to enable other ways of addressing issues

Please also see advice received today from the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils.

Neighbourhood Plan engagement/ consultation – discussion to take place with the consultant, likely to continue for now only online methods.

Mayoral

See above re Mayor Making.

Many events now being cancelled e.g. Morris Men Challenge, PhAb evening.

Not entirely in Council's hands e.g. Mayor's Charity event 27th March 2020 cancelled.

Recommend: Mayor and Deputy Mayor to suspend attending events.

Town Council events

Music and Fun in the Park:

- Cancel Music in Park. Original thought could go to August but likely disruption at that time, issues likely with bands and other suppliers, also staffing issues in August .
- Fun in Park: also suggest cancel.
- VE Day events: cancel.
- Review other events as time passes.

Guildhall and Cinema

Majority of venues now closed or closing soon.

Cinema closing temporarily 19th March 2020.

Many Guildhall hirers now cancelling.

Recommend: Guildhall also temporarily close.

To advise further regarding weddings. Note Church of England guidance.

- Continue dialogue with Cinema management and keep under review.
- Put in place security measures during period of closure.

Museum and café

Majority of venues now closed or closing soon.

Abingdon County Hall Museum and Mousehole Café temporarily closed from 18th March 2020.

- Continue to review.

Councillors and staff (general)

Advice to councillors/ staff who become poorly and require to self-isolate.

Risk assessments of staff who may be more vulnerable due to medical/ family circumstances and may need to be isolated.

Mental health concerns for all.

Liquid soap supplies and disposable gloves available.

However no hand sanitiser available.

Works services including cemetery

See separate paper re the cemetery, which will be the priority.

Further items:

- Social distancing measures for staff to allow team to take vehicles home and receiving instructions from supervisor re phone, to minimise need to attend at the depot.
- Cemetery office – has now temporarily closed, small enclosed space potentially puts staff at risk. Phone service/ e-mails available. (Note – unusual to have onsite office. Though convenient most matters with funeral directors are dealt with by phone/ online). Public asked not to go to the Lodges, which are tenanted by staff, so appropriate notices in place.

Administration

We are increasingly being urged by government to socially distance ourselves as far as possible. Our risk assessments are such and our ability to maintain our services without face to face contact mean that decision has been taken to close to the public at 5pm Friday 20th March.

All office staff now able to work from home as we have arrangements in place to continue to provide our services through home working without placing staff or public at unnecessary risk. Phones calls can be answered and staff can use e-mail and their files.

A Manager will be present in the office on certain days to undertake work required on-site.

Appropriate notices on door and website signposting residents to services. We are still available to speak with and assist but within the context of required social distancing.

- Staff flexible to redeployment as required.

- Daily contact with all office staff.
- Looking ahead at what tasks can be done in advance.
- Checking arrangements with suppliers of goods and services etc and what contingencies can be put in place.
- Ensure key services covered e.g. financial, cemetery.

Financial

A further report from the Treasurer/ RFO will follow detailing decisions required in relation to financial arrangements.

Confidential section

Report of Assistant Town Clerk/ Head of Services re cemetery and risk assessments.

Pro-active Council

Keep website up to date with advice linking to government/ other local authority websites.

Setting up a section of the website in relation to the Pandemic, in the first instance this will be informational, linking to NHS and government websites.

Use of social media.

Can we work in partnership with others to support the vulnerable/ those self-isolating? The Council has admin/ communication resources available which may assist.

<https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/18306729.coronavirus-community-groups-oxfordshire/>

Members are requested to work through this paper as a basis for making decisions on the various items detailed.

Nigel Warner
Town Clerk
19^h March 2020.

Advice received from Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils,

16th March 2020

**KEEPING THE COUNCIL FUNCTIONING DURING THE CORONAVIRUS –
PLANNING NOT PANICKING!**

Further to our e-mail of last week, please see guidance below **regarding delegation of decision making** to an officer of the council or a small emergency committee to ensure that the council continues to function during the next few weeks/months. This is in case a council cannot hold meetings because they are forbidden to do so or because of self-isolation causes the council to be inquorate. This should only be in extremis. At present neither large nor small meetings are banned but please continue to keep updated on the central government advice as legislation is anticipated later this week <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>

Common sense precautions – hand washing, separation at meetings, staying away if feeling unwell should all be the order of the day.

As a reminder, it is possible for a council to delegate decision making to an officer of the council, i.e. the clerk or the responsible financial officer (RFO) or to a committee under the Local Government Act 1972, Section 101. Please read the attached Legal Topic Note. Despite the Corona Virus all the existing legislation guiding the functions of a parish council remain in place (Local Government Act 1972), until such times as we might be told otherwise by central government.

We suggest that it may be prudent, if there is no scheduled council meeting coming up imminently, that the chairman convenes an extraordinary meeting of the council for the purpose of delegating functions to the clerk and/or Emergency Committee to ensure that the council can keep functioning, even if meetings cannot be held.

In our view, the delegation needs to be broad and to the effect that the council empowers the clerk/RFO/committee to do anything expedient and necessary to ensure the continuous business of the council, and to deal with mandatory undertakings in order to prevent the authority from incurring liability during the period that the delegation is applicable. This wording can be used in a minute.

We have been asked about the **Annual Parish Meeting** which is scheduled to be held between March 1st and June 1st. If you haven't already had it consider moving it to the latest possible date in the last week of May; it could be a scaled down affair to make life easier.

We have been asked about **remote meetings**, using Skype or Zoom rather than actually meeting face to face. As the law stands this is not allowable, councillors have to be present and voting, which is interpreted as being actually in the very room. This is where delegated decision making to a small committee or a designated officer will make life easier.

As you may now know the elections scheduled for May have been postponed .