

## ABINGDON TOWN COUNCIL

Report to	Town Council
Meeting date	30 March 2022
Report author	Nigel Warner
Agenda item	12

### Report of Town Clerk

1. **Purpose of the Report**

1.1 To agree governance matters as detailed in the report.

2. **Summary**

2.1 The report makes a proposal that all the Council's Committees meet in-person with effect from 11 May 2022, that the requirements of s.85 of the Local Government Act 1972 in relation to attendance at meetings is reviewed and that the calendar of meetings for 2022/23 is agreed.

3. **Action required**

3.1 To agree meeting arrangements with effect from 11 May 2022.

3.2 To agree that having regard to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic any member who does not attend at least one in-person meeting in a six-month period of the Council, its committees, sub-committees, working parties and working groups, due to the risk to their health resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and most of our meetings until May 2022 having been held virtually, has the requirements of Section 85 (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 waived, this to be reviewed again by the Council on or before 30 June 2022. Note that it is good practice to specifically consider individual members to whom this applies and therefore at paragraph 6.5 of this report there is a resolution in relation to Cllr Andrew Coveney if he is unable to attend the meeting on 29 March.

3.3 To agree the calendar of meetings for 2022/23.

4. **Link to strategic plan and objectives**

4.1 An efficient system of governance for the Council will assist in achieving the Council's key objectives and in particular KO3: To manage the Council's assets efficiently and effectively to meet for the needs of the community now and in the future.

5. **Background**

5.1 On 29 September 2021, the Urgency Committee and the Town Council reviewed the emergency governance arrangements in place during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was decided that the council's committees should continue to meet online as advisory committees. The recommendations of each advisory committee are then considered by the next meeting of the town council. The town council is conducted as a hybrid meeting with those members physically present at the meeting able to vote and make decisions but with the option also for members to attend on-line, in which case they can speak but not vote.

5.2 It should be noted that whilst most meetings have taken place online, there have also been meetings which have taken place with councillors and staff since the offices re-opened to the public in September 2020 and a number of the Working Groups/Parties (Bandstand, Platinum Jubilee and Guildhall Lease) have been meeting in-person. The frequency of these meetings has varied as the case numbers have waxed and waned.

5.3 With much business being conducted online and opportunities for members to attend meetings in person being limited, the Council has to consider attendance requirements for members who have been unable to attend in-person meetings and in this regard has previously resolved to waive the requirements of Section 85 (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 in relation to the six-month rule, which is permitted in law.

5.4 The Council must set its calendar of meetings annually and needs now to do so for 2022/23, noting that it is our practice to also agree the first cycle of meetings of the following council year. Meetings up to and including 29 June 2022 have therefore already been agreed.

6. **Key information and options**

6.1 Two years into the pandemic Covid-19 remains a significant public health problem despite vaccination and increased immunity within the community. We are as a nation experiencing another wave of infections, although there are early signs of the rate of increase slowing. In the seven days to 20 March 2022 a total of 1,954 positive tests were recorded in the Vale of White Horse District, an increase of one-third on the previous week and 60% above the national average.

**Town Council, 30 March 2022**

**Agenda item 12**

- 6.2 It is our responsibility to operate a safe environment, or at least as safe as possible, for the public, councillors and staff. However, the government have removed all coronavirus restrictions and that makes it increasingly difficult for us to steer a path that will keep everybody safe whilst 'learning to live with Covid'.
- 6.3 It is my judgement that from the next cycle of meetings all committees should again meet in person but with a hybrid facility which would enable those unable to attend in person to participate in the meeting, albeit not allowed to vote. I feel that now is the right time to do this when, although the virus is still widespread in the community, the overall risks to most people are much lower than they were and therefore the balance is changing such that now it is important that we have committees meeting in person so they can make decisions which can then be actioned more quickly than at present. Virtual meetings have served us well but have meant that all business undertaken by such committees has to be referred to the town council meeting.
- 6.4 Our risk assessments will be regularly reviewed in line with the latest advice and communicated to all those attending meetings. If circumstances change, we will act.
- 6.5 With regard to attendance at meetings, the town council has approved a general dispensation in relation to attendance to cover our virtual meetings but it is good practice to specifically consider those who are covered by the dispensation. Cllr Andrew Coveney has attended virtual meetings and performed his duties as a councillor. However, he has been unable to attend the meetings in person which have been held, his last attendance for the purposes of the Act being on 28 April. Whilst covered by the town council's general dispensation as noted above and our previous approval of his absence, I therefore recommend that the town council also approve the following additional resolution if he is unable to attend in-person on 29 March 2022:

"That in accordance with the provisions of section 85 (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 the requirement to attend meetings in person is waived for Cllr Andrew Coveney because he has been unable to attend meetings in person because of the town council's governance arrangements during the ongoing pandemic which has limited the opportunity to attend in-person, and his work commitments when meetings of the Town Council have taken place. The requirement is waived until the town council meeting scheduled to take place on 29 June 2022 or the next meeting following 29 June 2022, should that meeting not take place, when the matter will be reviewed. "

- 6.6 The calendar of meetings is in draft. We will issue this early next week as there are some areas which we need to consult with Committee Chairs on, specifically the evening of the week on which individual committees meet (two committees - Community and Environment & Amenities - have this year generally been meeting on Tuesdays) and the proposal discussed at the Town Infrastructure Committee that the planning panel changes from a Monday to a Thursday evening in order to give Members time the previous weekend to consider any applications they would wish the panel to review. I have decided not to send the draft calendar out until these matters are settled as I wish to avoid having numerous editions of the

Agenda item 12

calendar this year. The calendar will be based on six cycles of meetings a year.

- 6.7 Separately but to note here, now we have had six full months of the new governance arrangements and committee meetings, now is the time to review how matters are working and any necessary adjustments. Therefore, the working party established by members will meet ahead of 11 May 2022 to consider any necessary adjustments. This will not involve any change to the basic structure of the four committees.

7. **Climate change/green implications**

- 7.1 In-person meetings have a negative climate change implication compared with virtual meetings as attendees have to travel to meetings and meeting rooms require heating and lighting.

8. **Financial/budget implications**

- 8.1 In-person meetings have a negative financial implication compared with virtual meetings as rooms have to be hired and under the town council's staffing policy it states that "an additional 15 minutes can be added to the start and finish times of the meeting to allow for travel/preparation time." However, these costs are accommodated within the budget.

9. **HR implications**

- 9.1 None that are not already provided for in the establishment.

10. **Supporting papers and appendices**

- 10.1 A draft calendar of meetings will follow week commencing 28 March 2022.

Nigel Warner  
Town Clerk  
25 March 2022