

West Meon Parish Council

Covid-19 Business Continuity Arrangements

Adopted by Resolution dated 7th April 2020

Introduction

Councillors will be aware of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Government guidance is that the worst-case scientific modelling estimates that up to 80% of the UK population could become infected during the course of the outbreak.

It is expected to last at least 4 months in the UK, and this is the reason for the strong distancing and isolation guidance already issued.

The Council has a duty of care to prevent the spread of infectious disease not just to Town Council members and staff but also to members of the public passing through council spaces and through casual hire of facilities.

However, the Council needs to ensure that it maintains effective and lawful decision-making processes and continues the operation of essential services and contractual obligations.

This report sets out how the Council can respond to ensure that these objectives are met.

1. Services

Parish Council Council Services

It is intended that the Parish Council will continue to provide cover to maintain services and respond to enquiries from the public. While the Council has no formal role or expertise in public health matters, it is well placed to distribute information to local residents and to keep people informed.

In light of the recent guidance regarding social distancing all enquiries will be dealt with via telephone and email. Flexible working and social distancing measures such as home working with rotational attendance will be implemented where possible in line with government guidance, subject to staff availability.

Grounds Maintenance

Some grounds maintenance will continue to the opens space whilst complying with current advice regarding social distancing, subject to staff availability. The team will also comply with current guidance regarding hygiene and the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as necessary.

There is low to medium risk to staff from these activities providing that precautions are taken when touching play equipment/bins and that staff engage with members of the public at a sensible distance. In the event that play areas will not be inspected weekly as they have been closed following Government guidance.

2. Matters Relating to Staff

National Joint Council for local government services (NJC) has issued guidance for employers which the Town Council will follow, summarised below:

“Employees who are sick or unfit for work need to focus on their recovery.”

If an employee is fit for work but decides, or is instructed, to self-isolate then their absence should not be recorded as sickness absence. Options for home or remote working will be offered to employees in accordance with the Council’s flexible working policy. As staff are ‘well’ at this stage they should stay on normal full pay for the duration of the self-isolation period until such time as they are confirmed to have contracted Covid-19, at which point they transfer to sickness absence leave and the usual provisions of the sickness scheme will apply.

If an employee is caring for someone who has or may have been infected with Covid-19, this period of absence should also be regarded as self-isolation. Given the employee may then have been in direct contact with the virus we would expect only working from home arrangements to be then considered for the duration of the incubation period. Employers should keep in touch to support employees.

Following all school closures, employers should be fully supportive of employees with childcare responsibilities and consider flexible working arrangements, including adapting working patterns to care for children or dependents or taking time off, whether this is special leave, annual leave or flexible working.

3. Contingency Budget

The information we have regarding Covid-19 is updating daily. However, we do know that it will be some months before we return to “normal” business. It is prudent to establish a cost centre funded with £5000 from reserves to support specific purchases relating to the Council’s response to Covid19. Purchases may include IT provision to support homeworking or virtual meetings.

4. Public Meetings and Events

It is a requirement of the Local Government Act 1972, that Council business shall be conducted at public meetings of the council and any committees.

Councillors and Clerks are unable to attend public meetings in the village hall and guidance has been provided to Parish Councils to provide online meetings. And any member of the public should contact either the Clerk or Chairperson to speak at these meeting.

Due to the nature of local government and considering the Councillors and Members of Public who attend meetings, there is a significant proportion of attendees considered “high risk” to Covid-19. Therefore, in order to protect attendees, public meetings and the Annual Parish meeting in the village hall are suspended until the Government specifically lifts current restrictions imposed to deal with Covid-19.

VE Day

Given the current restrictions it is proposed that the VE day celebrations scheduled for 8th May 2020 are cancelled and efforts transferred to rescheduling the event to celebrate VJ day during August 2020.

5. Delegation to the Clerk

The Clerk is formally designated “Proper Officer”/”Responsible Finance Officer” (RFO) and in law is the only individual who can act on behalf of the Council and lead the administration of all the Council’s activities Some obligations are statutory whilst others are determined by the Council as part of the Clerk’s job description. These delegated powers are the everyday duties of the Proper Officer and Responsible Finance Officer, including management of all staff, services and finances.

General Delegation

To allow the Council to operate on a minimum requirement basis, the following is delegated to the Clerk until the Government lifts the restrictions imposed to deal with Covid-19:

The Clerk shall have delegated authority to make decisions on behalf of the Council where such decisions cannot reasonably be deferred and must be made in order to comply with a commercial or statutory deadline.

This will be carried out where possible by consultation with Council Members by electronic means or telephone. The Clerk will further consult with the committee chairman as necessary. The delegation does not extend to matters expressly reserved to the Council in legislation or in its Standing Orders or Financial Regulations. Any decisions made under this delegation will be recorded in writing and will be published in accordance with the relevant regulations

Planning Applications

The Clerk will submit a summary response to SDNP Council of any planning applications, having consulted with a minimum of 3 councillors and having secured agreement from the Chairman of the Planning and Environment Committee.

Finance

All purchases and payments, already allowed for within the budget, will be made by the Clerk as the Responsible Finance Officer. These will be made at the appropriate time in order to maintain the services of the Council, to fulfil contractual obligations or to prevent any late charges. A summary report of all payments will be presented to the Town Council at the first meeting following the lifting of restrictions.