

WHEATLEY PARISH COUNCIL— PARISH COUNCIL MEETING 7TH DECEMBER 2021 ITEM 178 v— UPDATE ON VIRTUAL MEETINGS AND RETURN TO FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

Author:	Clerk
Strategic Goal:	Goal 4 – Develop the council to enable it to deliver its functions effectively and to instill effective leadership.
Strategic Aim:	4.2 Provide excellent communication and transparency.
Summary:	An update on the current legislation and considerations for returning to face-to-face meetings.
Legislation:	Ending of The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 and reverting back to Local Government Act 1972

Purpose/Background

The legislation enabling the parish council to hold meetings virtually expires at midnight on 6th May 2021 after this date local councils will need to revert to the Local Government Act 172 which only allows for face-to-face meetings. To maintain communication, transparency and democracy, the council needs to make plans to meet its statutory obligations. Further advice on this has been provided by OALC and circulated to councillors on 6th April 2021

The council has already approved an enhanced scheme of delegation; however, this should only be used as a last resort.

The COVID-19 restrictions around social distancing and Covid secure premises remains in place until, at least 21st June 2021. The council will approve its schedule of meetings at its meeting on 4th May.

There is a legal challenge, pending, in April and should this see an extension of the current legislation the parish council will continue with virtual meetings.

Hiring of facilities

The parish council does not own any suitable buildings that can accommodate a full council meeting, or a committee meeting, under the current restrictions.

Our usual venue, the Merry Bells will remain closed for meeting bookings until mid-May, and the council has already moved its meeting date to Tuesday 4th May which will allow for a virtual meeting. The changes in legislation will come into effect for our June and possibly July meetings.

The Merry Bells have already issued [revised conditions of hire](#), addressing Covid secure measures that are to be followed and revised capacity numbers (max 30). Key considerations and issues include:

Attendants adhering to measures in place and following guidance and signage.	Monitoring by officer/councillor Track and trace codes available. Sanitiser and wipes available.
Room layout – 1 Cllr per table with 1-2m between each person (16 required)	Will need to reconfigure seating space and will take longer to set up. Allocated seating for any public in attendance. Numbers may need to be restricted. Clarification on when room will be available and may need to alter meeting start times.
All attendees to always wear face coverings.	This will hinder clear communication and discussion, especially as it also recommended that voices are not raised. Clerk to investigate inhouse PA system.
Room is ventilated (doors and windows opened)	Will take longer to set up room and to clear away at end of evening. Attendees advised to wrap up warm.
Committee meetings to be held in Merry Bells Coffee Room, rather than Parish Office, or if practicable outside (Open Spaces?)	Larger space to enable covid secure environment. Will have a financial impact on the council. Weather restrictions may hinder outside meetings.

Resources

The council will need to ensure that it has sufficient supplies of cleaning/sanitising equipment as well as masks (although attendees advised to bring their own). These can be purchased from existing budgets.

At the start of any meeting attendees should be reminded of the need to inform the council should they later have Covid-19 symptoms or subsequently have a positive test. This information also needs to be shared with the Merry Bells Committee.

Additional officer time will be required to set up and clear away after meetings, including sanitising furniture and equipment. It is proposed that the Clerk, with support from the Chair will visit the venue and identify suitable layouts.

The [risk assessment](#) will be reviewed and revised in relation to face-to-face meetings. This will be circulated to all officers and councillors ahead of any future face-to-face meetings.

Venue hire costs for full council meetings have been included in the budget for the current year, and there should be adequate resources within the existing budget to accommodate costs from committee meetings.

Other considerations

The use of lateral flow testing is an option for officers and councillors. Currently these are only available to select members of the community, further expansion may facilitate testing prior to attending a council meeting.

Review

It is anticipated that a review of any face-to-face meetings (under current restrictions) will be reviewed to identify any improvements or adjustments that could be implemented to aid communication, democracy or accessibility.