



Date: 04 March 2021

Title: Report Item 8 – Future Meetings

By: K Larkin (Parish Clerk)

Purpose: To report on the implications of permission to hold remote meetings being withdrawn after 6th May 2021

Recommendations: a) To note the report
b) To make contingency arrangements for meetings in May, June and July 2021, including the Annual Parish Council Meeting and Annual Village Meeting

Introduction

The Coronavirus Regulations 2020 that allow local authorities to hold meetings remotely contain an end date of 6th May 2021. This means that, without any further action from the government, all local authorities including parish councils must return to face to face meetings from 7th May. The National Association of Local Councils is working with a number of national bodies to press the government to extend these regulations beyond this date and will continue to stress the urgency and importance of this issue. However, at the time of writing the government has no plans to extend the regulations and so councils should start preparing for the real possibility of face to face meetings from 7th May.

The government's roadmap out of lockdown, just published, says that from 17 May the rule of six could apply in public indoor venues, and that all restrictions might be lifted by 21 June, though progress at each stage requires tests to be met on vaccines, infection rates and emergence of new variants. There is therefore much uncertainty, but it looks as though lockdown restrictions will prevent face to face meetings being held before 21st June. If this leaves a period (7th May – 21st June) when parish councils are left in limbo, NALC recommends that each council should have a contingency plan to fit their needs and manage risks.

Ordinary council meetings

NALC recommends the council to conduct as much business as possible before 7th May so that the council can dedicate time to those issues in remote meetings. EDFPC in fact has a remote meeting scheduled for 6th May, which is very convenient. However, it may need to think ahead to what happens in June. Normally the annual audit report is considered in June, to meet the requirement that the Annual Governance and Accountability Return be signed off by the council before 1st July. It is not known whether there will be any flexibility in the timetable in 2021 (the council actually has a meeting scheduled for 1st July). It may help the council's business continuity to implement a scheme of delegation. This would allow the clerk to make certain limited decisions for the council between

7th May and 21st June, e.g. probably just paying invoices. The council has signed up to a three-year agreement on its insurance which will renew automatically on 1st June 2021 for its third and final year, so that is not a problem. No other time sensitive business comes to mind.

RECOMMENDATION – That the clerk be authorised to make payments subject to the Financial Regulations during any period (approx. 7th May to 21st June 2021) when it is not possible to summon a council meeting

RECOMMENDATION - That the council meeting scheduled for 1st June be held informally with no decisions made, if required

RECOMMENDATION - That the council meeting scheduled for 1st July be cancelled and brought forward to a date between 21st June and 30th June, if required

The Annual Parish Council Meeting

NALC recommends that where possible, the annual council meeting be held while the current Regulations permit for it to be held remotely. EDF has in fact already published a date of either 6th or 13th May for the APCM. The date needs to be specified by resolution in advance, and it is a statutory requirement that the meeting appoints a Chair and Vice Chair for the coming year. Unfortunately, if the date has to be 6th May then the three new members elected on that day will not be able to participate in the appointment of the Chair and Vice Chair. If this happens, then the current Chair and Vice Chair would like it to be known that they would consent to be re-elected on an interim basis until such time as a meeting of all nine councillors could be lawfully held to make fresh appointments, probably in late June or July.

Normally, EDFPC follows the common practice of using its annual meeting to review other appointments and committee structures, but there is no statutory requirement to keep such business for an annual meeting, and it can be done after 21st June when all the new councillors are in place.

Other business commonly carried out at the APCM includes reviewing policies, procedures, the inventory and the asset register. However, these can be done at any time.

RECOMMENDATION – That the Annual Parish Council Meeting be held on 6th May unless permission to meet remotely is extended at least until the end of May. In the event of an extension being granted, the APCM should be held on 13th May

The Annual Village Meeting

In normal times every English parish must have an annual parish (=village) meeting on a day between 1st March and 1st June. This should be organised by the parish council. It would theoretically be possible to convene such a meeting remotely before 6th May, but the social aspect of the evening which has been a large part of the point of it locally would be difficult to replicate online. It would also be impossible to replicate on a face to face basis after 7th May and before 1st June. Although the parish council has a duty to summon the meeting, it is a fact that there is no penalty for not doing so.

RECOMMENDATION - That arrangements for an Annual Village Meeting be reviewed in May

Meetings of the Planning Committee

The same regulations apply to the Planning Committee as to full council. In May/June the backstop position could be to merge planning with council and keep the combined agenda as light as possible. The only alternative would be for the Planning Committee to meet informally on the scheduled dates (the third Tuesday in the month), and to flag up the informality when sending responses to the SDNPA. This could work as the council is not actually determining applications, and in the event of a query the response can be reviewed and ratified by full council at a later date.

Risk Assessment for face to face meetings

When face-to-face council meetings resume there will still be the risk to attendees of COVID-19 exposure. NALC advises that councils should conduct a risk assessment in advance of a face to face meeting which should give consideration to what the council can do to reduce risk to councillors, staff and public including:

- Providing hand sanitiser to those entering the meeting room and making sure hand sanitiser is readily available in the room itself
- Staggering arrival and exit times for staff, councillors and members of the public
- Placing seating at least 2-metres apart
- Ensuring everyone wears face masks
- Holding paperless meetings
- If papers are provided, people should be discouraged from sharing with others and asked to take the papers with them at the end of the meeting to minimise how many people handle the papers
- Arranging seating so people are not facing each other directly
- Choosing a venue with good ventilation, including opening windows and doors where possible
- Choosing a large enough venue to allow distancing – this may mean choosing a different venue to what the council used before.
- The council (or venue owner/operator) will need to identify the venue's maximum capacity in their risk assessment, taking into account the need for social distancing. Consider how the council will ensure this capacity is not exceeded and how it will manage the situation if more people wish to attend than capacity allows. For example, could meetings be live-streamed or could members of the public submit questions via email?
- If the venue has an NHS QR code to support test and trace then all attendees should register using that app, for those without access to the app they should register attendance in line with the venue's test and trace procedure. NB all venues in hospitality, the tourism and leisure industry, close contact services, community centres and village halls must have a test and trace procedure
- Venues must conform with the government guidance for multi-purpose community facilities and for council buildings. If the venue is run by the council then the council must take responsibility for this, otherwise, the council can ask the venue to provide confirmation that they do conform to this guidance
- The council must understand and ensure it is acting in compliance with the latest government safer workplaces guidance.

It is recommended that, at least for the first few months of physical meetings, the council should book the main hall, with participants sitting at individual tables at least two metres apart and with the emergency doors open. In addition, the hall caretaker should arrange the furniture to ensure correct rotation and the council should pay for this as well as the additional cleaning that would be required. The council will need to plan for this even if an extension to remote meetings is granted, as at some time physical meetings will resume, possibly by the autumn.

RECOMMENDATIONS - That the above Risk Assessment (or any update from NALC) be followed when face to face meetings recommence