

REPORT TO PICKMERE PARISH COUNCIL

14th July 2020

AGENDA ITEM 8.6 – NATURE OF PUBLIC FORUM

1. Background

- 1.1 Council's recently approved Standing Orders introduced a new system for the Public Forum section of your Council's agenda, whereby, in summary, questions or comments could be given by members of the public at the meeting provided that notification of the topic had been received by your Clerk in advance of the meeting, and that the subject of the question or comment was a matter included on that meeting's agenda. If a member of the public wished to comment on or question something not on the agenda, then it needed to be notified to the Clerk outside the meeting, who, in discussion with your Chair, would decide how best to respond to that question or comment – whether by responding in writing or otherwise, or by adding an agenda item to a future council meeting.
- 1.2 During the period since the Covid19 lockdown, while council meetings have been held online, your Clerk in conjunction with your Chair decided that public questions or comments on an agenda needed to be notified to the Clerk in advance of the meeting, but that these would be described by the Clerk at the meeting, since the challenges of holding meetings online would have been complicated further by introducing direct public contributions at the meeting.

2. Report

- 2.1 Earlier in this meeting, Council will have considered if the VH might be reopened for use. At the time of writing, this seems unlikely. One factor possibly precluding that is that the potential need to accommodate unknown numbers of members of the public wishing to attend a council meeting may well conflict with continuing government guidance on social distancing.
- 2.2 If online meetings are therefore to continue for the foreseeable future, then it would be appropriate at this meeting to decide whether at future online meetings, members of the public be permitted to present their own comments/questions on agenda items in the Public Forum section of the meeting. One facet of such an approach that your Clerk feels necessary would be that any such member of the public should be visible and identifiable to others attending the meeting, rather than being heard in audio only. Apart from anything else if such members attend the meeting in audio only, it would be very difficult for your Clerk to manage the Zoom process and identify who exactly wishes to speak and when.
- 2.3 Alternatively, if a date can now be set for meetings to return to the VH, then members may be able to decide now whether in such a context the Public Forum should revert to its format as defined in Standing Orders (as described in 1.1 above.)

3. Recommendation

- 3.1 That members decide, bearing in mind any previous decision as to the potential for reopening the Village Hall for future Council meetings, the format for the Public Forum section of council agendas to be adopted for the time being.