

REPORT TO PICKMERE PARISH COUNCIL

4th May 2021

AGENDA ITEM 7.1 CONTINUED HOLDING OF ON-LINE COUNCIL MEETINGS ARISING FROM COVID

1. REPORT

1.1 Government Covid regulations brought in in 2020 required that Parish Council meetings should be held online and not in person for a period that expires on 7th May 2021. There has been some debate in local government circles as to whether, should there be no formal extension of this period, it would be lawful to continue to hold Council meetings online, or whether statute dictates that, to be lawful, meetings would have to revert to their normal format, being held in person.

1.4 Probably the key issue in this context is the need to ensure that the Council's annual accounts, with the accompanying transparency resolutions, are approved in a lawful way. However, your Council is fortunate in that its May meeting is being held on 4th May – that is 3 days before the relevant Covid regulations expire – and this allows for the Council's accounts to have been submitted to the internal auditor, and to be in a position capable of approval at this online meeting.

1.5 It is understood that the National Association of Local Councils is lobbying Government to seek an extension of the Covid regulation period for online meetings on the basis of various factors, among them that:

- Many councillors would not wish to meet in person whilst the pandemic is not defeated – some councillors might well not have been vaccinated before the requirement to resume meetings in person and others might be particularly vulnerable to infection despite having been vaccinated;
- Similar considerations apply to members of the public who might wish to attend.

1.6 However, it is understood that any further determination of the question is unlikely until at least mid-May. Further, as a result of the views that have been passed to Government, it has decided to hold a 'call for evidence', inviting councils to submit their views on how to deal with this issue. The link to that call is [Local authority remote meetings: call for evidence - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/local-authority-remote-meetings-call-for-evidence) and the deadline for submissions is 17th June 2021.

1.7 In the meantime, the options available to your Council include the following:

- Accept the Government's position (as currently expressed) and decide to hold future Council meetings in the Village Hall. However, that brings with it the need to deal with issues of social distancing and the resultant need to restrict overall numbers attending to perhaps only 10 persons, including councillors and clerk, until the Government's Step 4 has been implemented. That means that the legal requirement to provide public

access to council meetings would not be complied with, if more than the permitted number of attendees arrive to view the meeting.

- As a variation of that, an attempt could be made to make the next meeting a 'hybrid' meeting, which councillors attend in person, socially distanced as required, but not permitting public attendance except via Zoom. Such an arrangement relies on the technology working reasonably, and this is risky particularly since there is no broadband service at the Village Hall, and that any streaming will rely on mobile phone signals. It could therefore mean that the council discussion can proceed in accordance with the law, but that public observation of the meeting is interrupted by technical issues and therefore is unsatisfactory (if so perhaps disrupting the meeting itself).
- Postponing any further meetings of the Council until either there are no longer any distancing requirements (after Step 4 is implemented, on 21st June according to the Government's current 'Road Map',) or until the ability to hold online meetings is extended. One possible action in respect of such a stance is to delegate powers to the Clerk, in consultation with the Chair, to make any decisions on behalf of the Council, and make any payments etc., until such time as meetings are resumed. Such a regime was effectively in operation this time last year when the initial lockdown was implemented and before online meetings became a possibility.
- Ignoring the Government's statement and continuing to hold online meetings, at least for the present.

1.8 Any update on the situation will be reported to members orally.

2. RECOMMENDATION

2.1 That members consider the situation and make decisions appropriately.

J Steel

Clerk to the Parish Council