

Copythorne Parish Council
Covid-19 Business Continuity Arrangements

1. 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.

Copythorne Parish Council (“the Council”) has a duty of care to prevent the spread of infectious disease not just to Council members and staff but also to members of the public.

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.

2. Services

- Council Offices (*the Parish Clerk’s home*)

It is intended that the Parish Clerk (“the Clerk”) will continue to 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 the office (*my home*) will be closed to the public from March 24th 2020. All enquiries will be dealt with via telephone and email.

- Playground Inspections

It is understood that there is a low to medium risk from these activities providing that precautions are taken when touching play equipment/bins and that councillors engage with members of the public at a sensible distance. In the event that the playground cannot be inspected it will be closed until inspections can resume. (NOTE: Current HM Government requirements are that the playground must be closed, this has been done by padlocking the gate and posting notices on the fencing).

3. Matters Relating to Staff

National Joint Council for local government services (NJC) has issued guidance for employers which the 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.

In the event of the Clerk being unable to work, contact with the public will be maintained by the Chairman of the Council (or in his absence the Vice Chairman) as currently happens when the Clerk is on Annual Leave.

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 other Volunteers can choose not to attend public meetings. As an officer of the Council, the Clerk cannot choose not to attend meetings.

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 are suspended until the Government specifically lifts current restrictions imposed to deal with Covid-19.

Whilst the Annual Parish Meeting is not a council meeting it is also suspended as above.

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.

i) 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 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.

ii) Planning Applications

The Clerk will submit a summary response as per Parish Briefing Note response guidelines to New Forest National Park Authority or New Forest District Council (as appropriate) of any planning applications, having invited comments from all councillors and having secured agreement for a response from a quorate majority of councillors (in the case of Copythorne Parish Council a quorum is three councillors so a 2-1 vote for a particular response would be sufficient).

iii) 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. Within five working days of the end of each calendar month I will send councillors a detailed list of the payments made in that month. A summary report of all payments will be presented to the Council at the first meeting following the lifting of restrictions.

~~To minimise social interaction between Council bank account signatories, cheques or electronic payment instructions for such payments are to be signed by the Clerk and one councillor (unless the clerk or a councillor is the beneficiary in which case the instruction will be signed by two unconnected bank account signatories) (Removed April 2nd 2020)~~

To avoid social interaction between Council bank account signatories, Internet Banking will be used by the Clerk to make such payments (up to an individual payment limit of £1,000). These payments will only be released to the beneficiary once they have been individually approved, in e-mails to the Clerk, by two councillors (neither of whom are – or connected to – the beneficiary) following sight of the invoice relating to the payment. A copy of our bank account statement will continue to form part of the monthly bank reconciliation sent to councillors to confirm that no unauthorised payments had been made. (Added April 2nd 2020)

Recommendation

That Council considers this report and approves it in full, noting that these continuity arrangements and delegations remain in force until such time that Copythorne Parish Council is able to meet in public.

David Rigby
Clerk & Responsible Financial Officer
Copythorne Parish Council
March 24th 2020

Approved by Council (by way of exchange of e-mails) – March 24th 2020

Section 5. iii - Amended by Council (by way of exchange of e-mails) – April 2nd 2020