

## THURSTON PARISH COUNCIL

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### Paper submitted to Full Council – 03.03.21 – Return to Face-to-Face Meetings

#### Agenda Item 8d) TO CONSIDER AND PREPARE FOR FUTURE MEETINGS IN PERSON

##### Background

The Council has received the following advice from the National Association of Local Councils: -  
The regulations that allow local authorities to hold meetings remotely apply to local authority meetings that are required to be held, or held, before 7 May 2021. This means that, without any further action from the government, all local authorities including local councils must return to face-to-face meetings from 7 May. NALC 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 this time government has no plans to extend these regulations and so councils should start preparing for the real possibility of face-to-face meetings from May.

NALC's position remains that all local councils should continue to meet remotely while the regulations are in force. The guidance below has been written to help local councils prepare for the scenario that remote council meetings cannot lawfully take place from 7 May 2021. There is still much uncertainty around how legislation or COVID-19 risks may change over the coming weeks and months. NALC will update this guidance as the situation evolves. Each council will have to decide which course of action will best fit their needs and manage risks.

To help local councils prepare for this possibility some advice and suggestions are below:

- Consider what council business can be conducted before May so that the council can dedicate time to those issues in remote meetings. The more discussion and decisions you can conduct in remote meetings means the council can aim to hold fewer and shorter face to face meetings after May.
- This may require more meeting time than is currently planned, so the council should look at the meeting schedule in the run-up to May and see if more time or more meetings are required. Where possible, consider holding the annual council meeting and the parish meeting while the current Regulations permit for them to be held remotely (see also NALC's Legal Briefing L01-20).
- Consider when the council does need to meet face to face, and whether meetings can be delayed to later in the year when the potential COVID-19 risk may be further reduced.
- The council might consider holding a remote meeting as late as possible in April so that councillors who are unable to attend face-to-face meetings will have as much time as possible before disqualification by virtue of s.85 of the Local Government Act 1972 becomes an issue.

From May 2021, as face-to-face council meetings resume there will still be the risk to attendees of COVID-19 exposure.

- 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.
- 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. Council will need to consider how it 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. The council will need to ensure that the venue provides 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.
  - The Clerk and Deputy Clerk, whose role involves supporting or attending council meetings, are aware of these guidelines and the work required to allow the council to prepare to return to face to face meetings from May onwards.

**To recommend that the Council agrees to the following decisions in light of the guidance provided by NALC: -**

- a) To hold the Annual Meeting of the Council on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> May as a Virtual Meeting via the Zoom Video Conferencing platform.**
- b) To agree to hold further meetings of the Council and its Committees post 7<sup>th</sup> May should legislation require to allow the smooth running of the Council.**
- c) To delegate to the Clerk the responsibility to source a suitable venue for full Council and Committee Meetings in person post-May 2021.**
- d) To hold the Annual Parish Meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2021 commencing at 7.00pm in the Cavendish Hall. *To note that the social distancing requirements of the hall allow for a maximum of 32 persons.***
- e) To offer extended leave of absence from attendance at meetings in person to all Councillors who request it.**