

REPORT TO A MEETING OF THE TOWN COUNCIL OF ROYAL LEAMINGTON SPA TO BE HELD ON 4TH JUNE 2020

CORONAVIRUS RESTRICTIONS – CONTINUITY OF COUNCIL FUNCTIONS AND OPERATIONS

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To enable the Council to consider matters relating to the continued functioning of the Council and delivery of its services during the period of restrictions during the Coronavirus pandemic.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The introduction of restrictions by the UK Government on 23rd March resulted in a nationwide prohibition on movement, specified forms of economic activity and all forms of public gathering. As a local authority, Leamington Spa Town Council has followed the instructions and guidance of Government and taken steps to ensure that as an elected body it has continued to fulfil its statutory responsibilities in accordance with the law and all relevant advice. In this process it has been assisted by the National Association of Local Councils and more locally by the Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils.
- 2.2 The prohibition of public gatherings has resulted in Council meetings being cancelled and re-arranged via remote platforms. The continued use of this medium both during the remainder of the period of restriction and thereafter is addressed in this report.
- 2.3 The suddenness of the health emergency has also brought into focus the Council's ability to continue to function without recourse to those facilities and assets available to it at the Town Hall. It is therefore opportune to assess how successful this has been and whether further measures need to be put in place.

3. COUNCIL MEETINGS

- 3.1 The introduction by the UK Government of restrictions on 23rd March followed on from earlier advice that large public gatherings should be avoided to minimise the risk of increasing the rate of infection from the Covid 19 virus. This resulted in the cancellation of the Annual Town Assembly originally scheduled for 6th April and meetings of the Town Council Planning Committee on 26th March and 16th April, and the Policy and Resources Committee on 30th March.
- 3.2 Assessment of various remote platforms has led to the Council adopting Zoom as its preferred platform and several Council meetings have now been held by this means including the Annual Meeting of the Council and meetings of both the Planning Committee, Policy and Resources Committee and Staffing Committee. Feedback from Members of the Council has been generally favourable as to the use of video meetings but further observation is welcomed as part of the discussion of this Report.
- 3.3 Issues that will need to be considered moving forward include:-

- (a) Maintaining transparency of the decision making process through access to meetings by Members of the public;
- (b) Managing expectations for visualising Council meetings in the period after the Covid-19 emergency is over.

In relation to (a) above, all meetings are presently publicised with details on how to access meetings remotely. Members of the public are therefore able to join a meeting and be admitted to participate in the public forum should they wish. The Annual Town Council meeting was joined by several members of the public. It is possible to stream meetings almost instantaneously via other platforms such as Facebook and Youtube but if this is done as a “live” broadcast there is no opportunity to retrospectively edit the meeting recording.

Managing meetings in the future, particularly when face to face meetings are once again permitted, will depend to an extent on whether the legislation (permitting remote meetings) is extended. At present the Coronavirus Act 2020 expires in May 2021. Much will depend on the success of the measures introduced by the Government to move into a less restricted phase of activity but it can be envisaged that the legislation allowing for remote meetings will continue in some form. This will give the Council the opportunity to consider whether it wishes to continue inviting remote participation at meetings that are conducted in a traditional face to face manner.

This is a matter that the Council may wish to request further investigation by the Policy and Resources Committee.

The views of the Council are invited.

4. RETURN TO WORK

4.1 Throughout the current restrictions the Council Offices have remained closed. The Council will be aware that the Office space is leased and is part of the Town Hall which is owned and managed by Warwick District Council. During this period, access has only been possible on limited occasions by prior arrangement when the Town Hall is open for other purposes, such as essential maintenance. This has necessitated all employees working from home accessing information via the internet.

4.2 At present Warwick District Council continues to follow Government advice that states that **“For the foreseeable future, workers should continue to work from home rather than their normal physical workplace, wherever possible”**. (OUR PLAN TO REBUILD: The UK Government’s COVID-19 recovery strategy- May 2020). In a concession to the Town Council’s circumstances, however, the District Council has agreed to provide limited access to enable the Internal Audit process to be undertaken and for the conduct of interviews required to complete the appointment of a new Town Clerk. This latter arrangement will need to be agreed in advance to facilitate preparation of the area of the building to be used.

4.3 At present it is not evident the extent to which the Town Hall will need preparation prior to admission of members of the public as would be necessary for conducting interviews. The Council has continued during the period of the lockdown to pay both rent and service

charges at the Town Hall despite not being able to access the offices. The charges arising over a 9 week period amount to £1860. It is to be hoped therefore that any costs arising from the limited re-opening for the purposes mentioned above will be waived in lieu of the payments that have been made. It is for the Council to consider whether it wishes to pursue with Warwick District Council the remission of rental and service charges incurred over this period.

- 4.4. The ability of employees to work from home has depended to an extent on their flexibility to adapt their home environment and use personal computers to conduct Council business. The Council may therefore wish to revisit the means available for remote access and consider investing in additional remote devices that can be used both by employees and, if necessary, by elected Members during future emergencies.
- 4.5 Independent IT support is presently acquired on a demand led basis which exposes the Council to greater risk in the event of there being problems beyond the scope of current employees. A further option may be to consider purchasing an IT support contract to ensure that support is readily available at a manageable and pre-agreed rate.
- 4.6 Remote working presents the Council with options concerning employee working practice. At present, all employees work a traditional office based working week. However, the introduction of home working during the current emergency has demonstrated that working remotely is an option for consideration, subject to developing the additional resilience outlined in paragraphs 4.4 and 4.5 above. Whilst the disposition of workstations at the Council Offices will permit the return to the work-place of all its office based employees without extensive adjustment and reconfiguration of office layout, it is nevertheless important to consider the impact on the work-place in the light of changes now taking place.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no immediate financial implications arising from this Report. However, some of the Policy decisions that may arise from changes to the Council's working practices may require additional budgetary provision in the future.

6. RECOMMENDATION

Compliance with the Government guidelines during the Coronavirus pandemic has required the Town Council to work flexibly in a dynamic environment. This has introduced new ways of working that may potentially become accepted practice for all local authorities in the future.

The Council is therefore Recommended to:-

- (i) Consider the implications of remote access at Council meetings, both for Members of Council and members of the public;
- (ii) Assess the Council's Information Technology capacity to ensure that is sufficiently resilient to meet the future challenges arising from increasing dependency on virtual meetings and distanced working; and

- (iii) consider the options to facilitate employees working from home on a planned and selective basis