

Coronavirus

A briefing note for parish and town councils in Northamptonshire

Issued: Wednesday 25 March 2020

This weekly briefing rounds up all the latest information of interest to parish and town councils on Coronavirus, the impact on council business, and the community response.

- 1. Virtual Meetings** – The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) is "*asking local councils to stop holding any physical meetings or gatherings during this time. This includes full council, committee meetings, annual parish or council meetings.*" NALC's opinion is "*that the likelihood of a successful legal challenge [for not holding a meeting] is low*". The Coronavirus Bill, which is set to become an Act this afternoon, makes provision for the Communities Secretary to bring forth secondary regulations allowing council meetings to be held by any means, including electronically. We are expecting these regulations to be made this week or next.
- 2. Zoom** – In readiness for remote meetings, and to facilitate communications in general, we are asking all councils to create a Zoom account. Go to www.zoom.us to sign up. There's a free option (which has a 40-minute limit for group meetings) or a pro version without the time limit that costs £11.99 per month. Ideally, participants join using a device with a camera and microphone (e.g. desktop, laptop, iPad, mobile phone etc) but if that's not possible, participants can simply phone in from a landline or mobile.
- 3. Volunteers** – Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) is co-ordinating the community volunteer response and wants to hear from individual volunteers or representatives of community groups, including parish and town council-led groups, that need extra volunteers in the coming weeks and months. Visit <https://bit.ly/3aj8sDz> to find out more and for the sign-up form.
- 4. Paying for Shopping** – Several councils have asked us whether they can pay for someone's shopping if that person hasn't got cash or cannot access cash. There is no legal power for this, and it presents a risk to public money, so our advice is that councils should not be doing it. We have raised the issue with NALC and with NCC and will advise further in due course.
- 5. Audits & AGARs** – The Northants CALC Internal Audit Service (IAS) team met this morning (on Zoom) and agreed practical arrangements for carrying out this year's internal audits remotely. The auditors will contact their councils accordingly. PKF Littlejohn has sent an email to every council saying that the issuing of audit instructions is delayed pending further guidance from Government. If virtual meetings are allowed (see above) then there is no need to change the audit process and timetable. Again, we are expecting further news this week or next.
- 6. Staying Plugged In** – Northants CALC is engaging with weekly calls with NALC and all other CALCs to stay up to date and share best practice. We are also in the daily Community Resilience Cell (CR-Cell) calls organised by Jo Maddams at NCC, who is co-ordinating the community response. If you wish us to raise any questions in either forum please send them by email to dmoody@northantscalc.com.
- 7. Fake News** – A lot of councils contacted us this week regarding the news that Public Health England (PHE) had asked every parish and town council in England to set aside 30 funeral plots each for victims of the coronavirus outbreak. This is fake news; PHE has made no such request. Northants CALC has contacted every council in Northamptonshire to ask if it operates burials, so that we can send specialist information and guidance just to those councils without troubling the inboxes of those councils that don't operate the service.