

Coronavirus

A briefing note for parish and town councils in Northamptonshire

Issue No.3: Wednesday 8 April 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 Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020* are now in force. A description and initial advice was in the bi-monthly *eUpdate*, which was published on Friday. Notice of meetings can be given on a web site, there is no requirement to put notices in noticeboards. The notice and agenda can be signed electronically, either with an image of a signature or by simply typing a name. Similarly, minutes can be signed electronically, by the person presiding at the meeting at which they are approved for signature. **All** councils should now be holding or trying to hold council and committee meetings virtually. If your council is struggling to hold virtual meetings, for whatever reason, please contact Northants CALC and we will try to help.
- 2. The Annual Meeting** – The requirement to hold an annual meeting of the council is suspended, but the council can hold one if it wants to. Councils are advised to hold an annual meeting in May 2020 as normal, unless there is an extremely good reason not to. Any decision to not hold an annual meeting must be made by the council, not by the clerk or chairman unilaterally.
- 3. External Audits & AGAR** – The government has extended the audit timetable by two months, so the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) must now be completed by 31 August 2020 at the latest. This provides additional flexibility; although most councils won't need it because they can hold virtual meetings as required. Further details about the timetable and the AGAR forms for the year ending 31 March 2020 will be circulated next week.
- 4. Funding for Councils** – Tesco is the latest organisation to make Coronavirus Response funding available to parish and town councils and community groups. Grants are available up to £500 for organisation who are supporting vulnerable people. See the Bags of Help website at <https://tescobagsofhelp.org.uk/grant-schemes/tesco-cv-fund/> for details.
- 5. Bye-Elections & Co-option** – *The Local Government and Police and Crime Commissioner (Coronavirus) (Postponement of Elections and Referendums) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020* came into force yesterday. The regulations suspend all elections, referendums and polls until 6 May 2021. This includes parish polls and Neighbourhood Plan referendums. Casual vacancies should be notified in the usual way; if a bye-election is demanded, it will be held on 6 May 2021, if no bye-election is demanded the council must co-opt to fill the vacancy as soon as is reasonably practical.
- 6. NALC Web Site** – Check out the National Association of Local Councils web page at <http://www.nalc.gov.uk/coronavirus> for all sorts of useful resources, including an updated copy of *Coronavirus Case Studies*, which now features 220 good ideas from around the country, including entries from Northamptonshire from Aldwinckle Parish Council and Middleton Cheney Parish Council. There's also a useful guide to holding remote meetings, which will be updated as the sector gains more experience.
- 7. And Finally** – As homeworking and self-isolation continue, it is a time for clerks and councillors to go the extra mile to support each other. Make sure there is frequent contact between the clerk and chairman and consider all the councillors and officer(s) getting together (virtually!) maybe once a week for a short operational update and just to check in with each other.