

## Coronavirus

### A briefing note for parish and town councils in Northamptonshire

#### Issue No.4: Wednesday 15 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** – Parish and town councils across the county are holding virtual meetings using Zoom, Teams or Hangouts. Even Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) held its Cabinet meeting yesterday virtually. It is the new normal. Northants CALC favours Zoom and yesterday recorded a training video to demonstrate how straightforward it is and to show how to deal with councillors joining by computer and phone, declarations of interest, public participation, and confidential items where members of the public and press are excluded. The video is at <https://youtu.be/AN56Xe2Nt8I> and you can watch the whole video or skip straight to the chapter of your choice by clicking the timing links in the description below the video. Understandably some councillors and clerks might be anxious using new technology, but the video aims to demonstrate that there's nothing to be afraid of; in fact, although it was a mock council meeting, it felt very real indeed! The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) thought it had negotiated a discount for councils but wasn't told that there was a 10-licence minimum order. NALC is still working on it, but in the meantime Zoom is just £11.99 per month if paying monthly, or £9.99 per month if paying annually (or completely free but with a 40-minute time limit, so for longer meetings participants would need to log off and log back on again).

**2. The Annual Parish Meeting** – The Annual Parish Meeting (APM), aka Annual Parish Assembly, Annual Town Meeting etc, is a meeting of electors. Sadly, in its excitement to produce legislation, the government overlooked parish meetings entirely, so as things stand there is an extant legal requirement for all parish and town councils to hold an APM, but it is against government guidance to do so. Legally, that's uncomfortable and it would be better for it to be resolved. NALC's view is that if a council does not hold an APM then the risk of legal challenge is negligible and if it holds an APM virtually, the risk of legal challenge is negligible.

Where there is a civil parish but no parish council, there is a Parish Meeting instead (e.g. Althorp Parish Meeting). For Parish Meetings the greater issue of being overlooked in the virtual meeting regulations is the requirement to have the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) approved at a meeting. A Parish Meeting must either comply with the AGAR submission deadline and approve the AGAR outside of a meeting, which is unlawful, or not hold a meeting and fail to submit an AGAR, which is unlawful. The government is yet to express its preferred unlawful practice, but NALC is making representations to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and any news will be circulated.

**3. Internal Audits** – The Northants CALC Internal Audit Service (IAS) is in full swing, with internal audit visits taking place remotely for the first time. It is working better than expected, and one of the internal audit team even reported that a clerk had asked if audits can always be done remotely from now on! Three quarters of councils in Northamptonshire use the IAS; if yours is not one of them, and you are struggling for an internal auditor, please let us know.

**4. Financial Impact** – Stories are emerging nationally of parish and town councils that are suffering financially, particularly those with buildings and facilities where costs are ongoing but income from lettings/bookings/fees etc has dried up. NALC is capturing evidence to make a case to government for financial support for the sector. A short survey includes questions on precept, staffing and income so it would be helpful to have this data to hand when completing it. Please visit <https://bit.ly/2yYaoU1>. Responses by 24 April 2020 please, if at all possible.