

Coronavirus

A briefing note for parish and town councils in Northamptonshire

Issue No.6: Wednesday 29 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. Furloughing** – The government’s Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme makes payments to employers to enable staff to be retained on the payroll even when there is no work for them (aka “furloughed workers”). Clearly the Clerk to the Council can never be furloughed (there’s definitely still work for clerks!) but there is a lack of clarity as to whether some parish and town council operatives might be eligible under the scheme. The government has been very clear that *“Where employers receive public funding for staff costs, and that funding is continuing, we expect employers to use that money to continue to pay staff in the usual fashion – and correspondingly not furlough them. The government expects that the scheme will not be used by many public sector organisations, as the majority of public sector employees are continuing to provide essential public services or contribute to the response to the coronavirus outbreak”*. The one exception might be where a parish or town council has a facility or asset that generates revenue surplus to costs and where an employee’s role is wholly and exclusively related to that facility or asset. An example might be a car parking attendant. If your council is considering furloughing any staff, please get in touch and we can provide bespoke advice.
- 2. Virtual Meetings** – The uptake of virtual meetings in Northamptonshire has been absolutely fantastic. Just a reminder that **all** parish and town council meetings **must** be open to members of the public. A virtual meeting that is not open to members of the public is not lawful and any decisions made at it are challengeable. Members of the public must be able to hear and be heard and, ideally, be able to see and been seen. The full web address of the meeting and any telephone number, meeting ID and password should be published in or with the agenda. It is not lawful to require members of the public to register in advance to attend, and they must be able to join the meeting at any time. In the real world a council wouldn’t organise a meeting in a secret location and require members of the public to contact the clerk in advance to find out what the location is, and it is no different in the virtual world. A council meeting is a meeting in public, not an illicit rave!
- 3. Northants Together** – The authorised Community Response in Northamptonshire, provided by the district and borough councils and co-ordinated by the county council, is working extremely well. The telephone number for anyone needing help is **0300 126 1000** (Option 5). Lines are open Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm. Please promote the number on your web site and social media channels using the hashtag #NorthantsTogether. The county council is organising a leaflet to be delivered to every single household in the county, and parish and town councils may be approached for assistance in hand-delivering the leaflets. Please help deliver the leaflets where possible, but if your council can’t or won’t help then that’s fine too; you just need to reply to the email requesting help when it arrives and alternative arrangements will be made to get the leaflet to your residents. If the leaflet helps even a small handful of people in need who might otherwise have slipped through the net, then it will have been worth doing.
- 4. Final Briefing** – This is the sixth and final weekly briefing dedicated to Coronavirus-related matters. We have no desire to fill your inboxes unnecessarily, and as we all settle in to the “new normal” there is much less time-sensitive news that can’t wait for the regular Friday mini *eUpdate*. Of course, if there is anything extremely urgent we will notify member councils by email, and if the situation escalates we may start up the dedicated briefings again, but for the time being, thank you for reading these briefings, for the positive feedback you have sent us about them, and for all that you are doing to help your communities.