

## **Bingley Town Council**

### **Proposal for returning to Public Meetings**

#### **Background:**

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) has again written to all Local Authorities informing them that all Local Authorities must return to face-to-face meetings (post pandemic) from 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021. NALC has continued to press the Government to extend the current regulations permitting remote meetings to be held but to no avail. Therefore, remote council meetings cannot lawfully take place after 7<sup>th</sup> May.

NALC has suggested that each council prepares its own unique arrangements to manage the risks associated with a return to face to face meetings.

At Bingley Town Councils “Finance & General Purposes Committee” meeting held on Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021 members resolved that Councillors Goode and Taylor prepare a proposal identifying both solutions and risks associated with this return. Their findings were reported to Full Council at the meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2021 but it was noted that an update from HMG had been received that day. It was resolved that Councillors Goode and Taylor would update their paper in line with the latest guidance (text with a yellow background indicates updated information).

#### **Prior arrangements before first face to face meeting:**

In line with the guidance received from NALC the council remains encouraged to conduct as much of its business as possible prior to 7<sup>th</sup> May to minimise the frequency of meetings and the number of attendees. Whilst the meetings of Full Council, its Sub Committees and all working Groups are held on a regular basis there is limited scope to reduce their frequency unless the work carried out by these groups is reduced or timed to achieve their terms of reference permits it. They go on to suggest that as much business and as many decisions should be conducted and taken remotely prior to the 7<sup>th</sup> May deadline thus reducing the requirement for face-to-face meetings.

Accepting that Full Council meetings must be held on a monthly basis: Councillors are asked to consider the frequency of the following meetings:

- Planning Committee.
- Finance & General Purposes Committee.
- Staffing Committee.
- Events Marketing and Communications Sub Committee.
- Emergency-Support Sub Committee.
- Neighbourhood Plan Working Group.
- Climate Emergency Working Group.
- Changing Places Working Group.

Councillors are also requested to consider if any of the work of these committees can be brought forward or deferred until the post COVID situation is clarified. Feedback from Councillors on these matters are still awaited.

As background HMG/NALC has suggested that any meetings or business that can be brought forward should be investigated thoroughly. Councillors will note that the Annual Town Meeting previously scheduled to take place on Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021 has been brought forward to Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> May. This decision was ratified by Full Council at its meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> March.

As Bingley is one of the Towns who are subject to elections the “Annual Meeting of the Council”, scheduled for 25<sup>th</sup> May, where officers are elected for Committees and working groups for the coming year, cannot be moved as it needs to take place post Local Elections (6<sup>th</sup> May) so newly elected Councillors can be involved. It should be noted that councils who are subject to elections, such as Bingley, are statutorily required to hold their annual meeting within 21 days of the election. The Governments road map permits indoor meetings from 17<sup>th</sup> May (this date is a bit confusing this and may be a typo in the NALC letter!) subject to no further revision of the COVID restrictions. Therefore, there is a window between 17<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> May for annual town meetings to be held. As Bingley has planned their meeting for 25<sup>th</sup> May they can be deemed compliant with this requirement.

Whilst it is disappointing to suggest that key occasions in the Towns calendar be held remotely thus removing the opportunity to meet both businesses and the public in person safety considerations should take priority in the current circumstances. In order to maintain and minimise risks associated with face to face meetings the latest requirement encourages councils to continue to provide the public with remote access up until the 21<sup>st</sup> June when HMG’s road map anticipates a lifting of indoor restrictions.

Councillors are requested to consider bringing any other business forward or postponing meetings where the business is non urgent.

In considering if any business can be brought forward other options to maintain business continuity may apply. If existing powers allow, YLCA advice is that Councils may wish to agree some delegation of decision making to the Proper Officer. This should only be considered where a council cannot meet for whatever reason and this power should only be permitted where a decision is required. It should be noted that it is not possible to delegate decision making to an individual councillor, including the Chairman.

#### **Management of meetings:**

Where meetings are to be held face to face post 7<sup>th</sup> May the following measures must be put in place prior to them taking place. These measures may vary dependant upon the location selected (see next section).

- A risk assessment of the venue should be undertaken prior to the meeting.
- Volunteer Councillors should attend early to set up the room and prepare the venue.
- The entrance should be managed and attendee’s temperatures checked (anyone with a high temperature should be politely refused access). BTC does not currently possess a digital thermometer so one would need to be purchased.
- All chairs and table surfaces should be sanitised with disinfectant wipes prior to the meeting.

- Meetings should be kept as short as is practical.
- Hand sanitiser should be available at entrance/exits.
- Social distancing of at least 2m to be observed at all times. Seating shall be placed at least 2m apart.
- Face masks should be worn unless individuals are exempt.
- Windows should be opened to improve ventilation where possible.
- Paper copies of any information should not be passed around or shared during the meeting.
- No refreshments will be provided so attendees should bring any water etc with them.
- All surfaces likely to have been touched should be wiped down post meeting.

Councillors Goode and Taylor have volunteered to arrive early to set up the room and monitor the entrance for all meetings they currently attend. Volunteers will be required for the Staffing Committee, Climate Emergency Working Group and the Events Marketing and Communications sub-committee.

#### Location of meetings:

For Bingley Town Councils future meetings various venues with potential to allow sufficient space for the social distancing of attendees were considered. It should be noted that whilst the Councils Hub meeting area is available, space within it severely limits the number of people who could safely attend meetings without compromise to their own safety or the safety of staff who occupy the adjacent office space. This is therefore not considered as a viable venue for all but the smallest of meetings. If any small meeting wishes to utilise the Hub they should register this with the Clerk at least 2 weeks ahead of the proposed meeting.

The following venues were originally suggested and approached as they are considered large enough to allow the above measures to be implemented although a maximum capacity should be identified;

- **Cottingley Cornerstones** (Available Thursday and Friday COVID capacity 40).
- **The Church of St Aidan** – Crossflats (Available Tuesday & Wednesday capacity?).
- **Mornington Road Methodist Church** (Available Monday, Thursday & Friday capacity 30+).
- **St Wilfrid's Church** – Gilstead (Available every weekday)
- **The Scout Hut** – Poplar House (In use most evenings would need to pre book).

Early contact was made with all the above venues to firstly check that they are available/open in the current COVID restrictions.

Secondly to assess the days on which these venues are available for hire.

Finally, the capacity/capability was established with social distancing to judge the size of meetings which could be held at the various venues. Once availability was established the following requirements were identified:

- Volunteers are identified to set up the room and monitor the entrance. (Some committees and sub committees still need to consider volunteers for the meetings that Councillors Goode and Taylor do not regularly attend).
- A risk assessment of the venue is undertaken prior to the meeting.
- Any unique risks associated with the venue i.e. limited space within the entrance.
- Wifi availability.
- Identify access arrangements i.e. key holders' availability to open up and secure post meeting.
- Contact details of management (see note from Administrative Officer).
- Confirmation of requirements of BTC (this may be very late for any venue given the timescales).
- Cost of venue hire.

It is proposed to book the venue for meetings 30 minutes before the start time to allow volunteers time to set up the room and prepare the entrance in time for others to arrive. Councillors and other attendees are requested not to arrive until 10 minutes before the scheduled start time. 15 minutes has been allowed after the meeting to allow volunteers to clear furniture and clean/wipe down surfaces in the room. Most meetings begin at 6.30pm and business takes no more than 2 hours (with the exception of Full Council which takes 2.5 hours) so as an example:-

Room booked from 6.00pm

Attendees arrive at 6.20pm

Meeting starts promptly at 6.30pm

Business ends at 8.15pm

Venue vacated by 8.30pm

As St Wilfrids Church Hall is available every weekday evening and Wifi is available from 1<sup>st</sup> April, therefore, it was agreed to initially to use the venue for all "near future" meetings. This ensures that only a single risk assessment will be required. Attendees will also become familiar with the arrangements at the venue (thought needs to be given what the latest date would be that this venue can be provisionally booked).

#### **Attendees:**

Where any issues prevent Councillors attending face to face meetings NALC suggest holding remote meetings as late as possible before the 7<sup>th</sup> May deadline to potentially avoid possible disqualification by virtue of s.85 of the Local Government Act 1972.

All Councillors should attend Full Council meetings unless they have underlying health conditions which may put them at greater risk.

Councillors not attending should tender their apologies to the Clerk/Administrative Officer in the normal way.

Only Councillors who are actually speaking will be permitted to remove their masks to ensure what they are saying is clear to everyone. Their mask should be refitted once they are finished speaking.

The Chair Person of each committee or working group should establish via telephone that meetings are quorate prior to them taking place to prevent unnecessary attendance by others. The Chair will also be in contact with the Clerk of the meeting who will attend remotely in the short term to ensure all comments are recorded accurately.

Up until 21<sup>st</sup> June members of the public will be encouraged to submit any comments/statements they have on issues prior to any meeting which will then be read out by Clerk/Chair in the Public Participation agenda item. These will be minuted. However, members of the public will still be able to attend meetings but their numbers will be kept to a minimum (see later notes on public attendance). To minimise the risk of Covid transfer to other attendees members of the public will be requested to attend in person or in small numbers except in pre-arranged exceptional circumstances.

#### **Staff Attendance:**

In all cases safety of people attending meetings is paramount. This is especially the case where staff attendance is required as they are more likely to attend the most meetings (subject to number available as currently BTC has vacancies for Deputy Clerk and an Administrative Officer).

Staff should at all times be made aware/kept up to date of the situation and arrangements for attendance at meetings. Any changes will be communicated as soon as possible.

Consideration should be given for the need of staff to attend some or all meetings in person. In some venues it may be possible for staff to log in remotely.

As Bingley currently has staff vacancies and locum staff do not reside locally, remote access will be required in the short term. Where possible locum staff will produce the minutes of meetings in agreement with the Chair. In exceptional circumstances if staff are not available to attend meetings and it cannot be postponed minutes will be produced by the meetings Chair Person or a volunteer Councillor.

Where staff are attending in person, all possible arrangements to ensure their safety will be assessed with a "workplace risk assessment". This shall be undertaken to ensure all reasonable steps are taken and BTC is acting in compliance with Government "safer workplaces guidance".

Any special arrangements for individual staff members or exemption from attendance should be considered in the first instance by the Staffing Committee who will remain the main link for information throughout this period of interim arrangements. Staff will be consulted and any concerns they have regarding these changes should in the first instance be addressed to their line manager, or the Staffing Committee or its Chairman in line with existing arrangements.

Guidance to support staff has been produced by ACAS. Staff may find “Guidance for employers and employees” related to COVID 19 and “return to the workplace” documents helpful and supportive during this process.

In applying the revision to the interim regulations Bingley Town Council places the safety of its staff as one of its highest priorities and will take all possible and practical measures to maintain it.

#### **Public Attendance:**

If BTC meetings are to return to a face-to-face format prior to the eradication of risks associated with COVID 19 the obvious way to minimise any risks of transfer of the disease is to limit the number of people who actually attend in person. It is key to conducting council business in a transparent way that the public are allowed access to conversations and under the standing order procedures given the opportunity to address the meetings. The latest guidance “encourages” councils to continue to provide remote access to minimise the need for the public to attend in person until at least 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021. The remote access capability of each venue will need to be assessed on an individual basis.

It should be noted that it remains important that in returning to the face-to-face format measures are taken to avoid too many people attending above the capacity of any particular venue. If too many people attend in person meetings will be delayed or even abandoned if the risks of transfer of infection cannot safely be minimised on the night.

It is a requirement that public attendance at all council meetings is facilitated by whatever means are safely available. The guidance continues to suggest that public opinion may be sought through increased use of on-line tools which would minimise the risk of personal attendance whilst maximising their opportunity to make any contributions to BTC business. Up until 21<sup>st</sup> June any comments the public wish to make can be sent in by email and read out by the Clerk/Administrative Officer or Chair and minuted accordingly. This will require clear guidance on the Town Councils web site on how this can be achieved.

Post 21<sup>st</sup> June it may still be pertinent that where public groups wish to express their opinions the Council request attendance of a single individual to represent them if they wish to express their concerns or put their case to Councillors directly. It is also important that the Press are provided an opportunity to attend and listen to meetings where the wider public interest may be pertinent.

If members of the public or press are to attend any meetings, they will need to follow the safety measures outlined above or their attendance would be at denied.

Wider use of the BTC website to provide more detailed information on issues of interest to the wider public may also be used to minimise the number of people wishing to attend. It would also be prudent to request, via the website, that any member of the public wishing to

attend provided prior warning of their intentions via the Town Clerk/Administrative Officer in advance.

**Associated Documents:**

See appendix 1 – Risk Assessment (attached).

See current BTC Diary for required dates.

**Ongoing Updates of current guidance:**

The advice from HMG is constantly being updated and advice may have changed between the submission of the paper and the Full Council Meeting scheduled for 27<sup>th</sup> April 2021. Therefore a verbal update may be required at that meeting.

**Proposal for consideration by Full Council:**

- (a) To book St Wilfrid's Church, Gilstead, for all Council Meetings in the near future as it is available every weekday (subject to risk assessment and WiFi availability).
- (b) Members of the public will be encouraged to access meetings remotely until 21<sup>st</sup> June and be requested to submit comments/statements by email.
- (c) To consider expenditure (if the legislation does not change by 30<sup>th</sup> April) of up to £40 for the purchase of a temperature sensor (BTC holds sufficient stocks of hand sanitiser and disinfecting wipes for the near future).