

To consider governance arrangements until 14th March 2022

At the Full Council Meeting held on 13th December 2021 Members agreed the following:

- To delegate all decision making to the Town Clerk until 14th March 2022 (or the introduction of legislation authorising remote decision making if earlier), except where matters are expressly reserved to full Council by statute, with appropriate steps being taken for consultation with elected members.
- To delegate authority to the Town Clerk, in consultation with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, to change the arrangements for the Estimates Meeting if necessary and to make appropriate risk-assessed arrangements for the Council Meeting on 14th March 2022.
- To note that the Town Mayor retains the right to call an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council at any time, provided it can be held in accordance with Covid-19 regulations and an appropriate risk assessment.

At that time, Covid rates were climbing sharply, the booster vaccination programme was in its early stages and there was uncertainty around the virulence of the Omicron variant. On 8th December the government announced the tightening of regulations, and guidance was issued to work from home where possible.

Since that date, booster vaccinations have been made widely available, scientific studies have demonstrated that the Omicron variant is less virulent than other variants and the government has removed the Plan B regulations and work from home guidance. In terms of case rates there has been a sharp fall since the middle of January. However, case numbers have increased in the seven days prior to the 28th January, and at 794 cases per 100,000 remain above the level of 600 per 100,000 in mid-December.

Against this background, Members are asked to review the arrangements that were put in place on 13th December. In particular, consideration could be given to the following matters which are in line with Town Council risk assessments:

- Bringing the scheme of delegation to an end given that an in-person extraordinary Council meeting can be held should it be necessary.
- Re-instating smaller committee meetings in person (Planning & Consultation; Policy, Finance & Performance Management; Personnel; and Capital Projects).
- Postponing larger committee meetings (Roads and Transport and Beach Management) until after 14th March when a further review will be held.
- Holding working party meetings either in person or remotely, as agreed by the nominated lead councillor and officer.

It is recommended that the following arrangements remain in place:

- Remote access (via Zoom or Facebook) be provided for councillors unable to attend any council, committee or working party meeting in person.
- No meetings of larger committees (Tourism, Roads & Transport, Operations, Beach Management Advisory) prior to 14th March.
- Delegation to the Town Clerk and Visitor Services Manager to agree proposals for new events on Town Council property, in consultation with the events working party, where permission is required for operational reasons prior to 14th March 2022.

If these changes are adopted this would essentially move the Council back to the position that was adopted at the Council meeting held on 1st November 2021. Under those arrangements full Council meetings were being held in venues larger than the Council Chamber and it is proposed that the meeting scheduled for 14th March be held at Swanage Methodist Church.

Any meetings held in person during this period must be compliant with the Council's risk assessment. Measures in place will be reviewed regularly, but are likely to include those stated on the agenda for this meeting, as follows:

- Attendance limited in the Council Chamber;
- Recommendation to take a lateral flow test prior to attending;
- Masks to be worn, at least until seated;
- Socially distanced seating arrangements;
- Windows and doors open to provide adequate ventilation.

If Members wish to adopt the above arrangements this will require a vote in favour of suspending Standing Order 9)a) which prevents the reversal of a previous council decision within 6 months of it being made. This approach would not be recommended in usual circumstances, but Members may deem this to be appropriate in light of the developments since 13th December.

A further review of meetings will be placed on the agenda for the Council meeting on 14th March, where, provided case rates continue to decline, it may be possible for Members to consider reverting to the arrangements that were in place during the summer and early autumn of 2021.

Action required:

To consider the suspension of Standing Order 9)a) to enable the Council to reconsider a decision made within the last six months without the need for a special motion.

To consider making the following governance arrangements for the period until 14th March 2022:

- Bring the delegation arrangements in place since 13th December to an end;
- Re-instate smaller committee meetings in person (Planning & Consultation; Policy, Finance & Performance Management; Personnel; and Capital Projects);
- Postpone larger committee meetings until after 14th March (Roads & Transport and Beach Management);
- Hold working party meetings either in person or remotely, as agreed by the lead councillor and officer;
- Make remote access available for councillors unable to attend any council, committee or working party meeting in person;
- Continue to delegate to the Town Clerk and Visitor Services Manager the determination of requests for new events on Town Council property, in consultation with the events working party, where permission is required for operational reasons prior to 14th March;
- Agree that the Council Meeting scheduled for 14th March 2022 should be held at Swanage Methodist Church.