

Report to the South Hinksey Parish Council – Extraordinary Meeting

Background

1. The Country is facing extraordinary times. The government advice, at the time of writing, includes that citizens should practise good hygiene, avoid unnecessary contact, only travel when necessary, avoid public spaces such as pubs, clubs, cafes etc. and self (family) isolate should anyone feel unwell. It is expected that these restrictions will increase.
2. In addition to this the Council is currently without its Clerk so the opportunity to use normal delegated powers is unavailable.
3. Against this background the Council has to consider how it conducts its business of keeping all safe and allowing decisions to be made. This report recommends to the Council temporary arrangements for consideration.
4. The Council has taken written advice on what to do from the Oxford association of local Councils and their advice is: *“for councils to call an extraordinary meeting and to delegate broad ranging powers to the Clerk/emergency group (Chairman/Vice Chairman and another, if possible) to enable the basic functions of the council to continue. Obviously in this instance your Clerk is not available although I hope you have access to bank accounts, passwords and council records. The government is minded to allow video conferencing but hasn’t actually legislated for it yet. But in these strange times I doubt whether anyone will throw the book at you. The small emergency group with delegated powers is the way forward, with records kept of their decisions and ratified as soon as practicable.”*

Issues

5. Looking at the work of the Council to identify the items of business that must be conducted it is considered that arrangements must be made for the following:
 - Making payments
 - Commenting on planning applications
 - Making arrangements for burials
 - Responding to any unforeseen event that may affect the Parish during this time.

Proposal

6. The council should take steps to allow the administration of the Parish to continue in this time of Emergency, wherever sensibly possible acting within the law but, if necessary, using its best endeavours to “get things done”. It is expected that at some stage the government will bring forward amendments to the 1972 Local Government Act to allow Councils to act more flexibly but in the meantime, we must have in mind that we need to be able to function as a council even in very unusual circumstances e.g. if members are self-isolating.

- a) To establish, for so long as the UK Government deems the COVID -19 crisis to be ongoing, an emergency committee consisting of the clerk and all councillors. This committee should meet in public if sensibly possible, but if not it, may meet any format that is useful, e.g. email/online/phone etc. However, it must do its best to be transparent, with all relevant documents or emails needing to be published.
- b) That this emergency committee may conduct any business of the council.
- c) That this emergency committee should continue to function even if there are only two members 'present' – although where possible this should include one councillor from each ward.
- d) The emergency committee may amend any of the Parish Council regulations if the situation so requires e.g. not to hold the required annual meeting or to delay an audit. However, in such circumstances, the event that is cancelled or postponed is to be rescheduled as soon as the circumstances permit. Any variations to Parish Council regulations are only to last for as long as the emergency committee is in existence.
- e) That if necessary, Parish Council meetings may be held by email or telephone or video call etc, to allow the business of the Parish Council to continue. However, all minutes or emails involved in such 'virtual meetings' should be published.
- f) If the Parish Council ceases to be quorate, it must report to the Vale of White Horse but, between then and a new member(s) being appointed by the Vale, it may continue to hold meetings (public or virtual) provided there is at least one member from each ward [The Village and The Hill].
- g) To cancel the scheduled Parish Council meetings until the situation becomes clearer.

Emergency Committee

7. Membership – Clerk and all members of Council

Duration – Until government restrictions are lifted

Quorum – At least 2 council members preferably one to be the Chair or Vice Chair but not essentially. It would also be preferable if there was at least one councillor from each ward.

Public Accountability – Agendas and minutes to be published in the normal way. Meetings to be held in a public place unless this is no longer practicable.

Recommendation

8. The Council is asked to agree the proposals at 6 with immediate effect.

Chair of the Parish Council