

**SHREWSBURY TOWN COUNCIL
FULL COUNCIL
22 MARCH 2021**

Officer: Helen Ball – Town Clerk

COUNCIL MEETINGS POST 7 MAY 2021

Purpose of Report

To update members on the provisions of the Local Authorities and Police & Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England & Wales) Regulations 2020

To consider how this might impact on the Town Council in relation to decision making

To approve a way forward

Meetings/Decision Making Pre-COVID

Prior to COVID Council operated a full timetable of physical meetings under the provisions of Schedule 12 Local Government Act 1972, with the majority of meetings being held at the Guildhall. Committees worked under a Scheme of Delegation in accordance with s101 Local Government Act 1972 alongside the Officer Scheme of Delegation, under the same act ensuring Council discharged its functions efficiently.

Decision Making Prior to the Flexibility of Meetings Regulations

As the threat of COVID began to manifest in March last year, Council made a series of decisions to ensure that Council operations could continue, once Stay At Home Directives were issued, public buildings closed and restrictions on the number of individuals meeting were made.

Council passed the following resolutions in March 2020 in relation to its decision making capabilities:

- (i) That in response to the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK, and in the event that it is not possible to convene a meeting of the Council in a reasonable time, the Town Clerk shall have delegated authority to make decisions on behalf of the Council where such decision cannot reasonably be deferred and must be made in order to comply with a commercial or statutory deadline. This will be carried out where possible by consultation with members by electronic means or telephone. The Town Clerk will further consult with the Mayor, Leader & Group Leaders for guidance as necessary. The delegation does not extend to matters expressly reserved to the Council in legislation or in its Standing Orders or Financial Regulations. Any decisions made under this delegation must be recorded in writing and must be published in accordance with the relevant regulations. This delegated authority ceases upon the first meeting of the Council after the Council meeting at which the delegation was put in place.**
- (ii) That the Scheme of Delegation as presented be adopted**

- (iii) That meetings of Standing Committees be cancelled for the remainder of the 2019/20 Municipal Year and that the Town Clerk determine the meeting schedule thereafter in conjunction with the Mayor & Leader**
- (iv) That the Annual Town Meeting scheduled for 27 for April be delayed and convened at a later date when safe to do so.**
- (v) That the Annual Town Council Meeting scheduled for 18 May remain a scheduled meeting, to take place if safe to do so and the Town Clerk to determine the format to meet the Council's statutory requirements, in conjunction with the Mayor & Deputy Mayor.**
- (vi) That the RFO be authorised to make payments electronically and remotely, having been authorised by any two of the Council's signatories with payments being validated remotely by one of the Town Clerk or Operations Manager.**
- (vii) That the Deputy Town Clerk arrange for any planning responses to be made in consultation with the members of the Planning Committee.**
- (viii) That the Operations Manager be given delegated authority to determine operational priorities and allocation of operational resources over the whole of the Council's estate.**
- (ix) That the Town Clerk ensure that throughout Members are kept informed of the work of the Council on a weekly basis**

These delegations worked well with senior officers liaising with the Mayor/Deputy Mayor, Group Leaders and Committee Chairmen. Officers maintained a schedule of decision making in the interests of openness and transparency

Meetings/Decision Making Post Flexibility of Meetings Regulations

On 4th March Local Authorities and Police & Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England & Wales) Regulations 2020 were created under the provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and provisions for flexible meetings were put in place with a hard end date of 7th May 2021.

Council began with holding Virtual Full Council Meetings and once it was established that COVID was to be around for much longer than hoped, virtual Standing Committee meetings were established.

All meetings have been held on Microsoft Teams Live with the public being given links to the meeting and all papers relating to the meeting published a week in advance of the meeting and live on the night.

Virtual meetings have worked well and better member attendance, public attendance and press attendance has been noted, so much so that members have expressed a wish to see a hybrid on physical and virtual meetings in the future.

Proposals once the Meeting Regulations Expire on 7 May 2021

Town Council Officers and Members have seen the benefits of holding virtual meetings, including:

- Reduction in grey mileage
- Reduction in the need to print Council papers
- Reduction in the length of time a meeting takes including travel time
- Increased attendance

Representations have been made by all of the Local Government National Bodies (LGA, LLG, ADSO, NALC, SLCC) requesting that the provision for flexible meetings be extended permanently and there is a willingness on the part of the Minister to do so, but this is not possible without changes to primary Legislation which would require parliamentary time, which is not possible in the timescales.

LLG & ADSO have been leading on seeking a Declaration in the Courts that the provisions of Schedule 12 Local Government Act 1972 can allow for the holding of virtual meetings rather than reliance on changes to primary legislation. In the meantime, all national bodies are recommending that alternative provisions to virtual meetings are put in place.

Many Local Councils across the country are bringing forward their Annual Council Meetings to the first week in May, but this is not possible in Shropshire due to the local elections and the need to hold the Annual Meeting of Council within 4-14 days of the elections (10-20th May). To add further complication, the Lockdown Recovery Roadmap does not allow for meetings in public buildings until 17th May (at the earliest) and this would only be confirmed a week before. Additionally, both the University Centre Shrewsbury and Shirehall have confirmed that they will not be taking external room bookings for the foreseeable future. This is likely to prove problematic for the Town Council as it does not have its own HQ and access to meeting space.

Therefore the following proposals are for members consideration:

1. Annual Meeting of Council is currently scheduled for 11th May at Theatre Severn. This cannot take place as the Theatre is not likely to open until Tier 2 of the Roadmap (no earlier than 17th May). Discussions have taken place with the Theatre and a provisional booking of 17th May has been made;
2. That Officers look at alternative venues in line with the current Roadmap arrangements (Other Town Council Community Centres, Greenhouse, in the open) should the Theatre not be available;
3. That Annual Meeting of Council be streamlined to formal annual business and that officer attendance is kept to a minimum (very few officers have yet to be invited for their COVID vaccinations which remains a risk to them, their families and the continuity of the organization);
4. Committees be appointed as normal, with the provision for informal virtual council meetings and a meeting schedule be established based upon the 17th May being the start of the Municipal Term. Discussions have already taken place with Members of the Planning Committee about the potential of having an additional Planning Committee Meeting on the 4th May to ensure timely planning comments;
5. That the officer delegations as approved in March 2020 be revisited but rather it be in liaison with Committee Chairmen, it be in liaison with the outcome of an informal virtual meeting of a Committee;
6. That once notified of newly elected Councillors on 10th May, they be contacted detailing arrangements, invited to drop off all necessary paperwork in a socially distanced manner and be

invited to a private Teams/Zoom meeting ahead of Annual Meeting of Council to detail future arrangements.