

CANVEY ISLAND TOWN COUNCIL

RISK ASSESSMENT AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY RESPONSE TO COVID19

1 Introduction

On 31 December 2019, Chinese authorities notified the World Health Organization (WHO) of an outbreak of pneumonia in Wuhan City, which was later classified as a new disease: COVID-19.

- 1.1. On 30 January 2020, WHO declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” (PHEIC). On 11th March WHO categorised the outbreak as a pandemic.
- 1.2. On 3rd March 2020 the Government published its response plan to the virus which consists of 4 phases
 - Contain: detect early cases, follow up close contacts, and prevent the disease taking hold in this country for as long as is reasonably possible (This includes individuals at risk of carrying the virus being asked by NHS111 to self-isolate for 14 days. Those testing positive are placed in quarantine (either under appropriate medical care or at home) and are required to undergo further testing with two negative results before being released from quarantine.
 - Delay: slow the spread in this country, if it does take hold, lowering the peak impact and pushing it away from the winter season. This may involve social distancing measures including closure of schools and cancellation of public events.
 - Research: better understand the virus and the actions that will lessen its effect on the UK population; innovate responses including diagnostics, drugs and vaccines; use the evidence to inform the development of the most effective models of care
 - Mitigate: provide the best care possible for people who become ill, support hospitals to maintain essential services and ensure ongoing support for people ill in the community to minimise the overall impact of the disease on society, public services and on the economy
- 1.3. The main public health campaign messages from the Government are as follows:
 - wash your hands with soap and water often – do this for at least 20 seconds
 - always wash your hands when you get home or into work
 - use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
 - cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze
 - put used tissues in the bin straight away and wash your hands afterwards
 - try to avoid close contact with people who are unwell
 - do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean
- 1.4. As of 16th March, the Government announced it was moving from the containment phase into the delay phase. New advice has been issued as follows:
 - Anyone who shows symptoms is required to **self-isolate for 7 days**. This means people should stay at home and avoid all but essential contact with others. Any other individuals within the household is now asked to self-isolate for 14 days from that moment as well.

The symptoms are:

 - a high temperature (37.8 degrees and above)
 - a new, continuous cough

- 1.5 The Government has announced that it will be considering further social isolation measures including banning large public events. Whilst schools remain open at this time closure may be considered at a later date. It should be noted that elderly people or those with the most serious health conditions are largely shielded from social contact for around 12 weeks.

2.0 Sources of Information

- 2.1. The Town Council will be acting on information and guidance available from the following sources to which all Councillors, staff and members of the public will be signposted.

- (a) Coronavirus – UK Government Response
<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>
- (b) General information to the public
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>
- (c) Guidance for non-clinical settings – Employers and Businesses_
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/covid-19-guidance-for-non-clinical-settings-and-the-public>
- (d) NHS Overview, symptoms and advice_
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>
- (e) Government Action Plan_
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-action-plan>
- (f) Government Advice for Self-Isolation at home
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-people-with-confirmed-or-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>

3.0 Key Facts.

The key to managing the risk of contracting the virus is to limit the opportunities for spread/transmission. This not only includes the main campaign measures suggested by NHS England in respect of hand sanitisation and reducing aerosol transmission by using tissues, but also adopting procedures for surface decontamination of “multi-use touch points” such as door handles, keypads etc.

- 3.1. The population segments at most risk of severe disease/death are those over 60 or with underlying medical conditions including diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular and renal issues and respiratory issues. This has implications when assessing the risk to the public, councillors and staff as there is a higher than average proportion of residents over the age of 60 and a significant proportion of Councillors who are either over the age of 60 or have pre-existing conditions.
- 3.2. Transmission of the virus is no longer contained or restricted to direct contact with people travelling abroad. The virus is now spreading within the community.
- 3.3. Unlike flu, there is a much longer incubation period, and people start shedding the virus at a much earlier stages before any symptoms are showing (pre-symptomatic phase).
- 3.4. The key risk of exposure is therefore from pre-symptomatic staff, Councillors or members of the public having contracted the virus and subsequently attending Council activities and thereby transmitting the virus to others.
- 3.5. The Town Council cannot determine or control what people do away from the workplace.

4.0 Current Position

Although the Dept of Health and Social Care, Public Health England and the NHS are leading on the UK response to the outbreak, the Town Council nevertheless has a duty of care to staff, Councillors and members of the public to conduct its own risk assessments at local level specific for its activities and take steps accordingly.

5.0 People at Risk

The Town Council cannot control what people do in their personal time and how they choose to respect (or not) the guidance from HMG Gov or indeed take additional steps to limit their exposure (such as taking holidays, visiting public places etc). Councillors and Members of the Public have a choice in whether they undertake Town Council activities however staff do not.

All staff have been asked to consider their own situations. It may be that decisions in respect of working from home or annual leave for those at risk may need to be taken into consideration.

In addition some members of staff may need to care for dependants or close family members in vulnerable groups. All staff have been directed to the Staff Handbook.

5.1. Office Staff

Risk of infection within the office – hand sanitiser push-button dispense units have been provided at the entrance to the building and are on all desks. Antibacterial spray and wipes are available in the meeting room, kitchen and office. Toilets have posters with the correct hand washing advice and antibacterial hand wash.

Risk of infection from each other – relies on all members of staff acting responsibly and following all precautions to keep the work area free from contamination and not coming into work if they feel ill.

Risk from members of public – staff advised not to meet in small confined rooms, to ensure they are 2m away and limit contact time to no more than 15 minutes. As the incidence of infection within the local community increases the office should be closed to the public.

5.2. Councillors

Risk from staff, each other and members of the public whilst attending council meetings/events and undertaking constituency work with residents

5.3. Members of Public

In particular attending council events such as the Wildlife Day, VE Day Service, Annual Council Meeting and Armed Forces Day.

Attendance at Council and Committee meetings is normally low with the exception of Planning, particularly if there is a contentious planning application

6.0 Measures

6.1. Hand and Surface Sanitisation

The Town Clerk has purchased a considerable amount of supplies in order to ensure the Council is fully equipped to deal with the outbreak.

6.1.1. For individuals

- 500ml Softalind pure Hand Rub pump action bottle for each member of staff provided on their desks and at the entrance to the office.
- Staff also provided with option to wear surgical gloves whilst at events or dealing with members of the public.
- Correct hand washing posters in the kitchen and toilet facilities.
- Antibacterial wipes available within the office and kitchen area.
- Antibacterial hand wash in kitchen and all toilet facilities.
- Large bottle of Clean Pro antibacterial spray for surface decontamination in the kitchen and for use in the main office area.

6.1.2. For use by residents/Councillors at meeting rooms/events etc

- Softalind pure Hand Rub in the office for members of the public and councillors
- Large drum of Clean Pro Plus antibacterial wipes for decontamination of surfaces prior to/after event
- Large bottle of Clean Pro antibacterial spray for surface decontamination (to save on wipes)

6.1.3. Other measures

- All cups/mugs/plates/cutlery used to be washed immediately after use and put away. Staff have been encouraged to not leave unwashed items on desks or in the kitchen. All staff use personal mugs.
- Surgical Gloves – provided for events or office should members of staff feel they wish to wear these.

6.1.4. Storage/use of products

Most stocks of hand sanitiser and alcohol wipes are sold out everywhere. This is especially the case for refill bottles for automatic dispensers. The Town Council has already procured sufficient hand sanitiser for the next 4 weeks provided it is used sensibly, and once antibacterial wipes have been used will substitute with spray and ordinary tissues for surface decontamination.

6.2. **Self-Isolation, Working From Home, And Phase 2 Social Isolation Measures**

a) Self-Isolation

The NJC have issued guidance on the response by Employers to PAID absence from work owing to coronavirus in accordance with the Green Book terms and conditions. The Councils current policy is to obtain medical evidence of sickness.

Self-isolation: within the 14 days of self-isolation Statutory Sick Pay will be provided but only if the person in isolation is unable to work.

Employees who are actually ill will be treated as off sick with associated sick pay in the usual manner.

Employees cannot just unilaterally decide to self-isolate without providing the Town Council with reasonable justification in order to qualify for pay.

If a member of staff chooses to self-isolate for no medical reason, no pay will be provided.

b) Working from Home

At some point, it will be necessary for the Council to consider staff working from home as per HM Gov advice.

The Town Clerk has consulted with the councils IT supplier and confirmed that access can be gained offsite and the council has adequate insurance cover for this purpose.

School Closures - All current staff members have school age children or children in nursery. Flexible working, working from home or agreed annual leave should be considered and staff are referred to the council's policy on dependant leave. There is no right to annual leave and any refusal for operational purposes must consider the correct appropriate notice period.

c) Cancellation of Public meetings

It is a legal requirement that all Council and committee meetings must be open to the public (except for discussion of sensitive matters). Therefore either the meeting takes place with members of the public attending if they wish, or it is cancelled. Councillors attending meetings also run the risk of infecting each other.

The Council has a statutory duty to hold its Annual Council meeting in May. The Town Clerk is awaiting advice as to whether this can be postponed.

d) Council Events and other services

Council events such as the Spring Beach Clean, VE Day Service, Wildlife Day and Armed Forces Day will need to be considered for cancellation.

Apart from meetings and events, the main items that will be affected by any working from home or closure of meetings will be making payments to suppliers, paying staff, any Health and Safety issues within the councils open spaces and planning responses. These are covered in the below short term Business Contingency Plan.

The data within the assessment is as up to date as at the time of writing (17th March 2020) and is evolving daily.

SHORT TERM BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLAN

IN RESPONSE TO COVID19 PANDEMIC

This document has been prepared in association with the Town Council's Risk Assessment for COVID19.

Introduction

The Government issued new more stringent isolation guidance on Monday 16th March 2020.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults>

1. *Avoid contact with someone who is displaying symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19). These symptoms include high temperature and/or new and continuous cough;*
2. *Avoid non-essential use of public transport, varying your travel times to avoid rush hour, when possible;*
3. *Work from home, where possible. Your employer should support you to do this.*
4. *Avoid large gatherings, and gatherings in smaller public spaces such as pubs, cinemas, restaurants, theatres, bars, clubs*
5. *Avoid gatherings with friends and family. Keep in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet, and social media.*
6. *Use telephone or online services to contact your GP or other essential services.*

Everyone should be trying to follow these measures as much as is pragmatic.

For those who are over 70, have an underlying health condition or are pregnant, we strongly advise you to follow the above measures as much as you can, and to significantly limit your face-to-face interaction with friends and family if possible.

Local Government Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP also announced support for local councils including the following:

- *Councils will be able to use their discretion on deadlines for Freedom of Information requests*
- *The deadline for local government financial audits will be extended to 30 September 2020*
- *It will consider bringing forward legislation to remove the requirement for annual council meetings to take place in person*
- *It will consider bringing forward legislation to allow council committee meetings to be held virtually for a temporary period*

A significant proportion of staff and Councillors are either in At Risk groups themselves or have close family members that are. Furthermore, Canvey Island has a high number of people over the age of 60 and various other at risk groups.

With the potential impact on Council staff, Members, contractors and suppliers, effective Business Continuity planning will therefore be key to maintaining Council services and corporate decision-making capabilities in order for the Council to continue to assist/lead the community as part of any resilience response.

The three main priorities for the Council are:

- a) Ensuring the Health and safety of staff, Councillors, volunteers, contractors and Members of the Public participating in Council activities
- b) Maintaining effective and lawful decision-making processes
- c) The continuing operation of essential services and contractual obligations

1.0 Health and Safety

Much of this has been covered in the Risk Assessment in respect of the measures the Town Council has already taken during the containment phase. Decisions now need to be made as the country enters the delay phase with specific focus on isolation and shielding the At Risk groups from becoming infected.

1.1. **Staff**

The Town Council office is open to the public on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of each week and now represents a HIGH risk to the staff and vulnerable residents. Working from home preparations have been started and should be implemented should government lock down guidance be given.

Due to all staff having school aged children, should the schools close it is proposed that the office is manned each day on a rota basis (unless all staff are working from home due to a lock down).

NB: Staff may take confidential information home in order to continue council business. All staff are aware of the council's policies, the general data protection regulations and the requirements for the securing confidential data.

RESOLVED

- **Home working approved upon government advice or by recommendation from the Town Clerk.**

1.2. **Public Events**

Now that the Government are discouraging social gatherings including pubs/clubs etc. the Town Council's planned events have been assessed as follows:

EVENT	DATE	NOTES	RESOLVED
Spring Clean	4 th April	Classified as a small gathering in a public place.	CANCELLED
Town Mayor Engagements	Anytime	Risk to Town Mayor and high risk groups	CANCELLED – until further advice provided
VE Day Service	8 th May	Classified as a small gathering in a public place. High risk to a large At Risk Group.	CANCELLED
Wildlife Day	23 rd May	Classified as a large gathering in a public place. High risk to a large At Risk Group.	CANCELLED RSPB have cancelled all of their current events
Armed Forces Day	27 th June	Classified as a large gathering in a public place. Very high risk to a large At Risk Group. Limited period to organise once things settle down.	CANCELLED
Garden Trail	25 th July	Classified as a small gathering in a public place. To be reviewed upon further government advice	CONTINUE TO ORGANISE Gardeners to be contacted to seek attendance

1.3 Council/Committee Meetings

All Meetings shall be open to the public and the press unless their presence is prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted or for other special reasons. (Public Bodies Admissions to Meetings Act (1960).

Furthermore, current legislation means that any decisions must be made by a quorate meeting of Councillors present and voting in the room by show of hands. (I.e. not by video link or email)

Even if videoconferencing is permitted, it is proposed that all meetings are postponed until the autumn. There is plenty of administrative and report work already required to support the Committees' previous decisions which the Town Clerk and Deputy Clerk can undertake from home.

RESOLVED

- **All meetings are postponed until further government advice is given.**
- **Urgent decisions are delegated to the Town Clerk and either Chairman of committee or Town Mayor as per standing order 24.**
- **Meetings should only take place if new legislation is introduced to permit videoconferencing or email agreement.**

1.4 Statutory Deadlines/Requirements

In addition to the Annual Town meeting for residents, there are a number of statutory meetings, requirements and deadlines that apply to local Councils. There has been no change to legislation or government guidance to amend or temporarily suspend these statutory duties so despite the logistical and practical issues imposed by coronavirus, the Council is still obliged to comply with the law.

(a) Annual Council Meeting - 18th May 2020

The Council must hold an Annual Meeting every year which, because this is not an election year, must be held in May (LGA (1972) Schedule 12 para 7(1) (2)). There is only one statutory item of business and that is the election of Town Mayor. However normally the Annual meeting also elects Committees, etc. as stated in the Standing Orders. Standing Orders also state that the Chairman and Vice Chairman of Committees hold office "until the next Annual Meeting".so until the Annual Meeting occurs (which it must in May) then the current positions remain.

RESOLVED

- **To review upon further government advice**

(b) Approval of Annual Accounts/Annual Return – by the 30th June 2020

All local Councils are required under s168 of the LGA (1972) to submit an annual financial return to the Secretary of State showing income and expenditure.

The Local Audit and Accountability Act (2014), Local Audit (Smaller Authorities) Regulations and the Accounts and Audit Regulations (2015) detail the procedure required. As a Category 2 authority with expenditure over £25k but below £6.5m, Canvey Island Town Council is obliged to complete an Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) and submit this to the External Auditor (PKF Littlejohn) by their deadline (this has not yet been provided). The law also requires there to be a 30 day public rights inspection period of the accounts to include the first 10 days in July (see staff paper for inspection provision)

Given the Government's most recent announcement, it may be that the Internal Auditor may wish to postpone her visit. In addition it is likely that pending emergency legislation will delay the date for submission to 30th September 2020.

RECOMMENDATION

- **That if practical and permitted - to proceed with the approval of the Annual Return and Accounts at a meeting in June – to be confirmed**

1.5 **Services**

(a) **Publications**

Quarterly newsletters can continue whilst staff work from home. Social media and website can also be maintained working from home. This will become increasingly important in respect of the Town Council's information to the public.

(b) **Website Compliance**

There is a statutory requirement to ensure the website is accessible by 30th September 2020, It was the intention for the working group to review the website and for a report to be provided to the next Policy & Finance meeting in April to review the costs implemented by Impact Media for the audit requirements or the potential of reviewing a new website design.

RESOLVED

- **To continue updating the current website in line with the audit recommendations**
- **If time allows to review the cost of the updates in line with a new website provider.**

(c) **Office Opening For Enquiries**

This could be managed providing it is possible for staff to attend on a rota basis should the schools close. Should all be working from home the office calls can be diverted to mobile numbers below:

Events Phone – Events & Community Officer

Town Clerks Office - Town Clerk

Town Clerk & Community Warden – Mobile numbers will be available on the website for health and safety issues

Main Office number – Deputy Clerk

Website – an additional page will be created on the website to provide all relevant information to the public regarding contact details and the council's services.

RESOLVED

- **To close the office to the public until further notice**

(d) **Planning Applications**

There is the possibility to continue to respond to required planning applications via committee comments.

RESOLVED

- **To delegate the power to the Town Clerk to respond to applications on behalf of the committee as an emergency measure.**
- **To agree to the Town Clerk referring applications to the committee for input.**

(e) **Open Spaces**

There is low risk to staff from these activities providing that precautions are taking when touching surfaces and not engaging with the general public for more than 15mins at 2m distance. In the event that play areas cannot be inspected weekly they will be closed until inspections can resume. General upkeep during the fast-growing summer months will be effected if staff and contractors are not available.

Contractors have been instructed to have contingency plans in place, however, if all contract staff are affected service may be affected. All health & safety issues will be referred to the Town Clerk and Community Warden.

RESOLVED

- **That the Town Clerk continue with the delegated authority to manage the staff and services of the Town Council and take whatever decisions are necessary in line with the Council's Risk Assessment.**
- **That the Town Clerk be authorised to utilise short term and temporary contractors where necessary to keep essential services running**

2.0 **Delegated Authority**

The Councils current standing order No 24 allows for the delegation of urgent matters as below:

There shall be delegated to the Town Clerk the authority to act in respect of any function of the Council which, in his/her opinion, does not admit of delay. Such authority shall only be exercised after consultation with the Town Mayor or Deputy Town Mayor, and the Chairman or Vice Chairman of the committee within whose terms of reference the particular function lies, unless they cannot be contacted and the urgency is such that action is paramount.

Financial Regulations 4.4.1 confirms that the Clerk shall have authority to authorise normal budgeted items of works up to the value of £5,000 in exercise of ANY of the Councils functions within the agreed budget without referral to the relevant Committee.

However, such payment would normally be signed by two councillors/authorised signatories and signed at a meeting of the Council or reported to the next available council meeting. The Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer are also authorised signatories and will only sign off payments in an emergency but never the same payment.

RESOLVED

To allow the council to operate on a minimum requirement basis, the following items are delegated to the Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer for the duration of the activation of this policy.

- **All required payments to suppliers and staff costs will be made by BACS and authorised by the Town Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer following an email to a minimum of 2 councillors who are also authorised signatories. All such payments will be recorded and evidence will be reported to the next available council meeting to be duly authorised by the council.**