

28 REVIEW OF DECISION-MAKING ARRANGEMENTS

COVID-19 - Other parish/town councils

A request for information on the main Clerks' Facebook page showed that:

- Many parishes are still holding meetings outdoors - or in large venues – or larger venues than they would normally use.
- Most are endeavouring to sit attendees 2m apart, provide sanitiser and ask for face coverings to be worn – except (but not always) when speaking.
- Some ask (with varying degrees of success) for attendees (staff and Members) to take a Lateral Flow Test (LFT) before attending.
- Most report that the majority of those attending meetings comply with mitigation measures.
- It is mainly the larger councils that have delegated decision-making authority to officers.
- Councils are continuing to use Zoom/Teams for meetings of working groups, with Members/officers of principal authorities - and to give a steer to Clerks with delegated authority.
- A few have continued to use Zoom (unlawfully) for council/committee meetings – arguing that this is supported by their COVID risk assessments.
- Many parish/town councils did not hold a parish assembly/town meeting in either 2020 or 2021 – and it is believed that most have no plans currently to hold a late assembly this year.

Venue options

RTC has quite a few Members relative to the size of its meeting space (Chamber) – and this has, on occasion, resulted in a crowded Chamber 'pre-COVID' when an issue has been considered with a high level of public interest.

Legally, Council/Committee meetings are open to all to observe – however, it is lawful to restrict the number of members of the public attending on safety grounds – and to adjourn a meeting so that it may continue at a larger venue.

The Chamber is used currently for weddings/ceremonies of up to 65 people (the 'pre-COVID' number could reach 90) – although the majority are smaller in size. However:

- (With the exception of the couple and conducting Registrar during the actual ceremony) those present are asked to wear face coverings – and there is a high level of compliance. (Masks are provided to those who don't have one.)
- Certain activities remain suspended – such as singing, use of TH audio equipment and the stair climber.

- Attendees are asked to keep 2m from the Registrars (ESCC policy).
- Town Crier activity also remains 'controlled'.
- RTC staff remain masked throughout.

Two 'in person' RTC meetings (including this one) have been held since the power to hold meetings remotely was not extended (early May 2021) – both at Rye Community Centre. The advantages of using RCC for meetings include:

- Much larger internal floor area
- Higher ceiling
- Reasonable (but could be better) ventilation
- Low (additional) cost - £17.50 hour
- Charity with long history of RTC support
- Sufficient tables available.

The main disadvantage is that RTC's regalia is not on site and would need to be transported there/back if Members wished to use RCC and reinstate robed Council meetings in the immediate future.

Note: TGCC is not considered to be a suitable venue all the while it is acting as Rye's Vaccination Centre.

Honorary Freemen/women

One nomination is pending – there is sufficient informal support for it from Members but a (separate) formal Council meeting is required to approve the award. Such meetings are normally robed. The nominee is happy to await until arrangements can be made for a meeting to be held safely. (Once a date has been established, the commemorative scroll is commissioned and this normally requires 4 weeks' notice).

The previous (successful) nominee was appointed remotely. She has received a badge but the scroll (completed) has yet to be presented. She has advised that she is happy to await until robed Council meetings are reintroduced.

Committees

RTC has two: Planning & Townscape and Personnel. The latter meets as and when required (usually as the Human Resources WG).

The P+T Committee has not met since May 2021. However, its Members met informally remotely until the end of July (with responses to planning applications being submitted under the Clerks' delegated authority).

Members are asked to consider whether, in the short-term, the Committee needs to resume meeting 'in person' every 2 weeks – or whether '4-weekly' would be sufficient – possibly with an informal Zoom meeting (to inform the Clerk's existing delegated authority in respect of planning application decisions) inbetween.

RECOMMENDATIONS (SHORT-TERM)

Given that infections are high and likely to increase during September – with hospital admissions rising - in the short-term, it remains safer for any necessary 'in person' meeting with public access to be held in larger venues.

RECOMMENDATION 1 That, whilst transmission rates remain high, with the exception of the Personnel Committee, (necessary) RTC 'in person' Council/Committee meetings should be held at RCC.

In order to avoid additional Council meetings being arranged for pressing single items, some discretion for general delegated authority to the Clerk would be helpful. This could be addressed by the Clerk asking Members whether they are content for a (single) matter to be determined by informal consultation by email – or whether they would prefer an 'in person' meeting to be arranged (assuming the power to hold remote meetings has not been reinstated).

RECOMMENDATION 2 That the Clerk be authorised to be make decisions on behalf of the Council if a majority of Members agree that an additional 'in person' Council meeting is not necessary – and that the Clerk has consulted Members informally prior to making the decision.

RECOMMENDATION 3 That Council meetings should not be robed unless the purpose of the meeting is to award an Honorary Freemanship.

RECOMMENDATION 4 That a robed Council meeting be arranged to consider the pending Honorary Freeman nomination – and to present a scroll to the previous nominee.