

# Briefing Note

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## Business Continuity & Coronavirus

### 1.0 Background

1.1 Coronavirus is a respiratory disease which seems to start with a fever, followed by a dry cough. After a week, it leads to shortness of breath and some patients require hospital treatment. The NHS says an epidemic in the UK is "likely". This briefing note explains how the statutory work of the parish council can continue in the event that some or all of its councillors and Clerk are unable to take part in public meetings.

### 2.0 Managing council business

2.1 How do we deliver on our legal obligations to hold meetings in public if councillors are unable to attend?

The legal requirement to have four meetings each year remain (one of which is the Annual Parish Meeting), so the current practice of holding eleven public meetings each year exceeds the statutory minimum.

*If scheduled public meetings have to be cancelled, this would be permitted in the short-medium term. Advisable to give a minimum of three working days' notice (as per publishing of agenda)*

2.2 What if the number of councillors who can attend does not meet the requirements for a quorum?

The minimum number of councillors needed to form a quorum in Menheniot Parish Council is four.

*SLCC<sup>1</sup> have advised that if we fall below that level, we should continue to meet in public to make decisions. Usual rules of publicity and transparency would still apply.*

2.3 What if the public meeting cannot be held and decisions on payments have to be made?

The council's Financial Regulations (S1.31) allow for small payments to be made outside of the meeting up to a value of £500. The only condition attached to this is that a signed note is made at the time and that the payment is reported back in the public meeting. The council has a system in place to manage out-of-meeting payments that has been used in the past satisfactorily.

Since the start of this financial year, 22 out of 122 payments have exceeded the £500 limit. These were:

Payee	Number of payments
Clerk salary	11
Contract payments	6
Grants	2
Projects	2
Annual insurance	1

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<sup>1</sup> Society of Local Council Clerks

CALC have advised that councillors have already given broad authority to pay these accounts when they agreed the budget last November when the precept was set. *Councillors can agree to give delegated authority to the Clerk, Chair and Vice Chair to agree at least the first two and last items, and postpone payments of the other 2 items if they felt it was necessary. This course of action would only be needed if payments were needed to be agreed and the public meeting was cancelled or delayed.*

2.4 What if the public meeting cannot be held and decisions on planning applications have to be made?

CALC remind us that the final decision on planning applications is made by officers who have delegated authority to do so. In the same way, the council can delegate authority to the Chair, Vice Chair and Clerk.

*However, councillors may prefer to continue to involve all of their members in the decision making, but to do so by email. The Clerk will still be able to post notices on its website and parish noticeboard for the benefit of residents, and continue to invite representations from the applicant.*

### **2.5 What if the parish clerk is incapacitated?**

The critical parts of the clerk's work have been identified as those relating to finance and planning. In the event that the clerk is unable to carry out his functions, the chair of the council will have access to his email box and can receive and respond to any matters that would normally need the clerk's attention. All planning applications and 99% of invoices are received by email.

## **3.0 Managing ourselves**

3.1 Be aware of your own health issues and those of the people you come into contact with most often.

3.2 Before attending council meetings, meetings where you represent the council or with individual residents (especially if this is at home), assess the risk for yourself and others. Are there other ways to engage? (For example, by email or telephone)

## **4.0 More information**

4.1 Cornwall Council has a page for residents that set out the council's response to the Coronavirus.

<https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/coronavirus>

4.2 Updated government information

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

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