

Covid-19 Response & Strategy – Updated 13.5.20

Further to last month's report and the Government's recent announcements and its [recovery strategy](#) issued this week setting out incremental phases for reopening the economy and society, I can confirm that we have now re-opened the tennis courts with restricted usage guidelines. The guidelines are printed on notices around the courts.

All other fenced and gated play areas with play equipment in are closed and locked. The Skate Park is closed and the Multi Use Games Area is closed and locked. The Recreation Grounds and open green spaces will remain open.

The Town Council office will remain closed for personal callers until further notice. We aim to keep a presence in the office and can be contacted by telephone on 01747 860701 or email lindseywood@merewilts.org. We also have intercom between the office and the outside entrance to the building

Mere Cemetery will remain open and the allotment sites will remain open.

Our grounds staff will both be returning to work full time on Monday 18th May – this is following a consultation with them and changing our working practices slightly so that they can maintain social distances and introduce new cleansing routines. Out street cleaner is back at work too.

The Andy Young Pavilion and Duchy Manor Changing Rooms will remain closed and the Public Toilets in Salisbury Street Car Park will remain closed although this is being regularly reviewed.

This is an unprecedented time but the health and safety of our staff, councillors and the community is our priority. The council is concentrating resources to make sure vital services are maintained and concentrating efforts to support the community during this difficult time.

There will be no Town Council meetings until further notice. Members of the Town Council have agreed to suspend Standing Orders and introduce Delegated Powers to ensure the day-to-day running of the Town Council and our services, albeit reduced services. The delegation will be made by the Clerk, Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Cllr. Jordan (as past Chairman). If there are any decisions that need to be made by the Town Council as a whole, then these will be done via email with written records kept of opinions, comments and decisions. A monthly report will be published on the website and sent out to councillors giving details of decisions that has been made and work that has been carried out by the Council.

Mere's Local Resilience Forum & Community Support Group

I am proud to say that Mere acted relatively quickly in the response for community support during this Covid-19 crisis situation. Mere Town Council and the Mere Resilience Forum worked together, liaising with the local Doctors surgery, pharmacy, businesses, foodbanks and other local organisations to establish a team of telephone coordinators and an army of volunteers headed by Mr. Richard Jefferies who is the

Local Resilience Coordinator. Volunteers hand delivered our Town Magazine, giving details of the support available to every household in Mere and we now have a very efficient service to help any Mere resident who is not able to get out – our volunteers collect prescriptions, shopping, post mail and offer moral support to those who are anxious or unnerved by what is happening. I estimate that we have 150 volunteers working to support the community of Mere in some form at the present time. Wiltshire Council's Wellbeing Hub is signposting parishioners to us for support and visa versa: If, it turns out that the support they need is beyond our remit, i.e. social services – then we will pass them on to the Wiltshire Wellbeing Hub or ask the Wiltshire Hub to contact them direct. Our support network is constantly being reviewed with feedback from volunteers, businesses and recipients being key to improving how we can offer assistance – indeed the volunteers who are carrying out practical tasks have just been issued with ID lanyards to enable them to provide a better shopping service and the Town Council has just ordered Hi-Vis jackets for the volunteers to wear. We are confident that we are making a real difference and many recipients have been humbled by the assistance given to them. There are numerous comments on Facebook from residents who are saying how lucky and proud they are to live in Mere and I have also received emails and seen a number of comments from people living far away who have relatives in Mere saying how wonderful it is to know that their relatives are being looked after by the community.

In the month to 25th April we have taken/made in excess of 630 related telephone calls, more than 84 individual shopping or prescription collections and more than 213 repeat trips for residents and we have more statistics to add.

New Regulations to allow remote meetings

The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 ("the 2020 Regulations") come in to force on 4 April. Broadly speaking, the 2020 Regulations enable local councils to hold remote meetings (including by video and telephone conferencing) for a specified period until May next year. They also remove the requirement to hold an annual meeting. The 2020 Regulations apply to local council meetings, committee and sub-committee meetings in England. Separate legislation is anticipated for Wales.

I have been given numerous briefing papers on this which I would be happy to make available on request. The Summary is

- The 2020 Regulations permit the holding of remote meetings, with conditions
- There is no longer a requirement for a parish council to hold its annual meeting although a council may do so if they so choose
- Appointments that would be made or required to be made at an annual meeting (e.g. election of chairman), will remain in place until an annual meeting is held (possibly next year) unless the council decide to elect a replacement earlier.
- Local councils can decide the methods they will use to facilitate the holding of remote meetings.
- Local councils can alter the frequency of, move or cancel meetings.

New regulations to extend audit deadlines

[SI 2020/404 The Accounts and Audit \(Coronavirus\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2020](#) This Statutory Instrument (SI) amends the deadline by which the Annual Governance Statement and Statement of Accounts of the Annual Governance and Accountability Return (AGAR) together with any certificate or

opinion issued by the local auditor (internal auditor) must be published from 30 September 2020 to 30 November 2020. Previously there was a requirement for all smaller authorities to have a common period for the exercise of public rights, being the first 10 working days of July. **Under the new regulations there is no requirement for a common period for the exercise of public rights.** Smaller authorities are still required to set a period for this purpose, but the only requirement is that **the 30-working day period for the exercise of public rights should start on or before the first working day of September, i.e. on or before 1 September 2020.** This SI was issued on 7 April and is effective from 30 April 2020.

Our external auditors, PKF Littlejohn, have revised their instructions and supporting documentation to reflect these legislative changes.

The changes in legislation have been made in order to help smaller authorities in the performance of their duties as a result of the restrictions of movement and limitations on social contact necessary to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus. However, there are no changes in the requirement for wet signatures on the AGAR. Wet signatures need to be added to the AGAR in the same order as previous years and that the AGAR will need to be passed between the relevant individuals for signature.

Notwithstanding the new deadlines given in the above SI, PKF Littlejohn have asked that we submit our approved AGAR and supporting documentation by 31st July but we can ask for an extension but have said 'If you are not able to meet this deadline please contact us to arrange an alternative submission date (subject to below) to avoid incurring the administrative charges. Non-submission will lead to chargeable chaser letters being issued (£40 plus VAT for all financially active smaller authorities). It is important to note, however, that in a change to prior years:

- no submission deadlines will be granted beyond 13 November;
- it will only be possible to extend submission deadlines by a maximum of 4 weeks at a time providing sufficient justification explaining the need for the extension is given;
- a statutory recommendation will be issued to all financially active non-responding authorities that fail to submit their documents by 13 November. Statutory recommendations for non-response are charged at the standard fee rate depending on the authority's expenditure

On top of this I have received notification from PKF Littlejohn that Mere Town Council has been selected for intermediate review for the 2019/20 reporting year as part of the required 5% sample of those who would otherwise be subject to a basic review. This means that we need to provide the external auditors with a lot more information.

It is important to note that the approval of the Annual Accounts and Completion of the Annual Return including the Governance Statement are functions that CANNOT be delegated and are therefore reserved to the full council, although an appropriate working group may make recommendations thereon for the Council's consideration.

The other things that are important to note is that

a) I have not yet been able to hold my year end internal audit with Mrs. Mary White and am unsure whether or not this can be done remotely, via email or video meeting.

b) The Town Council will be unable to complete the Annual Governance Statement until it has reviewed the effectiveness of its internal control system

DELEGATED DECISION REPORT – 11th May 2020

- 1. Review and Assess the effectiveness of internal control measures** – It was agreed that the Clerk should contact those councillors that signed up for the working group in March (Kate, Lesley & Aubrey) to see how they would like to proceed. It is possible that some papers/policies could be sent out to individuals for assessment and recommendation and then they might be prepared to come along to a social distancing meeting or to have a video meeting or conference call.
- 2. Internal Audit** - The Clerk pointed out that this cannot take place until 1 (above) has happened and in any case the year end accounts are not prepared yet. It was agreed to wait until the accounts have been prepared and all paperwork is ready for internal audit and then discuss with Mary White as to how we proceed. Options could be as 1 (above).
- 3. Future meeting options** – with reference to the information given above, the Clerk reported that as far as she was aware and at the present time, the approval of the accounts and completion of the AGAR are the only reasons that we will need to hold a meeting in the near future. PKF's deadline has been extended by a month and there is an option to extend this further if required. It was agreed to wait until mid-June (when the 12-week isolation period has ended) and consult with members on the options for meeting. It may be possible, if within Government Guidance, to hold a social distancing meeting somewhere inside or outside or to arrange a virtual meeting, whether by video or telephone conferencing platform.
- 4. Sports Invoices**
 - a) Youth Football Club 2019/20** – The Clerk reported on details of a conversation with the Chairman of Mere Youth Football Club relating to issues over their 2019/20 financial contribution to the Town Council. It was agreed to raise an amended invoice for 2019/20 reducing the contribution from £705 to £450 which the Youth Football Club felt was more reasonable. It was also agreed that when the Town Council can hold meetings again, to hold a sports development meeting so that we can discuss financial contributions from all groups and also discuss usage of the sports facilities and conflicts of usage.
 - b) Sports Clubs invoices for 2020/21** – The Clerk reported 'The Council agreed, at the Annual Budget meeting, to increase sports lettings by 3% this year. Previously, we have sent out all sports invoices a year in advance in order to avoid charging the sports groups VAT. However, it has now come to my attention that this is not correct, whether legislation has changed or whether I was wrongly advised, I do not know. In any case, it seems that there needs to be some kind of discussion on the financial contributions that sports groups are prepared to make to the Town Council or the invoices made by the Town Council to the sports groups. Added to that, the Covid-19 pandemic and government guidelines has meant that a number of sports groups have been unable to use facilities for part of the season.' At the Clerks suggestion, it was therefore agreed that NO invoices are sent out for the 2020/21 year at the present time and that this matter should be discussed with all sports groups at a sports development meeting when we are able to hold a meeting.

5. Planning Applications

Application Ref: 20/02840/FUL
Application for: Full Planning
Proposal: Replacement dwelling
At: Midstone House, Mere. BA12 6AT

The Clerk reported that she had not received any objection and no objections had been posted online. The present property is an insignificant bungalow behind a hedge at the top of Mere Down. The proposed dwelling will be a new barn-style two-storey luxury home but the design statement says it will be 6.5m to ridge height and the current bungalow is 5m to ridge height so the new dwelling will only be 1.5m higher. The dwelling will be in a fairly prominent location in the AONB .

Delegated decision – No objection

6. Finance, Policy & Resources

- a) **Payments** – Delegated decision – the payment schedule attached was approved and the Clerk authorised to make electronic payments.
- b) **Emergency work to dead tree at Duchy Manor** – The Clerk reported that she was aware of a dead poplar tree at Duchy Manor that was within close proximity of private property. Whilst organising some other urgent tree work on Long Hill, she had asked the tree contractors to provide a quotation to cut down the poplar which needed to be felled by sections. The quotation was £510 + VAT. Delegated decision – agree to quotation and ask contractor to carry out work as soon as possible.