

Annual Council

Date: Wednesday 13 May 2020

Title: Update from the Town Clerk

Contact Officer: Town Clerk – Sharon Groth

Background

The purpose of this report is to update Members on Council business as well as matters relating to COVID-19 since the meeting held on 20 March 2020.

Members are also referred to the Agenda for part B of this agenda item pertaining to the recommendations of the Corn Exchange Working Party.

Delegated Decisions

As a result of the delegations brought about by the COVID-19 the Town Clerk has taken the following decisions:

- (a) Insurance Renewal – has been renewed for a further year with the Council’s existing insurer – Zurich Municipal Insurance with an annual premium of £18,809 (£18,247 2019/20 annual premium). The supply base of insurance for the local Town & Parish Council sector is limited and Zurich do have the majority of the market as they remain competitive. A full evaluation was made 3 years ago and Zurich still came out significantly cheaper. Officers will test the market later in the year in order to assess the situation then for 2021 going forward.
- (b) Payflow (BACS) limit – in order to be able to pay some larger payments to regular suppliers/contractors such as Continental Landscapes for the Council’s grounds maintenance contract the Town Clerk has requested that Barclays Bank increases the monthly limit on Payflow from £75,000 to £110,000. This is how the Council pays its salaries and payments to the Inland Revenue/Pension provider, and gives some flexibility for a couple of other payments each month which would need two Councillors to physically sign the cheques.
- (c) Community Use of Burwell Hall for COVID-19 – agreement was given to aid the Witney Land Army and others with using the hall as a distribution centre for food parcels. Officers are now in discussions with the WLA and the Community Fridge on combining the offering and using the Corn Exchange as a temporary base because of space restrictions and logistics of Burwell and the Moorland Rd Centre.
- (d) Commissioned an Environmental Risk Assessment at the Windrush Cemetery to ensure the ground is suitable to take an increase in burials due to COVID-19 as existing permissions permit a lesser number. Cost £4,900.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020; The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020; The Accounts and Audit (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020.

Members may be aware that several regulations have come into force in order to legally amend the way the Council operates - such as the ability to hold virtual Council meetings. At an earlier agenda item a new committee structure has been presented – once this has been agreed Officers will draft a calendar of meetings accordingly for adoption at a future meeting of the Council, along with the finalisation of the Committee membership so that meetings can then begin – either remotely, or return to face to face meetings when government guidance permits. The Town Clerk will circulate an email in due course requesting Members desires with regard to their Committee Membership so that the Leadership can review the compile the membership.

The other change which Members should be made aware of at this stage is the extension to the date the Council is required to adopt its Annual Governance and Accountability Return [AGAR]. This has been moved from 30 June to 31 August 2020. The Council’s Accountants are currently scheduled to attend the Town Hall on 2 June 2020 to do the year end accounts, however restrictions currently apply to this visit so may need to be scheduled later in the summer, but Officers are hopeful that it will meet the new deadline.

Membership and Nominees to Outside Bodies

It should be noted that the annual change in Mayor means that incumbent will be Ex-Officio on the Witney & District Twinning Association as well as the St Mary’s Church Preservation Trust.

Listed below are the Town Council nominees serving on other outside bodies which terms of office are due to expire in the next 6 months. The terms of office are set by the various bodies and Council appointments are made on the expiry of the term or vacancies caused by resignation, disqualification, etc. Most terms of Office are for a 4 year term.

1. Witney Town Charity

D Temple – June 2020

H W Chirgwin – June 2020

2. Witney Educational Foundation

R W Barton – May 2020 - *Mr Barton has indicated that he would be happy to continue and the Foundation is very keen to retain him.*

R Bolger – July 2023 – has resigned

3. Cogges Welfare Trust Charity

Mrs Paula Richardson = September 2020

H W Chirgwin – September 2020

Those appointed need to live in the Cogges area

The Council is requested to give consideration to either allowing the current incumbent to continue for a further 4 year term of office or nominating someone else.

Update on the Implications of COVID-19 & Return to Work Strategy

Burials remain the Council's priority and over the past two weeks an increase has been seen – although this is not directly linked with COVID-19. As previously reported the Operations & Estates Officer and Town Clerk had separated the Works Personnel into two teams in order to try and protect the workforce. Predominantly burials are taking place at the Windrush Cemetery and working practices have had to be adapted to meet the demand. If the number of burials increase further beyond the capacity of the Works teams normal working day the Town Clerk has agreed that overtime will be paid – as the accumulation of lieu time is not viable along with annual leave entitlements which no one is in a rush to take currently. This would put an added burden on the workforce going forward. Additional equipment in order to run two grave digging teams may also have to be hired in to meet the demand.

No staff were furloughed – as a precepting authority the furlough scheme wasn't intended to apply in any case – where possible staff were redeployed to cover other duties where there was pressure on the existing team and was a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic – such as checking of locked play areas on a daily basis 7 days a week.

Officers continued to assess the COVID-19 risks to the staff and adjusted working practices accordingly. Members will be aware that several new members of staff joined the WTC team since October – particularly in the Works Team where the most pressure currently is. The Town Clerk is pleased to report that at the end of March a week intensive course on grave digging was provided and the four new members trained accordingly. The new team members have adapted quickly and the Council should congratulate all the staff for their commitment and continuation of providing an excellent service during these extraordinary difficult times.

The Senior Management Team are now working on the next phase and how the Council Offices and Services/Facilities can begin to return to operating in a safe workable manner whilst adhering to the Government guidelines. The Compliance Officer will be instructed to undertake a full risk assessment every step of the way and put plans in place to minimise or mitigate any risks to staff. Based on the statement from the Prime Minister it is unlikely the Council's Public Halls will reopen before the end of June. This will significantly affect the Council's income – the Town Clerk has contacted the insurers regarding the business continuity cover and this is the response received:

"I am afraid that, in common with the rest of the insurance market, the Select for Local Councils policy will not provide Business Interruption cover for costs and loss of income resulting from you having to close your venues or reduce your services to your clients, as a result of Coronavirus.

This is because Business Interruption cover is principally designed for situations where your property is damaged by flood or fire for example and is therefore out of action whilst repairs are carried out. Zurich does provide cover for some 'non-damage' business interruption. This includes the need to close premises due to unforeseen events, including specified diseases. A policy of this type will usually list which diseases are covered and Zurich's policies have never included diseases linked to pandemics, such as SARs, Avian Flu or Coronavirus, because it is very difficult to quantify the risk.

I do understand that this is not the answer you were hoping for. I wish I could be of more help, but there is nothing in a standard insurance policy that will protect you from the very unfortunate set of circumstances that you - and many other organisations - are currently facing."

Many Council's are in this similar position and NALC are actively lobbying government on funding for Town & Parish Councils – although some funding has been provided to District Councils.

Environmental Impact

Having declared a Climate Change Emergency at its Council meeting on 26 June 2019 – with this in mind Councillors should have due regard – where possible - to the environmental impact of any decisions they make with regard to its facilities and services it operates.

Risk

The Council employs professional qualified Officers to advise and ensure that the Council implements and follows new regulations in a timely manner. Officers have been carrying out dynamic risk assessments as and when government guidance changes or new guidance released.

The Council as an employer has a duty of care to its employees and to ensure that its working practices do not contravene any health & safety legislation or employment law and therefore do not bring detriment to the staff health and wellbeing. Officers continue to work together to minimise and mitigate any risk as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Financial Implications

Financial implications of the delegated decisions are detailed in the report above.

There have been unavoidable financial implications reacting to and implementing/adapting safe working practices – be it the procurement of additional PPE or other infrastructure/equipment. This will be quantified to a future meeting of the Council.

Due to some of the Council's services and facilities having to close there has been a loss of income which will affect the Council's overall financial standing – again this will be quantified to a future meeting of the Council.

Recommendation

Members are invited to note the report and delegated decisions taken by the Town Clerk; and

1. agree nominations to the outside bodies accordingly:
 - a) Witney Town Charity x 2 positions
 - b) Witney Educational Foundation x 2 positions (one for 4 years and one until July 2023)
 - c) Cogges Welfare Trust x 2 positions