

**SHREWSBURY TOWN COUNCIL
FULL COUNCIL
25 JANUARY 2021**

Officer: Helen Ball – Town Clerk

COVID UPDATE

Purpose of Report

To update Members on COVID related matters involving the Town Council.

Areas of Work/Activity

1. Lockdown 2

Lockdown 2 took place from 4 November – 2 December 2020. During this period, the Market Hall trade was restricted to essential stalls as was the Sunday Market with car boot sales being cancelled. All participatory sport was cancelled with golf, tennis, bowls and croquet completely shut. Parks & Open Space and play remained open.

2. Lockdown 3

Lockdown 3 has been operational since 5 January 2021. Currently there is no indication on when restrictions shall be lifted.

3. Staffing

Staffing levels remains challenging with 4 members of staff on long-term sick leave, 2 back on shielding and 2 vacancies that cannot effectively be recruited and filled until lockdown concludes. In addition there are a number of staff who have requested alternative working arrangements be put in place as they are experiencing childcare difficulties due to schools being closed and their partners being classed as key workers.

Generally speaking morale amongst staff is reasonably good, although staff who come into contact with the public are struggling as there are difficulties with retaining good social distancing between them and the public.

Admin staff continue to work from home and the public do not see any difference in the service provided. There are however concerns about long-term mental health issues of working from home and being isolated from work colleagues. Managers are keeping in regular contact with those staff.

Senior Management staff are generally working apart with the Town Clerk & Deputy Town Clerk predominantly at home and making visits to Riggs Hall and the Depot, the Head of Operations based at the Depot and the Head of Finance at Riggs Hall.

4. Finances

The Head of Finance has briefed the Finance & General Purpose Committee on financial projections for the year end. It is envisaged at this stage that the deficit outturn shall be in the region of £90k, but this will be dependent on how long Lockdown 3 continues. It is envisaged that COVID will continue to effect the council finances well into the 2021/22 financial year.

5. Communications/Social Media

Staff have continued to maintain a high presence communicating to the public. All notice boards have COVID Updates, there is a special section on the Website for COVID related matters and social media regularly posts regarding COVID matters, also picking up on Public Health Shropshire matters.

6. Council Meetings

All Council meetings continue to be virtual with attendance better than the year previous when a programme of physical meetings operated. All the Committees seem to be working well and decision making has reverted back to Councillors rather than Officers.

The Regulations allow for virtual meetings until early May with no provision for the Annual Town Meeting. The national bodies are urging government to extend these regulations.

7. Elections

We have been advised from Shropshire Council Electoral Services that plans for elections on 6 May continue with the Pre-Election Period commencing on 15 March. As with all previous pre-election periods, all work undertaken will be assessed for urgency. Any general requests identified on the campaign doorsteps will not be considered until after the elections. Councillors should also endeavor to conclude any Councillor Grant funding by this period.

8. Markets

The General Market remains operational for essential market traders only with footfall being reduced. Stall holders have again been offered reductions in rental during Lockdown 3 and traders are being encouraged to take their two weeks' holiday grace which is built into their contracts.

The Sunday Market is open for essential traders but income and footfall are dramatically down.

9. Parks & Open Spaces

All Parks & Open Spaces remain open, unless they have had to be closed for flood reasons. The Quarry has been exceptionally busy as the public continue to use the facility for their daily exercise.

10. Play

Under current Government Guidelines, all play areas should remain open. All have been COVID Risk Assessed and new signage has been in place. A number of complaints have been received from the general public questioning the Town Council's decision to keep them open particularly as schools are closed. The mental and physical benefits of keeping these facilities open far outweigh risk of transmission. The current message has been for parents to act more responsibly when using these facilities and ensure they and their children continue to follow the HANDS-FACE-SPACE rules.

11. Sports Facilities

All team sport has been cancelled and Golf, Tennis, Bowls and Croquet facilities have been closed. Staff continue to maintain facilities to ensure that when these can open they can do so as quickly as possible.

There are increasing concerns about the impact on grounds operations going into the summer of 2021 when it is likely that grass will be growing at maximum capacity, summer sports will have begun, but winter sports will not yet have finished. It may be that the Council will need to put a finishing date on winter sports activity to be able to manage these potential conflicts.

12. Toilets

Toilets have remained open albeit some facilities within the toilet blocks being closed to ensure social distancing can be maintained.

There remain infrastructure problems with the Top Quarry facilities as water pipes have been damaged and an emergency feed from the depot is susceptible to poor supply during freezing conditions.

As anticipated, the Butcher Row Facilities continue to be extremely susceptible to drug use and have had to be closed on a number of occasions due to the conditions users have left it in.

13. Cemetery

Cemetery staff continue to offer services and operate appropriately where there are COVID burials.

14. Treeworks

The Treework programme is underway. Urgent Ash Die Back work is completed and work is ongoing with identified tasks as well as annual shrub bed maintenance.

15. Fisheries

Fisheries remain open but are restricted to Shrewsbury resident use only where they can justify the activity as part of their exercise. All fisheries are regularly inspected by bailiffs which work with both Environment Agency Personnel and the Police.

16. Allotments

All allotment sites remain open and are working to guidelines issued by the National Association of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners.

17. Youth

Open Access sessions in Youth Clubs are suspended and Youth Workers are beginning enhanced Detached Work. Alternative Curriculum work continues as does the food project funded through the Youth Endowment Fund. The Youth & Community Manager continues to work with both Team

Shrewsbury and Recovery Task Force Partners to help address youth related matters particularly around non-compliance of Government Rules.

18. Civic

Mayoral activity continues to be restricted during Lockdown 3 as it is deemed non-essential. The Mayor however is being used to spread out the messages of COVID related matters.

19. Capital Works

Where appropriate, Capital Works continue but at times this has been restricted due to contractors being furloughed or difficulty in receiving supplies.

20. Shrewsbury Recovery Taskforce

The Town Clerk, Deputy Town Clerk and Head of Operations continue to attend the fortnightly Shrewsbury Recovery Taskforce meetings and have supported the work of the partnership throughout. All town centre road closures have been removed during Lockdown 3. The measures are in place to maintain public social distancing when the public have been encouraged to visit the town centre and shop; currently everyone is being instructed to adhere to the Stay At Home message.

21. North Shrewsbury COVID Working Group

The Town Clerk, Deputy Town Clerk and Youth & Community Manager has been feeding into the North Shrewsbury COVID Working Group, a group set up to address increased virus numbers in the Harlescott, Battlefield & Sundorne areas of town.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (i) That the Report be noted.