

WINSFORD TOWN COUNCIL

RISK ASSESSMENT - COVID-19 (MARCH 2020)¹

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

On 31st December 2019 Chinese authorities notified the World Health Organization (WHO) of an outbreak of pneumonia in Wuhan City which was later classified as a new disease - COVID-19.

On 30th January 2020, WHO declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” (PHEIC).

On 11th March 2020 WHO categorised the outbreak as a pandemic and subsequently stated on 14th March 2020 that Europe is now the centre of the pandemic.

UK Chief Medical Officers HAD classified the risk to the UK as moderate. This has now been raised to high as of 12th March 2020.

On 10th February 2020, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced strengthened legal powers to protect public health.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 have been put in place to reduce the risk of further human-to-human transmission in this country by keeping individuals in isolation where public health professionals believe there is a reasonable risk an individual may have the virus.

On 3rd March 2020 the Government published its response plan to the virus which consists of four phases: -

- Contain - detect early cases, follow up close contacts, and prevent the disease taking hold in this country for as long as is reasonably possible (includes individuals at risk of carrying the virus being asked to self-isolate for 14 days). Those testing positive are placed in quarantine (either under appropriate medical care or at home) and are required to undergo further testing with two negative results before being released from quarantine;
- Delay - slow the spread in this country; lowering the peak impact; and pushing it away from the winter season. This may involve social distancing measures including closure of schools and cancellation of public events;
- Research - better understand the virus and the actions to lessen its effect on the UK population; innovate responses including diagnostics, drugs and vaccines; use the evidence to inform the development of the most effective models of care;
- Mitigate - provide the best care possible for people who become ill, support hospitals to maintain essential services and ensure ongoing support for people ill in the community to minimise the overall impact of

¹ This risk assessment continues to apply as of 12th April 2020

the disease on society, public services and on the economy

The main public health campaign messages from government are: -

- Wash your hands with soap and water often – do this for at least 20 seconds
- Always wash your hands when you get home or into work
- Use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze
- Put used tissues in the bin straight away and wash your hands afterwards
- Try to avoid close contact with people who are unwell
- Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean

As of 12th March, the Government announced it was moving from containment phase into delay phase. New advice has been issued as follows: -

- Anyone who shows certain symptoms is now required to self-isolate for seven days, regardless of whether they have travelled to affected areas. This means people should stay at home and avoid all but essential contact with others for 7 days from the point of displaying mild symptoms², to slow the spread of infection;
- Individuals are no longer asked to call 111 to go into self-isolation. If their symptoms worsen during home isolation or are no better after seven days they should contact 111 online at www.111.nhs.uk. If they have no internet access, they should call 111. For a medical emergency dial 999.

The government has announced that it will be considering further social isolation measures including banning large public events as per 17th March 2020. Whilst schools remain open at this time closure may be re-considered.

It should be noted that it has been indicated that elderly people may be quarantined for up to four months and other drastic measures may need to be implemented including forced requisitioning of buildings as temporary hospitals.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Winsford Town Council will be acting on information and guidance available from the following sources to which all councillors, staff and members of the public will be signposted:

- Coronavirus – UK Government Response
<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>

² The symptoms are:

- High temperature (37.8 degrees and above)
- New, continuous cough

- General information to the public
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>
- Guidance for non-clinical settings – Employers and Businesses
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/covid-19-guidance-for-non-clinical-settings-and-the-public>
- NHS Overview, symptoms and advice
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>
- Government Action Plan
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-action-plan>
- Government Advice for Self-Isolation at home
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-people-with-confirmed-or-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>
- WHO – Getting Workplace ready
https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=359a81e7_6

In the preparation of this risk assessment, additional information/guidance has been utilised from the following sources:

- Cheshire West & Chester Council
- Cheshire Association of Local Councils
- WHO website technical guidance
- Society of Local Council Clerks
- National Association of Local Councils
- Local Government Association information for Councils
- Ellis Whittam (Employment and Health & Safety Advisers)
- National Joint Councils for Local Government Service – advisory notice (6th March 2020)

KEY FACTS UNDERPINNING THE RISK ASSESSMENT

The following information has been used to underpin the risk assessment.

This is an enveloped respiratory virus spread in aerosols/droplets via person to person direct contact and indirect contact with infected surfaces/hands.

The key to managing the risk of contracting the virus is to limit the opportunities for spread/transmission. This not only includes the main campaign measures suggested by NHS England in respect of hand sanitisation and reducing aerosol transmission by using tissues, but also adopting procedures for surface decontamination of “multi-use touch points” such as door handles, keypads etc.

This is a novel virus hence unlike influenza so there is no natural immunity/vaccine. It is therefore likely a high proportion of people will become infected (current estimates are 80% of the UK population) and according to the government's action plan up to 20% of the Town Council's staff/councillors may be infected during the peak of the outbreak.

Business continuity planning is therefore key to maintaining Council services and corporate decision-making capabilities – see attached WTC Business Continuity Plan and Action Plan.

Children can be infected and can have a severe illness but based on current data overall illness seems rarer in people under 20 years of age.

So far, there has been no obvious sign that pregnant women are more likely to be seriously affected

The population segments at most risk of severe disease/death are those over 60 or with underlying medical conditions including diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular and renal issues and respiratory issues. This has implications when assessing the risk to the public, councillors and staff in Winsford as there is a higher than average proportion of residents over the age of 60 and a significant proportion of councillors and staff are either over the age of 60 or have pre-existing conditions.

Transmission of the virus is no longer contained or restricted to direct contact with people travelling abroad. The virus is now spreading within the community.

Unlike 'flu, there is a much longer incubation period, and people start shedding the virus at a much earlier stage before any symptoms are showing (pre-symptomatic phase).

Although studies in China show the incubation period can range from 0-27 days, WHO have determined a quarantine/isolation period of 14 days to be appropriate. Most people start showing signs between 5-11 days post infection.

Data available suggests the virus can survive in the air for at least three hours, on cardboard for 24 hours and on hard surfaces (e.g. stainless steel, melamine etc) for up to 72 hours, possibly longer.

In respect of infection by close contact, advice is to limit contact to no more than 15 minutes and to stand more than 2m distance.

Once recovered from the virus, an individual has immunity. Tests are still being conducted to understand how long after recovery infectious viral particles (as opposed to fragments of viral RNA) are shed. Recent published research indicates that people with mild symptoms stop shedding infectious virus after about day 10 of the onset of symptoms. This is relevant in respect of how soon after recovering from coronavirus staff can return to work and Council can resume business.

The key risk of exposure is therefore from pre-symptomatic staff, councillors or

members of the public having contracted the virus and subsequently attending council activities and thereby transmitting the virus to others.

The Town Council cannot determine or control what people do away from the workplace.

CURRENT POSITION (17th MARCH 2020)

A daily bulletin is issued at 2pm giving the number of confirmed cases. There is a 24-hour delay before details of the locations of the confirmed cases are released by Public Health England. This is now recorded by CWAC so unless it is published in the press, it may not be possible to readily identify whether there are confirmed cases in Cheshire.

The bulletins are monitored daily by the Town Clerk and Mayor as the risks will increase once cases start to be confirmed within the local community.

The government has announced that it will not be testing people with mild symptoms for coronavirus who are self-isolating. Therefore, the number of confirmed cases will not accurately reflect the extent to which the population of Cheshire is infected.

The first three cases in the CWAC area were confirmed on Friday 13th March 2020.

Although the Dept of Health and Social Care, Public Health England and the NHS are leading on the UK response to the outbreak, the Town Council nevertheless has a duty of care to staff, councillors and members of the public to conduct its own risk assessments at local level specific for its activities and take steps accordingly.

PEOPLE AT RISK

The Town Council cannot control what people do in their personal time and how they choose to respect (or not) the guidance from the government or whether they take additional steps to limit their exposure (such as taking holidays, visiting public places etc).

Councillors and the public have a choice in whether they undertake Town Council activities, but WTC staff do not have that choice.

All staff will be asked to update their medical questionnaire to ensure those in vulnerable risk groups are identified. It may be that decisions in respect of working from home for these at risk members of staff may need to be taken at an earlier stage.

In addition some members of staff care for close family members in vulnerable groups. Their specific concern is not that they become infected but that they unknowingly transmit the virus during the 14-day asymptomatic period to their vulnerable relatives. Again, if they have vulnerable dependents, then decisions on working from home may need to be made at an earlier stage.

Administrative/Office Staff

Risk of infection from WTC staff is currently low owing to working in their own office space and where staff members are in an office together distance can be over three

meters. It should be noted, however, that Wyvern House is not exclusively occupied by the Town Council and also that other organisations are located in the building. The Town Council has not control over these matters.

The Town Council can, however, offer hand sanitisers for staff and the public.

Risk of infection from each other relies on all members of staff acting responsibly and following all precautions to keep the work area free from contamination and not coming into work if they feel ill.

In the cases of members of the public, staff are advised not to meet in small confined rooms, to ensure they are three metres away and to limit contact time to no more than 15 minutes.

As the incidence of infection within the local community increases, members of the public will not be allowed into the office and all services will be carried out via email and phone where possible.

The Town Clerk; Administrative Officer (0.8 FTE); and Support Officer can work from home on laptops and log into the council server enabling essential services and payments to be made.

Groundsmen

These staff members are at lesser risk owing to outdoor working although staff do visit the office regularly throughout the day for work instruction, keys, purchase orders etc.

Groundsmen do have smart phones and email addresses so all work instruction can be sent through in this way so avoiding increased contact.

Over/Wharton Recreation Grounds are meeting places for lunch and rest breaks for groundsmen so there is a risk of them infecting each other.

Staff will be instructed to take staggered breaks where possible.

The main risks are from approaches by members of the public and direct contact with play equipment recently touched by members of the public in the parks.

Also, contamination is possible from e.g. petrol hoses and when visiting petrol stations and equipment being delivered and purchased from suppliers.

Councillors

There are risks to councillors from staff, each other and members of the public whilst attending council meetings/events and undertaking constituency work with residents

Members of Public

Attendance at council meetings is normally low but has been higher in recent times. Any meetings held in the CWAC chamber³ would need to be fitted out with

³ Located on the ground floor of Wyvern House, Winsford

sanitisers and attendees would need to sit over three metres away from each other.

MEASURES

The measures adopted will be defined by whether the government is still working to contain the virus or merely delay it. The point at which further measures will need to be undertaken, including working from home, will be determined by when the first cases start to be confirmed in the local community.

- *Infection Control Measures – hand and surface sanitisation*
The Town Clerk has purchased supplies in order to ensure the council is fully equipped to deal with the outbreak. Supplies are in high demand but we have placed orders with our suppliers which are on back order.

In cases of extreme risk to services the Clerk already has the authorisation to order goods up to £5,000 for a single transaction. The Clerk shall report such action to the Mayor or Chair of Finance Committee in their absence as soon as possible and to the Council as soon as practicable thereafter.

- For individuals
Hand sanitiser bottles will be provided to all members of staff for use during the course of council duties which are on order and will be issued when received.
 - Other measures
All cups/mugs to be soaked in Milton fluid. Staff will be encouraged to bring in their own identifiable mug for personal use.
 - Storage/use of products
Most stocks of hand sanitiser and alcohol wipes are sold out everywhere including on-line. The Town Council has identified a supply of hand sanitiser and will ensure it is used sensibly, and once alcohol wipes have been used will substitute with antibacterial spray and blue roll for surface decontamination. It has been stressed to all staff that the supplies they are given are for work-related activities and not for personal use at home. All personal supplies are now locked away when staff go home. All stocks are currently kept under lock and key within the office
- *Infection Control Measures –Self Isolation, Working from Home, and Phase 2 Social Isolation Measures*
 - Self-Isolation
The NJC have issued guidance on the response by employers to paid absence from work owing to COVID-19 in accordance with the 'Green Book' terms and conditions. Currently any order for self-isolation will be given by NHS 111 either as a result of contact tracing or as a result of the individual contacting them for advice. This will be treated as absence with full pay but not as sickness absence. Employees who are actually ill will be treated as off sick with associated sick pay in the usual manner. Employees cannot, however, unilaterally decide

to self-isolate without providing the Town Council with reasonable justification in order to qualify for full pay.

- Working from Home
At some point, it will be necessary for the Council to consider staff working from home as per government advice. This will mainly apply to the office staff as the Groundsmen team can continue to carry out their duties outdoors with much lower risk. The Town Clerk is consulting with our IT consultant IMS about making provision for staff to work from home whilst being able to access the documents on the server via a secure VPN connection.
- Cancellation of Public Meetings
It is a legal requirement that all council meetings must be open to the public (except for discussion of sensitive matters) - either the meeting takes place with members of the public attending if they wish or is cancelled. Committee meetings will be held in Room G1 of Wyvern House from 17th March 2020 onwards. The NALC⁴ Legal Team are investigating whether an alternative to holding face to face meetings (e.g. video conferencing with live streaming to the public) can be utilised by Local Councils during a period of risk to public safety, or whether total suspension of the council decision making process is the only option. This information will be shared as soon as it is known.

ADDENDUM (12TH APRIL 2020)

On 4 April 2020, the government brought The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020 into force to allow local authorities to conduct meetings remotely. Winsford Town Council will be holding meetings remotely. Details of these meetings will be advertised via the Town Council website www.winsford.gov.uk and the public will be able to attend.

- Council Events and Other Services
Following on from the Prime Minister's advice on the 16th March 2020, all current planned events organised by Winsford Town Council will be rescheduled for a later date.
- Council Services
There are no current plans to close our parks to members of the public but again this may have to be reviewed.

⁴ National Association of Local Councils