

COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 14

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

Cllr Southern asked:

We, as Councillors, are finding it difficult to do our job without easy access to all officers by telephone and email. With modern technology, all officers working from home clearly have telephones and access to the Council's systems. The current system of contact through a single source, such as elections@hart.gov.uk or any other method merely puts another stage into the process. As this was a temporary measure when Covid19 arose and, although many officers are taking well-deserved leave, when are Councillors going to have direct access to officers in the normal way?

Cllr Neighbour responded:

Many members have welcomed the more organised co-ordination of the councillor enquiries approach which have resulted in speedier and more effective Officer response. It is certainly an arrangement that has been supported by all three Group Leaders.

What has been enlightening has been to learn of the extent and depth of member enquires but more importantly, it has also demonstrated why there is a need to manage member engagement to ensure that officers are not overloaded with more than simply service requests.

One of the main strengths of the arrangement has been the ability to monitor response times and to ensure that enquires do not get missed. However, nothing within the arrangement seeks to restrict access to either Heads of Service or specific case officers, such as planning or environmental health officers.

All officers are still responding to specific case work and can be contacted by both email and telephone in the usual way. However, members must appreciate that if they chose to go direct to an individual case officer then that approach is not directly monitored and it cannot be guaranteed that you'll get the same level of response rate that you would otherwise get going through the councillor enquiry route.

We think that overall the arrangement is a success but it will be kept under review in the same way that it has recently been review and adjusted.

Cllr Southern asked:

With Covid19 clearly diminishing in Hart, when are the officers going to re-occupy the Council offices? The existing arrangement of work stations gives nearly all officers about two metres of space in each direction and the offices are large enough to enable all this to happen.

Cllr Radley responded

The first point to highlight is that unlike many Councils Hart has opened its Reception and is effectively providing a full suite of services. Service delivery to our residents is being maintained. Site visits, subject to social distancing, have recommenced and all

key officers can be contacted by both email and telephone in the usual way. The need to return to the Office is not one that is driven by any service delivery requirement.

The Officer Leadership Team is working on future plans for the office and the working environment because suitable work stations are not in place to accommodate intensive reoccupation. One also has to question the value of people travelling to office just to do all the things which can equally be done well from home. People will come into the office where scheduled face to face meetings are going to be productive but that will not be every day of the working week. This is not because of the need for social distancing (that will pass) but because we have now experienced the efficiencies of working from home.

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Cllr Southern asked:

Zoom and Teams meetings are adequate, but unsatisfactory in many ways. Networking and other communications outside the meetings are being stifled. When are all Council meetings going to be run in the Council chamber as they were before Covid19 occurred?

Cllr Neighbour responded:

At this point in time we are not in a position to return to pre-COVID 19 arrangements and we are at the very limits of our current technological abilities in delivering the current arrangements. I personally would welcome a return to the 'cut and thrust' of face-to-face Council meetings but it will require careful planning to ensure that everyone feels that it is the right thing to do. Officers are already working on ideas to give us some options because the implementation of the new modern.gov Committee process extends to giving us a better and more sophisticated platform to develop our audio visual arrangements with a realistic opportunity to explore the potential of hybrid meetings. This may be something that we could look to assess later this autumn.