**COVID19 UPDATE  FRIDAY 20 MARCH 2020**

Good evening,

I hope this email finds yourself and your families well, I wanted to get in touch to say thank you for your patience at this time as our staff are working to respond to the Covid-19 situation and plan for essential decision-making. As you would expect, those staff at work are extremely busy at present, and we ask for your continued patience as we prioritise queries we are receiving. For queries relating to democratic services please contact Committee@wiltshire.gov.uk and be assured you will receive a response as soon as possible.

You will have already seen cancellations for most of our meetings over the next three weeks. Where meetings are to continue, this is because they have been considered urgent. We are also encouraging the public to participate by sending comments in writing, if it is not appropriate for them to attend meetings in person.

Many of you have enquired about the provision to hold committee meetings online, at the current time we are bound by legal requirements in the 1972 Local Government Act which require members to be physically present at public meetings in order to be able to vote and be part of the quorum. The provision for ‘remote attendance’ is something that many local councils are lobbying for in the Coronavirus Bill, this is not currently contained within the draft Bill, however this may be subject to change. Please note the current requirement is legislative, and not something we have discretion over in our Constitution.

With regards to other areas:

**Staff**

As the Coronavirus (COVID-19) situation evolves, our staff continue to play key roles in supporting our communities by providing essential services and delivering our priorities, including protecting the most vulnerable.  Their professionalism and dedication during this unprecedented challenge is hugely appreciated and their wellbeing is of the utmost importance.

To support this we’ve made changes to our existing policies, working patterns and practices.  This includes supporting home working and are promoting social distancing strategies for staff who continue to work in council buildings and deliver customer-facing services. There are likely to be a number of changes to our front facing services over the coming weeks so please keep checking our website for changes.

**Libraries and Leisure Centre Closures**

Following the Government announcement today (Friday 20 March) all leisure centres, libraries, mobile library service and leisure centres will be closed until further notice.

Where possible, staff affected by these closures will be redeployed to help protect essential services and as soon as we are able to re-open these facilities we will do so.

**Schools**

Our education team is working with our schools over the weekend to ensure that education provision is available across the county for school age dependents of critical workers and vulnerable children from week commencing 23 March until further notice.

The following guidance on critical workers was provided by Government yesterday <https://bit.ly/2U6IGwL>  The guidance sets out those whose work is critical to the coronavirus response and keeping crucial public services going.

For children not attending schools we have put home learning support and resources on our website for families to access.

**Support for businesses affected by COVID-19**

The Government announced (Friday 20 March) that from this evening all cafes, pub, restaurants and bars must close until further notice. These measures will be reviewed monthly. Theatres, nightclubs and cinemas are also affected. We are working in partnership with Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SWLEP) to support businesses in the county that may be affected.

They also announced an additional package of financial support, including help for businesses that experience increased costs or cash flow problems, expanded rate relief, a business interruption loan scheme, and a grant scheme.

Link to more info: <http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/news/articles/covid-business>

Thank you

**Cllr Philip Whitehead**