



Xx March 2021

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, Minister for Housing, Communities & Local Government;
 Rt Hon Theresa May MP; Rt Hon John Redwood MP; Matt Rodda MP;
 James Sunderland MP
 House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

By email to:

robert.jenrick.mp@parliament.uk; mayt@parliament.uk; john.redwood.mp@parliament.uk
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Dear Sirs and Madam,

I write on behalf of the seventeen Town and Parish Councils within Wokingham Borough to express our collective concern over the impending expiry of The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meeting) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, which allows us to hold council meetings using online platforms.

We welcome the timetable published by the government on 22nd February, setting out a schedule for re-opening our halls and public spaces, but note that there will be a period of some two or more months between when the current regulations are due to expire, and the earliest date at which it is anticipated that we will be able to meet indoors, without social distancing restrictions, which is anticipated to be 21st June 2021 at the earliest. Town and Parish Councils are required by law to hold an annual meeting in May and cannot lawfully decide not to do so, but we may find ourselves in a position where we will be in breach of lockdown restrictions if we convene physical meetings beyond May 6th 2021.

Many parish councils meet in local halls which are too small to comfortably accommodate councillors, staff and members of the public who may wish to attend council meetings. Those who have larger halls may find that trying to meet in a socially distant way results in adverse impacts such as members having to shout to be heard properly across a larger room, which is contrary to advice on limiting the potential spread of the virus through droplets in the air.

As councils, our principal concern when considering the return to physical meetings is the health and wellbeing of our members, our staff and visitors to our meetings. Until the vaccine rollout is completed, we are very concerned that a return to face-to-face meetings will create unnecessary risk for members who may be vulnerable, to members or staff who may not have been offered vaccines by early May, and visitors who may fall into either or both of those categories.

We urge you therefore, to ask the government to extend the regulations until May 2022, to allow greater flexibility in the return to physical meetings, to avoid taking a backwards step in the progress we have made in overcoming this virus which has had such a dramatic effect on our nation. We all look forward to being able to meet in person again and resume our council activities in a physical way, but most importantly, we want to do this when our members and community are able to do this in a safe way.

Yours faithfully,

Councillor Simon Weeks
Chair, Finchampstead Parish Council

On behalf of the Parish and Town Councils of: Arborfield & Newland; Barkham; Charvil; Earley; Finchampstead; Remenham; Ruscombe; St. Nicholas Hurst; Shinfield; Sonning; Swallowfield; Twyford; Wargrave; Wokingham; Winnersh; Wokingham Without; Woodley.

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