



# Sedgefield

## Town Council

# COVID SECURE MEETINGS POLICY

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# SEDGEFIELD TOWN COUNCIL VIRTUAL MEETING PROTOCOL

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## 1. **Introduction:**

In the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic, central government enacted “The Local Authority (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020” which were valid from 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020 until 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021. These Regulations were issued to give local authorities greater flexibility in the conduct of meetings, including allowing Councillors to attend remotely, and for public and press access to those meetings. The measures within those Regulations were to help Town and Parish Councils redeploy their resources to deal with the pandemic and ensure essential business continues whilst upholding democratic principles and protecting the health and safety of Councillors, Officers and the public in-line with official public health guidance. Sedgfield Town Council adopted its own Virtual Meeting Protocol on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2020 to assist Councillors, Officers, members of the public and press to understand how virtual meetings would differ from a physical meeting and to assist people to engage in debate and decision making. During that time period all Council meetings have taken place very successfully and productively via virtual means using Microsoft Teams with members of the public also participating in the Council’s Monthly Meetings and P&R Committee meetings<sup>1</sup>.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over the UK government has set out a route map to take the country out of the current restrictions and for that reason the government has stated the Regulations of 2020 will not be extended and that face to face council meetings must return from 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

## 2. **Purpose of This Policy:**

The purpose of this COVID Secure Meetings Policy is to detail how the Council’s Committee meetings and Working Group meetings will operate in the interim period until all COVID restrictions have been lifted by the UK government. The Policy will detail how such meetings will run to ensure Councillors and Officers have the confidence to participate in them effectively while also allowing members of the public to observe and participate in Committee meetings.

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<sup>11</sup> Note: During this time period all Environment Committee matters and Community Development & Engagement Committee matters have been dealt with under the P&R Committee’s agendas.

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### 3. **Types of Council Meetings:**

The Town Council operates a number of Committees and a number of Working Groups. The Council's Working Groups do not have any delegated powers (unless delegated such by a Committee, e.g. the Fireworks Working Group to oversee the delivery of the annual fireworks display for the Town) and are for investigation purposes only to produce recommendations for subsequent determination by Committee. Sections 4.0 and 5.0 detail how Committee meetings will take place face to face in COVID secure way whilst Section 6.0 details how Working Groups will continue with meeting virtually until 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021 by which time the UK government hope to have lifted all COVID restrictions meaning that normal working arrangements will resume for all activities.

#### 3.1. Town Council Committees:

The Town Council operates the following Committees:

- Monthly Meeting
- Policy & Resources (P&R) Committee
- Environment Committee
- Community Development & Engagement Committee
- Community Chest<sup>2</sup>
- Sedgefield Extra<sup>3</sup>
- Personnel Committee<sup>4</sup>

Procedures for operating COVID-secure Committee meetings (excluding Personnel Committee) are detailed in Section 4 of this Policy with the Personnel Committee's arrangements detailed in Section 5.

#### 3.2. Town Council Working Groups:

The Town Council operates the following Working Groups:

- Butterwick Road Cemetery Working Group
- Estates Working Group

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<sup>2</sup> Note: These are scheduled as required depending upon requests for donations received.

<sup>3</sup> Note: The work of this Committee tends to predominantly take place via email circulation and comment.

<sup>4</sup> Note: Members of the public are not permitted to attend meetings of this Committees due to the nature of discussions.

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- Finance Working Group
- Fireworks Working Group
- Policy & Records Management Working Group

Procedures for operating COVID-secure Committee meetings (excluding Personnel Committee) are detailed in Section 4. of this Policy with the Personnel Committee's arrangements detailed in Section 5.

#### **4. Operating COVID Secure Committee Meetings (excluding Personnel Committees):**

Returning to face to face meetings will predominantly see a return to the Town Council's traditional ways of working. The notable exception is that additional arrangements must be included so as to ensure meetings are as COVID secure as possible thereby protecting all who attend. It is important to stress that not everyone has yet been vaccinated, or fully vaccinated, against COVID and therefore at all times everyone (staff, Councillors and members of the public) must act responsibly with a high level of caution as if they could become infected or pass on the virus and in doing so continues to play their part in reducing risk as much as possible. This section details:

- Meeting agenda and notice of meeting
- Committee packs
- Meeting venue and building procedures
- Meeting Attendance Procedure for Councillors:
- Public Participation and meeting attendance procedure for members of the public
- Standing Orders and meeting recording
- Behaviour and conduct

##### 4.1. Meeting Agenda and Notice of Meeting:

From 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021 the Town Council will revert back to its traditional way of publishing Council agendas with a copy on the Council's website and a copy displayed in the Town's noticeboard. These will be displayed giving three clear days notice of the meeting.

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#### 4.2. Committee Packs:

Councillors will continue to be summonsed as normal via a meeting agenda along with supporting documentations required for the meeting in the form of a Committee pack. Town Council Committee packs will continue to be produced in their traditional paper format on the Monday prior to the Committee meeting to which they relate. These packs will continue to be issued to all Councillors via the first class postal system until such a time that the Town Council Offices are open and at that point individual Councillors can decide whether they wish to continue with a pack issued by the post or make an appointment to collect in person from the Town Council Offices.

#### 4.3. Meeting Venue and Building Procedures:

To be able to factor in the required social distancing measures needed all Town Council Committee meetings will need to take place in the main hall of Sedgefield Parish Hall. Committee meetings in the Town Council Offices meeting room will only be able to resume once all COVID restrictions have been lifted. Sections 4.4 and 4.5 give Councillors and members of the public detailed information regarding how Committee meetings will operate in a COVID secure way at this new venue.

To ensure the Parish Hall operates in a COVID secure way for the duration of Committee meetings a full risk assessment has been produced which will be continuously monitored by the Town Clerk and the following building procedures will also be in operation:

- A one way system for people moving through the Hall will operate with everyone coming into the Hall from the side entrance from the car park and exiting the building from the fire door leading onto Front Street.
- The entry and exit doors in the main hall will be kept open for the duration of any Council meeting so as to ensure there is some flow of ventilation.
- No Councillor or any member of the public is permitted access to the Hall's main kitchen or the Fletcher room.
- The doors leading to the upper areas of the Parish Hall will be locked at all times during Council meetings.
- Due to space limitations it is not possible to use the disabled lift during Council meetings
- The latch on the side door entrance to the Parish Hall from the car park will be dropped by the Parish Hall Security Officer once all Councillors and registered

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member of the public have arrived. No unauthorised attendees will be permitted in the building.

#### 4.4 Meeting Attendance Procedure For Councillors:

From 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021 all Council Committee meetings, with the exception of the Personnel Committee as members of the public are not permitted to attend, must be in person, i.e. face to face. It is essential that all Cllrs play their role in making the Council's face to face meetings as COVID secure as possible. Each Councillor must abide by the following rules at all time:

- Abide by the staggered entry system to the Parish Hall by ensuring they arrive no earlier and no later than their personal allocated time slot (see Appendix A). If a Councillor misses their allocated time slot they must wait outside the building for instruction as to when they can be permitted. All Councillors must inform the Clerk prior to the meeting whether or not they will be attending the meeting.
- Wear a face mask to enter the building and remain wearing that until seated at their allocated seat (see Appendix B) then replace face mask at any time when leaving their seat (which can only be for either going to the toilet or leaving the meeting).
- When entering the Parish Hall use the wall mounted hand sanitiser point to sanitise hands.
- When entering the Parish Hall all Councillors should scan the QR code for the Parish Hall which is located near to the wall mounted hand sanitiser point in the lobby area.
- Go directly to allocated seat in the Main Hall (see Appendix B) and remain two metres away from all other Councillors, staff and members of the public at all times. Councillors are asked not to move their allocated seating and to remain seated at all times when in the meeting. Should anyone require the toilet during that time they will have to raise their hand to request permission to leave the room.
- In the event that a Councillor starts to feel unwell during the meeting they must raise their hand and then proceed to the Fletcher Room which will be the building's isolation zone from which medical assistance can be sought.
- To bring personal Committee pack to the meeting and then to ensure when leaving the building that no papers are left behind, i.e. take all personal Committee packs and rubbish home with them. Ideally, Councillors should try to bring as few a number of personal items with them as possible to the meeting.

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- No beverages or refreshments are to be provided in the Parish Hall, however, Councillors can bring their own filled water bottle with them if they wish but these must be removed from the building when leaving.
- When the Council meeting is closed by the Chair then Councillors will leave the building according to their allocated staggered exit time (see Appendix C). This exit time is non-negotiable and no Councillor should remain in the building or congregate outside the building to socialise with others. It is essential that people disperse as quickly as possible to limit contact risk. Councillors should sanitise their hands using the wall mounted sanitiser unit next to the exit door.

#### 4.5 Public Participation and Meeting Attendance Procedure For Members Of The Public:

From 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021 there will not be the opportunity for the public to attend Council Committee meetings virtually as there is no wi-fi facility in Sedgefield Parish Hall. Public participation by members of the public either observing or speaking at Council Committee meetings is welcomed and will remain a standing agenda item on agendas.

Due to space limitations, and the necessity to ensure appropriate social distancing measures are in place to protect all, it is a requirement that any member of the public wishing to attend to either observe a Council meeting or to speak during a Council meeting must register their attendance by no later than 12 noon on the day of the Council meeting. To register attendance at a Council meeting the member of the public must email the Town Clerk at [town.clerk@sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk](mailto:town.clerk@sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk) stating their name and give full contact details which will be retained for the purpose of track and trace. At that time the member of the public will be allocated a timeslot to enter the Parish Hall. Please note there will be no unauthorised admittance to the Parish Hall and that due to the implications of required social distancing there will be a maximum capacity for members of the public able to attend in order to ensure everyone's safety.

Each member of the public must abide by the following rules when in the Parish Hall:

- Wear a face mask to enter the building and remain wearing that until seated at their allocated seat then replace face mask at any time when leaving their seat (which can only be for either going to the toilet or leaving the meeting).
- When entering the Parish Hall use the wall mounted hand sanitiser point to sanitise hands.

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- When entering the Parish Hall all members of the public should scan the QR code for the Parish Hall which is located near to the wall mounted hand sanitiser point in the lobby area.
- Go directly to allocated seat in the Main Hall (instruction will be given by a member of Town Council staff) and remain two metres away from all Councillors, staff and other members of the public at all times. Members of the public are asked not to move their allocated seating and to remain seated at all times when in the meeting. Should anyone require the toilet during that time they will have to raise their hand to request permission to leave the room.
- In the event that a member of the public starts to feel unwell during the meeting they must raise their hand and then proceed to the Fletcher Room which will be the building's isolation zone from which medical assistance can be sought.
- To bring with them a copy of the meeting agenda which can be obtained prior to the meeting from the Town Council's website. This should be taken away by the member of the public for disposal at their own home.
- No beverages or refreshments are to be provided in the Parish Hall, however, a member of the public can bring their own filled water bottle with them if they wish but these must be removed from the building when leaving.
- When the Council meeting is either closed by the Chair or the Chair asks members of the public and press to leave so that exempt information can be considered then members of the public must leave the building accordingly in a systematic way with the person nearest the exit point going first, then the second person nearest etc until all have vacated the building. A member of Town Council staff will advise. This exit time is non-negotiable and no member of the public should remain in the building or congregate outside the building to socialise with others. It is essential that people disperse as quickly as possible to limit contact risk. Members of the public should sanitise their hands using the wall mounted sanitiser unit next to the exit door.

#### 4.6. Standing Orders and Meeting Recording:

All Town Council meetings will continue to abide by the Council's Standing Orders. Recording Town Council Committee meetings will revert back to pre-COVID arrangements whereby this is done via audio recorder only with recordings being destroyed once minutes of the meeting have been formally agreed at the following month's Monthly Meeting.

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4.7. Behaviour and Conduct:

Everyone in the meeting will need to be respectful and compassionate towards one another, emotions may be higher than usual but that only makes it more important that everyone approaches the meeting with respect and in the spirit of the Council's Code of Conduct. It is essential that all meeting attendees, including members of the public and press, give due attention to the matters being discussed. Behaviour that is contrary to the intended outcomes of the meeting will be dealt with at the discretion of the Chairman.

4.8. Role of Parish Hall Security Officer:

The Parish Hall Security Officer will oversee the operation of the Parish Hall's lobby area to ensure that staff, Councillors and members of the public adhere to the rules in this policy and if necessary inform the Chair of the Council should anyone break the rules and need to be asked to leave. The Parish Hall Security Officer will ensure that traffic flows smoothly through the Hall's lobby area and that no individuals congregate in that area causing a bottle neck. The Parish Hall Security Officer will open the Parish Hall prior to the commencement of Councillors staggered starting times to enter the building, to ensure that any members of the public attending the meeting are registered to do so and then confirm to the Clerk when everyone expected is in attendance. This Officer will also assist registered members of the public in being seated and then overseeing them exiting the building before then assisting Cllrs in exiting the building in accordance with this Policy.

No other hire bookings can take place while the Parish Hall is being used for a Council meeting.

**5. Operating COVID Secure Personnel Committee Meetings:**

As Personnel Committee meetings are not open to the public these will continue until 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021 to take place via Microsoft Teams and in accordance with Town Council's Virtual Meeting Protocol.

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## 6. Virtual Working Group Meetings:

Sedgefield Town Council recognises the huge benefits that have been achieved over 2020/21 from virtual meetings and until all COVID restrictions have been fully lifted then Working Group meetings will continue to take place virtually via Microsoft Teams. Central government believe this date will be 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021.

Virtual working allows Councillors and Officers to attend meetings remotely. Whilst in remote attendance a Councillor or Officer must be able:

- To hear, and where practicable see, and be so heard and, where practicable, be seen by, the other members in attendance,

The Town Council has fully utilised Microsoft Teams as its platform to enable virtual meetings. Microsoft Teams is a collaboration and conversational platform as part of Office 365 which will be used by Sedgefield Town Council to enable video and audio conferencing for persons using mobile devices, desktops and fixed room systems. It also includes the following facilities:

- Within meetings you can share screens and record your meeting
- Participants can join meetings, without joining Teams by clicking on the email link
- Previous meeting notes and recording can be accessed
- The platform allows for 250 participants in one meeting but limits the number of participants on screen to 9 at a time

### 6.1. Working Group Meeting Agenda and Papers:

Where possible Working Group meeting agendas and papers will be issued electronically no later than one week in advance of the meeting date.

### 6.2. Recording Working Group Meetings:

The Town Council's requirement to record meetings continues and for virtual meetings this will be through Microsoft Teams video record facility to assist the Clerk with the production of subsequent minutes and are for this purpose only. These recordings will be deleted following approval of minutes.

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### 6.3. Working Group Meeting Protocols:

The Chairman of the Working Group will Chair in accordance with Standing Orders. To aid the effectiveness of such the following protocols will be adopted:

- Throughout the meeting only the Chair and Clerk will remain unmuted throughout. All other attendees will be expected to mute themselves when not speaking – this helps keep background noise to a minimum which will improve everyone’s ability to hear the discussions.
- It is essential that all Councillors have the opportunity to speak and equally important that everyone understands who is speaking at any given time for minuting purposes. The Chair of the meeting will give each Councillor the opportunity to speak on an agenda item. The Chair will ask each Councillor in accordance with surname alphabetical order to speak as follows:

BLAKEMORE	Allan
BROWN	David
CANT	Mark
CARR	Ann
CARR	Mel
FINLAYSON	John
HART	Catherine
HEASMAN	Paul
JASPER	David
NICHOLSON	Allan
SEYMOUR	Jimmy
TOWLER	Julie
WALTON	Alf
WAYMAN	Mavis
WINTER	Stephen

### 6.4. Behaviour and Conduct:

Regardless of whether a meeting takes place face to face or via virtual means The required standards of behaviour and conduct by Councillors are the same regardless of whether a meeting takes place remotely or face to face. Everyone in the meeting will need to be respectful and compassionate towards one another, emotions may be higher

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than usual but that only makes it more important that everyone approaches the meeting with respect and in the spirit of the Council's Code of Conduct. It is essential that all meeting attendees give due attention to the matters being discussed. Behaviour that is contrary to the intended outcomes of the meeting will be dealt with at the discretion of the Chairman.

6.5. Additional Role of Town Clerk:

In addition to the normal role of Town Clerk, for the purpose of virtual Working Group meetings, the Clerk will also assume the role of Meeting Moderator. The role of Meeting Moderator is to oversee the technical aspects of the meeting such as ensuring attendees are admitted, muting microphones when required etc.

6.6. Technical Issues:

As a Working Group meeting progresses if a Councillor is believed to have 'dropped out' this will be minuted. It is possible that drop outs can be caused by poor connectivity. If 'drop outs' result in the meeting becoming inquorate Councillors will endeavour to re-join for a period of 15 minutes. After 15 minutes if the meeting is still inquorate, the Chairman will suspend the meeting and reconvene at a later time and date subject to the statutory days of notice. Councillors will be telephoned or emailed to advise of the suspension of the meeting.

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**APPENDIX A – Councillors Allocated Entry Times For  
Admittance To Parish Hall For Council Meetings**

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Town Council Committee meetings will commence at 7pm prompt in Sedgefield Parish Hall. This means that Councillors must allow extra time while covid restrictions remain in place to take their allocated seat and be ready for the start of the meeting by abiding by the following staggered entry times to the Parish Hall. If you are unable to achieve your allocated time you will be asked to wait and the Parish Hall Security Officer will allow you to enter as soon as possible. Please be respectful to the Parish Hall Security Officer if you are asked to wait. Please note: That once all Councillors are seated then time is needed to permit the registered members of the public to the Hall and be directed to their allocated seating.

<b>Surname:</b>	<b>Forename:</b>	<b>Entry Time:</b>
<b>BLAKEORE</b>	<b>Allan</b>	<b>6.22pm</b>
<b>BROWN</b>	<b>David</b>	<b>6.24pm</b>
<b>CANT</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>6.26pm</b>
<b>CARR</b>	<b>Ann</b>	<b>6.28pm</b>
<b>CARR</b>	<b>Mel</b>	<b>6.30pm</b>
<b>FINLAYSON</b>	<b>John</b>	<b>6.32pm</b>
<b>HART</b>	<b>Catherine</b>	<b>6.34pm</b>
<b>HEASMAN</b>	<b>Paul</b>	<b>6.36pm</b>
<b>JASPER</b>	<b>David</b>	<b>6.38pm</b>
<b>NICHOLSON</b>	<b>Allan</b>	<b>6.40pm</b>
<b>SEYMOUR</b>	<b>Jimmy</b>	<b>6.42pm</b>
<b>TOWLER</b>	<b>Julie</b>	<b>6.44pm</b>
<b>WALTON</b>	<b>Alf</b>	<b>6.46pm</b>
<b>WAYMAN</b>	<b>Mavis</b>	<b>6.48pm</b>
<b>WINTER</b>	<b>Stephen</b>	<b>6.50pm</b>

Note: Members of the public who have registered to attend the meeting will join after 6.51pm.

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# **APPENDIX B – Councillors Allocated Seating Plan For Council Meetings**

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**STAGE**

Town Clerk

Chair of Town Council

BLAKEMORE

BROWN

CANT

CARR A.

FINLAYSON

HART

HEASMAN

JASPER

NICHOLSON

SEYMOUR

TOWLER

WALTON

WAYMAN

WINTER

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## **APPENDIX C – Councillors Allocated Exit Times For Leaving Parish Hall After Council Meetings:**

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At the conclusion of the Town Council Committee meetings, and once all registered members of the public have left the building, Councillors and Town Council staff will leave the Parish Hall in the following sequence:

The Town Clerk;

The Chairman of the Council;

Remaining Councillors in alphabetical order as follows:

- BLAKEMORE Allan
- BROWN David
- CANT Mark
- CARR Ann
- CARR Mel
- FINLAYSON John
- HART Catherine
- HEASMAN Paul
- JASPER David
- NICHOLSON Allan
- SEYMOUR Jimmy
- TOWLER Julie
- WALTON Alf
- WAYMAN Mavis
- WINTER Stephen

The Parish Hall Security Officer (who will ensure the building is completely vacated and secured).

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