



# ChALC Report: Impact of Covid on Council Business October 2021

## Background

ChALC has conducted a survey amongst town and parish councils to determine the impact of the pandemic upon their ongoing council business.

A short questionnaire was devised which asked the following questions: -

- Have you seen an increase/decrease in attendance at council meetings (by members or the public)?
- Have you seen an increase/decrease in the number of events you hold or the attendance at them?
- Have you been able to maintain links that you developed with organisations during lockdowns?
- Have you struggled to manage and maintain your assets (e.g. village halls, play areas, allotments) with lockdown?
- How have you managed staff? What has been the main challenges?
- How difficult has it been to comply with Covid restrictions when carrying out day-to-day business?
- Have there been any challenges with accessing or following the various guidance available from Central Government and others?
- Has there been an increase in requests/responsibilities for certain areas (e.g. public rights of way, litter picking etc) outside of previous council business during Covid?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about the impact on your council?

This report presents an overview of the statistical outcomes and observations from the questionnaire and recommends some actions that could be taken to address some of the key points.

## Responses Received

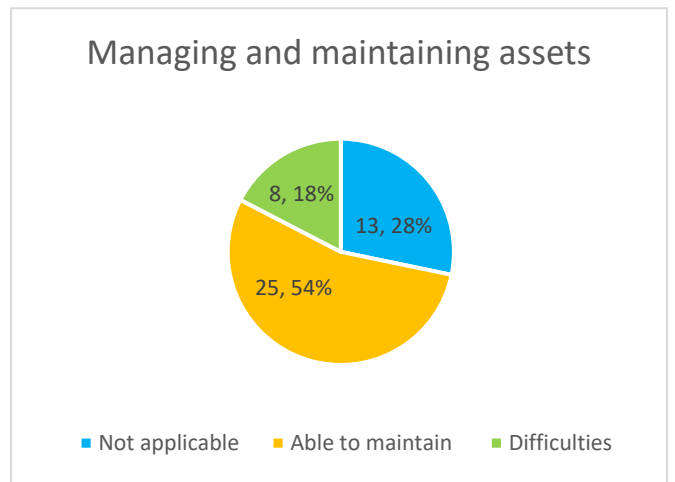
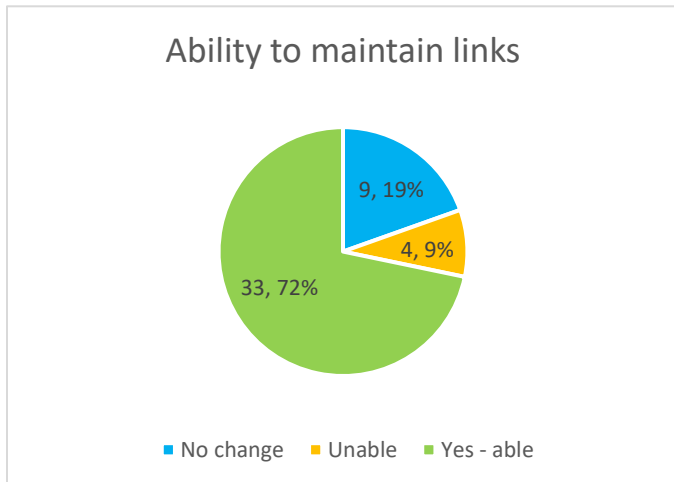
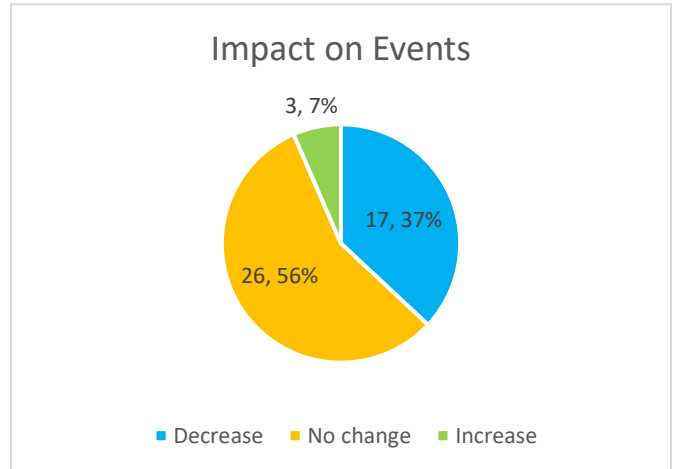
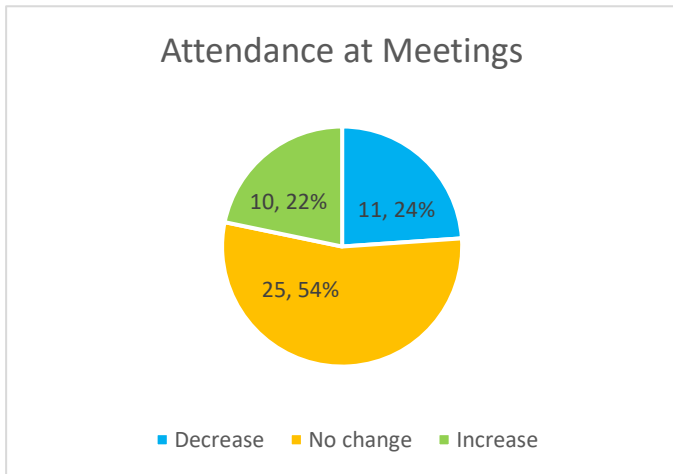
A total of 46 returns were made by the deadline date.

Authority Area	No of Responses*
Cheshire East Council	25
Cheshire West and Chester	16
Warrington	3
Halton	1
Trafford	1

It should be noted that of these responses, 5 councils reported no impact at all on their business.

## Statistics

The following charts show the basic responses to the first four questions, which asked about increases/decreases in participation and the ability to maintain links and assets.



It appears that overall, about half of the local councils responding experienced little change in terms of meetings and events. Most were able to maintain links with organisations and those local councils that had assets were able to maintain them, although sometimes at an increased revenue cost to comply with restrictions and regulations.

However, written responses and comments made do provide a more nuanced picture that help to explain the more polarised responses and some of these are bulleted on the next pages below.

### **Have you seen an increase/decrease in attendance at council meetings?**

- Since Face to Face meetings have re-started, I almost had to cancel one meeting due to not being quorate. Zoom meetings always had around 90% attendance.
- We had improved public attendance (average 12-14) when we held online Council meetings. We are now back to normal in-person meetings and attendance has dropped back to 4-5. We have had a request from a member of the public to stream council meetings and we are investigating costs.
- Virtual meetings were not well attended at all in comparison to pre-Covid attendance. Now that meetings are being held in person, we are seeing a rise in the number of resident attendees again.
- There was an increase at the meetings during lockdown when the council were using Zoom. Since returning to face to face meetings the council have experienced a decline in attendance, although this has picked up in the last month or so.

### **Have you seen an increase/decrease in the number of events you hold or the attendance at them?**

- During the “full Lockdown “periods no event could run. When certain restrictions were lifted, we saw an actual increase in the hall use. Because other facilities were not able to get Covid Safe.
- Decrease. We have had to cancel most events and that has had an impact on Council business as I think Cllrs now feel demotivated and there is a definite lack of enthusiasm. We have always been a council enthused and encouraged by community engagement at our popular events and whilst we have done other events like a scarecrow festival, Cllrs have definitely felt less engaged.
- Covid had a huge impact on our Civic centre and Institute, both of which are income generating buildings. This is gradually returning. Our outdoor market suffered in the first wave of lockdown but has returned to pre Covid levels.
- The number of face to face events decreased during the main pandemic. We have begun to organise events again, but in a more low-key fashion than previously. We do anticipate that the number of events will return to pre-pandemic levels slowly.

### **Have you been able to maintain links that you developed with organisations during lockdowns?**

- Borough Councils have been very unresponsive on occasions and difficult to contact. However it's mixed as some Borough Services continue to respond promptly. Other suppliers and contractors have been very hard to maintain links with during lockdowns.
- Yes. A local Whatsapp group was very helpful. The village hall closed down. Our first PC meeting after Covid emerged was the catalyst for a cross-village covid support initiative which helped a lot of people in need during the crisis. So in some ways our communication increased!
- No. Due to the cancellation of so many events, we haven't engaged so much with community groups although we have tried. We also regularly met with Developers on our new housing estate and whilst that is now picking up, that all got postponed which meant issues were more difficult to solve quicker.
- Yes, it has been worth subscribing to Zoom as we have continued with Working Groups, Partnership working with other groups by Zoom. We are continuing to use Zoom as it provides an easy way to meet without taking time out for travel or paying for room hire.

## Have you struggled to manage and maintain your assets (e.g. village halls, play areas, allotments) with lockdown?

- Not really. We have an excellent caretaker who has maintained the venue. We also took the opportunity to carry out decoration and maintenance work while the venue was closed to the public.
- The Parish Council have struggled to manage and maintain the parish hall during lockdown and have relied on councillors volunteering to carry out additional cleaning etc.
- The costs to our Play Area have escalated beyond all expectations! Our Jubilee Field was used SO much during lockdown but that has had an effect on maintenance costs. Combined with an increase in materials (wood for fences, chippings etc), our maintenance costs are now huge.
- One issue was that our insurance company said that after an initial grace period in the early part of the pandemic, it could not continue to insure our two buildings unless we turned off electricity/gas/water etc. This was not easy to implement as one building provides an electricity supply to a 'streetlight' on parish council-owned land and we wanted to keep that light illuminated, and secondly cutting off energy supplies meant that we could not keep central heating going, which raises problems for older buildings in particular.

## Staff Management

"Managing communication and providing enough support were the main challenges especially when working separately. In addition, it has been a challenge to manage the feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety experienced by staff during the pandemic which were caused by the need to constantly react to an ever-changing landscape"

It seems most councils responding employ a clerk as the only member of staff, and as most normally work from home there have been few operational issues. In some councils the councillors have stepped up to undertake tasks, and there have been reports of some outstanding caretakers. However, there has obviously been impact in terms of working in isolation and the subsequent need to be aware of and deal with any staff welfare issues.

- Staff have been managed by social distancing and virtual meetings. The main challenge has been keeping risk assessments up to date with all the changes and communicating these changes
- Staff in offices worked alternate days and at home. Office is now Covid Friendly and will remain so. Parish Warden works alone outdoors.
- We furloughed staff from the income generating areas of the council and considered the possibility of furloughing other staff which did not take place. Luckily MS Teams was already in place on all officer lap tops so we could continue to operate as soon as the first lockdown started. Working from home has had its benefits and challenges. Some officers have said they are more productive at home as there are fewer interruptions. Some prefer being in the office. Those managing staff have had to ensure they are in contact regularly with their staff to motivate, manage and carry out welfare checks.
- The Clerk and Assistant Clerk both work from home now rather than the office. It has become more difficult to delegate work when not sharing an office but we are getting used to a new system to do this.

## Compliance with Covid restrictions

“The guidance received has been very clear via ACRES. Initially it was a lot to get our heads around but everyone was very positive and committed to the outcomes. The constant cleaning is the main burden that was ongoing. But everyone was very mindful of the protection it provided and the privilege for groups to still be able to meet. So everyone really worked extremely hard to maintain the guidelines and cleaning regimes.”

For some councils there were no issues at all, and others reported various business challenges. Some took advantage of new ways of working and through using Zoom. Those councils with venues had additional tasks. A key concern noted has been ongoing engagement with suppliers and contacts which has been described as slow or non-existent.

- The obvious challenge was holding remote meetings, but we had a dry run with training and Parish Councillors were all able to participate effectively. Day to day business has become more difficult because of unresponsive suppliers and contacts.
- Basic tasks became more complex due to not meeting – e.g. wet signatures on documents – but there was always a way round the difficulties. It became obvious that the informal catch ups at the start and end of meetings were incredibly useful. These didn't happen on Zoom.
- We have plenty of reminders at the workplace, although it is easy to forget the rules when at work, when most of the time staff are coming from their safe home environment where the rules haven't applied in the same way.
- As all meetings were being held remotely and the venue was closed during the main pandemic it was easy to comply with the covid restrictions. We conducted a thorough risk assessment before re-opening the venue and installed the necessary hand sanitisers and all other necessary items. The venue is now open again and we have not encountered any particular issues.

## Were there any challenges in following guidance?

“The guidance has been lengthy and ambiguous more than difficult to access. This is evident as the rules have been applied differently by different organisations and have resulted on occasions in conflict”

Many responses reported little or no challenges. There were a variety of advice sources quoted (including ChALC) although some had difficulty with finding or accessing advice. Issues with official guidance included understanding the relevant detail, length and ambiguity of guidance, and keeping track with updates. The main providers of such information are NALC; ChALC and the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC). Although there were reports of differing information, on examination it was the same - although the presentation was different. This is something for the organisations themselves to consider for the future.

- We found that when major changes were announced it took about a week for the detailed guidance to be issued and there seemed to be an expectation that the Council knew all the details before the announcements.

- It initially took a couple of virtual meetings to discuss the various guidelines and how to adopt them. After that it was notices in place signage and clear communication to all involved. Everyone really did work for the greater good.
- The frequency of updates was a challenge but as the Clerk had delegated powers for hall reopening, measures could still be taken between council meetings Virtual meetings became productive once we fathomed the software. Etiquette was interesting at times.
- Yes. Lack of guidance on meetings once the regulations permitting remote meetings expired during lockdown. This was very poor from Central Government and we were left trying to operate in the face of conflicting advice

### **Was there an increase in requests/responsibilities for certain areas?**

“This has been our area of impact. More members of the public using rights of way, more litter being left, members of the public not necessarily familiar with the Countryside Code. More fly tipping whilst recycling centres have been closed”

Whilst under half of the responses reported an increase, there were three distinct areas highlighted, namely a growth in Litter, in Dog Waste and the expanded use of Public Rights of Way leading to more requests to keep them clear.

- During this time we noticed our playing field (once reopened) being used much more and the roads around the village became busier with parked cars from people travelling to our village from towns (some tens of miles away!) to use the network of footpaths. This led to some inconsiderate and inappropriate parking issues that the Council had to deal with. There was also a noticeable increase in litter and of groups of cyclists passing through the village.
- Yes, as we are a rural parish we saw an increase in the number of people enjoying the countryside. This entailed more traffic on the PROWs and at times we needed to ask CWaC to cut them back to allow for social distancing etc. This was in addition to the normal cutting schedule. The amount of dog fouling also increased in the early days of the pandemic as more people were at home but following publicity campaigns and the setting up of a resident advisory panel, things have improved again. We also created the ‘Bridging the Gap’ initiative which pulled together dozens of volunteers. They carried out numerous activities from delivering food to the elderly and vulnerable to undertaking pastoral work with those who required it. This took quite a lot of organising.
- As we own land next to Pickmere Lake, we have experienced very serious problems of hundreds of visitors to the lake during the first lockdown (when other recreational facilities were closed), and now Pickmere Lake is ‘on the map’ again we are getting many more visitors to the lake especially in good weather than we did pre-lockdown – although there are no toilet etc facilities there nor much parking provision. We have had continuing liaison with police and district council but the problems remain.
- Yes, hugely! Everyone is now very aware of the PROW’s in our area (which is great!) but there has been a huge increase in the residents who are requesting that they are cleared or that hedges are cut back etc. Likewise, Litter has increased hugely. However, the great news is that our litter picking volunteers has also increased hugely (people looking for things to do during Lockdown that felt useful) so that is one good thing to come from Covid.

## Some additional comments

- There has been much to consider and the everchanging rules have at times been hard to keep up with. It's disappointing that although many rules have been relaxed, the cleaning regimes and rules have not. This is very frustrating and difficult to manage given that other hirers in the area seem to be relaxing their rules and not maintaining their cleaning regulations in line with the Govt. guidance.
- Our Parish Council is small and by definition lacks resilience. There is only one part time employee and so the likelihood of adverse consequences for the Parish Council resulting from Covid is high and the impact would be significant.
- The main problem was the fact that there was no compatibility between agencies for online meetings. CWaC Members were unable to access our PC meetings. We found that the police could not access any online meeting that they had not originated and the same seemed to apply to CWaC. What is needed is consistency and compatibility, where all agencies use the same online platform and can access each other's meetings. We went 18 months without our PCSO being able to attend online PC meetings.
- I think Covid has demonstrated the need for hybrid meetings and the use of technology in meetings. However, many councils don't have the funds, venues or knowledge to adapt and bring this to their residents and more guidance and support would be wonderful.
- The move to online meetings was technically interesting in a rural parish where some parts have very poor Internet and Mobile Phone coverage. However, we managed to get around most problems. The government grants that we managed to successfully apply for made all the difference in allowing the community buildings to survive the closures.
- Our council stepped up. A local group was set up with council involvement and financial support, to ensure local vulnerable residents received shopping, prescriptions and put together a leaflet that was delivered to all houses with details of shops and restaurants that were offering delivery services. Councillors that live alone clearly struggled with not meeting people. They would speak more regularly and for longer on the phone, wanting and needing company and conversation.

## Recommendations

It is proposed that the following actions are given consideration, developed and implemented: -

- Coordination of improved and more timely guidance aimed at local councils
- Explore how to improve compatible online systems for meetings between various agencies
- Increased access to mental health support for local council staff and vulnerable councillors
- Support to improve communication and responses from third party suppliers/principal authorities
- Ongoing development of virtual meeting skills and support for hybrid meetings/virtual meeting
- Support for volunteer development and management
- Partnerships with PROW Teams, and resourcing local councils to maintain Rights of Way

## Appendix A - Participants

Responses were received from the following councils: -

Alsager	Hatherton and Walgherton	Newbold Astbury cum Moreton
Antrobus	Higher Hurdsfield	Peover Superior
Ashley	Holmes Chapel	Pickmere
Ashton Hayes and Horton cum Peel	Huntington	Plumley Toft & Bexton
Brereton	Ince	Sandymoor
Bunbury	Kettleshulme	Saughall and Shotwick Park
Calverley	Little Leigh	Somerford
Carrington	Lower Peover	Stoke and Hurleston
Cholmondeston and Wettenhall	Lymm	Styal
Darnhall	Malpas	Tiverton and Tilstone Fearnall
Davenham	Marbury and District	Utkinton
Goostrey	Mere	Walton
Grappenhall and Thelwall	Mobberley	Wincham
Great Budworth	Mottram St Andrew	Winsford
Handley and District	Neston Town Council	Worleston and District
Hartford	Nether Alderley	