



BUCKFASTLEIGH TOWN COUNCIL

Judith M. Hart
Clerk to the Council

Website: www.buckfastleigh.gov.uk

**TOWN HALL
BOSSELL ROAD
BUCKFASTLEIGH
DEVON TQ11 0DD**

Tel / Fax (01364) 642576

Email clerk@buckfastleigh.gov.uk

Mr Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

7 May 2021

Dear Mr Jenrick,

Re: Buckfastleigh Town Council 6th May 2021 – Petition regarding removal of emergency powers

The government have decided to remove emergency powers that allowed local councils to meet remotely and on Friday 7th May revert to the status quo that requires all council meetings to be face to face. A High Court challenge has failed to overrule this.

Buckfastleigh Town Council has major concerns about this, and our objections are outlined below.

Increased risk of transmission of COVID19

The general public will not be able to meet indoors with more than 6 people until at least the 21st June with the exception of funerals and other essential gatherings. We do not believe that there is any reason to treat our council meetings as an exception as we have proved that we can do business quite adequately without meeting face-to-face and have been doing so for over a year.

Some of our councillors are older or vulnerable due to health conditions and are not happy to meet in person. The younger members have not yet had vaccinations or are only partially vaccinated and are also not comfortable for this reason.

If it is still not considered safe for the public to meet in groups indoors, then where is the case made to say that it is safe for us? As a council, we are supposed to set an example for our parishioners. How are we to expect the public to stick to government rules if we are being forced to break the same rules?

How are councils supposed to do business if they do not have meeting places that they can make Covid-safe? Why force us to take unnecessary risks just as we are getting on top of this pandemic as a nation? We are unable to see the logic behind this decision.

For the reasons above and in the light of recent research that suggests transmission is around 18 times less likely outdoors, Buckfastleigh Town Council have regrettably taken the decision to conduct our meetings outdoors at least until the 21st June (when we will reassess the situation). Our AGM on 19th May will now be held in Victoria Park (with rain shelter provided), so that we can maintain safe social distancing and abide by general government rules, which we expect at that time to allow up to 30 people to meet outdoors.

Accessibility

For some years we have had questions about the legislation that governs council meetings. We feel it has not moved apace with technology or social change. This emergency has been an opportunity to test out more flexible ways of conducting business which have proved to work. All around us, organisations of all types are waking up to the fact that they can work in more flexible ways that save time and money and reduce environmental impact.

In particular we have found meetings to be more accessible – enabling councillors and the public with disabilities or mobility issues to attend in comfort. We have also found that meetings have been more accessible to younger folk who are parents and would otherwise need to find child-care to attend meetings. We are concerned that a return to conventional meetings would restrict accessibility and thus exclude both councillors and members of the public, going against the societal and legal trend of opening-up access to all. We believe the democratic process especially would benefit from more accessibility and engagement. We feel that we are capable of hosting meetings that would include both face-to-face and remote access and this would be the most accommodating for all.

Petition

In the short term we ask that the government immediately withdraw their requirement for a return to face-to-face meetings until such time as there is negligible risk of transmission – i.e., when the entire population is properly inoculated, and we know that new strains of the virus are not going to overwhelm resistance.

For the longer term, we call upon the government to take this opportunity to enhance local democracy by reassessing the regulations that apply to meetings and allowing more flexibility to provide a much needed and overdue increase in their accessibility and public engagement.

Yours sincerely,



Council Chair Councillor Sue Clarke and all Members of Buckfastleigh Town Council

c.c Mel Stride MP for Central Devon
National Association of Local Councils
Devon Association of Local Councils