



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 circulated 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?

Responses Received

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

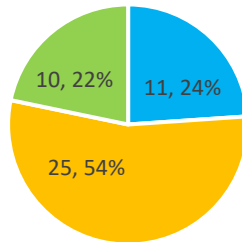
*Of these, 5 councils reported no impact at all on their business.

Statistics

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

We saw an overall decrease in attendance whilst we went online. Now that we are back face to face, we are seeing the same attendance as before

Attendance at Meetings

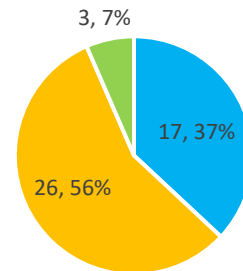


■ Decrease ■ No change ■ Increase

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 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

Impact on Events

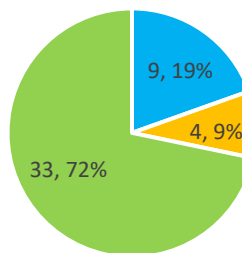


■ Decrease ■ No change ■ Increase

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

Not as instant. Everything takes longer and people getting back to you takes a lot longer

Ability to maintain links

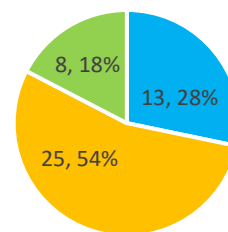


■ No change ■ Unable ■ Yes - able

Yes, it has been worth subscribing to Zoom as we have continued with Working Groups, Partnership working with other groups by Zoom.

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.

Managing and maintaining assets



■ Not applicable ■ Able to maintain ■ Difficulties

The costs to our Play Area have escalated beyond all expectations. Our Jubilee Field was used so much during lockdown 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.

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.

Compliance with Covid restrictions

“The guidance received [regarding the running of village halls] 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.

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 in 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.

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.

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

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	Kettlehulme	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	