

29 September 2020

Dear Colleague

I had hoped that by now I would be able to be sending a message of good news with details of how we might start routine branch meetings again. However, as you know across the country generally there have been a number of restrictions recently introduced and some rulings that were initially guidelines, have now become law.

The latest situation is that:-

“The regulations allow groups of up to 6 to socialise together at an activity within their group. These do not have to be members of the same household and a group could be made up of individuals from 6 different households”.

"Different groups should be separated by two metres (or where not possible 1 metre with mitigation measures so that social distancing is maintained between them. People in groups of 1 i.e. individuals, need to be socially distanced from other groups".

“Mingling between different groups (or mixing of groups) is not permitted. The guidance advises that activities where there is significant likelihood of different groups interacting, and therefore breaking the law, should not take place in a community facility”

Therefore, the Trustees at the Board meeting last week decided that it was now very clear that meetings of over 6 people (even in Covid-secure premises) were not permitted and from 22 September this is covered by legislation with the possibility of fines being imposed if the regulations are not adhered to.

I had advised the Trustees that I had reviewed the activities of other similar organisations and considered carefully the exceptions where groups can be larger than 6, which can be:-

- a) for work, or the provision of voluntary or charitable services
- b) registered childcare, education and training

My interpretation unequivocally is that references for voluntary or charitable services do not include social/planning meetings and as Fellowship branch meetings are more usually social, the Trustees ruled that no meetings other than 6 or below can be held until the social interactions restrictions are lifted.

Consideration was also given to branches meeting on a Covid-19 secure premises on a proviso that people keep very separate in their pre-defined group of 6 and individuals avoid social interaction with anyone outside that group.

I am sure you will accept that in practice this is very difficult to achieve and it would be impossible for branch officers to be confident that people from different groups would not socially interact for example, in the car park or even inside the premises. As we now know any breach of the guidance would make the meeting unlawful.

Regrettably although the situation changes rapidly it is likely that these measures will be in place for 6 months. Obviously if the situation improves we will immediately review the ruling.

At the time of writing I am also aware of the growing number of local lockdowns which introduce even more stringent measures.

This means of course that for the vast majority of branches there will be no meetings held during the financial year 2020/2021. As you know some while ago, it was agreed that we should change the payment of capitation fees so they are now collected and paid in the current year. This new arrangement took effect this year which means that the capitation fee should be collected and paid into Central Office by 15 January 2021.

Whilst it is clearly understood that membership fees are usually collected at one of the meetings, the Trustees felt that it was appropriate for other methods to be used for this year and hope that branches would be able to collect fees from their members.

However, you will also appreciate that the capitation fee for this year (2020/2021) has been reduced to £10 and in previous correspondence I have suggested that capitation fee for members for this year could be taken from branch funds. That is a decision entirely at the discretion of the branch officers but I know a number of branches have already made that decision.

If you are having difficulty in collecting the capitation fee or believe that the financial reserves could not cover the payments required, please don't hesitate to contact Central Office. I am sure you understand that even in these unprecedented times, there is a need for us to ensure that the Fellowship can remain sustainable.

A number of branches have raised concerns about the fact that it will now not be possible to hold an Annual General Meeting in this financial year. That is understood and is acceptable for this year.

However, some branches might find it possible to hold an AGM virtually by zoom or an alternative platform. Other branches have taken the decision to conduct the AGM by post sending out details for members to vote upon. This has been achieved successfully and is a recommended way forward. I entirely understand that in some cases branch officials will be standing down and elections need to take place, which can be done by post.

There are examples of where this has been very successful and if you want to talk to me to find out how to do it, please don't hesitate to make contact with central office and we will arrange an appropriate time for me to telephone you. Naturally we want to make it as easy as possible to return to normal activities as soon as possible but the Charity Commission understands that this is an exceptional year and accept that a greater degree of flexibility is required.

You will be aware that we postponed the recruitment drive which was associated with the P60 process earlier this year. We are now concerned that branch meetings may not be taking place in April or May 2021 and therefore a decision as to whether to proceed next year is currently on hold. The Trustees have agreed that the final decision as to whether to proceed or not should rest with the Chief Executive.

I am sorry that there is no real optimism in this note but I do know how hard branch officers have worked to ensure that there is the continued engagement with members which is much appreciated both by your members and the Trustees. I am confident that we can successfully navigate these uncharted waters and look forward to the time that some form of “new normality” can begin.

As always my grateful thanks to Branch Officers and don't hesitate to make contact should you want advice or help. Central Office will remain covered 5 days a week although there will only be one member of staff in the office at any one time.

You can call the office 01305 361317 at any time and if there is no-one there at that time, messages are monitored and someone will get back to you.

With kind regards.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Rostill', written in a cursive style.

John Rostill OBE  
Chief Executive