

This may seem like a long article but it is important

The trustees have been working hard to try and find EXACTLY what we can and cannot do during the current lock down.

Here is a transcript of the pertinent questions and answers that we have had from our local Council Executive Leader and the Dept. for Health and Social Care. We are still awaiting a response from the office of the Prime Minister and our local MP although to be fair these were snail mail requests as it is not possible to easily e-mail either of them. The same correspondence was sent to all of them.

Firstly from Cllr. Woodward:

Q1 We are members of Fareham Men's Shed. Virtually all of our members are septuagenarians or octogenarians who, because of their age, have obviously been more cautious than most during these unprecedented times. As an organisation we have been trying to keep in touch with members via Zoom and telephone calls. Lately we have been hearing phrases that are starting to make us concerned over the mental safety of some of our members - phrases that could link to thoughts of suicide.

The members that these thoughts are coming from are either bachelors or widowers without relatives that are able to visit, possibly because they have none or they live abroad or in areas in a higher tier. Because of their age some do not use computers so the Zoom approach will not work, whilst some have hearing problems or speech impediments, so neither Zoom nor phone conversations are really possible.

These are proud men, they have lived through hard times and have become extremely self-sufficient, some of them have hardly left their houses now for nearly nine months because they have been obeying these highly restrictive rules and believe that that is the right thing to have done

Shed members are in the position of being able to offer support without seeming to but the rules are preventing us from doing so. We are not carers, nor would we want to be, but we are caring and that is what makes it all so hard. Most members are far more careful than the majority of the population so in some ways we are, along with other similar groups that involve older people, a special case.

Should we break the rules that central government have laid down, ignore our personal 'bubbles' or ignore the men that have this problem?

A1) My answer is that from Wednesday onwards you and the group should set up a series of regular visits to these gentlemen. In a Tier 2 area it is perfectly acceptable for people to gather outdoors in groups of up to 6 subject to appropriate distancing. Why not pack flasks of tea and warm coats and meet up to 4 other members at someone's home? Take a garden chair and a warm coat and sit out for a couple of hours and be as cantankerous as you like. ... Or you could maybe mention that he suggested you came. I fact I have been quietly visiting many people in such a fashion during the pandemic outside as I have feared for their state of mind and would even be happy to join for a chat if welcome. Even in the lockdown it is fine and legal to meet one other person outdoors.

You must admit a somewhat facetious answer so clarification was sought:

Q2) Unfortunately as one becomes older, and especially past the 70 year point, cold is felt far more sharply as you will find out for yourself one of these days. Midwinter is no time for people of our age to be sitting outside, even wrapped up with hot water bottles, it is far too easy to unknowingly start to suffer from hypothermia, prostate problems requires regular visits to the toilet, especially if one is starting to feel the cold, yet this would not be possible. I doubt that our members would go for such an idea. If we were to meet in the Theatre where live performances are to be allowed, would this be acceptable as it could not be classed as a performance or show? The Theatre can seat about 200 people, could we use it as a meeting place for all members as long as we stick to social distancing?

A2) I am sorry that you seem to have come up with lots of reasons not to help your friends and colleagues when there are potential workarounds for all of them including just choosing more clement days. I would not propose sitting in a garden in freezing temperatures, rain or snow. You mention Titchfield Festival Theatre. Maybe they could borrow some patio heaters which would enable people to sit outside and keep warm as to propose indoor mingling would not be appropriate. The key is reducing the chance of infection hence the more relaxed rule of six for outdoors.

It is permissible for one person to enter another's home to give care and leaving your home to help with charitable work to aid the vulnerable is also permissible. It is also fine to use an indoor toilet.

I hope you manage to arrange contact with which all parties feel comfortable."

Our comment:

Once again a somewhat pointless response as TFT do not have enough open space that we could use and why should we expect them to pay for outdoor heaters? The important point though is the penultimate para. It means that we now have approval from the person in charge of Covid-19 precautions in our area to actually MEET, ENTER and USE ANOTHER MEMBER'S WC. As long as it is for the exercise of trying to relieve mental stress. To this end are any members WITHOUT problems willing to go to members who need support and have a face to face with them? If you are if you could let know and he will try and create a pairing for you.

Now from the DHSC

Thank you for your correspondence of 27 November about the impact of COVID-19 on mental health. I have been asked to reply.

I was very sorry to read of your members' mental health problems and I appreciate your concerns.

This is an extremely challenging time for the whole country and the Government knows that the pressures of dealing with COVID-19 and the measures necessary to tackle it will be hugely disruptive and occasionally distressing. However, leaving the virus to spread unchecked would have a devastating impact on the whole country and it is vital for everyone's safety that we all follow the Government guidelines. COVID-19 is indiscriminate in who it infects and it would be irresponsible for the Government to allow too many exceptions to the current social-distancing arrangements.

I would suggest that you urge your members, if they feel they can, to discuss their situation with their GP, who will be able to assess their health and assist them in accessing suitable healthcare services if appropriate.

If they do not feel able to speak to their GP or anyone close to them, they may wish to contact the Samaritans. The Samaritans provide anonymous, confidential and non-judgemental support, 24 hours a day, for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair. More information about the Samaritans is available online at www.samaritans.org, and the contact details are overleaf.

Tel: 116 123 (this number is free of charge and will not appear on the telephone bill)

Email: jo@samaritans.org

It is important to remember that while people must stay physically apart, there are many other ways that people can interact socially with family and friends, now more than ever.

There are many online sources of practical advice for people that are self-isolating, as well as those affected by other aspects of social distancing. Mind's advice can be found at www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing.

You may also be interested to know that formal support groups can meet in numbers of up to 15 people. This guidance can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-restriction-tiers-what-you-need-to-know>.

I hope that this reply is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Moses

Ministerial Correspondence and Public Enquiries

Department of Health and Social Care

Our comment

Very useful but once again refer to the penultimate para. It means that we can have socially isolated meetings at the Shed. Our view is that it may not be the best of ideas to open the Shed completely but there is much tidying to be done as we have received a great deal of equipment from Wessex Technology, perhaps some of those members that this was originally about would be interested in helping – if so who?

If we can have meetings of up to 15 members could we tap Kevin to allow us to use the Acorn. We know how careful he has been to keep within the recommendations for cleanliness, in fact the Theatre is probably one of the safest places to meet in Fareham. Would anybody be interested in just having a socially distanced gathering of up to 15?

The last point is that as theatres can open subject to certain restrictions could we term a quiz a 'performance'. With the way that Tony runs them it would certainly be one, so how many members would be interested in taking part? Once the panto is over we may even be able to use the Oak theatre. We have checked and a speaker would certainly be termed a performance. We have a couple of speakers that we could call on so who would be up for that one?

Please contact one of the Trustees with your thoughts and depending on an adequate level of interest we shall take the relevant ideas forward.