Bassetlaw Council holds a COVID safe AGM

Bassetlaw DC not only met safely in public for its AGM, it also elected the UK’s youngest chair of a district council, says Cllr Simon Greaves.

Despite COVID restrictions still in place across the country, and the virus starting to spread again, the Government now requires us to stop virtual meetings and return to holding all our meetings in public. So, for all of us who serve in local authorities and for all our staff who so staunchly help us run our councils, we have to take a risk that no other branch of government is asked to, meet in person and meet in public. If we don’t, then the services we supply will grind to a halt and the people we were elected to serve will pay the price.

  Thanks to everyone’s hard work and with fantastic support from the people of Bassetlaw, we now have one of the lowest COVID infection rates in the region. In the last week alone infections here have dropped by 30%, but we don’t live under the illusion that COVID is no longer a threat. We have a duty to our electorate to maintain these low levels. There is no doubt that unless we handle future council meetings carefully, this mandate from Westminster will threaten our ability to do that.

 The first test for us was our AGM which took place on May 19. We committed to make it the most COVID free meeting possible. We decided all our councillors and staff would test for COVID within 24hrs of the AGM and access to the meeting would be dependent on proof of a negative test. In addition, we were determined to make the council chamber as COVID safe as we possibly could.  To achieve all this, we asked specialist COVID testing company Event Testing Ltd to help us.  ETL use the very latest technologies to test people for COVID before they leave home, and verify they are COVID free before they can go to events such as our AGM.

Together, we worked out a programme where all our team would take a Lateral Flow Test (LFT) at home 24hrs before the AGM. LFTs are the same kind of tests all our secondary school kids are taking twice a week so they can attend school. So, we knew they worked.  When the test was taken the negative result was downloaded on to a specialist App ETL provided. When our councillors and staff arrived at the AGM, they scanned the App, the scan confirmed their negative test, and they were allowed in.

Of course, there were some teething problems, especially amongst members without smartphones and a few of our veterans who struggled with the technology, but by adapting our council IPads to accept the App and providing good technical help both our councillors and staff attended with proven negative COVID tests on the night.  This AGM was an important milestone for BDC, because this year we elected Cllr Jack Bowker chair of the Council for 2021/2. Jack is now the well-deserved youngest chair of a district council in the UK.

We weren’t content just ensuring all our team was COVID free for the AGM. We wanted to make the venue, Retford Town Hall, was as safe as possible as well.  Working with ETL, we installed an Eco Chamber, a sanitising airport style chamber, harmless to people and clothing, that when walked through ensures no external contamination is carried into the building, at the entrance to the town hall.  In addition, inside the meeting room we strategically installed a series of Radic8 air sterilisations units that neutralised any bugs and viruses, including COVID and kept our environment clean and toxic free throughout the meeting.

 I am convinced that while COVID and all its mutations remains a threat to us all, we have to take whatever precautions necessary to ensure when our council meets in public it does so safely for the sake of the community we serve, our staff and our councillors.

**Cllr Simon Greaves is leader of Bassetlaw DC**