

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee

Date **19 September 2017**

Report of: **Head of Democratic Services**

Subject: **POLLING PLACE REVIEW**

SUMMARY

The Council has a statutory duty to keep under review the polling districts and polling places it uses for parliamentary and other elections.

Members of the Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee are asked to consider options for the location of various polling places in order to avoid the use of schools and to improve pedestrian and disabled access where problems have been identified.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee considers amending polling place designations from May 2018, as set out in Appendix A to the report, subject to the full statutory polling district and polling place review being carried out, with full consultation, by 2020.

INTRODUCTION

1. In accordance with the Electoral Administration Act 2006, the Council has a statutory duty to keep under review the polling districts and polling places it uses for parliamentary (and other) elections. The last major review was undertaken in 2014 which confirmed the scheme for the use of polling places and polling districts throughout the Borough for all elections.
2. The Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee has delegated powers to undertake such a review and to recommend a final scheme to the Council for adoption.

THE LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

3. The Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA '83) requires the local authority to divide its area into polling districts for the purpose of parliamentary elections and to keep such districts under review. Polling districts may also be designated for local government elections and in practice they follow the same boundaries as the parliamentary ones. Essentially, polling districts are the geographical sub-divisions of an electoral area, whether that is a constituency, a county division or a borough ward. Neither the parliamentary constituency boundaries, nor the local government wards and division boundaries may be changed by this process.
4. A local authority is also required to designate a polling place for each polling district. A polling place is a building or an area in which polling stations are located. The location of a polling station within a polling place is a matter for the Returning Officer and, as part of any review, the Returning Officer is required to make formal comment on polling places currently or likely to be used in any parliamentary (or other) election.
5. In undertaking a review the local authority must seek to ensure that all electors in a constituency have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances. It must also seek to ensure that so far as is practicable every polling place is accessible to electors who are disabled. A polling place should preferably be located within the polling district, but the RPA '83 recognises this is not always feasible.
6. The process for undertaking a review is largely prescribed by the RPA '83 and subsequent Regulations but minor alterations can be implemented between major reviews to satisfy the reasonable requirements of electors or to consider the accessibility to disabled persons of polling places within a designated polling place.
7. The Returning Officer has delegated powers to select an alternative venue as a polling place in the event that a confirmed booking of a polling place, cannot be achieved. However, by virtue of the statutory powers available to local authorities regarding the use of schools, the Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee is asked to consider alternative options in this instance and to make its recommendation to Council for approval.

POLLING PLACE REVIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8. Following a post-election review carried out by the Returning Officer and the Electoral Services team, a number of alternative venues are put forward for consideration as alternative polling places and stations to be used from the May 2018 elections. A full list of proposed amendments are contained within Appendix A and the following section provides further background information for consideration:

Schools – General use

9. Returning Officers have the authority to utilise schools if they are required to serve as polling places. Whilst this can be a convenient option from an organiser's perspective it can also be controversial and unpopular with electors, especially if the school decides to close to pupils. Complaints received about the use of schools as polling places have often referred to the fines imposed on parents for taking their children out of school without permission, citing this as an unfair situation when schools close on polling day causing parents to have to arrange additional childcare.

Schools used as polling places 2016

10. The EU Referendum was announced in February 2016 for Thursday 23 June. Several schools across the borough were already booked for the combined elections taking place on Thursday 5 May and had already allocated their inset days for that academic year. A further closure of these schools on 23 June would have meant an unscheduled day's closure in addition to their inset days.
11. Rather than close these schools on 23 June, which would have meant pupils missing a day's education and forcing many parents to either miss a day's work or fund childcare for the day, the decision was taken by the Local Counting Officer (Returning Officer) to relocate polling stations away from schools wherever possible.
12. All of the relocations were successful in that they provided accessible places to vote for the local electorate. None of the relocations attracted any complaints from electors.

Schools used as polling places 2017

13. Polling places were booked for the county elections on 4 May in accordance with the Polling Place Review 2014 i.e. reverting back to using schools.
14. This prompted questions from parents asking why schools were again being used when alternatives were successfully used for the EU Referendum the previous year. In addition, Anne Dale Infant School returned their venue booking form declining the booking. In the interest of community relations, instead of invoking the legal powers of the Returning Officer to utilise the school, the polling place was again relocated away from the infant school to Crofton Community Centre, with the confidence afforded by the successful relocation of the same polling place for the EU Referendum. Complaints were also received from parents at Ranvilles Infant School and Harrison School, however as the schools accepted the bookings they were both used as polling places in May 2017.
15. The Parliamentary General Election was called in April 2017 for Thursday 8 June. Several schools across the borough were already booked for the county elections taking place on Thursday 4 May and had already allocated their inset days for that academic year. A further closure of these schools on 8 June would have meant an unscheduled day's closure in addition to their inset days. Rather than close these schools on 8 June, which would have resulted in pupils missing a day's education and forcing many parents to either miss a day's work or fund childcare for the day, the decision was taken by the Returning Officer to relocate polling stations away from schools wherever possible.

Appendix 1

16. This was the same scenario around polling places for the EU Referendum so the EU Referendum polling places list was largely used as a blueprint for the Parliamentary General Election, as they had already been proven successful in June 2016.
17. Again, all of the relocations were successful in that they provided accessible places to vote for the local electorate. Again, none of the relocations attracted any complaints from electors.

Ranvilles Infant School

18. The only polling place that has not yet been relocated away from a school is Ranvilles Infant School. This is largely due to the absence of a suitable, alternative venue within either of the polling districts which the school serves.
19. Unfortunately, this is also the school that attracts the strongest and most frequent complaints from parents/electors. Due to the nature of these complaints advice was sought from Hampshire County Council (the local education authority) and a meeting was held with the head teacher to attempt to appease the situation. The hostility of some parents towards the school and Fareham Borough Council have made negotiations challenging. The on-going nature of these complaints are driving the need to relocate the polling station away from the school.
20. In the neighbouring polling district, St Philip Howard Church is already a polling place with ample space to accommodate multiple polling stations. There is a pelican crossing on Peak Lane and a footpath along Cunningham Drive offering a safe pedestrian route for voters, Cunningham Drive is the main bus route between the Ranvilles area and the church providing a regular, public transport connection and there is also sufficient parking around the church making it an acceptable alternative to Ranvilles Infant School under the circumstances.

Moving away from schools as polling places in 2018

21. The short timescales involved in organising the EU Referendum and the snap Parliamentary General Election forced unplanned trials, over 2 years, of alternative polling places to schools. It has twice been demonstrated to electors, pupils' parents and schools that alternative polling places can be successfully used, diminishing the rationale for using schools on polling day and strengthening the case for relocating polling stations away from schools.

The Miner's Arms public house

22. In June 2016 and May and June 2017 complaints were received from a powered wheelchair user who votes at the Miner's Arms, Funtley, about the difficult disabled access. A new ramp was provided in May 2017 which helped with wheelchair access to the pub however the restricted space inside the venue does not allow a wheelchair to easily turn around.
23. Funtley Social Club is easily accessible in a wheelchair with a great deal of space inside in which to manoeuvre so is a better option of polling place for disabled access.

Sarisbury Green Social Club

24. Sarisbury Green Social Club, as well as being a polling place, is a meeting point for the pigeon racers' National Flying Club which means polling day often coincides with pigeon racers' meetings and their cargo of racing pigeons. The Returning Officer has requested a review of this polling place so as to avoid these conflicting bookings.
25. At a distance of 0.5 miles away in the same ward is St Margaret Mary Church Hall on Middle Road, which is already used as a polling place and has ample space for a second polling station.
26. Relocating from the social club to the church hall would solve the meeting clash problem whilst economising by making the church hall a double polling station. There are pelican crossings for safe, pedestrian road crossing, there is sufficient parking in the vicinity and good public transport links to Middle Road making it accessible to the electorate.

Abbey Croft Nurseries

27. The polling district of T11 contains limited suitable buildings to designate as a polling place and for some years, a portacabin has been installed in the Abbey Croft Nursery car park for each election at a cost of £1284.
28. There is no footpath along Segensworth Road which is a busy, commuter short-cut at rush-hour. The only pedestrian access is along a grass verge which is slippery and dangerous in wet weather. The car park surface is uneven making level positioning of the cabin challenging and disabled access difficult. There are often problems with the generator so the electricity supply is unreliable and has previously left voters and staff without lighting for several hours whilst awaiting a visit from the contractors.
29. In the same polling district is the Holiday Inn hotel which, for £500, offers modern function rooms, safe pedestrian and cycle routes, and ample parking. The hotel is keen to be a polling place, can accommodate our signage needs and will provide a desk in main reception to assist voters in finding the correct room to vote in.
30. All sites have been visited, evaluated for suitability and risk assessed by the Electoral Services Manager and Deputy Returning Officer.

OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

31. Further to the use of temporary polling stations for the EU Referendum and the Parliamentary General Election, a list of polling stations which may benefit from a permanent move has been identified and is shown in appendix A.

RISK ASSESSMENT

32. Failure to meet the reasonable requirements of electors or not taking sufficient account of accessibility to disabled persons may lead to representations to the Electoral Commission who may direct changes to be made. In undertaking the review the Council may ensure that it is taking reasonable steps to enable all electors to participate in the democratic process.

CONCLUSION

33. The Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee is asked to consider amending the polling place designations with effect from the May 2018 elections, as set out in Appendix A, subject to the full statutory polling district and polling place review being carried out, with full consultation, by 2020.

Background Papers:

Complaints received from parents at Ranvilles Infant School and Harrison School

Reference Papers:

Report to Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee – 16 September 2014: Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Leigh Usher. (Ext 4553)

Appendix 1
Appendix A

Ward (district)	Usual polling place	Recommended polling place	For	Against
Fareham East (FE2)	Harrison Primary School	United Reformed Church	Tried and tested at EU Referendum 2016 and Parliamentary General Election 2017. Worked well. No complaints from electors. Allows school to remain open on polling days.	0.3 miles from school. No other negative attributes identified.
Fareham North (FN1)	The Miner's Arms	Funtley Social Club	Disabled access at Miner's Arms is difficult and regularly attracts complaints from a wheelchair user. Social club has much better disabled access in comparison.	0.1 miles from Miner's Arms. Electors are used to Miner's Arms as polling place. No other negative attributes identified.
Fareham North (FN2, FN3)	Uplands Primary School	Fareham Leisure Centre	Tried and tested at EU Referendum 2016 and Parliamentary General Election 2017. Worked well. No complaints from electors. Allows school to remain open on polling days.	0.4 miles from school. No other negative attributes identified.
Fareham West & Titchfield (FW4, FW5, TI3).	Ranvilles Infant School	St Philip Howard Church	Historically and to present day the most contentious and widely protested polling place in the borough. Close proximity of 4 schools and Community Centre on Oldbury Way would create dangerous congestion if community centre was used instead. Infant school and community centre both unco-operative. Relocation would demonstrate FBC's willingness to respond to electors wishes and allow school to remain open on	0.8 miles from school. Electors will need to cross Peak Lane (main road) although pelican crossing provides safe crossing point.

Appendix 1

			polling day.	
Hill Head (HH1, HH2)	Crofton Hammond Infant School	Crofton Community Centre	Tried and tested at EU Referendum 2016 and Parliamentary General Election 2017. Worked well. No complaints from electors. Allows school to remain open on polling days.	0.5 miles from school. No other negative attributes identified.
Portchester West (PW1, PW2)	Northern Junior Community School	Northern Pre- School	Tried and tested at Parliamentary General Election 2017. Worked well. Situated on same site as school. No complaints from electors. Allows infant and junior schools to remain open on polling days. Permanent relocation already approved by Pre-School board of governors.	No negative attributes identified.
Portchester West (PW3)	Wicor Primary School	Portchester Community Centre	Tried and tested at EU Referendum 2016 and Parliamentary General Election 2017. Worked well. No complaints from electors. Allows school to remain open on polling days.	0.5 miles from school. No other negative attributes identified.
Titchfield (TI1)	Abbeycroft Nurseries	Holiday Inn	There is no foot path on Segensworth Road so there is no safe pedestrian access to Abbeycroft. Portacabin generator is noisy, often has power failures and the space is unpleasant in foul weather. Holiday Inn has safe pedestrian and vehicular access plus modern accommodation at a third the cost of the portacabin.	0.6 miles from Abbeycroft Nurseries. Electors are used to Abbeycroft as polling place. No other negative attributes identified.