

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to Council

24 October 2019

Subject: **POLLING DISTRICT AND POLLING PLACES REVIEW**

Report of: **Head of Democratic Services**

SUMMARY

The Council has a statutory duty to keep under review the polling districts and polling places it uses for parliamentary (and other) elections. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 requires that a review be undertaken before 31 January 2020.

An interim review of all polling places was carried out in 2017. The subsequent recommendations from that review were agreed by the Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee in September 2017 and approved by Council in October 2017.

This report summarises the review process and proposes the final scheme for approval by Council.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Council approves the proposed Scheme for Polling District and Polling Places 2019, as attached at Appendix A to this report.

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 full review was undertaken in 2014 and an interim review was undertaken in 2017 to address issues surrounding the use of schools as polling stations as well as other problematic locations. The regulations contained in The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a change to the timing of compulsory reviews of UK Parliamentary polling districts and places. The current compulsory review must now be started and completed between 1 October 2018 and 31 January 2020.
2. The Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Committee (LRA) has delegated powers to undertake such a review and to recommend a final scheme to the Council for adoption.
3. The LRA Committee considered an initial report on this review at its meeting on 18 June 2019 and a final report on 15 October 2019. The Committee considered the public consultation responses and the proposed amendments to the scheme and have resolved to recommend the draft scheme, as attached at Appendix A, to Council for approval.
4. This report concludes the review process and proposes the final scheme for approval by Council to come into effect from 1 December 2019 for the next four years, unless an unscheduled UK Parliamentary General Election is called in which case the changes will be implemented at the most appropriate date no later than 31 January 2020.

THE LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

5. The Representation of the People Act 1983 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.
6. 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 this review, the Returning Officer is required to make formal comment on polling stations currently or likely to be used in any parliamentary (or other) election.
7. 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 station is accessible to electors who are disabled. A polling place should preferably be located within the polling district, but the Act recognises this is not always feasible,
8. The process for undertaking a review is largely prescribed by the Act and 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 stations within a designated polling place.

9. If the local authority in carrying out a review fails to meet the reasonable requirements of the electors or does not take sufficient account of the accessibility to disabled persons of polling stations within a designated polling place, then representations may be made to the Electoral Commission. The Commission may then direct the authority to make alterations to the polling places designated in the review.

THE 2019 REVIEW

10. The review was conducted in three stages in order to give maximum opportunity for public comment and the views of local interest groups to inform the review:
- **Stage One:** (1 April – 13 May)
Collate and publish data; give notice of the review; undertake preliminary consultation with interested parties and statutory consultees; commence inspection of current and potential polling places as necessary; prepare draft proposals.
 - **Stage Two:** (20 June – 17 July)
Publish draft recommendations as determined by the Committee at the meeting of 18 June; invite further comment from interested parties and statutory consultees; complete inspection of current and potential polling places as necessary.
 - **Stage Three:** (30 July – 24 Oct)
The LRA Committee at its September meeting considered comments received during the final consultation stage and recommends a final scheme to Council. At the adoption of the final scheme, public notice will be given; Electoral Registration Officer will implement and publish the register of electors on 1 December 2019. Returning Officer to have regard to the scheme in the conduct of elections.

The Draft Scheme

11. Attached to the report presented to the LRA Committee at its 18 June 2019 meeting was the detailed list of polling districts for each ward, together with a note of the current polling place and electorate (as at 1 March 2019). Any consultation comments which were received were also noted.
12. The proposals for each ward, in summary, were:

Fareham East	No change to current scheme
Fareham North	No change to current scheme
Fareham South	No change to current scheme
Fareham West	No change to current scheme
Fareham North-West	No change to current scheme
Hill Head	No change to current scheme
Locks Heath	No change to current scheme
Portchester East	No change to current scheme
Park Gate	Further consideration to be given to alternative venues for PG2 and analysis of voter turnout PG1, PG3 and PG4 No change

	to current scheme
Portchester West	No change to current scheme
Sarisbury	No change to current scheme
Stubbington	ST2 - Further consideration to be given to alternative venues ST1, ST3 and ST4 No change to current scheme
Titchfield Common	No change to current scheme
Titchfield	No change to current scheme
Warsash	No change to current scheme

13. As can be seen from the above table, the remaining specific actions were to review polling districts Park Gate 2 and Stubbington 2.

Schools – General use

14. 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.
15. For these reasons an interim polling place review was conducted in September 2017 which recommended avoiding the use of schools wherever possible and as a consequence, a number of polling places were amended as part of that review. These changes have been incorporated into the draft scheme being proposed as part of the 2019 review.

Final Consultation Responses

16. A total of 34 final consultation responses were received. 27 of these were either positive or neutral. Of the remaining seven responses, two echoed the issues already raised in Park Gate. The other five responses did not show any trends or objective issues that needed to be addressed.
17. The statutory, first and second consultation responses can be found at Appendix B to this report.

Park Gate

18. Park Gate has been the subject of several reviews as electoral registration statistics show that it is a growing ward. Polling districts PG1, PG3 and PG4 are now well established in their existing venues and have attracted no adverse comments. PG2 was subject to an interim polling place review in October 2017 when it was moved away from Sarisbury Green Social Club due to booking clashes with other community group meetings.
19. However, the relocation to St Margaret Mary Church Hall in Middle Road has attracted some criticism over the distances some voters need to travel. The current polling district boundary split results in the biggest distance from the polling station being some 1.5 miles away from Vine Close.

20. The recent housing development schemes in the Park Gate area have resulted in a significant imbalance across the four polling districts and so it is recommended that a holistic review of the polling district boundaries be undertaken to redistribute the voter number balance between the districts and to re-assess the polling stations accordingly.
21. Therefore, the changes required are to:
- The number of voters voting at St Margaret Mary Church Hall in Middle Road
 - The number of voters in each polling district which are currently unbalanced
 - The distance some voters are required to travel to their polling station (particularly from the south end of the ward to St Margaret Mary Church Hall)
22. The recommended amendments are to:
- The district boundary lines (PG1, PG2, PG3) have been redrawn to balance the number of electors in each district.
 - PG1 and PG2 will continue to vote at St Margaret Mary Church Hall
 - PG3 (which now forms the south end of the ward) will vote at Priory Park Community Centre to reduce the distance travelled for voters and balance the number of voters at each polling place.
 - PG4 will continue to vote at Priory Park Community Centre.
 - Priory Park Community Centre is currently used for a single polling station (PG4) but has sufficient space for 2 polling stations so there are no cost implications.
23. To aid the transition to a new polling station for voters in the new PG3, letters will be sent to affected households informing them of the change once the new electoral register is published with the new polling districts and before any communications start regarding the May 2020 elections.
24. The Returning Officer and the ward councillors for Park Gate have been consulted and are fully supportive of the proposals.

Stubbington

25. For the European Parliamentary Election in May 2019, Stubbington district 2 was moved to the Stubbington Methodist Church on Mays Lane at the instruction of the Returning Officer. This was to alleviate congestion within the car park and within the polling place at Crofton Community Centre which now holds 5 polling stations.
26. A complaint was raised by a resident of Crofton Court because voters there had to walk or drive past the Community Centre, which is directly adjacent to Crofton Court, in order to get to the Methodist Church.
27. It is recommended that the district boundary line at the cross section of ST1 and ST2 be redrawn to move voters at Crofton Court, Village Close and Stubbington Lane (Odds 1 to 29, Evens #26) from ST2 to ST1.

28. The recommended amendments are to:
- The district boundary lines (ST1, ST2) have been redrawn to balance the number of electors in each district.
 - ST1 will continue to vote at Crofton Community Centre.
 - ST2 will continue to vote at Stubbington Methodist Church
29. The Returning Officer remains of the view that there should not be more than 5 polling stations at Crofton Community Centre (all 4 Hill Head districts use Crofton Community Centre) and is in support of this recommendation.
30. The ward councillors have been consulted and are in support of this proposal although both have highlighted that parking at the Methodist Church in Mays Lane can be difficult during busy periods and so the situation there will be kept under review.

IMPENDING LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY REVIEW

31. Fareham Borough Council has recently been notified that it has been selected for a Local Government Boundary Review which is scheduled to be completed by 2022. The purpose of this review is to examine the number and boundary lines of wards for the purposes of the election of councillors, and to ensure an even distribution of electors per elected member. This means ward boundaries will likely undergo a compulsory review within the next 2-3 years which may result in statutory boundary changes (and subsequently possible polling districts and places changes) and will therefore over-ride any changes made by this current review.

RISK ASSESSMENT

32. Members are reminded that undertaking this review fulfils the Council's statutory obligations, as per the statutory notice at Appendix C. However, 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, which may direct changes to be made. In undertaking the review, the Council is ensuring that it is taking reasonable steps to enable all electors to participate in the democratic process.

CONCLUSION

33. The Council is required to undertake a review of the polling districts and places used in parliamentary (and other) elections before 31 January 2020. It must observe certain criteria, not least of which is accessibility to polling places by disabled persons. The draft scheme set out in Appendix A to this report has been formed taking account of the preliminary comments of statutory consultees and having regard for housing developments in the next four years, when the next review will be undertaken. The Council is asked to approve the draft scheme.

Appendices:

A: Draft Polling District and Polling Place Scheme 2019

B: Consultation Responses

C: Statutory Notice of Review

Background Papers:

None

Reference Papers:

Representation of the People Act 1983

The Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places (Parliamentary Elections) Regulations 2006

The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013

Contact: For further information please contact Leigh Usher (Ext: 4553)