

Report to Constitution and Members' Services Standing Scrutiny Panel

Date of meeting: 4 October 2011

Portfolio: Leader's Portfolio



Subject: Review of polling districts, polling places and polling stations

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Recommendations:

That a report be submitted to the Council recommending that:

- (a) the proposals for polling districts and places as set out in Appendix 3 to this report be approved; and**
- (b) the proposals be published and copies made available for inspection by the public at the Civic Offices, in at least one place in each parliamentary constituency and on the Council's website.**

Introduction

1. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 introduced a duty for all polling districts and polling places to be reviewed by the end of 2011.
2. A polling district is the area created by the division of a constituency, ward or division into smaller parts, within which a polling place can be determined which is convenient to electors. A polling place is the building or area to which polling stations will be selected by the Returning Officer. A polling station is the room or building chosen by the Returning Officer where the poll takes place.
3. Local authorities are required to divide their area into polling districts for the purposes of parliamentary elections, designate polling places for these polling districts and keep these under review. Polling districts and places for local government elections are not automatically part of the review. However, the polling districts and places for parliamentary and local government elections should always be the same.

Aim of the Review

4. Authorities must:
 - (a) seek to ensure that all the electors in the constituency have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances; and
 - (b) seek to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable, the polling places for which they are responsible are accessible to all electors, including those who are disabled.

Review Process

5. A review of polling districts and polling places must be conducted by the end of 2011 and at least every four years after that.
6. The review is a function of the Council and not the Electoral Registration Officer or the Returning Officer.
7. As part of the review a consultation exercise was undertaken between 25 May and 25 June 2011 in relation to the proposals set out in Appendix 1. These proposals represent the existing arrangements. Any change must be supported by a reason.
8. Members, local M.P's and interest groups were consulted. In addition the Returning Officers for the Brentwood and Ongar and Harlow Parliamentary Constituencies were consulted. Returning Officers are required to comment on all existing polling stations and any new polling stations. As the proposals incorporated the views of the Returning Officer for the Epping Forest Parliamentary Constituency it was not necessary to undertake specific consultation with him.
9. The location of the proposed polling districts and polling places are the responsibility of the Council and the location of polling stations is the responsibility of the Returning Officers.
10. As this Council currently elects by thirds, the Returning Officer for the Epping Forest Constituency has been looking continuously at the choice of polling stations and therefore proposed no changes for this review.

Results of Consultation

11. A resident of Buckhurst Hill referred to two polling stations in the Buckhurst Hill East Ward, the Woollard Centre in Loughton Way and the Roding Valley Hall in Station Way. He expressed the view that whilst the Woollard Centre is well placed, the Roding Valley Hall is on the edge of the ward necessitating a long walk or travel by car for many electors. He suggested that the Health Centre in Buckhurst Way would be more convenient for the majority of electors. Officers had concerns about this alternative location due to the lack of off street parking and the difficulty of parking on-street on what is a busy road. However, contact was made with the Health Centre to check the extent of accommodation available and the possibility of using the Centre as a polling station. The Health Centre responded that the building is used for clinic every day and could not be made available without severe disruption to the services offered.. There is no other suitable building in the locality and whilst the Roding Valley Hall is on the edge of the ward it is still within easy waking distance for many electors. No change is proposed therefore.
12. Councillor Sandler drew attention to the possibility of the Council converting Faversham Hall, Faversham Close, Chigwell Row into flats and the lack of any other suitable building in Chigwell Row for use as a polling station. The Cabinet has agreed that officers should seek tenders from housing associations for the conversion of 20 bedsits into 10 flats in Marden Close (adjacent to Faversham Hall) and that, as part of the tender exercise housing associations should also be asked to provide an optional tender price for converting Faversham Hall into two flats. However, the process has been delayed and the Director of Housing has advised that he envisages the Hall still being available for use as a polling station in May 2012. It may be necessary to look for an alternative location for use after 2012 but for the time being no change is proposed.
13. Councillor Waller expressed the view that the use of part of the bar area in the Railway Hotel in Lower Sheering as a polling station is not ideal as it is on the very edge of the ward and county boundary, it is two miles from some electors, different

entrances to the public house make it difficult for tellers and some electors may adopt a principled stance which makes them unwilling to enter licensed premises. He recognises, however, that there is no other suitable building in Lower Sheering and that the Railway Hotel represents the best available option and is preferable to the alternative of a portakabin. Accordingly, he supports a continuation of the current arrangements.

14. Ongar Town Council advised that they are happy with the current arrangements. Brentwood Borough Council, Theydon Bois Parish Council and the Brentwood and Ongar Liberal Democrats all advised that they had no comments on the proposals. No other responses were received.
15. A list of those responding to the consultation exercise is attached as Appendix 2.

Final Proposals following Review

16. Attached as Appendix 3 are the proposals following consideration of the responses received to the consultation exercise. No changes are proposed.
17. In cases where the polling stations are not within the polling district this is due solely to the lack of any suitable venue within the designated area.

Appeals Process

18. It is possible that representations could be made to the Electoral Commission, claiming that the review process has not been conducted correctly.
19. There are only two grounds on which a representation can be made:
 - (a) the local authority has failed to meet the reasonable requirements of the electors in the constituency;
 - (b) the local authority has failed to take sufficient account of accessibility to disabled persons of the polling stations within a polling place.
20. In the event of the Commission deciding to change a polling district, the Council would need to republish its electoral register to incorporate the new changes.
21. The proposals for polling districts, polling places and polling stations are set out in Appendix 3 attached.
22. Appendix 4 sets out the reasons for the proposed polling districts and polling places.