

**Report to Overview & Scrutiny
Committee
Date of meeting: 18 October 2011**



SCRUTINY



Portfolio: Leader

Report of: Constitution and Members' Services SSP

Subject: Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations

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Committee Secretary: M Jenkins (01992 564532)

Recommendations:

That a report be submitted to the Council recommending that:

- (a) the proposals for polling districts and places as set out in the Appendix 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 covering the Epping Forest District 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 at least every four years and a review has to be completed by the end of 2011. As the Register of Electors for 2012 has to be published on 1 December 2011 the review needs to be approved by full Council at its meeting on 1 November 2011 so that any changes can be incorporated in the new register. If this timescale is not met it will be necessary to publish a register on 1 December 2011 and then completely re-publish the register on completion of the review.
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. The review is a function of the Council and not the Electoral Registration Officer or the Returning Officer.
6. As part of the review a consultation exercise was undertaken between 25 May and 25 June 2011. As this Council currently elects by thirds, the officers have been looking continuously at the choice of polling districts and places and therefore proposed no changes for this review. Members, local MPs, agents and interest groups and the public 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.
7. 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.

Results of Consultation

8. 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 as a 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. We are proposing therefore that no change be made.
9. 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.

10. 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 and we are proposing that no change be made.
11. 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.

Views of Members of the Panel

12. In addition to considering the results of the consultation exercise, the Panel has discussed matters raised at our meeting by members. The only change that we agreed to the submitted proposals was to change the proposed polling station for the Theydon Bois ward from the Village Hall to the Church Hall. The Returning Officer accepted this change as the buildings are in close proximity and the Church Hall has been used as a polling station at some recent elections. The Church Hall meets the reasonable requirements of electors and the access criteria. Using the Church Hall also has the benefit of officers being able to prepare the Village Hall for counts during the day of elections rather than at the close of poll which can lead to a delay in counting.

Final Proposals following Review

13. The proposals following our consideration are attached as an Appendix. The only change to the previous arrangements is in respect of the polling station for Theydon Bois. The polling districts have been in place for several years and are considered to provide all electors with reasonable facilities to be able to vote.
14. 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.
15. In recommending as set out at the commencement of this report we have had regard to:
 - (a) the reasonable requirements of the electors in the constituencies; and
 - (b) the accessibility for disabled persons to the polling stations within the polling places.
16. Following approval of proposals by the full Council, it is necessary to publish the proposals and make copies available for inspection.
17. We recommend as set out at the commencement of this report.