

Report to Council

Date of meeting: 1 November 2011

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Chairman: Councillor R Bassett



REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES

Recommending:

- (1) That the proposals for polling districts and places as set out in the Appendix to this report be approved; and**
- (2) That 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. We received a report from the Constitution and Members' Services Scrutiny Panel on a review of polling districts and polling places required under the Electoral Administration Act 2006 to be undertaken by the end of 2011.
2. We noted that 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. We were advised that 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. We understand that 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. We were advised that the review is a function of the Council and not the Electoral

Registration Officer or the Returning Officer and that as part of the review a consultation exercise was undertaken between 25 May and 25 June 2011

6. 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.

Results of Consultation

7. A resident of Buckhurst Hill suggested that the Health Centre in Buckhurst Way would be more convenient for the majority of electors than the polling station at Roding Valley Hall. We were advised that 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.
8. 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, we were advised that the process has been delayed and the Director of Housing has indicated 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.
9. 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. We agree with this conclusion.
10. 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.

Final Proposals following Review

11. Attached as an Appendix are the proposals following consideration of the responses received to the consultation exercise. No changes are proposed.
12. 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.

13. We recommend as set out at the commencement of this report.