

Report to the Council

Committee: Constitution and Members' Services Standing Scrutiny Panel

Date: 30 October 2007

Chairman: Councillor R Church

Item: 11

1. REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS, POLLING PLACES AND POLLING STATIONS

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 covering the District and on the Council's website.

Introduction

- 1.1 The Electoral Administration Act 2006 introduced a duty for all polling districts and polling places to be reviewed by the end of 2007.
- 1.2 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 the 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.
- 1.3 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, polling districts and places for parliamentary and local government elections should always be the same and in reviewing parliamentary polling arrangements we have also reviewed local government arrangements.

Aim of the Review

- 1.4 In undertaking the review 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.

- 1.5 The final decision on the review is a matter for full Council and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee have authorised this Panel to report direct to full Council on this matter so that the review can be concluded at the Council meeting on 30 October 2007. If this timescale is not achieved it will be necessary to report to the full Council meeting on 18 December 2007 but this will result in a new register of electors being published on 1 December 2007 following the annual audit and a revised one being published following the meeting on 18 December 2007 at the conclusion of the review. Clearly this situation should be avoided.

Review Process

- 1.6 As part of the review a consultation exercise has been undertaken and members, local Members of Parliament, local councillors and interest groups have been consulted. In addition it was necessary to consult the Returning Officers for the Brentwood and Ongar and Harlow Parliamentary Constituencies.
- 1.7 The locations 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 appropriate Returning Officer.

Results of Consultation

- 1.8 We have considered the results of the consultation exercise. Generally speaking favourable comments were made about the use of Murray Hall, Borders Lane, Loughton for the AT and BG polling districts rather than the Hedges Close Old Peoples' complex and the Alderton School which have been used for some elections in the past. Some concern was expressed about the use of the Buckhurst Hill Baptist Church as a polling station for polling district AD. One consultee questioned the use of the St Mary's Parish Centre as a polling station for polling district BF during the duration of building works. The Waltham Abbey Town Council expressed some concern about the lack of a polling station at the Breach Barns mobile home park and about the distance from the park to the polling station at Waltham Abbey Town Hall. The Acting Returning Officer for the Brentwood and Ongar Parliamentary Constituency suggested alterations in respect of Stanford Rivers Parish and Lambourne End.
- 1.9 We agree that the use of Murray Hall is preferable to the use of Hedges Close and the Alderton School. Murray Hall is central to the Barfields polling district and is easily accessible on foot or by vehicle. Similarly, the use of Murray Hall is favoured for the Whitehills polling district. Whilst the hall is not in that polling district it is immediately adjacent and can be reached safely on foot and by vehicle. Murray Hall provides better facilities than those available at Hedges Close where the holding of an election disrupts the residents of that home.
- 1.10 We are of the opinion that the problems experienced in relation to the Buckhurst Hill Baptist Church can be overcome with suitable signage and consultation with the site operator regarding other uses of the building. The lack of undercover provision for tellers is regretted but is an insufficient reason to change what is otherwise a very suitable location.
- 1.11 We understand that assurances have been given that the St Mary's Parish Centre will remain fully accessible during building works and that those works will be completed by April 2008. We do not consider that there is any advantage in moving this polling station.

- 1.12 In relation to the comments made by Waltham Abbey Town Council about Breach Barns, it is unfortunate that following the closure of the social club building at the mobile home park there is no longer any suitable building for a polling station. The Town Hall has been chosen as an alternative following consultation with local members as it is more easily accessible using public transport than other possible locations.
- 1.13 The Acting Returning Officer for the Brentwood and Ongar Parliamentary Constituency suggested that the Stanford Rivers Parish, which is currently split into two polling districts, should be made into one polling district. This suggestion is supported by the local County Councillor and no adverse comments have been made about this suggestion by the Stanford Rivers Parish Council. In recent years electors from both polling districts have voted at the same polling station at Toot Hill, and they will not therefore be inconvenienced by the suggestion. Accordingly, we are proposing one less polling district as a result of combining Toot Hill and Hare Street into one "Stanford Rivers" polling district.
- 1.14 The other suggestion made by the Acting Returning Officer for the Brentwood and Ongar Parliamentary Constituency is that the polling station in the Parish Rooms at Lambourne End should be removed with all electors in the Lambourne Parish voting at the Abridge Village Hall. In making this suggestion he has referred to the fact that other electors have to travel further to vote than from Lambourne End to Abridge and that the additional costs of a polling station for so few electors is not viable. In considering this suggestion we have taken account of the views of the Lambourne Parish Council who are totally opposed to the suggestion. We have given careful consideration to this suggestion having regard to the fact that the requirement of the Council is to seek to ensure that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances. The place for voting must be accessible for all electors, should be easy to find on polling day and as close to electors as possible. Costs are a secondary issue. On balance, we do not consider that it is reasonable to expect electors to travel to Abridge to vote in the Abridge Village Hall. It is clear to us that the use of the Parish Rooms at Lambourne End provides a polling station which can be accessed on foot by electors, being in the centre of the principal residential road of the village and within half a mile of all properties in the village. This was undoubtedly a factor in achieving a higher turnout at Lambourne End at the most recent election than the average across the District. The Abridge Village Hall is approximately two miles from the centre of Lambourne End and the vast majority of electors would need to travel there by car as there is no public transport between Abridge and Lambourne End.

Summary

- 1.15 Our proposals for polling districts and polling places are set out in the Appendix to this report. One less polling district is proposed as a result of combining Toot Hill and Hare Street into one "Stanford Rivers" polling district. No other changes are proposed except that the polling district letters have been revised to run consecutively in relation to the new Parliamentary Constituencies. These changes in letters will take effect at the next Parliamentary election and in the meantime registers will be published showing current and proposed arrangements eg. North Weald Village – Constituency: Epping Forest (Brentwood and Ongar) Polling District: AQ (BW).
- 1.16 We recommend as set out at the commencement of this report.

