

Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee



Report of head of legal and democratic

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To: Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee

DATE: 27 November 2018

Interim Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places

Recommendation

1. That the Committee approves the schedule of polling districts and polling places set out in Appendix A which incorporates the proposed changes set out in paragraph 18 of this report.

2. To authorise the returning officer, in consultation with committee members, parish councils and the ward councillors, to allocate an appropriate polling place for polling districts RAE (East Hagbourne) and RAI (West Hagbourne).

Purpose of Report

1. This report sets out proposals for polling districts and polling places following an interim review prior to the scheduled district and parish elections in May 2019 to reflect the outcome of recent community governance reviews agreed by this committee, reflected in the South Oxfordshire District Council (Reorganisation of Community Governance) Order 2018, related alteration changes to district ward boundaries made by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, reflected in the South Oxfordshire (Electoral Changes) Order 2017, and to ensure electors continue to have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.

Strategic Objectives

2. The report does not specifically relate to any of the council's strategic objectives, but agreement of the recommendations (amended if the committee sees fit) will ensure compliance with the law.

Background

3. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a change to the timing of compulsory reviews of UK Parliamentary polling districts and polling places. The last such review in South Oxfordshire was undertaken in October 2014. The results of the polling places and polling districts review were agreed by this committee at its meeting on 26 January 2015. An interim review of specific issues was undertaken in 2016 with this committee agreeing changes at its meeting on 26 October 2016. The next statutory review of polling districts and polling places will take place in 2019 and be concluded by January 2020 at the latest.
4. The changes to polling districts and polling places agreed by this committee in 2015 were first used at the parliamentary and local elections in May 2015. The current polling arrangements within South Oxfordshire are predominantly satisfactory and have been shown at elections conducted in recent years (the 2015 elections, the European Referendum and Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2016 and the Oxfordshire County Council and Parliamentary elections in 2017) to be practicable.

Terminology

5. **Polling District:** a geographical area created by the sub-division of a UK Parliamentary constituency or ward into smaller parts within which a polling place can be located which is convenient to electors. By and large each parish is a polling district in its own right and has its own polling place or places. Exceptions are where parishes are sub-divided into electoral wards or split between district wards which necessitates the creation of additional polling districts.
6. **Polling place:** the building(s) within each polling district that will house polling stations.
7. **Polling stations:** the room or area within the polling place where voting takes place. The number of polling stations within each polling place is a matter for the returning officer and is not covered in this report.

The review

8. Council gave notice of the review in October 2018. Notice of the review was published on the council's website and given to the Acting Returning Officer (ARO), parish councils and district councillors. The closing date for consultation responses was 2 November 2018. Consultation responses, including the ARO's comments, are set out in the appendix to this report.

Key issues

9. The South Oxfordshire District Council (Reorganisation of Community Governance) Order 2018 (The Order) made a change to the parish boundary between the parishes of Harpsden and Henley. The area transferred to the Henley North ward of Henley-on-Thames parish will automatically become part of the polling district designated for the area it is transferring to (LIA2).
10. Paragraph 4(10) of The South Oxfordshire (Electoral Changes) Order 2017 gave effect to a related alteration request submitted by this council to amend the district ward boundary of Forest Hill & Holton and Wheatley district wards to ensure coterminosity with the parish boundaries of Wheatley and Holton parishes as set out below:

“Each area that ceases to be part of the parish of Holton and becomes part of the parish of Wheatley in consequence of the 2015 Order ceases to be part of Forest Hill & Holton district ward and becomes part of Wheatley district ward”.
11. This change abolishes the requirement for polling district LEI1 which provides for electors voting in Wheatley parish and Forest Hill & Holton district ward. Under the revised arrangements these electors will vote in Wheatley parish and Wheatley district ward and will be incorporated in polling district LQA and vote at The Merry Bells polling place.
12. The local district councillor and Nuffield Parish Council have again called for the designation of a polling place in Nuffield (voters currently vote at Nettlebed Village Club in Nettlebed) and suggested the use of a mobile unit on the Huntercombe Golf Club site. This committee, at its meeting of 20 October 2016, considered this issue and noted that a mobile unit was used at the May 2015 elections which was not ideal for either the polling station staff or the club. In the absence of a more suitable permanent location officers recommend the continued designation of Nettlebed Village Club as the polling place for Nuffield whilst continuing to monitor the redevelopment of the Church.
13. Barley Hill County Primary School, currently designated as the polling place for polling district LNA2, has requested the council designate an alternative polling place. Officers have identified the Snooker Club at St Andrews Court, Wellington Street, as a suitable alternative venue and recommend it is designated as the polling place for the forthcoming elections.
14. Henley-on-Thames Town Council and a local resident have questioned the need for the current number of polling places in Henley (currently four) on the grounds of cost. Officers consider that the current arrangements provide convenient and accessible venues for the electors. Whilst a reduced number of polling places would reduce cost the number of polling stations is likely to remain the same and therefore any cost saving would be reduced. A local resident also suggested redesignating Valley Road School as a polling place. This council has sought to avoid using schools on election day unless the headteacher confirms that s/he is happy for the school to remain open on election day. This is not the case in respect of Valley Road School. The current polling place at Henley Leisure Centre, whilst located outside the polling district for the Henley North ward of Henley-on-Thames parish, is considered a suitable location.

15. East Hagbourne Parish Council has requested the council designate The Pavillion as the polling place for East Hagbourne rather than the Village Hall to avoid disruption to regular bookings on election day. Whilst The Pavillion offers an accessible location for residents of East Hagbourne, its location on the east of the village does not provide such an accessible location for electors in West Hagbourne who share the current polling place which is located on the west of the village. Officers are currently investigating the suitability and availability of The Pavillion and will provide an update at the meeting. Subject to the matter not being resolved the committee is invited to authorise the returning officer in consultation with committee members, parish councils and the ward councillors, to allocate an appropriate polling place for polling districts RAE (East Hagbourne) and RAI (West Hagbourne).
16. The Regal Centre in Wallingford will not be available for use at the elections in May 2019. Officers propose designating St Mary's Church in the Market Place as an alternative. St Mary's Church has proved a suitable polling place at previous elections.
17. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is currently considering a related alteration request from this council to amend district and county council division boundaries to transfer areas from the Sonning Common district ward and county division into the Henley-on-Thames district ward and county division to reflect the change agreed by this committee to amend the parish boundary between Harpsden and Henley parishes and ensure coterminosity with those changes made at parish level by this committee and implemented by The Order. If the LGBCE does not agree to make a related alteration order it may be necessary to create a further polling district. The returning officer has delegated authority to make changes to polling districts and polling places where circumstances dictate that this is desirable, having first consulted with members of the committee and local councillor(s). It may be the case that the returning officer must rely on this delegation to avoid calling a further meeting of the committee.
18. The issues and officer proposals are set out below.

Parish	Issue	Proposal
Harpsden and Henley	The South Oxfordshire District Council (Reorganisation of Community Governance) Order 2018 makes a change to the parish boundary which will require amendments to existing polling districts.	To amend the polling districts to reflect the change in parish boundaries. Incorporate area in LIA2.
Wheatley	Change to district ward boundary set out in The South Oxfordshire (Electoral Changes) Order 2017	Abolish polling district LEI1 and incorporate the area in polling district LQA.
Nuffield	No suitable venue available in Nuffield. A mobile unit was	Designate Nettlebed Village Hall, Nettlebed as

	provided on the Huntercombe Golf Club site in 2015 this arrangement was not an ideal arrangement for staff or the club. Both the local ward councillor and parish council support the need for a polling place in Nuffield.	the polling place for Nuffield. Officers will monitor progress with the redevelopment of the church .
Thame North	Barley Hill County Primary School request to allocate an alternative polling place.	Designate the Snooker Club St Andrews Court, Wellington Street, Thame as the polling place for polling district LNA2
Henley	To reduce the number of polling places in Henley and redesignate Valley School as a polling place in place of Henley Leisure Centre for Henley North.	To make no change to the current designated polling places.
East Hagbourne/ West Hagbourne	To consider designating The Pavillion as the polling place.	Officers to investigate availability and suitability of venue for electors in East and West Hagbourne.
Wallingford	Regal Centre unavailable.	Designate St Mary's Church as an alternative.

Financial Implications

19. There is a modest cost associated with running a polling place. Often this cost is shared amongst a number of parties because the polling place hosts multiple elections at the same time. Cost, however, should not be a prime consideration in determining how many polling places to designate.

Legal Implications

20. The Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended) (Section 18C (5) and Section 31) allows a local authority to conduct an interim review of any polling district, polling place or polling station within its area, outside of the timescales for a compulsory review.

Risks

21. There are no discernable risks associated with the proposals set out in this report

Conclusion

22. The council met its legal requirement to complete a review of polling districts and polling places by the end of January 2015. To address changes to community governance arrangements agreed by this committee and reflected in The Order and The South Oxfordshire (Electoral Changes) Order 2017 and to make sure suitable and convenient polling arrangements are provided for local electors before the next scheduled elections in May 2019, an interim review of polling districts and polling places has been undertaken. The committee is invited to agree the proposals set out in paragraph 17 of this report and note that the returning officer may use delegated authority to address issues that could arise that require changes.

Background papers: “Polling District and Polling Places Review” report to the Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee on 26 January 2015.
“Interim review of Polling District and Polling Places Review” report to the Community Governance and Electoral issues Committee on 26 October 2016