

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: 29 October 2019

Polling District and Polling Places Review

Recommendations

That the Committee:

1. notes the consultation responses and the officer comments set out in appendix A;
2. notes the Acting Returning Officer's comments in appendix B;
3. approves the schedule of polling districts and polling places set out in Appendix C to this report; and
4. authorises the head of legal and democratic, acting in her capacity as the council's returning officer, 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 the local councillor(s).

Purpose of Report

1. This report sets out proposals for polling districts and polling places following a periodic review required by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013.

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. In accordance with the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, the Council has a duty to undertake a review of parliamentary polling districts and polling places, which it must complete by the 31 January 2020. Subsequent reviews must be undertaken at least once every five years. The last such review in South Oxfordshire was undertaken in October 2014. The results of the polling districts and polling places review were agreed by this committee at its meeting on 26 January 2015. The council undertook an interim review with this committee agreeing recommendations at its meeting on 27 November 2018 prior to the district and parish elections in May 2019 to ensure arrangements reflected the outcome of recent community governance reviews agreed by this committee, reflected in the South Oxfordshire District Council (Reorganisation of Community Governance) Order 2018, and to ensure electors continue to have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.
4. The current polling arrangements within South Oxfordshire are predominantly satisfactory as has been shown at elections conducted in recent years (the 2015 elections, the European Referendum, Police and Crime Commissioner elections in 2016 and the Oxfordshire County Council and Parliamentary elections in 2017) and very recently at the district and parish elections in May 2019, to be practicable. At the local and parliamentary elections in 2015 there were issues with queues at the polling place at Willowbrook Leisure Centre in polling district RBA. This committee, at its meeting on 20 October 2016, supported the proposal to subdivide polling district RBA in Didcot, implemented for the PCC and EU Referendum in early 2016, with Ladygrove Community Centre and Willowbrook Leisure Centre designated as the polling places. All polling stations were visited during the May elections and comments received have been taken into consideration as part of the review.

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.

Requirements of the review

8. Local authorities must comply with the following legislative requirements when designating polling districts and polling places:
 - Each parish in England must be a separate polling district

- The council must designate a polling place for each polling district
- The polling place must be an area in the polling district unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly outside the polling district (for example, if no accessible polling place can be identified)
- The polling place must be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of the district how they will be able to reach the polling station
- That so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place is accessible to electors who are disabled

The review

8. Council gave notice of this review on 15 July 2019. Notice of the review was published on the council's website and given to the Acting Returning Officer (ARO), parish councils, district councillors and members of parliament. The review was also publicised via a press release and social media.

Consultation responses

9. The council received a number of responses before the deadline of 27 September which are set out in appendix A attached to this report with officer comments. The Acting Returning Officer for Henley was consulted, and her comments are attached at appendix B and referred to below.

Key issues

10. In her comments the ARO asked the council to endeavour not to use schools that are required to close if used as a polling station. As set out in appendix A, the council currently uses the Youth Centre at Lord William's School which does not require the closure of the school. Culham School has closed with pupils now attending the primary school in Clifton Hampden. Officers are seeking an assurance that the building will be available as a polling place.
11. The ARO requested the council review the designation of polling places in Henley-on-Thames, particularly the designation of Henley Leisure Centre. The leisure centre currently serves electors in both the south and north wards of Henley-on-Thames and was designated in 2015 because it is more convenient for voters in that part of Henley. Whilst officers have investigated other options there are currently no suitable venues. The only alternative is for voters to travel considerably further to the other designated polling places.
12. Officers propose that the council continues to designate The Fox and Hounds Public House as a polling place for electors in Pyrton, Shirburn and Watlington. Due to the rural nature of the area the venue provides a convenient location for a number of electors. Whilst the ARO requested officers investigate the continued designation of this polling place she is supportive of the continued designation of the public house as a polling place.
13. In her comments the ARO suggests no polling place is shared by two district wards, unless special circumstances apply, such as the lack of a suitable building

for polling stations in the adjoining areas, to avoid potential confusion for voters. Where this is not avoidable or is considered to offer geographical convenience to voters, she recommends the use of separate rooms or a physical boundary should be considered. The election team welcome this suggestion and will ensure a clear physical barrier is provided in such circumstances.

14. Officers are also currently identifying alternative polling places for those designated in appendix C should any become unavailable for a particular election.

Financial Implications

13. 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. At national elections the cost is reimbursed to the council. Cost, however, should not be a consideration in determining how many polling places to designate.

Legal Implications

14. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 requires the council to complete its review of polling districts and polling places by 31 January 2020. Decisions made in respect of the proposals in this report will fulfil this requirement.

Risks

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

Conclusion

16. The council has a legal requirement to complete a review of polling districts and polling places by the end of January 2020. Decisions taken in respect of this report will fulfil that requirement.

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 Districts and Polling Places report to the Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee on 27 November 2018