

Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee



Report of head of legal and democratic

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To: Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee

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Temporary changes to polling stations due to Covid 19

Recommendation: That the Committee

1. approves the temporary proposed changes to polling places set out in paragraph 5 of this report for the forthcoming elections to be held on 6 May 2021;
2. notes the temporary polling place changes agreed by the returning officer under delegated powers set out in paragraphs 6 to 11 of this report for the forthcoming elections to be held on 6 May 2021;
3. authorises the returning officer, in consultation with committee members and the ward councillors, to allocate appropriate polling places where the need arises for the elections on May 6 2021;
4. authorises the returning officer, in consultation with committee members and the ward councillors, to allocate appropriate polling places where the need arises for any other elections, by-elections, referendums and polls during 2021.

Purpose of Report

1. This report sets out proposed changes to polling places for the May 2021 elections to provide a more Covid 19 secure environment, asks the committee to note those polling places designated by the returning officer under delegated powers as alternatives for those not available at these elections and seeks a delegation to make any further changes to polling places necessary to provide a secure voting environment for these and any other elections, by-elections, referendums and polls during 2021.

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 every four years. The last compulsory review was completed in October 2019. However, it is now necessary temporarily to review polling places which are not suitable in the current circumstances.

Terminology

- **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
- **Polling place:** the building(s) within each polling district that will house polling stations.
- **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.

Proposed temporary changes

4. The temporary changes seek to address and comply with social distancing measures introduced by government. The venues set out below are considered wholly or partly unsuitable polling places for the May 2021 polls for the following reasons:
 - Social distancing difficult to maintain
 - Polling station staff unwilling to work if placed in a high risk environment
 - Failing electors expectations of feeling safe when voting
5. The table below sets out the current arrangements and proposed temporary changes.

Parish	Issue	Proposal
Wallingford	St. Mary’s Church, Market Place currently accommodates two polling stations. This is a busy polling place and not suitable for two polling stations in the current circumstances.	To sub-divide the polling district to provide for a polling place and one polling station at St. Mary’s Church with an additional polling place with a single

		polling station at Wallingford Methodist Church. This venue has been used as a polling place at previous elections.
Cholsey	Cholsey Cricket Pavilion is currently designated as one of the polling places in Cholsey. This venue is small and not considered suitable in the current circumstances.	Designate The Great Hall, Fair Mile as an alternative venue.
Watlington, Shirburn and Pyrton	A polling place is currently provided for at the Fox & Hounds Public House, Christmas Common. This venue is very small and not considered suitable in the current circumstances.	To designate Watlington Parish Office as an alternative. This venue is currently used as a polling place for electors in Watlington and is suitable to accommodate the additional electors.
Didcot	A polling place is currently provided for at The Northbourne Centre, Church Street, Didcot with two polling stations.	To designate Didcot Leisure Centre as the polling place for polling district RDB and King Alfred Community Centre as the polling place for polling district S99. This arrangement will not only address social distancing issues but also concerns raised by staff regarding the facilities at the Northbourne Centre.

Temporary change to be agreed under delegated powers

6. The scheme of delegation provides for the returning officer to designate an alternative polling place if the designated polling place becomes unavailable for a particular election.
7. Didcot Civic Hall in Didcot is currently designated as a polling place accommodating four polling stations. However, Didcot Civic Hall will be unavailable for the elections. The returning officer has identified Southern Neighbourhood Community Centre and The Barn, Foxhall Road, as alternative polling places, each to accommodate two polling stations.

8. The schedule approved by the committee in October 2019 designated Culham School as the polling place for Culham. The school closed in March 2020 and no suitable alternative venue has been found in Culham. The returning officer therefore proposes to designate Clifton Hampden Village Hall (if available) as the polling place for Culham. Such an arrangement has been used at a number of previous elections. If the village hall is unavailable (confirmation is currently being sought but indications are that it is unlikely to be available) then an alternative polling place(s) will be sought. These are likely to be outside the parishes.
9. Shiplake Scout Hut, designated as the polling place for Binfield Heath, is still unavailable following a fire at the premises in 2019. The returning officer has designated Shiplake Memorial Hall as an alternative venue as provided for at previous elections. It also serves as the venue for Shiplake and is suitable to accommodate the additional electors.
10. Highmoor Cross Memorial Hall is not available due to use as a nursery. The returning officer has again designated Stoke Row Village Hall as an alternative venue as at the European Parliamentary election in 2019. The venue will serve as a polling place for electors in Highmoor Cross and Stoke Row and is suitable to accommodate the additional electors.
11. The Youth Centre, Lord William's School, which has two polling stations, is not available for these elections. The returning officer has designated Christchurch Centre and Chinnor Rugby Club as alternative venues.

Delegation to returning officer

12. Officers within the elections team continue to review the safety of polling places for the forthcoming elections. In order to address any concerns with venues, the committee is asked to authorise the returning officer to designate further alternative and additional polling places to address any safety concerns.

Publicising the changes

13. In March, poll cards will be issued to eligible electors. These will highlight any temporary changes to polling stations.
14. Officers will work with colleagues in communications to advertise the changes via social media, press releases and parish councils. The location of polling stations will also be published on the website.

Financial Implications

15. There are costs associated with running additional polling places and there will be additional costs associated with Covid secure measures. For the forthcoming elections these will be split between Oxfordshire County Council, the Police and Crime Commissioner election and any by-elections or neighbourhood planning referendums because polling places will host multiple elections at the same time. Cost, however, should not be a prime consideration

in determining the designation of a polling place, particular in the current circumstances.

Legal Implications

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

Risks

13. By designating alternative and additional venues we will be able to minimise the risk of spreading coronavirus to our staff and electors. Dependant on the building one way systems will be operated through polling stations. Risk assessments of polling stations will be carried out and these, along with national and internal guidance, will determine Covid secure measures required.

Conclusion

14. The council met its legal requirement to complete a review of polling districts and polling places in October 2019. To address concerns relating to the current pandemic, the committee is requested to agree alternative and additional polling places to provide a secure voting environment for electors and staff. The committee is also invited to note the changes agreed under delegated powers and to authorise the returning officer to make any further changes required to address safety concerns.