

Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee



Report of Chief Executive

Author: David Buckle

Telephone: 01235 547612

E-mail: david.buckle@southandvale.gov.uk

To: Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee

DATE: 26 January 2015

AGENDA ITEM 5

Polling District and Polling Places Review

Recommendation(s)

That the Committee:

- (a) approves the schedule of polling districts and polling places set out in Appendix A to this report
- (b) recommends to cabinet that it sets aside some of the community capital grants scheme to fund improvements to disabled access to buildings used as polling stations
- (c) gives delegated authority to the chief executive, acting in his 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. A polling district is a geographical area created by the sub-division of a UK Parliamentary constituency. A polling place is the building(s) within each polling district that will house polling stations. The number of polling stations within each polling place is a matter for the Returning Officer and is not covered in this report.

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 2015. Subsequent reviews must be undertaken at least once every five years. Some of the considerations that the council has to take into account are set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983.
4. Although the 2013 Act only relates to parliamentary constituencies, it is appropriate to designate polling districts and polling places that also work in respect of the new district wards created as a result of the Local Government Boundary Commission's electoral review of the district. The proposals in this report achieve this.
5. In undertaking the review I have given due regard to the following considerations, some of which are enshrined in legislation:
 - that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances
 - that so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place is accessible to electors who are disabled
 - where possible, the polling place is in its own polling district
 - each parish is a separate polling district unless special circumstances apply
 - no polling place is shared by two district wards unless special circumstances apply
 - polling places should be "logical"; that is, electors should not have to pass another polling place to get to their own
 - not to use school buildings unless the head teacher confirms that s/he is happy for the school to remain open on election day
6. My proposals are set out in appendix A and broadly accord with the above criteria. By and large, each parish is a polling district in its own right and has its own polling place or places. Exceptions are as follows:
 - because Didcot parish is sub-divided into three electoral wards for the district council I propose to divide it into three polling districts that align with the ward boundaries. I regard this as special circumstances

- In the case of the Didcot wards, Henley, Thame, Wallingford, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, Cholsey, Crowmarsh, Goring and Watlington I propose designating more than one polling place to aid voter convenience
 - a number of smaller parishes do not have suitable premises to designate as a polling place, so the polling place is in the most easily accessible adjacent parish taking account of district ward boundaries
 - the polling station at Christmas Common (in Watlington parish) provides a significantly more convenient place for some electors from Pyrton, Shirburn and Lewknor parishes to vote than the main polling place for that parish. I propose to designate it as a polling place for all four parishes, although in the case of Lewknor this will mean a small number of electors voting outside of their district ward
 - the residents of Wheatley parish are split between two district wards – Wheatley and Forest Hill and Holton. This is as a result of the decision by council as part of its community governance review to extend the boundary of Wheatley parish. It is possible that the Local Government Boundary Commission may have amended the district ward boundary to align with the new parish boundary before May, but I propose to designate Holton village hall as a polling place for Wheatley parish (in addition to the Merry Bells in the heart of Wheatley village) in case it has not
 - as yet I have been unable to secure a suitable alternative polling place to John Hampden School in Thame. I had hoped to use Thame Youth Centre, which is under the control of Lord Williams's School, but have not reached agreement with the school. If I cannot find an alternative then I propose that the council designates John Hampden school as a polling place, which will unfortunately result in its closure on election day
7. The committee should note that where a polling district is served by more than one polling place, the allocation of specific properties to a specific polling place falls outside the remit of this review. For information, however, I am carrying out this work in parallel with this review (wearing my hat as Returning Officer).

Consultation

8. We have been through a two stage consultation process. Stage one was to invite general views from interested parties, notably parish councils and ward councillors on any issues that the review should cover. Stage two involved consulting these same groups and disability groups on draft proposals, as well as making them available for general comment. This was done by placing them on the council's website. Given the general lack of public interest in a technical review like this, I did not consider it necessary to carry out a more extensive consultation.

9. Key issues raised in the first consultation and my response to these are set out in the table below:

Parish/Ward	Issue	Response
Benson and Ewelme	Provide a polling place at RAF Benson to allow service personnel to vote more easily	I have had no contact from the station commander to suggest that access to the current polling places in Benson and Ewelme presents a problem for service personnel based at the airfield. There may also be security problems with non-service staff needing to access the polling place. No change proposed
Brightwell	Voters in Shillingford have to travel into Wallingford to vote currently. Is it possible to provide a more local polling station?	Shillingford is an outlying area of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell parish. In recent years the polling place for electors from Shillingford has been the Regal Centre in Wallingford. As this means voters voting in an adjacent district ward I do not want this to continue. We have secured the office at Shillingford Hill Park as a polling place for the 2015 elections and will assess its suitability for future years.
Didcot North East	The Ladygrove estate should have more than one polling place to improve voter access	In principle I agree but in practice this is difficult to achieve. The current designated polling place is Didcot Town Football Club. This lies to the west of the estate but there are no public or other buildings on the eastern side suitable for designation as a polling place. There is ample space at the football club to accommodate the necessary polling stations. No change proposed
Forest Hill	Voters in Shotover and Bayswater have difficulty getting to	These are two very small communities where road access is only possible via

	<p>Forest Hill village hall. Is it possible to provide them with a more convenient voting location?</p>	<p>Oxford. They would not justify a polling station in their own right and I cannot identify anything better than the current arrangement. No change proposed.</p>
<p>Goring</p>	<p>There is no parking at Storton Lodge; can you revert to using Goring C of E primary school?</p>	<p>I moved the polling station to Storton Lodge (the scout hall) last year to avoid the need to close the school. I acknowledge that it is not ideal and have looked for alternatives but without success. I am not prepared to recommend using the school as this will result in its closure for the day.</p>
<p>Henley</p>	<p>Could Gillots Leisure Centre be used by some voters in Henley North as well as those in Henley South (both town council wards) as it is more convenient than using the town hall?</p>	<p>I am proposing to designate Henley as a single polling district to reflect the new district council warding arrangements. Gillots leisure centre will be a designated polling place for the whole area. I am considering the most appropriate allocation of voters to polling places as a separate exercise but am sympathetic to the request.</p>
<p>Nuffield</p>	<p>Nuffield residents should be able to vote in their own parish and not have to travel to Nettlebed to vote</p>	<p>It has proved very difficult to find a polling place in Nuffield in recent years. For a long time we used the officers' social club at Huntercombe YO1 but this is no longer available. We then used Nuffield Place, a National Trust property, but this proved problematic and is now no longer available. We have followed up a suggestion of using the golf club and have received confirmation that this is possible for the May elections. I therefore propose designating Huntercombe Golf Club as the polling place for Nuffield.</p>

10. The second consultation commenced on the 19 December. At the time of writing this report the comments received and my responses were as follows:

Parish	Issue	Consultation responses	Proposal
Berinsfield	Disabled access to the Church Hall	The Parish Council notes the comments regarding disabled access. Church Hall is currently used by disabled people and therefore PC is of the view that the current arrangements are suitable for polling purposes.	Retain Church Hall as polling place for Berinsfield.
Cholsey	Cholsey cricket pavilion suggested as additional polling station	PC supports this suggestion	I invite the Committee to designate Cholsey cricket pavilion as a polling place
Goring-on-Thames	Lack of parking at Goring Village Hall	Library suggested as alternative	The county council is not in favour of this as the library is open to the public on a Thursday. The electoral services officer visited the library and is of the view that it is not suitable for a polling place. I propose retention of Goring Village Hall as a polling place
Nuffield	Polling place is outside parish	Suggest using mobile unit at Huntercombe Golf Course or a room in the Golf Club	Huntercombe Golf Club has confirmed the availability of a room for the May 2015 elections. I propose that the committee designates Huntercombe Golf Club as the polling place for Nuffield parish
Stoke Talmage	Polling place is in different district ward –	Most residents travel to work via the M40;	Stoke Talmage parish is now in a different district ward to Lewknor parish. Travelling to

	use Lewknor Village Hall	Lewknor Village Hall is therefore most convenient as they can vote on the way to or from work. In addition, the back road to Pyrton suffers from severe flooding.	Pyrton village hall is not significantly more inconvenient so I invite the committee to designate it as the polling place for Stoke Talmage
Watlington	Lack of parking at Memorial Club	Church suggested as alternative	Church has poor access. I propose designating the Parish Room (used at recent elections with no complaints) as the polling place in Watlington
Wheatfield	Use Tetsworth Memorial Hall instead of Lewknor Village Hall	Parish meeting supports this suggestion I also put this suggestion to Adwell parish meeting but had no response	I invite the committee to designate Tetsworth memorial hall as the polling place for both Wheatfield and Adwell parishes as it provides a more convenient location for electors to vote

I will report any comments received following publication of this report at the meeting.

- Although I anticipate implementing the decisions made by the committee in respect of polling districts and polling places in full, it is possible that issues could arise that require changes. The council's constitution currently gives me delegated authority to choose an alternative polling place if the designated one becomes unavailable. I propose that this is widened to refer more generally to changes in circumstances and extended to cover changes to polling districts as well. This will avoid a situation where the Committee may have to meet at short notice to agree what could be a relatively trivial change. I am happy that the delegation includes reference to first seeking the views of members of the committee and the local councillor(s) covering the area affected.

Access Issues

- The committee will note that the schedule in appendix A lists a number of premises where access for disabled people is not particularly good. In all cases there is no ready alternative. As Returning Officer I will be asking the cabinet to consider setting aside some of the communities capital grants scheme monies to fund works that improve disabled access to these buildings. The Committee may wish to consider passing a resolution supporting that request.

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. Cost, however, should not be a prime 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 the 31 January 2015. 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 2015. Decisions taken in respect of this report will fulfil that requirement. For the most part existing polling districts and polling places remain. Where there are changes these are generally because of changes to district ward boundaries, changes to the availability of premises or the identification of new or better premises to host polling stations.

Background Papers

Responses to the consultation