

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT BY RETURNING OFFICER

TO:	COUNCIL		
DATE:	23rd February 2021		
TITLE:	POLLING PLACE IN WHITLEY WARD		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR BROCK	PORTFOLIO:	LEADERSHIP
SERVICE:	ELECTIONS	WARDS:	BOROUGH WIDE AND WHITLEY WARD
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1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 Further to Minute 56 of the Council meeting of 26th March 2019 which considered the Review of Polling places 2018/2019 in accordance with the Electoral Administration Act 2006 (the 2006 Act), which requires the Council to undertake a review of its polling districts and polling places every five years to a national timetable this report relates to a change of polling place for Whitley Ward. This change will have effect for the Borough and Police & Crime Commissioner elections to be held on 6th May 2021.
- 1.2 This report also sets out the grant of a delegation regarding polling places outside of the compulsory review period due to the Covid pandemic which may require urgent changes to be made to polling places or polling stations. Following the guidance of the Electoral Commission it is proposed to grant a delegation to the Returning Officer in consultation with the Leader and relevant ward members.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That with regard to Whitley ward, Geoffrey Field Junior school be designated as the polling place for Whitley ward (polling district SA) in place of the Geoffrey Field Infants School with immediate effect.

- 2.2 That the Returning Officer, in consultation with the Leader of the Council and the relevant ward members, be given delegated authority to be allowed to alter polling places or polling stations outside of the compulsory review periods, where changes were required to be made as a matter of urgency.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The guidance for Returning Officers published by the Electoral Commission states that the local authority must make the decision if a polling place must be moved and that if this is at short notice that the council's own delegation procedures should be followed. At present there is no such delegation in place in the Reading Borough Council and there is a subsequent risk to the reputation of the council.
- 3.2 It is the Council's policy to encourage electors to exercise their right to vote and to locate polling places and polling stations in buildings which are suitable for the areas concerned and which assist voters in that area who wish to vote in person to reach their polling station and gain access in a manner which will encourage them to exercise their right to vote.
- 3.3 The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a requirement for reviews of polling districts to be undertaken every five years, during each Parliament. The Council's last review was undertaken in 2019, and reported to full Council on 26th March 2019.

4. THE PROPOSAL

4.1 Whitley Ward

- 4.1.1 The polling place for Whitley ward district SA is the **Geoffrey Field Infants School**, which is not available as a Polling Station. The use of this school as a polling station has been the arrangement for many years and was as reported in the 2019 review of polling districts.
- 4.1.2 I have arranged to move the polling station to the adjacent **Geoffrey Field Junior school**, which is located on Exbourne Road, Whitley, Reading.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 The Council seeks to achieve its strategic aims through promoting the participation of Reading people in local democracy.

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 6.1 The changes to the Whitley ward polling place set out in this report have been made following consultation with the local ward Councillors.
- 6.2 The poll cards for both polling districts will show the new polling station. That for Whitley ward polling district SA will show **Geoffrey Field Junior school** with the additional words, “Replacement polling station”.

7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to –
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 7.2 In this regard you **must** consider whether the decision will or could have a differential impact on: racial groups; gender; people with disabilities; people of a particular sexual orientation; people due to their age; people due to their religious belief.
- 7.3 The principal equality consideration for polling stations is access, in particular for electors with mobility or sight difficulties. **Geoffrey Field Junior school** is well lit and fully disability compliant, with ramped access to the polling place.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1983 require that every Parliamentary Constituency must be divided into polling districts and that each District Council must divide its area into polling districts for that part of the Constituency within its area. Reading falls within the area of two Parliamentary Constituencies - Reading East and Reading West.
- 8.2 In exercising its powers, the Council is required to give all electors “such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances”. In addition, in choosing polling places, only places which are accessible to electors who are disabled must be chosen so far as is reasonably and practicable.
- 8.3 Unless there are special circumstances, the polling place for any polling district should be located in the district itself. **Geoffrey Field Junior**

school is located on the same road as the present polling station and is convenient for all parts of the ward, by foot, car or public transport.

- 8.4 A polling place is usually the building to which people go to vote and polling station is the location within the building at which electors obtain their voting papers.
- 8.5 The Returning Officer is required to provide a sufficient number of polling stations in each polling place and to allocate electors to the polling stations in such manner as he or she thinks most convenient.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers). There are not considered to be any direct environmental and climate implications as regards to the recommendations in this report.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The Electoral Registration service has a budget of £7,000 for the hire of polling places.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Report to Council 26th March 2019, on the Review of Polling Places 2018/19.