

**READING BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**REPORT BY RETURNING OFFICER**

|                         |  |                   |                                    |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>TO:</b>              | <b>COUNCIL</b>                               |                   |                                    |
| <b>DATE:</b>            | <b>26 MARCH 2019</b>                         |                   |                                    |
| <b>TITLE:</b>           | <b>REVIEW OF POLLING PLACES 2018-19</b>      |                   |                                    |
| <b>LEAD COUNCILLOR:</b> | <b>CLLR LOVELOCK</b>                         | <b>PORTFOLIO:</b> | <b>CORPORATE SERVICES</b>          |
| <b>SERVICE:</b>         | <b>ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION</b>              | <b>WARDS:</b>     | <b>BOROUGH-WIDE</b>                |
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**1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT**

- 1.1 Further to Minute 52 of Policy Committee on 26 November 2018, and 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 four years to a national timetable, this report sets out the results of the consultation exercise undertaken for the 2018-19 review of polling districts and polling places in Reading, and identifies the responses received. It also reviews the deployment of polling stations within polling places.
- 1.2 The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 (the 2013 Act) introduced a change to the timing of compulsory reviews of UK Parliamentary polling districts and polling places. The current compulsory review must be started and completed between 1 October 2018 and 31 January 2020 (inclusive). Subsequent compulsory reviews must be started and completed within the period of 16 months that starts on 1 October of every fifth year after 1 October 2018. That is, the next review must be started and completed between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025.
- 1.3 The last review took place in 2014, and was reported to full Council on 21 October 2014 (Minute 30 refers)
- 1.4 Notice of the 2018-19 review was published on 3 December 2018, on the Council's website, at the Civic Offices, and in the Council's libraries. The deadline for responses was 2 January 2019. Letters and emails were sent to the following interested parties, specifically to invite them to participate in the review:
- All Councillors
  - The Borough MPs
  - Party Agents
  - Polling Station Inspectors at 2018 Elections
  - Organisations receiving papers for the Access Forum
  - Polling Station venue managers

- Community & Residents' Groups and Associations
- 1.5 This year's review attracted 37 responses: a significant increase from the 7 responses generated by the 2014 review. These are set out in the schedule at **Appendix A**. The appended schedule also includes comments on polling places received by my Electoral Services team over the past year, outside the consultation period. These are shown in *italics* and shaded.
- 1.6 As Returning Officer, I must make a written submission to the review process which comments on the existing polling stations and any new polling stations that may be used based on proposals made in the review. My written submission is at **Appendix B**.
- 1.7 Both the results of the consultation (Appendix A) and my written submission (Appendix B) have been published on the review page of the Council's website from Friday 8 February 2019.
- 1.8 This report reviews both attachments, and recommends changes below to the Council's polling places and stations in their light. In the text below I have shown the cross-reference to the relevant paragraph in the report.

## **2. RECOMMENDED ACTION**

- 2.1 That the results of the consultation on the 2018-19 review of polling places (Appendix A), and the Returning Officer's written submission (Appendix B), be received and noted;
- 2.2 That the following changes to polling places be noted: [para. 3.5]
- a) The change of name of the polling place for Caversham polling district 3 (MB) to The Weller Centre (from Amersham Road Community Centre);
  - b) The relocation of the polling station for Norcot polling District 1 (E) at St George's Church, St George's Road, from the Church Hall to the church;
  - c) The Returning Officer's intention to return the polling place for Mapledurham ward (Y) to the Mapledurham Pavilion, when this has been rebuilt and the suitability of the new building to host a polling station has been confirmed; [para. 3.6]
- 2.3 That, following the closure and disposal of Southcote Library at Southcote Lane, the polling place for Southcote polling district 2 (FB) be moved the Southcote Community Hub in Coronation Square; [para. 4.3.1]
- 2.4 That, in the case of building works at Battle Library making the building not being available for future elections, the polling place for Battle polling district 1 (A) be moved temporarily to Emmanuel Church, Oxford Road, next door; [para. 4.3.1]
- 2.5 That with regard to Whitley ward:
- a) The Returning Officer's intention to explore options for a new polling district and polling place in Whitley ward, to serve the new developments west of the Basingstoke Road and in Green Park, be noted; [para. 4.3.2]
  - b) Polling districts S and SC, both of which currently poll at Whitley Park Primary School, be merged; [para. 4.4.3]

**2.6** That the following changes be made to the number of polling stations at the polling places listed below: [para. 4.4.3]

- a) Battle polling district 1 (A) - Battle Library - establish second polling station
- b) Katesgrove polling district 2 (BA) - Christchurch Centre, Milman Road - reduce to 1 polling station
- c) Kentwood polling district 1 (C) - St Mary Magdelene Hall - reduce to 1 polling station
- d) Norcot polling district 1 (EA) - St Michael's Primary School - reduce to 1 polling station
- e) Redlands polling district 2 (RA) - Redlands Primary School - reduce to 1 polling station

**2.7** That the position and responses concerning the use of Caversham Primary School as the polling place for both Caversham polling district 4 (MC) and Thames polling district 3 (WB) be noted, and in this respect: [paras. 4.5.8 and 4.5.9]

a) the lack to date of suitable alternative polling places in Thames ward polling district 3 (WB), and the Returning Officer's continuing efforts to find a suitable alternative locations, be noted and endorsed;

b) the Returning Officer consult with Thames ward Councillors about a more comprehensive review of polling districts in the ward, with a view to bring suitable locations for polling places in other parts of the ward into play;

c) The Returning Officer consult with Caversham ward Councillors about the following options:

- Combining polling district 4 (MC) with polling district 2 (MA), with the polling place at Thameside Primary School (two polling stations)
- Identifying a suitable alternative location in polling district 4 (MC)
- Modifying the polling district boundary between Caversham polling districts MA and MC, to extend polling district 4 (MC) eastwards, to include the area north of Church Street and west of Prospect Street; and moving the polling place to Caversham Library.

d) Caversham Primary School to continue to be the polling place for both Caversham polling district 4 (MC) and Thames polling district 3 (WB), and host three polling stations, until suitable alternative polling places for both wards and polling districts can be identified and agreed.

**2.8** That the position and responses concerning Kentwood polling district 4 (CC), in the light of the closure and imminent demolition of the Norcot Community Centre, Lyndhurst Road, be noted, and in this respect: [para. 4.5.10]

a) a temporary polling station be set up at the Lyndhurst Road Community Centre, operating from the Council's Emergency Planning vehicle, for the duration of the works to build a new community facility at the site;

b) the Returning Officer consult with Kentwood ward Councillors about a more comprehensive review of polling districts in the ward, with a view to bring polling places in other parts of the ward into play, as described in para. 4.5.10;

**2.9 The Head of Legal & Democratic Services, as Returning Officer, be authorised to implement all appropriate actions arising from the review and discussed in this report, in consultation where appropriate with affected ward Councillors.**

### **3. POLICY CONTEXT**

3.1 The 2006 and 2013 Acts do not provide for a review of constituency or ward boundaries, and the review of polling districts and polling stations must therefore take place within the existing constituency and ward boundaries.

3.2 The Council's ward boundaries were last reviewed in 2001-02. This established the current boundaries of wards. There have been no further changes to ward boundaries to date. However, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England review the position annually, based on the electoral register for the authority published on 1 December each year, and have given the Council notice that they will include Reading in their review programme for 2019-20.

3.3 Reading has 16 wards, in which 15 elect three Councillors, and one - Mapledurham - elects one Councillor. With the exception of Mapledurham ward, each ward is divided into a smaller number of polling districts, with their own polling place. The polling place is the building within which the polling station is located. Some polling places have more than one polling station. Two polling places - Alfred Sutton School and Caversham Primary School - each hosts three polling stations; at Caversham Primary school, two are for Thames ward (polling district WB) and one is for Caversham ward (Polling district MC).

3.4 Reading has 51 polling places, covering 53 polling districts, and 75 polling stations. The current pattern of polling district boundaries was established following the 2002 ward boundary review, and has not changed since the review undertaken in 2007.

3.5 Changes have been made to the location of some of the polling places in the polling districts, to reflect changes in building use or, in some case, demolition. Since the polling place review in 2014, four changes have been made to polling places:

- The polling place for Battle polling district 1 (A) has changed from Cranbury College to Emmanuel Methodist Church [Agreed by Council, 14 May 2017 - Minute 13]
- The polling place for Mapledurham ward (Y), has changed from the Mapledurham Pavilion to Caversham Heights Methodist Church [Agreed by Council , 22 March 2016 - Minute 57] (see also 3.6 below)
- The name of the polling place for Caversham polling district 3 (MB), has changed from Amersham Road Community Centre to The Weller Centre;
- The polling station for Norcot polling district 1 (E), at St George's Church, has changed from St. Georges Church Hall to St. Georges Church, due to the demolition of the Church Hall, and will move into a new community facility being built at St George's Church.

3.6 It is intended to return the polling place for Mapledurham ward to the Mapledurham Pavilion, when this has been rebuilt and the suitability of the new building to host a polling station has been confirmed.

### **4. REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES**

## 4.1 Review Process

- 4.1.1 A polling district is a sub-division of a constituency or ward. A polling place is a geographical area within a polling district in which a polling station can be located: there is no legal definition of the term “polling district”, which therefore can be defined tightly (the building in which the polling station will be located) or widely (the entire polling district). It is possible to have a polling station outside the polling district in special circumstances, in which cases the polling place must be clearly specified.
- 4.1.2 The review is required under Section 16 of the 2006 Act, which amends Section 18 of the Representation of the People Act 1983. Under Section 18C of the amended 1983 Act, a review of each polling district and polling place must be completed before the end of a period of four years starting with the completion of the previous review. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 changed the timing of compulsory reviews of Parliamentary polling districts and polling places, aligned to the timetable for five-yearly General Elections. Under this, the current review must be completed by 31 January 2020.
- 4.1.3 The end results must be published in the next new electoral register. Therefore the results of the 2019 review will be incorporated into the new electoral register published on 1 December 2019.
- 4.1.4 The responsibility for signing off the review rests with full Council. The legal position is that Sections 18 and 31 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 allow constituencies and wards to be divided into polling districts. Under the Functions and Responsibilities Regulations issued under Section 17 of the Local Government Act 2000, these are functions which cannot be exercised by the executive. Council could delegate these functions to a Committee (or to an officer) but to date it has not done so.
- 4.1.5 The process is based on parliamentary constituencies. Under Schedule A1 of the Parliamentary Election Rules it involves a number of specified stages:

The Council must:

- Publish notice of review
  - done 3 December 2018
- Consult with Returning Officer(s) for parliamentary constituencies in Council areas - and publish these when received (within 30 days of receipt)
  - I am the only Returning Officer for Reading. My response is at Appendix B.
- Seek representations from persons with an expertise in relation to access and disability - who must also have an opportunity to comment on the Returning Officer’s representations (see para. 7 below)
- Any elector may also make representations - which may include proposals for specified alternative polling places (see para. 4 below)
- On completion of the review, compile and adopt a revised scheme - which must be published, with reasons given for decisions.

The Returning Officer must:

- Make representations about the location of polling stations within polling places
- Allocate electors to polling stations (after review)

4.1.6 This report marks the completion of the review, and recommends revisions to the Council’s arrangements for polling districts and polling places to apply until the next review (scheduled for 2022), for the reasons given in this report and its appendices.

#### 4.2 Projected Growth

4.2.1 Appendix B includes indicative information on projected new residential developments in individual wards and polling districts, based on the Council’s Residential Planning Commitments report as at 31 March 2018. The Commitments report shows planning consents given for a total of 3,975 new dwellings (hard commitments - of which 1,206 were under construction), with the possibility of a further 2,981 dwellings on sites identified as suitable for housing (soft commitments). These figures are for all consents and give a total of 6,956 new dwellings with hard or soft commitments. The electoral register currently has 72,283 dwellings, so if all of these dwellings were to be built, it would represent an increase of nearly 10% in dwelling numbers across the Borough.

4.2.2 The sites listed in Appendix B are for developments of 20 or more dwellings. The majority of the new residential development is projected to take place in two wards: Abbey (3,600 dwellings) and Whitley (2,100 dwellings).

#### 4.3 Comments on Polling Places

4.3.1 Appendix B also includes my comments on polling places. Most are acceptable. However, the following should be noted:

| <b>Polling District</b> | <b>Polling Place</b>                    | <b>Comments</b>   |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Battle A                | Battle Library                          | Will be available May 2019. Planned building works delayed to start the following week.   |
| Kentwood CC             | Norcot Community Centre, Lyndhurst Road | Closed and boarded up - due to be demolished - new build to be residential with community facility<br>Not available May 2019 and possibly 2020.<br>For this year’s elections, a mobile polling station will be provided in Lyndhurst Road in the emergency planning vehicle.<br>(See also para. 4.5.10 below) |
| Southcote FB            | Southcote Library                       | Building has closed.<br>The polling place to move permanently to the Southcote Community Hub in Coronation Square, which is where the Library has re-located.   |

4.3.2 The growth of residential development in Whitley ward is predominantly to the west of Basingstoke Road, especially to the west of the A33 relief road (Green Park, Madejski stadium). This suggests the need for a new polling district and polling place in that part of the ward, west of Basingstoke Road. This would affect current polling districts Whitley S (Whitley Park School) and Whitley SB (Whitley Wood Community Centre). This option will be explored.

#### 4.4 Polling Station Electorates

- 4.4.1 Appendix B further includes details of the current electorate for each polling district, broken down by absent (postal) voters and voters in person. This is relevant to the review because the Electoral Commission guidance is that polling stations should not have more than 2,500 electors who vote in person at the polling station.
- 4.4.2 Polling places can host more than one polling station, and 22 (out of 51) do. Two host 3 polling stations.
- 4.4.3 From an initial scan of Appendix B, the following polling places may justify a change of arrangement in the number of polling stations:

| Polling District        | Polling Place                      | Comments   |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Battle A<br>(1 PS)      | Battle Library                     | 2,460 voters in person<br>Will need 2 polling stations   |
| Katesgrove BA<br>(2 PS) | Christchurch Centre<br>Milman Road | 1,379 voters in person<br>Could reduce to 1 polling station  |
| Kentwood C<br>(2 PS)    | St Mary Magdelene Hall             | 1,793 voters in person<br>Could reduce to 1 polling station  |
| Norcot EA               | St Michael's Primary               | 1,569 voters in person<br>Could reduce to 1 polling station  |
| Redlands RA             | Redlands Primary                   | 1,087 voters in person<br>Could reduce to 1 polling station<br>(Also suggested by ward Councillor)                                   |
| Whitley SC              | Whitley Park Primary               | 330 electors. Does not need to be a separate polling district. This is a legacy from 2002 ward boundary review. Merge with Whitley S |

#### 4.5 Consultation

- 4.5.1 The results of the consultation exercise are set out in **Appendix A**. This presents the results of the consultation by ward in alphabetical order, with the anonymised respondents being categorised by the polling district in which they live; and whether a member of the public, or polling place, or election staff, or a Councillor or officer.
- 4.5.2 As mentioned above, 37 responses were received through the consultation. In addition, for completeness, details of five critical comments about polling stations, received over the preceding 12 months, have been included, shown in italics and shaded, to give a total of 42 responses.
- 4.5.3 Of the 37 responses received through the consultation, 24 were from respondents who lived in the polling district about which they were commenting, and 13 (35%) were not. Therefore a third of responses were about a polling place that the respondent did not use. This interesting statistic is evidence of a campaign about using schools as polling stations and will be discussed in more detail in paras. 4.5.7 and 4.5.8 below.
- 4.5.4 No comments were received about the polling places in the following six wards:

| Reading East | Reading West |
|--------------|--------------|
| Church       | Minster      |
| Katesgrove   | Norcot       |
| Mapledurham  | Tilehurst    |

- 4.5.5 Two polling places received positive comments about their use as polling places:

- New Hope Centre (Abbey L)
- Sir Herman Gollancz Hall (Abbey LA)

#### 4.5.6 The following polling places received a small number of critical comments:

##### Abbey

- St John & St Stephen Church, Orts Road (LC) - no disabled parking

##### Battle

- Oxford Road Primary School (AC) - disagree with schools being used as polling places

##### Caversham

- Thameside Primary School (MA) - disagree with schools being used as polling places

##### Kentwood

- St Mary Magdelene Hall (C) - difficult to access by foot up a steep incline. Also dislike of tellers.

##### Park

- Alfred Sutton Primary School (PA) - disagree with schools being used as polling places

##### Peppard

- Micklands Primary School (VB) - disagree with school being used as polling place

##### Redlands

- St Luke's Church Hall (R) - a long way from Granby Gardens
- Uneven pavement in highway outside

##### Southcote

- Southcote Primary School - disagree with schools being used as polling places (2 comments)

##### Thames

- Highdown School (W) - difficulties of ensuring adequate signage
- Caversham Primary School (WB) - a long way from Mayfield Drive (off Henley Road)

##### Whitley

- Whitley Park Primary School - poor accessibility from Kennet Island / Green Park (4 comments)

#### 4.5.7 Use of Schools as Polling Stations

Local Authorities across the country use schools as polling places and have done so for generations. Schools which are maintained from public funds have a duty to make themselves available for use as polling places if required by the Returning Officer.

In Reading, 22 of our 51 polling places are schools (43%). Being a local polling station reinforces the school's position within its local community and brings local residents into the school to vote.



Of the 22 schools, 20 are Primary or Nursery schools. In all cases, nowadays the school will close and treat polling day as an inset day.

The date of local elections is set by statute, and is the first Thursday in May each year. Schools that are polling places can plan on this basis and schedule an inset day. My Elections team gives timely notice of forthcoming known election dates to all polling places, including schools. Since 1997, the Government has arranged all general elections and national referenda to be held on the same day as local elections, as are PCC elections; with the exception of the 2017 general election, which was called outside the provisions of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

At election time, the Department for Education issues the following standard advice to schools that are used as polling places. Local authorities have the power to require a school to act as a polling station. The decision to close the school rests with the head teacher and will usually depend on whether arrangements can be made for voting to take place separately from the rest of the school premises, with a separate entrance and exit. If the school decides to close on polling day, it should try to make up the lost education by re-arranging the school calendar so that the school meets the requisite 190 days, or holding a non-contact (“inset”) day on polling day so that teachers are at work but not the pupils.

As can be seen above, a number of schools that are polling places attracted responses suggesting that an alternative arrangement should be found. Common themes were the inconvenience of childcare and the disruption to education. The latter will not arise if the school treats polling day as an inset day, as suggested by the Department of Education.

Also as mentioned above, there is evidence of an active campaign about the use of Caversham Primary School, which attracted 10 responses from people who do not use it as a polling station.

During the year preceding the consultation exercise, I received two complaints about the use of Southcote Primary School as a polling place, and one about Micklands Primary. Interestingly, the consultation did not generate any negative comments about either location. The position in Southcote ward may have been aggravated by holding two by-elections over the past four years. The complainant about Micklands was a parent, not a voter at the school.

#### 4.5.8 Caversham Primary School

Caversham Primary School is the polling place for two polling districts in different wards - Caversham MC, and Thames WB. It hosts three polling stations.

The use of the school as a polling place was the subject of a local campaign, possibly encouraged by the school, which generated 21 responses, split between polling districts as follows:

- Caversham MC - 4
- Thames WB - 6
- Thames WA - 7
- Mapledurham Y - 1
- Unknown - 3

Of these, 20 proposed moving the polling place(s) away from Caversham Primary School; and 1 supported the use of the school as a polling place. One was a Caversham ward Councillor.

As can be seen above, only 10 (half) of the responders proposing moving the polling place away from the school were voters at the school (ie voters living in Caversham MC and Thames WB).

Caversham Primary School has been used as a polling place for very many years. Before the 2002 ward boundary review it was the polling place for the eastern part of Caversham ward. The 2002 ward boundary review moved the ward boundaries north of the river, and left the school just over the border into Thames ward. The polling place for what is now polling district Caversham MC was moved to Thameside Primary School. However, in the 2007 polling places review there was a local campaign to restore this area's polling place to Caversham Primary School, which was agreed by Council on 16 October 2007 (Minute 30 refers).

As Caversham and Thames wards are currently constituted, Caversham Primary School, in Hemdean Road, is inconveniently located in the south-western corner of Thames WB, and is a long way from the eastern parts of that polling district, north of Henley Road. One response, from a resident in Mayfield Drive (off Henley Road) asked for the return of voting at New Bridge Nursery, in Lower Caversham, a move which is not possible because that polling place is in Caversham ward.

#### 4.5.9 Alternative Options to Caversham Primary School

If the Council were minded to explore options to move the polling places for Caversham MC and Thames WB (two polling stations) from Caversham Primary School, the options are limited, but set out below. Despite the inconvenience of the school as the current place for both polling districts, I would not recommend moving from the school unless a more suitable polling place can be identified in a more convenient part of the Thames WB polling district.

##### **Thames WB**

As currently constituted, Thames ward polling district WB does not have any other public buildings that could be suitable to serve as a polling place. A location along the southern part of Peppard Road would be geographically more desirable, if one could be found. No practical alternative locations in the polling district were suggested by any respondent.

For Thames WB, St Anne's School and the Chiltern Nursery have been approached but are not options. My officers are currently exploring the option of the Army Cadets hut in Balmore Park.

##### **Caversham MC**

It would be easier to move the Caversham MC polling place. As mentioned above, it was moved to Caversham Primary School in 2007 from Thameside Primary School (the polling place for Caversham MA), to which it could return. This would involve a merger of Caversham MA and MC polling districts. The polling place at Thameside Primary School would require a second polling station.

My officers are exploring the option of Hemdean House School, in Hemdean Road, which unlike Caversham Primary School (nearly) is in the Caversham MC polling district.

Caversham Library has also been suggested, and the Children's Library could be suitable (but small). The Library is not in Caversham MC polling district. Therefore effecting this would require modifying the polling district boundary between Caversham polling districts MA and MC, to move extend polling district 4 (MC) westwards, to include the area north of Church Street and west of Prospect Street, which would then include Caversham Library. The electorate of Caversham MC polling district is small - 577 voters in person.

#### 4.5.10 Alternative Options to Norcot Community Centre, Lyndhurst Road (Kentwood CC)

This is a more intractable problem, which could mean that the polling district serving the old Norcot Estate could be without a permanent polling place for the duration of the building works, with no guarantee that the community space provided in the new building will be suitable for future use.

There is one other public building at the western edge of the polling district - Norcot Nursery - which is not keen to be used as a polling place because it would require the Nursery's closure on election day, for safeguarding reasons.

The electorate in the polling district who vote in person is high - around 1,650 - but the turnout in local elections is low (around 28%). Therefore for this year's local elections, we plan to use the emergency planning vehicle as a mobile polling station, parked outside the Community Centre. However, this is not a viable option going forward, in particular for a parliamentary election or referendum, and a fall-back replacement polling place is required.

The local ward Councillors have been consulted about alternative locations. One responded to the consultation, but could not identify possible alternative public buildings in the polling district. Two possible suggestions have been made: Rivers gym in Scours Lane, and Waitrose in Oxford Road. The former is out of the way from local residents. Waitrose has been approached but is not an option.

If an alternative polling place cannot be identified in the Kentwood CC polling district, it may be necessary to take more radical action and re-organise the polling districts in the ward. One possibility is set out below:

- Move all of Kentwood CC into Kentwood C polling district, and transfer the polling station to St Mary Magdelene Hall
- Move the south-eastern part of Kentwood C polling district - around Rodway Road - into Kentwood CB polling district, with a move of polling station to Meadow Park Academy (formerly Upcroft Primary School)
- Reorganise the two polling stations at St Mary Magdelene Hall - one covering the former CC polling district, and the other covering the remainder of the CB polling district.

## 5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 The electoral registration process and elections support the promotion of the participation of Reading people in local democracy.

## 6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 6.1 The arrangements for public consultation on the review were agreed at the Policy Committee on 26 November 2018. Details are given in para. 1.3 above.

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## 7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

### Access

- 7.1 A significant element of the review is to consider the suitability of the existing polling stations in terms of access. Section 16 of the 2006 Act has amended Section 18D of the 1983 Act to require the authority to take sufficient account of the accessibility of disabled persons to polling stations (S18(2)(b)).
- 7.2 Disability audits of the Council's 51 polling places (75 polling stations) were undertaken in 2008 and 2011 by the Council's Property Service, as part of those reviews. These have been reviewed subsequently each year in the light of experience at that year's elections. At each election, I ask Presiding Officers to report back on access issues in their polling stations; and my Deputy Returning Officers also look at access as part of their polling station inspections.
- 7.3 For this review, the Council's Property service has commissioned an access audit of our polling stations, from Faithful and Gould, the Council's surveying consultants.
- 7.4 Officers from my Electoral Services team attended the Council's Access Forum on 29 November 2018. They presented the polling places review to the Forum, and invited participating organisations to respond. The Council's Access Officer, Helen Bryant, did respond, and her comments are included in Appendix A, and are set out below:

“As a disabled person and a wheelchair user, I think that there needs to be an all-round approach to thinking about Polling Stations and access; not only in terms of getting in and out and the space within the building, but also getting to the Polling Stations in the first place.

I had thought that, because I had a power chair, it would be easier for me to get to my Polling Station, but it was almost as hard as when I tried it in my manual wheelchair, because of the state of the pavements and kerbs in the area. It also did not feel safe, in some parts, because of these problems.

Maybe, if possible, it would be wise to have a rethink and ask people who have such needs where they feel would be easier for them to go to vote; it might not always be the place that seems to be the most logical in terms of distance. Distance, for me, is less of a factor than being able to get there safely and easily.

I have reverted to a postal vote again, but if this were to be taken into consideration, and a more easily accessible, existing Polling Station could be used instead, so much the better. Or, it may be necessary to find another building, although none comes to mind at the present time.”

- 7.5 The view of my Polling Station Inspectors and myself is that all of the polling places we use are wheelchair accessible, either directly or through discrete arrangements made at the venue. In some cases there can be a long distance from the road to the room used as the polling station.

### Parking

- 7.6 Many polling places, in particular in central Reading, have limited free parking for any voter. This extends to dedicated disabled parking spaces. However, drivers with a Blue Badge can park on double yellow lines if they display their badge and time. The

most difficult polling places to access by car are Sir Herman Gollancz (Abbey LA), Redlands Primary School (Redlands RA), and Newtown Primary School (Park P).

- 7.7 One response commented on difficulties of getting to the polling place due to the state of the public highway. This is beyond the scope of this review. However, I note that full Council, when it considered the results of the 2014 review, resolved to ask the Highways Service to consider the current state of pavements in Redlands Ward at the approach to the polling stations and prepare a repair schedule and carry out the work where necessary.
- 7.8 As mentioned above, 22 of the Council's 51 polling places are schools (43%). Over the past decade, schools have reviewed and upgraded their security and safeguarding arrangements, including installing perimeter fencing and gates. This has had the intended effect of restricting public access, including in some cases vehicular access.

### Public Transport

- 7.9 Given the tight urban density of Reading Borough (4.04 hectares), no polling place is more than half a mile from a bus route, and many are located on routes.

## **8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 Paras. 4.1.2 and 4.1.4 above set out the legal basis for the changes dealt with in this report.
- 8.2 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. I am the Returning Officer for both constituencies.
- 8.3 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 reasonable and practicable.
- 8.4 Unless there are special circumstances, the polling place for any polling district should be located in the district itself.
- 8.5 A polling place is usually the building to which people go to vote and polling stations are the locations within the building at which electors obtain their voting papers.
- 8.6 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. There is now a total of nearly 19,000 postal voters in local elections in Reading. The review should therefore focus on the remaining 92,400 electors who are not postal voters and will need to vote in person at their local polling station.
- 8.7 For the 2011 Referendum on Alternative Voting, the Chairman of the Electoral Commission, in her capacity as Chief Counting Officer, introduced a national specification for the ratio of the number of electors in person in a polling district to polling stations, and polling staff. This required a maximum limit of 2,500 electors in person per polling station (who are not postal voters); and 2 Poll Clerks if the number

of electors in person was over 1,500. Since then, the Electoral Commission has requested that Returning Officers bear in mind the predicted turnout per election type and staff their polling stations accordingly, bearing the above ratio in mind as guidance.

## **9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 The 2018/19 budget for electoral registration is £327k, and the budget for local elections is £90k: the cost of the review has been met from within these.
- 9.2 The Council's spend on hiring its 51 polling places for each election is just over £17,000. The rates of hire vary between venues, in a range from £60 to £1,000. The average is £336.

## **10. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 10.1 Electoral Commission Guidance - Reviews of Polling Places, Polling Districts and Polling Stations.