

GENERAL PURPOSES AND LICENSING COMMITTEE - FRIDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2022

REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1. That the General Purposes and Licensing Committee:

- Approve and recommend to Council the Returning Officer's final recommendations for formal designation of polling districts and polling places;
- Note representations as part of the consultation; and
- Note alteration to polling districts.

2. PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW

2.1. The recent review of the New Forest electoral arrangements by the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBCE) has necessitated a review of polling districts and places to ensure that polling districts are coterminous with the revised ward boundaries.

2.2. This is not a compulsory five-year review as required by the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, the last of which was undertaken during 2019. Instead, this is an interim review to ensure the appropriateness of arrangements as part of the implementation of the electoral review changes, however the Electoral Commission guidance for undertaking the compulsory review will be followed.

2.3. The new boundaries do not come into force until May 2023 and any changes made as part of this review will also not be effective until that time.

2.4. This is not a matter that can be dealt with under delegated authority and the Committee's recommendations will be approved by Council.

2.5. The following definitions and requirements are provided as background information:

- A Polling District is a geographical area created by a sub-division of a UK Parliamentary constituency for the purposes of a UK Parliamentary Election
- A Polling Place is a building or area in which polling stations will be selected by the Returning Officer
- A Polling Station is the room or area within the polling place where voting takes place. Polling stations are chosen by the Returning Officer
- Each district council must provide "such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances". The Council has a responsibility to ensure that, so far as is reasonable and practicable, every polling place for which it is responsible is accessible to electors who are disabled
- Unless special circumstances apply, a polling place and polling station should be in the same polling district
- The Returning Officer has no power to requisition buildings in private ownership for use as polling stations but is entitled to use schools maintained or assisted by a local authority, as well as those schools' receiving grants made out of monies provided by Parliament. This includes academies and free schools.

3. REVIEW PROCESS

- 3.1. Following the General Purposes and Licensing Committee's approval to conduct this review at their meeting in July 2022 a formal Notice of Review was published, and representations invited during the six-week consultation period between 18 July and 28 August 2022.
- 3.2. The following actions were undertaken to ensure that the review was widely communicated:
- A Notice of Review was published on the Council's website and displayed at all the Council's Information Offices
 - A press release was prepared and published on the Council's website
 - Information on the review was included in the Council's resident and staff e-newsletter
 - The Council's social media channels were utilised
 - Emails/Letters were sent to elected representatives including MPs, district council members and parish and town councils
 - Emails inviting comments were sent to known disability groups within the area
- 3.3. A dedicated area of the Council's website was also established containing background information to the review including maps of the proposed polling districts and an online form for representations to be made.
- 3.4. A meeting with a representative from the New Forest Disability Information Service was held in August, and their views on the review were gained as well as general guidance to help improve the polling places for those with access needs.
- 3.5. Meetings were also held with representatives from Waterside Primary School and Wildground Junior School, which are the two schools currently designated as polling stations in the Hythe area, at the end of their summer term.
- 3.6. Six drop-in sessions were held to invite members of the council and relevant town and parish councils to further consult on changes to polling districts and places arising directly from the ward boundary changes and to make comments regarding any known issues and concerns using local knowledge. Specific sessions were held for New Milton, Ringwood, Hythe and Dibden, Fawley, Totton and Lymington and Pennington and a sixth session was held welcoming other councillors.
- 3.7. As part of the initial consultation with the Returning Officer all existing polling places and/or stations were given a RAG rating and those identified as red or amber were visited to understand and mitigate known issues. This totalled 18 sites. A number of these arose directly out of the ward boundary changes where the previous polling station was now outside of the district ward boundary and an alternative venue needed to be identified.

4. SUMMARY OF REPRESENTATIONS

- 4.1. During the consultation 70 representations were received, each of which being given full consideration by the Returning Officer in informing their final recommendations at

appendix 1. A summary of all representations and the Returning Officer's response can be found at **appendix 2.**

- 4.2. Nine of the representations received could not be considered as part of this review, three related to postal voting, five could not be related to a specific polling station and one was with regard to the naming of the new district wards which have been laid before parliament and this review does not provide an option for commentary on these changes.

5. RETURNING OFFICER'S FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1. In considering all representations, consultation discussions with elected members and Town & Parish Councils, and the issues previously identified or arising from boundary changes, the Returning Officer has recommended the following changes.

Ashley Bashley and Fernhill

Representations for this ward have been considered all concerning the geographical location of New Milton Cricket Club, which is no longer a viable location for a polling place due to it being outside of the district ward boundary. The Returning Officer's final recommendation is that New Milton Cricket Club will no longer be used as a polling station, and for electors in polling district NJ, Bashley Village Hall (new polling station) will be the designated polling place and electors in polling district NK will be invited to use St Peters Church Hall as their polling place.

Additionally, Bashley Village Hall has been considered to be a more suitable alternative to St Johns Church Hall (polling station for polling district NF) and is within very close proximity to the existing venue. St Johns Church Hall will no longer be used as a polling station. This will be replaced by Bashley Village Hall.

Ashurst, Bramshaw, Copythorne and Netley Marsh

Valetta Barn is no longer available for use as a polling place and consequently the Returning Officer recommends the continued use of Fritham Free Church as the polling place for polling district BF.

Barton and Becton

The Sea Scouts Hall on Becton Lane has been assessed and is deemed to still represent the most appropriate venue and location for electors in polling district NM. The Returning Officer's staff will work with the venue to identify any opportunities to improve accessibility and lighting.

Bransgore, Burley, Sopley and Ringwood East

The existing polling place for the polling district RI, Crow W.I. hall, is now outside of the district ward boundary and consequently the Returning Officer has determined that the new polling place for these electors should be Burley Village Hall. Crow W.I. Hall will no longer be used as a polling station.

Brockenhurst and Denny Lodge

The existing polling place for the polling districts DL and DM is now outside of the district ward boundary and consequently the Returning Officer has determined that the new polling place for these electors should be the Beaulieu Road Hotel (new polling station).

Additionally, the existing polling district BM will combine with existing polling district BK to become polling district BK. Polling district BM will no longer exist. The previous polling place for polling district BM is outside of the district ward boundary and it has been determined that the more suitable polling place is Brockenhurst Village Hall which is the existing polling place for BK.

Downlands and Forest North

The existing polling place for polling district MR, Blandford Hall, was highlighted in the initial consultation due to the access being via steps to the hall. Although an alternative was assessed its location was not deemed to be as convenient and on balance Blandford Hall is deemed to represent a more appropriate venue with appropriate mitigation from polling station staff.

Fawley, Blackfield, Calshot and Langley

Representation was made in favour of the continued use of Blackfield Baptist Church, which is no longer a viable location for a polling place due to it now being outside of the district ward boundary. Having considered suitable alternatives within the district ward the Returning Officer's final recommendation is that Blackfield Baptist Church will no longer be used as a polling station and the designated polling place for the polling districts of FC and FE will be the Royal British Legion Club (new polling station) on Exbury Road. Existing polling district FE will combine with existing polling district FC, to become FC. Polling district FE will no longer exist.

Additionally, the polling district boundary between polling districts FD and FB will be moved. Endorsed by the ward members for Fawley, Blackfield & Langley there are two isolated properties within polling district FB and moving the boundary will mean that these electors are provided with a more accessible polling station within polling district FD.

Hythe South

Nine representations were received for this ward which have been considered as part of the review. All of which concerned the two schools which are currently designated as polling places in the Hythe South ward.

The use of schools is a contentious and divisive issue and in making their final recommendations the Returning Officer has sought to balance the importance of individuals having easy and convenient access to exercise their democratic right to vote and the education of children who have not only been significantly impacted by the pandemic but where maintaining attendance levels is a key priority. In meeting with the schools, it was also apparent that their use for polling causes disruption and inconvenience to the school, its children, and the parents. Additionally, the Government has asked Returning Officer's not to use schools for the past two parliamentary elections, although the law still allows for this. Representations have been received against the using of schools for these reasons and also in support of using these schools due to their central location within the communities that they serve.

Where possible the Council and the Returning Officer has tried not to use schools as polling places and in every other area a suitable alternative has been available. It is unfortunate that the only two polling districts where schools have needed to be used are both within the same district ward area and where the alternatives previously considered appropriate are now both outside of the new ward boundary.

Alternatives have been investigated as part of the review for both schools.

Waterside School (polling district HK1) - The Scout Hut on Shore Road has been assessed for its suitability as an alternative to the school and has been identified as the only potential alternative venue within the polling district area. However, the Scout Hut does not allow for good pedestrian access with an absence of pavements along the road and a poorly surfaced walkway from the Langdown estate. Parking along the road has also been cited as a potential issue. The school still provides the only viable polling place for this polling district and is being designated as such by the Returning Officer. The Returning Officer's staff will work closely with the school to mitigate the impact of this decision which will include possible options to use the school site without it needing to fully close, whilst ensuring the safeguarding of children.

Wildground School (polling district HN) – Two possible alternatives to using Wildground School have been identified and assessed, St. Anne's Neighbourhood Centre and the Glen public house. The Glen could provide a suitable alternative, near the school with a central location in the community and a separate function room which would enable the polling station to be away from the public bar area. Disabled access would be facilitated through the bar itself due to the presence of steps to the function room, however this could be mitigated by additional staffing and signage. St. Anne's Neighbourhood Centre is already used as a polling station for the HO polling district within the Hythe South Ward and although it could accommodate a double polling station with HN it has been ruled out due to restricted available parking. Having considered all options the Returning Officer has concluded that The Glen be designated as the polling place for polling district HN. This, as with all changes, will be kept under review.

Lymington

The Sea Scouts Hall on Kings Saltern Road has been assessed and is deemed to still represent the most appropriate venue and location for electors in polling district LD. The Returning Officer's staff will work with the venue to identify any opportunities to improve accessibility and lighting.

Milford and Hordle

Representations received for this ward concerned the accessibility and available facilities at Brockenhurst Young Farmers Club. This has also been identified by the Returning Officer's staff as an existing issue. A suitable alternative has been identified within the polling district and the Returning Officer's final recommendation is that Brockenhurst Young Farmers Club will no longer be used as a polling station, with the River of Life Church Hall (new polling station) being designated as the polling place for the polling district HC.

Pennington

The previous polling station for polling district LF, Pennington WI Hall, is no longer available and an alternative needed to be established. Representations were received for this ward which has been considered as part of the review. The Returning Officer's initial recommendation was that the Pennington Sports and Social Club be the new polling place for this electorate, although two other alternatives have also been identified as part of the review. The Town Council Pavilion was considered and is not a viable option as it is used as a day nursery and would not be available. The 1st Lymington and Pennington Scout hut has also been considered and although it would prove a suitable alternative, the facilities at the Pennington Sports and Social Club have been fully assessed for accessibility.

Therefore, the Returning Officer's final recommendation is that Pennington Sports and Social Club should be designated as the polling place for polling district LF.

Totton Central

The existing polling place for the polling districts TA, Totton & Eling Cricket Club is now outside of the district ward boundary and consequently the Returning Officer has determined that the new polling place for these electors should be the Totton & Eling Community Centre, which is used as an existing polling station.

Totton North

Alternative polling places have been considered for polling district TL, the portacabin at Tottonians Rugby Football Club, however it is still considered that this is the most appropriate venue and location, and further work will be undertaken to assess the viability of alternatives ahead of the next statutory review.

Totton South

West Totton Community Centre is no longer a viable venue for polling district TB as it now falls outside of the district ward boundary. The Returning Officer has determined that the most suitable alternative venue is Totton and Eling Cricket Club, which is used as an existing polling station.

- 5.2. The final designation of all polling districts and polling places can be found at **appendix 1** and a revised map of polling districts at **appendix 3**.
- 5.3. Where a polling district boundary has needed to be moved to align with the new ward boundaries, part areas that are moving to a different polling district are suffixed with a 'Z'. This may mean that voters will now need to go to a different polling place within their new polling district. A summary of these changes is in the table at **appendix 4** and should be considered in conjunction with the map at **appendix 3**.
- 5.4. Maps for each new district ward, with all polling districts and polling places marked, can be found on the Council's website at <https://newforest.gov.uk/districtsandplacesreview2022>

6. NEXT STEPS

- 6.1. Subject to approval at Council the Returning Officer's recommendations when agreed will be published on the Council's website and implemented accordingly.
- 6.2. In accordance with guidance from the Electoral Commission all representations received as part of the review will be published on the Council's website. Consideration has been given to data protection and all personal data will be omitted from this publication.
- 6.3. Where Polling Stations have changed electors will be informed of the change in writing and invited to apply for a postal vote if this is more convenient. These changes will also be highlighted on poll cards for the May 2023 elections.
- 6.4. The revised electoral register, to be published for December 2022, will contain part areas suffixed by the letter 'Z'. These part areas will remain within the existing wards until the changes come into effect in May 2023 and will subsequently form part of the relevant polling district when the 2023 revised register is published.

6.5. Any changes will be kept under review and further consideration will be given to necessary improvements for the next compulsory polling places and polling district review in 2024.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1. There are no financial implications arising directly out of this report.

8. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

8.1. Each polling station is assessed to ensure accessibility requirements are met and where this is not the case the review considered alternative venues or any necessary mitigating actions.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1. The small geographic nature of polling districts means that electors are only required to travel a short distance to their polling station if they are travelling by car.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

REPORT TO GENERAL PURPOSES &
LICENSING COMMITTEE – 18 JULY
2022