

Extract from the draft minutes of the Governance and Audit Committee meeting of 3 September 2019

168. Polling Districts and Polling Places Review

The review was presented by Jason Granger, Customer Solutions Manager, and James Bennett, Senior Electoral Services Officer. The Customer Solutions manager introduced the principles and requirement for the review, and explained his role, and that of the Electoral Services Team.

Councillor Dave Harris attended and with the consent of the Chairman addressed the Committee to thank officers for their work and comment on the proposals resulting from the review. The need to ensure that all voters had access to polling stations and that access was as easy as possible was stressed, along with a request that, so far as was possible, the placing of polling stations outside the district they served should be avoided, if at all possible.

Councillor Harris supported the proposed change of polling station for polling district BF (Shrub End), as the proposed site would be safer for residents voting, regarding its position in relation to the road. The Councillor raised an element of concern that the proposed polling station for BE (Rainsborowe Road), proposed to be at the Shrub End Community & Sports Centre) was to the North of the area it would serve, and would entail a long journey for some residents wishing to vote. He suggested that the current BE polling district be split in two, and an additional polling station be located, for the new additional polling district, at the old local community gym. This would be for use by the residents of the streets to the South of Abbey Field and would make voting easier, especially for those with limited mobility. It was confirmed that it would be relatively simple to create a new polling district, but that any additional districts proposed would need to be approved by the Governance and Audit Committee.

The proposed change to the arrangements for polling district AB (Willows and Monkwick) was raised. Councillor Harris raised issues which had come to his attention regarding difficulties reported to him regarding residents voting in the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections at the interim polling station, sited at Abbots Community Hall. These included complaints that the station was difficult to reach by some voters with limited mobility. Alternative options were given, such as the Ormiston Centre, who would be willing to have a portacabin temporarily sited on their site, and Monkwick Junior School's recently-built new block, which is separated from the main school buildings, mitigating safeguarding concerns regarding its possible use as a polling station. The proposed use of Thomas Lord Audley School was questioned, with concerns cited regarding the difficulty of access to the Gym, via a step, for those with limited mobility. A third alternative site proposed by the Councillor was the St Margaret's Church, Stansted Road.

The Chair confirmed that the Committee and officers had discussed the importance

of polling stations meeting the needs of all residents and to avoid, wherever possible, the siting of stations outside the boundaries of the polling districts that they served. It was also confirmed that the Abbots Community Hall would only be available as a polling station up to the day before the next scheduled local elections, in May 2020. The Customer Solutions Manager informed the Committee that the comments and discussions previously made and held by the Committee regarding the importance of siting, when possible, polling stations within their polling districts had been considered and agreed with. The Council was committed to obtaining use of either Thomas Lord Audley or the Ormiston Centre. Officers had now been able to commence talks with the Paxman Academy regarding its potential use as polling station for district BF (Shrub End) and efforts are being made to further a constructive relationship with the Academy. Likewise, efforts were being made to look at the potential for using the former Garrison Gym.

A Committee member highlighted the busy nature of the polling station sited at Stanway Village Hall, and the expectation that future residential developments in the area would make it busier still. The view was given that use of the Hall for district GL (West Stanway) was manageable in the short term, but that a long-term alternative would ease the pressure on the site. The Senior Electoral Services Officer explained that St Albright's Church had been considered as an alternative but had not yet been approached, and that alternatives suggested to Stanway Village Hall would be explored for the long term.

The Committee enquired as to what plans were in place, should a general election polling day be set for a day other than a Thursday. The Committee was informed that plans had been put in place and communications with venues would be necessary to ensure that they are informed of the ramifications stemming from a polling day being set for a day of the week other than Thursday. Polling stations would be confirmed as soon as possible, following any confirmation of a general election polling day date.

The Committee considered the need to minimise average journey distances to polling stations and it was considered that flexibility in siting polling stations was necessary, especially in rural wards where distances of journeys were often greater. Officers informed the Committee that the Council's online CMAPS software could be used to help measure journey distances between any part of a polling district and its polling station. A member of the Committee requested whether it was possible for links to CMAPS to be included within future reports of this type, to allow members easy access to the function.

RESOLVED that the Customer Solutions Manager ensure that the Governance and Audit Committee receive a future update and opportunity to review the arrangements for polling stations, to occur prior to the arrangements being confirmed for polling station placements for the 2020 Colchester Borough Council elections.

RECOMMENDED to FULL COUNCIL that it approves and adopts Appendix A – Proposed schedule of Polling Districts and Polling Places, with the proviso that the Governance and Audit Committee will further review polling station arrangements before the 2020 Colchester Borough Council elections.