

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

**MISCELLANEOUS FUNCTIONS
COMMITTEE
MONDAY 23RD OCTOBER 2006**

REVIEW OF POLLING STATIONS

<u>AN OPEN ITEM</u>	
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER	Walter Delin, Returning Officer
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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 During the 4th May 2006 local elections it was drawn to the Returning Officer's attention that certain polling stations were no longer fit for purpose. As a result he has conducted a review of these premises and looked at possible alternatives. The results of the review are set out below:

2. Recommendation

The Committee is asked to DECIDE:

- 2.1 The recommended changes relating to polling stations as detailed in Appendix 2 of the report be approved.**

3. Background

- 3.1 Following the May elections a number of reports/comments were received from polling station staff, councillors and the public, about the adequacy of some of the premises used as polling stations.
- 3.2 As a result these comments were investigated further, culminating in a number of alternative venues being proposed.
- 3.3 At the time of looking for alternative premises the Returning Officer also established that two long-standing venues i.e. Sladen Middle School and Lea Street First School, would be closing under the County Council Education proposals for Wyre Forest at the end of July 2007. It is not known at this stage what will happen to these buildings in the future.

4. Key Issues

- 4.1 Currently the Council is required to keep polling districts and places under review

'to give electors the best facilities for voting that are practicable in the circumstances'. Section 18 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 as amended by the Electoral Administration Act 2006 also requires that, 'as far as is reasonable and practicable, only polling places which are accessible to electors with disabilities should be designated'. A copy of section 18C of the act is reproduced as Appendix 1 'Extract from the Electoral Administration Act 2006'.

5 The Proposals

5.1 See Appendix 2 - 'New Polling Station Proposals 2006' attached.

6 Financial Implications

6.1 The only significant financial implication will be if the council decides to reinstate the 'Portakabin' in Cairndhu Drive. The costs involved with the hiring and setting-up of a temporary building as a polling station will be in the region of £1500, with staffing costs of approximately £200. The average hire charge for an ordinary polling station is about £190.

6.2 In the future, once the council is required to carry out a 'full' review of polling districts and polling places, there will almost certainly be additional costs involved. In the first instance it may be necessary to engage the services of a surveyor to produce a report covering access arrangements to premises and subsequently to fund (or find a more suitable alternative) the cost of any 'remedial' work necessary to make polling station premises compliant.

7. Legal Implications

7.1 There are no legal implications at this stage other than those mentioned in paragraph 4.1 above. However, once section 16 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 comes into force, it will be necessary to carry out a complete review of all polling districts and polling places within 12 months of that date. Subsequent reviews will then have to take place within 4 years of the previous one.

7.2 It will also be necessary for the authority to seek representations from persons with particular expertise in relation to access to premises or facilities for persons who have different forms of disabilities and such person 'must have the opportunity to make representations and to comment on the returning officer's representations'.

8. Consultees

8.1 Returning Officer; Head of Legal & Democratic Services; Parish Clerks (as appropriate); ward councillors (as appropriate).

9. Background Papers

9.1 None.

EXTRACT FROM SECTION 16 OF THE ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION ACT 2006

Part 4 — Review of polling places

18B Polling places at parliamentary elections

- (1) A polling place is to be designated for each polling district in a constituency.
- (2) But subsection (1) does not apply if the size or other circumstances of a polling district are such that the situation of the polling stations does not materially affect the convenience of the electors or any body of them.
- (3) A relevant authority must—
 - (a) designate the polling places for the polling districts in its area, and
 - (b) keep the polling places in its area under review.
- (4) **The following rules apply—**
 - (a) **the authority must seek to ensure that all electors in a constituency in its area have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances;**
 - (b) **the authority must seek 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;**
 - (c) **the authority must have regard to the accessibility to disabled persons of potential polling stations in any place which it is considering designating as a polling place or the designation of which as a polling place it is reviewing;**
 - (d) **the polling place for a polling district must be an area in the district, unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly outside the district;**
 - (e) **the polling place for a polling district must be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of the district how they will be able to reach the polling station.**
- (5) **If no polling place is designated for a polling district the polling district is to be taken to be the polling place.**

NEW POLLING STATION PROPOSALS 2006

1. Bewdley & Arley Ward

Current Arrangements

- 1.1 The current polling place for the Bewdley & Arley East Ward (BE-A) is St George's Community Hall, Load Street, Bewdley, but, because the only access to the main hall is via a flight of stairs, the polling station is in the basement.
- 1.2 The basement has many drawbacks for polling station staff who are there for over 15 hours on polling-day. The premises are obviously below ground meaning that that there is no natural light and ventilation making the room gloomy and depressing. It is also very hot on warm days and cold on most others.
- 1.3 The room also has to accommodate 2 polling stations, there being 2300 electors in the polling district plus another 200 from the Ribbesford polling district BE-C .
- 1.4 The owners of the hall are quite happy for us to use the main hall or indeed the ground floor foyer, but accept that at the moment there is no access for the disabled, parents with prams/pushchairs or the elderly who find stairs difficult. They are however hoping to insert a lift in the not too distant future but this may not be a total solution as breakdowns have been known to happen and of course not everyone is happy using lifts.

Alternatives

- 1.5 Very few alternatives with such good parking facilities exist. Other premises suggested include the Cricket Club, Lower Park, Bewdley; Bewdley Friends Meeting House, Lower Park, Bewdley and the Bewdley Museum, once renovation works have been completed as part of the Worcestershire Hub and the Institute in Load Street.
- 1.6 A further suggestion has been 'doubling-up' at St. Anne's Middle School, Wyre Hill, which is currently the polling station for Bewdley West Ward. There are classrooms leading from the corridor at the back of this room which could be used as the school closes on election days.
- 1.7 Certainly the alternatives provide a better standard of building, but none of them are so centrally appointed as St. George's and would obviously involve the majority of electors having to travel further to vote.
- 1.8 It must also be recognised that there is a large elderly population living in and around the town centre and if the polling station is moved, it may have an adverse effect on turnout.

- 1.9 With this in mind the alternative suggestions further out of the town centre may have to be discounted and the improvements to the Museum and Guildhall will need to be completed before they can be considered.

Recommendations

Whilst accepting that most of the above alternatives would provide suitable accommodation, the Returning Officer is conscious of the fact that the RPA rules require that wherever possible facilities for voting must meet the reasonable requirements of all electors. This being so, despite it's shortcomings, it is recommended that the polling station remains where it is for the time being and that the Museum/Guildhall is inspected at a later date to gauge its suitability.

2. Greenhill Ward

Current Arrangements

- 2.1 Currently electors in polling districts GR-A1 and GR-A2 vote at the St. Johns Ambulance HQ on Birmingham Road. There are 2378 electors in total, eligible electors on the 4th May being 2153. At the district council elections (34% turnout in May 2006 735 electors actually voted) it was possible to manage with a single polling station, one Presiding Officer and two Poll Clerks.
- 2.2 However, at County Council elections as the two polling districts are in different county council electoral divisions, it is necessary to have two separate polling stations and the premises are not large enough to deal with this. The situation is exacerbated when UK parliamentary elections or combined elections are held, as was the case in 2005 when turnouts were doubled and quite frankly the facilities for voters were inadequate.

Alternatives

- 2.3 Previously, electors living to the north of the Birmingham Road voted in a temporary polling station (portakabin) sited on Cairndhu Drive and although there were the usual difficulties associated with such premises, turnout was about the same as at St John's Ambulance (33% in May 2003).
- 2.4 When alternative venues to the portakabin were being sought back in late 2003 the only other possibility appeared to be the St. John's Ambulance HQ although concern was expressed at the time about electors having to cross the very busy Birmingham Road. It was only with some reluctance that changes were made.
- 2.5 As the St John's premises are clearly too small to provide two polling stations the only real alternative is for the electors of polling district GR-A1 to vote again at the

portakabin in Cairndhu Drive, leaving those electors in PD GR-A2 to continue to vote at St. John's Ambulance.

Recommendations

The Returning Officer is of the opinion that it is no longer tenable to use the St. John's premises as two polling stations. It is believed for the reasons stated that it would be better to re-instate the temporary polling station in Cairndhu Drive, whilst ensuring that access arrangements are as good as they possibly can be for this sort of premise.

3. Habberley & Blakebrook

Current Arrangements

- 3.1 Prior to May 2005 for many years the polling station for PD HA-C (1567 electors) was at The Old School, Brook Street, but these premises were always quite difficult for the elderly, people with disabilities or parents with prams/pushchairs etc. Car parking was also a problem.
- 3.2 For the past two elections, 5 May 2005 and 4 May 2006, electors have voted at Blakebrook Special School, Bewdley Road, Kidderminster which, although on the very edge of the polling district did provide much better access and parking facilities.
- 3.3 However, this year the Headmaster has received objections from parents that the school was being closed on election - day, as they had to find alternative specialist care/support on the day in question for their children.

Alternatives

- 3.4 It would be a retrograde step to return to Brook Street even if it was still available and therefore the following other possibilities have been considered: Doubling-up at the Day Opportunities Centre, Habberley Road and St. John's First School.
- 3.5 If it was just the case of two polling stations in the Day Opportunities Centre (HA-A1/HA-A2 1880 electors) and (HA-C 1567 electors) it would be manageable and indeed it would still be so if the county council election was held on it's own. However, there has been a pattern developing of UK parliamentary elections being combined with County Council elections (the last two have been combined) and if this was the case three polling stations would be required and the premises are not large enough to deal with this.
- 3.6 The St. John's First School is a viable alternative and the Head Teacher is happy to help as long as sufficient notice is given to her so that parents can be advised well in advance.

Recommendations

- 1) **The request from the Head Teacher of Blakebrook Special School that the school no longer be used as a polling station for polling district HA-C be accepted;**
- 2) **St. John's First School is designated as the polling station for HA-C electors.**

4. Oldington & Foley Park

Current Arrangements

- 4.1 At the last two elections electors for SP-C1 (1653) voted at Holy Innocents Hall and are in the St John's County ED. SP-C2 (300) and OL-A2 (842) electors voted at Foley Park First School and are in the St. Mary's ED.
- 4.2 Ward councillors for the two wards in question (Sutton Park and Oldington & Foley Park) are of the opinion that there are insufficient voters to warrant polling stations at Foley Park First school, believing that Holy Innocents Church Hall is large enough to accommodate all voters.

Alternatives

- 4.3 Having investigated this matter further it is true that the Holy Innocents Hall is large enough to cater for two polling stations.
- 4.4 It would mean though that different voting arrangements would have to apply for district and county council elections. For example at district council elections SP-C1 and SP-C2 voters (Sutton Park 1953 electors) would vote at one PS and OL-A2 (Oldington & Foley Park 842 electors) at the other. At county elections SP-C1 voters (St Johns ED 1653 electors) would form one polling station and SP-C2 and OL-A2 (St Mary's ED 1142 voters) the other and at a UK parliamentary election if not combined with any other type of election, the 'county council' split would probably be retained.
- 4.5 This however is a mere administrative detail which, need not concern the general public and would not be of any inconvenience to them.

Recommendations

That Foley Park First School is no longer used for polling station purposes and all electors for the three polling districts referred to above vote at Holy Innocents Church Hall.