

ALLOCATION OF POLLING PLACES

Executive Summary

The Council is responsible for the designation of polling places across the Borough and must comply with the following access requirements for all polling places;

- ensure that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.
- ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place is accessible to electors who are disabled.

Following the 5 May 2022 election and the Elections Act 2022 proposal to implement measures to improving accessibility at elections, a review was undertaken by the Council's (Acting) Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer. The focus of this review was the evaluation of the suitability of three polling places currently used within the Borough.

The three existing polling places are:

- Oaktree School on Gorsewood Road (St John's West polling district (K1) in the St John's Ward)
- Barnsbury Primary School and Nursery on Almond Avenue (Barnsbury polling district (D5) in the Heathlands Ward)
- The Lightbox on Chobham Road (Town Centre polling district (B1) and Town Centre North polling district (B2) in the Canalside Ward)

The Council is now recommended to agree the designation of three new polling places, to take effect in advance of the 2023 Borough elections. The proposed polling places are:

- Sutton Avenue, St John's West polling district in the St John's Ward
- The Lighthouse Barnsbury, Barnsbury polling district in the Heathlands Ward
- The Welcome Church, Town Centre/Town Centre North polling district in the Canalside Ward

Recommendations

The Council is requested to:

RESOLVE That the designation of the following sites as polling places be agreed:

- Sutton Avenue, St John's West polling district in the St John's Ward;
- The Lighthouse Barnsbury, Barnsbury polling district in the Heathlands Ward; and
- The Welcome Church, Town Centre/Town Centre North polling district in the Canalside Ward.

The Council has the authority to determine the recommendation set out above.

Allocation of Polling Places

Background Papers: None.

Reporting Person: Julie Fisher, Chief Executive and (Acting) Returning Officer
Email: julie.fisher@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3333

Contact Person: Frank Jeffrey, Head of Democratic Services
Email: frank.jeffrey@woking.gov.uk, Extn: 3012

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Ann-Marie Barker
Email: cllrann-marie.barker@woking.gov.uk

Shadow Portfolio Holder: Councillor Ayesha Azad
Email: cllrayesha.azad@woking.gov.uk

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Council is responsible for the designation of polling places across the Borough. A polling place is defined as:

“The building or area in which polling stations will be selected by the (Acting) Returning Officer. A polling place within a polling district must be designated so that polling stations are within easy reach of all electors from across the polling district.”

- 1.2 A polling station is the room or area within the polling place where voting takes place. Unlike polling districts and polling places which are fixed by the local authority, polling stations are chosen by the relevant Returning Officer for the election.

- 1.3 Following the 5 May 2022 election and the Elections Act 2022 proposal to implement measures to improving accessibility at elections, a review was undertaken by the Council's (Acting) Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer. The focus of this review was the evaluation of the suitability of three polling places currently used within the Borough.

Identifying a Suitable Polling Place

- 1.4 Local authorities must comply with the following legislative requirements regarding the designation of polling districts and polling places:
- the council must designate a polling place for each polling district, unless 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
 - the polling place must be an area in the district, unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly outside the district (for example, if no accessible polling place can be identified in the district)
 - the polling place must be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of the district how they will be able to reach the polling station Accessibility
- 1.5 Local authorities must also comply with the following access requirements. As part of the review, they must:
- seek to ensure that all electors in a constituency in the local authority area have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances
 - 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
- 1.6 The Council 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.

2.0 Existing polling places

- 2.1 The current designated polling place for the St John's West polling district (K1) in the St John's Ward is the Oaktree School on Gorsewood Road. The current designated polling place for the Barnsbury polling district (D5) in the Heathlands Ward is the Barnsbury Primary School and Nursery on Almond Avenue. The following concerns have been received from both school Headteachers and parents over the continued use of these schools as a polling place.
- safeguarding of the children on polling day
 - the impact on the school and its teaching staff
 - disruption to the children's education by the closure of the school

Allocation of Polling Places

- 2.2 The current designated polling place for the Town Centre polling district (B1) and Town Centre North polling district (B2) in the Canalside Ward is The Lightbox on Chobham Road. The following accessibility issues to all voters and the financial impact to the Council were identified as part of the review.
- considerable cost incurred of hiring the venue as a polling place
 - location and accessibility of the polling place by all electors within the polling district
 - lack of parking

3.0 Proposed polling places

- 3.1 Sutton Avenue is part of the Council's independent living scheme. Its residential accommodation is located on the corner of Sutton Avenue/Copley Close which is within a short walking distance of The Oaktree School and is therefore within the St John's West polling district. Sutton Avenue is accessible to electors from Copley Close and Sutton Avenue by foot. It should be noted that disabled access is only accessible via Sutton Avenue.
- 3.2 Sutton Avenue has a common room available to use as a dual polling station. The common room is situated within a self-contained unit and is a separate facility to any of the other residential accommodation units at Sutton Avenue. On street parking and multiple designated disabled parking bays are available.
- 3.3 To ensure Sutton Avenue is accessible to all those entitled to attend the polling place a temporary ramp will be required to be installed at the entrance to provide level access on polling day.
- 3.4 The Lighthouse Barnsbury on Ash Road is located near to The Barnsbury Primary School and Nursery. It is centrally located in the main residential area of the Barnsbury polling district and therefore accessible to the majority of voters by foot.
- 3.5 The Lighthouse Barnsbury's function room is available for use as a polling station. The Lighthouse Barnsbury is accessible to all electors and has suitable disabled access with the instalment of a widened door entrance and a ramp for use by wheelchair and mobility scooters users.
- 3.6 There is currently no designated disabled parking bays in the vicinity therefore a temporary bay will be created within the layby directly outside The Lighthouse Barnsbury on polling day.
- 3.7 The Welcome Church on Church Street West is located within half a mile of The Lightbox, a seven minute walk on foot and is therefore within the Town Centre/Town Centre North polling districts. The Welcome Church is accessible to all electors from Oak's Road where a large car park is available with multiple designated disabled parking bays.
- 3.8 The Welcome Church has a large auditorium available to use as a polling station. The auditorium is separate to the rest of the Church and can be accessed directly from the car park through automated double doors. Multiple polling stations could be accommodated with ease if required and the Welcome Church is capable of accommodating all voters going into and out of the polling stations even in the event of a high turnout.

4.0 Corporate Strategy

- 4.1 Ensuring that all Polling Stations are fully accessible to all residents of Woking Borough Council is a priority of the (Acting) Returning Officer and the Electoral Commission. The Woking Strategy For All highlights the importance of engagement with all residents of the Borough and the Council will continue to seek to improve access to the electoral process.

5.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 5.1 Designating the following premises as the polling place for the respective polling district ensures that all electors in those areas have suitable facilities for voting.
- Sutton Avenue, St John's West polling district
 - The Lighthouse Barnsbury, Barnsbury polling district
 - Welcome Church, Town Centre/Town Centre North polling district

Equalities and Human Resources

- 5.2 Sutton Avenue, The Lighthouse Barnsbury and the Welcome Church are accessible for all electors in their respective polling districts.
- 5.3 There are no human resource implications associated with these proposals within this report

Legal

- 5.4 There are no specific legal implications or risks identified within the report.

6.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 6.1 The Ward Councillors for the respective polling districts were contacted separately and have confirmed that they are content with the proposed alternative polling places. Furthermore, as part of the review of polling places, the Council has discussed measures that can put in place to improve the voting experience for electors with disabilities such as sight loss. The Chairman of Woking Access Group was consulted on measures the Council could put in place to ensure all electors, regardless of disability, will be able to attend a polling station and vote in person.
- 6.2 The proposals were considered by the Council's Elections Panel at its meeting on 31 January 2023.
- 6.3 As part of a review of a polling place, the local (Acting) Returning Officer must be included as a consultee. The (Acting) Returning Officer has confirmed that she supports the recommendations in this report.

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