

Minutes of General Purposes and Arbitration Committee

Monday 22 February 2021 at 6.00 pm

Present: Councillor Dhallu (Chair)
Councillor Z Hussain (Vice Chair)
Councillors Allen, E A Giles and Millar.

Also present: Tracey Hurst – Election Services Manager, Amundeeep Johal – Democratic Services Officer, David King – Elections Assistant, Suky Suthi-Nagra – Democratic Services Manager and Shane Parkes, Democratic Services Officer.

1/21 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Councillors P M Hughes and Melia.

2/21 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

3/21 **Changes to Polling Places for the Local, Police and Crime Commissioner and Combined Authority Mayoral Elections on 6 May 2021**

Approval was sought to changes to Polling Places and Polling Stations in the Blackheath, Langley, Smethwick, Soho and Victoria and West Bromwich Central Wards for the Local, Police and Crime Commissioner and Combined Authority Mayoral Elections on 6 May 2021.



The Council had been informed that a number of venues used as Polling Stations for the most recent elections in the Borough were not available for use for elections in May 2021, others would not be available to be used for any future elections.

In view of the current concerns surrounding Covid-19 and the sudden potential disruption of plans to use a particular Polling Station, it was recommended that approval for making any late changes to Polling Places or Stations be delegated to the Returning Officer, subject to consultation with relevant ward members.

The recommendations had been shared with relevant ward members and, in some instances, amended to produce an outcome which was considered more suitable for the electorate.

Agreed to recommend to Council:-

- (1) that approval be given to changes to Polling Places and Polling Stations as set out in Appendix 1;
- (2) that the Returning Officer be delegated authority for making future changes to Polling Places as a result of unforeseen safety concerns, subject to consultation with relevant Ward members;
- (3) that the Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer implement the changes recommended in the report.

4/21

Nominations for the Offices of Civic Mayor and Deputy Civic Mayor of Sandwell for the 2019/2020 Municipal Year

In accordance with the Council's agreed process for the selection of Mayor, the Committee considered the nominations received for the office of Mayor for the 2021/22 Municipal Year.

The Committee considered the nomination of Councillor Mushtaq Hussain to the office of Mayor for the 2021/22 Municipal Year. The nomination was supported by a requisite five serving members of the Council.



The nomination for the office of Deputy Mayor for the 2021/22 Municipal Year would be considered at full Council at its next meeting.

Agreed to recommend to the Council:-

- (1) that Councillor Mushtaq Hussain be nominated for the office of Mayor of the Borough of Sandwell for the 2021/2022 Municipal Year;
- (2) that a nomination for the office of Deputy Mayor of the Borough of Sandwell for the 2021/22 Municipal Year be considered by full Council.

Meeting ended at 6.27 pm

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Proposed Polling Places Changes for May 2021 Elections

1. Blackheath Central Methodist Church, High Street, Blackheath (BLA and BLH)

This Polling Place is situated in the BLA district of the Blackheath Ward and has, in recent years, served not only voters from that district but also voters who live in the neighbouring BLH area.

However, the Council has been informed by the Church that they do not anticipate being open at the time of the election and therefore will not be available to be used as a Polling Station for use in May 2021.

Consideration has therefore been given to alternative venues within the Blackheath town centre area and beyond.

Following a discussion with the council's Principal Libraries Officer about the possible suitability of using Blackheath Library as a Polling Station, it is felt that the building would be suitable on the accessible ground floor area of the building. The Library is situated less than 100 metres away from the Central Methodist Church.

There are also some on-street and off-street car parking spaces available for those who choose to drive to the Polling Place and spaces for disabled staff and visitors are immediately adjacent to the Library.

However, following consultation with Ward members, it was felt that, whilst this is a suitable a move for electors in BLA ward, there could be a better, more accessible Polling Place for electors in the BLH Ward and so an alternative venue was sought, for electors living in this District.

The BLH district is very limited in terms of having suitable buildings and/or suitable land on which to position a Temporary Hut that could act as a Polling Station.

Research has therefore looked at suitable places in immediately-adjacent Polling Districts and it is felt that relocation of the Polling Station to Temple Meadow Primary School in the neighbouring Cradley Heath and Old Hill Ward is the best option. This school currently serves a Polling Station for the CRF District and so is used to hosting elections. There would therefore be two Polling Stations in one Polling Place and there would be clear signage and safeguards in place for voters to ensure that they vote in the correct Ward, as well as additional Covid-safeguards in place (as in all double stations) given the increased footfall.

According to Google Maps, the distance from the mid-point of the BLH Polling District to Temple Meadow School is 0.3 miles and a 4-minute walk closer than it is from the same



mid-point to Blackheath Library. Also, for electors who choose to walk to their polling station, the route is far less hilly.

Ward members have been consulted on these proposals and have assisted in arriving at the recommendation below.

Recommendation:

In the knowledge that the Blackheath Central Methodist Church is not available for use in 2021, it is recommended that for the forthcoming and future elections, residents living in

- a) the BLA Polling District go to vote at Blackheath Library, High Street, Blackheath and
- b) the BLH Polling District are invited to vote at Temple Meadow Primary School, Wrights Lane, Cradley Heath.

2. Smethwick Fire Station, Entrance in Green Street, Smethwick (SMC)

This Polling Place is situated in the Community Room of the Fire Station and lies within the Smethwick Ward.

The Council has been informed that, owing to restrictions associated with Covid-19 this Polling Place will not be available for use in 2021.

In looking for a suitable alternative location, officers initially sought to gain permission to erect a Temporary hut on the Fire Station car park, but after further correspondence with the Station Commander, he advised he was not certain he would be able to gain permission to site the hut in the grounds of the Fire Station, it was decided to seek an alternative proposal for the 2021 elections. The Returning Officer would very much like to be able to use the Community Room at Smethwick Fire Station for election purposes again in the future, as soon as circumstances permit.

Therefore, in view of the likely temporary nature of a change away from the Fire Station, it is proposed to re-locate to an existing Polling Station facility in a neighbouring Polling District in the Smethwick Ward for 2021, rather than trying to identify a brand new Polling Place.

Having spoken to the Presiding Officer at the Polling Station for SMD, Holy Trinity Church in Church Hill Street, and the Minister at the Church, additional floor space can be used at this building to cater for the increased footfall. According to Google maps, this site is 0.3 miles or 5 minutes' walk away from the Fire Station.

Despite the increase of voters at this location, there are not considered to be any on-street car parking issues.



Ward members have been consulted on this proposal and have not raised any objections to the recommendation below.

It is recommended that, for elections in May 2021, the Polling Station previously housed in Community Room at Smethwick Fire Service is re-located Holy Trinity Church in Church Hill Street, Smethwick.

3. Akrill Memorial Methodist Church, The Uplands,

Entrance from Taylors Lane, Smethwick (SMG and SME)

The Council has been informed that this Polling Place, which serves as the Polling Station for two Polling Districts (SMG and SME) in the Smethwick Ward is unable to commit to being open in May 2021 and therefore alternative sites have had to be considered.

Having considered alternative options, the most practicable is to re-locate to the Dance Studio in the nearby Harry Mitchell Leisure Centre, situated in Broomfield, approximately 300 metres from the entrance to the existing Polling Place.

The facility enjoys ample on-site car parking, and, like the Akrill Memorial Church, is situated in the SMG District. The site is on level ground and is not considered to have any accessibility issues. Ward members have been consulted on this proposal and have not expressed any objections to this recommendation.

Assuming this re-location proves successful, there is no reason why the new location could not become a permanent Polling Place for these Districts.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Polling Station for SME and SMG Polling Districts is relocated from the Akrill Memorial Methodist Church to the Dance Studio at Harry Mitchell Leisure Centre, Broomfield, Smethwick for the foreseeable future.

4. Brandhall Golf Course (Coffee shop)

Heron Road, Oldbury (LAE)

The Polling Station is situated in the Langley Ward.

Members will be aware that the Council permanently closed this Golf Course in summer 2020 and therefore the Club House/Coffee Shop is no longer available for use as a Polling Station.

Having considered a number of alternative options, and having consulted Ward members, it is thought that the most desirable option is for a temporary hut to be positioned on council-



owned land, a short walk away from the previous site at the junction of Heron Road and Brook Road, Oldbury.

Officers from Property Services and Housing have also been consulted and have advised that they have no objections to this proposal and have confirmed that, subject the Council granting approval to this proposal, they will notify shopkeepers and residents in the immediate locality of some possible minor disruption on the day of the election, as a result of a Polling Station being positioned on this land.

According to Google maps, the proposed new site is less than 100 metres away from the entrance to the Club house at the Golf course.

Assuming this re-location proves successful, the new location would become the permanent Polling Place for the District.

Recommendation:

That, as a result of the permanent closure of Brandhall Golf course, and the consequential loss of the venue as a Polling Station, approval is granted to the positioning of a hut on land at the corner of Heron Road and Brook Road, Oldbury as a replacement for the Station. This arrangement shall continue for all future elections, until further notice.

5. Temporary hut on the Car Park of Ron Davis Family Education and Training Centre Ballot Street, Smethwick (SVD)

This Polling Place is situated in the Soho and Victoria Ward and has one of the smallest of all electorates in the Borough, currently with 789 electors.

The Council has been informed that this Centre could, at the time of the election in May 2021, be undergoing extensive refurbishment work and therefore cannot commit to the car park being available to house a Polling Station, in the form of a temporary hut, as has previously been the practice.

Investigations have therefore taken place to establish a suitable alternative venue.

The SVD district is immediately adjacent to the neighbouring area of SVC where electors go to vote at the Community Action Project (CAP) in Windmill Lane, Smethwick.

Following a site visit it was clear that, by moving to a larger room within the CAP Centre than is currently used, this Polling Place could easily accommodate additional voters.



There is a good -sized car park at the rear of the building with an entrance in Windmill Precinct. The building is accessible for voters with mobility difficulties.

According to Google maps, this venue is situated within a five-minute walk and 0.2 miles away from the Ron Davis Centre.

In the event that experience proves that this enforced re-location is successful, then this change will continue beyond 2021.

Members have been consulted on these proposals and have not raised any objections.

Recommendation:

That approval is granted to the re-location of the Polling Station for voters in the SVD Polling District from a Temporary hut on the Car park of the Ron Davis Family Education and Training Centre to the Community Action Project in Windmill Lane, Smethwick for elections in 2021 and thereafter.

6. Committee Room A, West Bromwich Town Hall, Entrance from Lodge Road, West Bromwich (WBG)

Members will be aware that Committee Room A, inside West Bromwich Town Hall, has been used as a Polling Station for many years.

Members will also be aware that the ground floor of the Town Hall is currently being used a Covid-19 testing site.

The need to continue to use the Town Hall for this important function is likely to continue until at least the Spring of 2021, and therefore means it is unlikely it can be used as a Polling Station for the elections on 6th May 2021.

It is proposed, therefore, that for these elections, the Polling Station for the WBG Polling District is transferred to the Ground Floor of the council's premises at 1, Providence Place, West Bromwich. This building remains within the boundaries of the WBG district and is accessible for voters with mobility difficulties.

Clearly, it is hoped that this will be a "one-off" alteration and that, for future elections, the Polling Station for the WBG district can revert back to West Bromwich Town Hall.

Members have been consulted on these proposals and have not raised any objections.

Recommendation:

That approval is granted to the re-location of the Polling Station for voters in the WBG Polling District from Committee Room A in West Bromwich Town Hall to the Ground Floor of 1, Providence Place, West Bromwich for the elections in May 2021.



For information only

Langley Swimming Centre,

Vicarage Road, Oldbury (BRA, BRB and BRC)

The Council has, in recent years, used small rooms inside the Langley Swimming Centre to enable voting to take place in the Bristnall Ward and, in particular, in the BRA, BRB and BRC Polling districts.

In view of the need to maintain, as far as possible, safe working distances in Polling Places, it is not considered advisable to continue to use these facilities.

It is therefore being planned to move the exact location where people vote in the 2021 elections from these small rooms to temporary huts - to be located on the car park at the rear of the Swimming Centre – i.e. with access from Brookfields Road.

The huts will be brand new and will be larger than those used for previous elections at various other locations in the Borough and will be accessible for voters with mobility difficulties.

