

Consultation Response Report of the Returning Officer Polling District, Places and Stations Review 2014

1. 1. Introduction

The Council's statutory appointed Returning Officer is under a legal duty to formally review all polling districts, places, and stations within the Borough every five years.

As part of a pre-review exercise, consideration was given to the current polling arrangements, with the express aims of:

- improving accessibility, most notably through the removal of temporary huts as polling places / stations; and
- helping to drive up pupil performance by maximising teacher-student contact time by closing as few schools as is practically possible on polling day.

The pre-review work has considered the needs of the electorate, candidates and elected officials but has also been mindful of the associated election costs.

A meeting with the Council Leader took place in January 2014 and subsequently three further Wards were re-visited in regard to temporary Hut provision – as set out within Part 4 of this report.

Also since the initial consultation two major elections have now taken place on separate occasions and the electorate have experienced the changes. The changes were drawn to the public's attention by way of a message on poll cards, local notices and full details on the Council's website. No adverse direct feedback was received from the electorate during either election.

2. Background

All wards were looked at and in particular those which had schools and Temporary Huts as polling places in order to meet the twin aims of improving access for all electors within the community and minimising school disruption. This detailed work considered many aspects concerning venues, looking at:

- new venues (60+) and existing venues
- accessibility, availability & costs of venues
- facilities at venues (parking / well lit / facilities for staff etc)
- geography and topography of the local area (train lines/ canals/ hills)
- distances travelled under current and proposed arrangements
- presiding officers' views of current venues
- information and views of Electoral Services
- future and current housing developments (planning data)
- national research – organisational & academic
- Electoral Commission's guidelines on locations & staffing
- schools' data – School Organisation
- comparative local authority data

3. Methodology

The exercise culminated in the formal publication of the draft scheme review document that was published on 14 October 2013 and sent to all stakeholders – Members, MPs, RO for Dudley MBC, and local disability groups. This was also made available for public comment on the Council's website and at the main reception area at Sandwell Council House and at Town Hall West Bromwich; Town Hall, Wednesbury; Council House, Smethwick; Haden Hill Leisure Centre, Cradley Heath; and both Smethwick and West Bromwich Libraries.

The report was produced after a three month in-depth study in to all the aspects referred to under Part 2 above.

The formal consultation period ran for seven weeks and closed on 2 December 2013 – some 27 written responses were received and the Returning Officer also made some further minor proposals (as detailed under part 4 below) having re-considered some initial proposals as further suitable venues have become available. This has also included trying to avoid having two polling districts from different wards being located at the same polling place.

4. Review of Information

Alphabetical by Ward within Parliamentary Constituency

Appendix 1 summarises the proposals.

1. Rowley Regis and Halesowen Constituency

The Chief Executive of Dudley MBC is the Returning Officer for this Constituency and he was consulted on the proposals. The only comment was that he welcomes proposals to reduce the number of temporary huts within the electoral area.

Blackheath Ward

The three local members opposed the loss of the two Temporary Huts in this ward (Polling Districts BLG and BLH). The view of the Returning Officer is that the draft proposals as set out in the scheme report of October 2013 be endorsed as the arguments put forward for the retention of the Huts is not supported as it is not believed that the increased distance for the electorate to travel to the station will affect turnout at elections. The distance to the alternative polling places put forward are still well within national disability guidelines and will give both the electorate and the staff manning the poll a better electoral experience.

The Returning Officer also has some reservations over the continued use of St Giles' Court for polling district BLC due to the access door to the polling station having to be knocked by the electorate for the concierge to let them, this being for security reasons. This venue only has about 350 voters (one of our smallest polling places) who vote in person and nearly 100 of them live at the property. No complaints have been received about this venue which has been used for a number of years; however possible alternative venues have been requested of local Members.

No comments were received about a possible change for BLE, on review propose to stay at existing polling place of Blackheath Primary School and the school have indicated they will use election day for teacher training.

Following both elections this year concerns were expressed by polling staff about the Blackheath Library venue for polling districts BLA and BLH being used going forward for a number of reasons, including – the library requires polling staff to clear and set up a suitably large area clear of book shelves and then replace all these at close of poll and there is a separate

organisation (Learning Direct) that is based at the Library and stays put when the Library closes for us on polling day and this adds to the noise and further reduces the limited parking spaces. Polling staff and also our Polling Station Inspector also has concerns whether the place will be suitably large enough notwithstanding these other issues for the Parliamentary poll next May. Following the last poll, consultation has taken place with local Ward members to investigate alternative venues. The most appropriate venue that has local Member support and meets all the criteria for a polling place is the Neighbourhood Housing Office on Payne Street which is just around the corner from the Library and has its own car park and a large public car park opposite. The venue has a suitably large room and is disabled friendly. It is proposed to use this venue for future polls.

Cradley Heath and Old Hill

Opposition from a local Councillor to the proposal to lose the temporary Hut on CRA, but they are supportive to the proposals to merge CRB and CRC at sole venue of Corngreaves Primary School and merge CRD and CRE at sole venue of Holy Trinity Church. The point is made offering postal votes to anyone who feels that new venues are inconvenient to attend and this is picked up under part 7 below.

No comments about the changes were recorded at the polls in 2014. However, local Members whilst canvassing on the Codsall Estate, have reported a number of people expressing the difficulty they had in going to Timbertree school to vote as there are a number of hills to climb.

Since the initial consultation the new Fire Station next to the existing polling venue of Haden Hill Leisure Centre has now opened in the CRG Polling District. This has the support of local Members. The Fire Station has a large community room we can use and this is fully disabled access and free to us to use. It is therefore proposed to use the Fire Station as the new polling place for future elections.

Rowley

The Rowley Branch of the Labour Party comments.

Opposes the merging of polling districts ROA and ROB to lose a Temporary Hut. The ARO believes that there is no justifiable argument put forward for the retention of the Temporary Hut but has noted that comments raised about the car park size of the revised polling place and the comments about the hilly nature of the area but feels that the car park size is reasonable for the electorate size, bearing in mind the electorate

have 15 hours to vote and though of a hilly nature many electors will go by car or have a postal vote particularly if they feel this is an issue for them.

It also opposes the continued use of the Cradley Heath Community Centre for polling district ROG. Electoral Services staff have investigated the suggestion of using as an alternative the St James Wesleyan Reform Church and have concluded that this is a viable alternative in regard to location, accessibility and overall suitability and this be the recommended new polling place for ROG and be used at elections from 2014. There were no adverse comments from polling staff or the electorate at the 2014 polls.

On review the Returning Officer's proposal to move from Brickhouse Primary School to Brickhouse Community Centre (polling district ROF) not be supported.

2. Warley Constituency

Abbey Ward

The local members propose no change. The only change was a proposal to lose one primary school – St Gregory's on polling district ABF by sending the electors to the adjoining polling place for ABE (St Mary's Hall). The school have been contacted and indicated that they close and will use for teacher training on polling day. The proposed combined polling place would still have to be a double polling station and as a result the Returning Officer supports the existing polling places and local member's views.

Bristnall

No comments received. The Returning Officer's draft proposals be supported.

Langley

The local members oppose the loss of the Temporary Hut within polling district LAG. The proposal is to send the electors to the adjoining polling district of LAB based at St John's Ambulance HQ which is big enough to accommodate these additional voters.

The furthest any voters would need to walk would be an additional 200m and the distances are well within the proposed maximum distances recommended by SCOPE. Unfortunately the Oldbury Social Club is still not willing to accommodate us and as a result the Returning Officer proposes that the polling change be supported.

No comments were received about the proposed move from St James' CofE Primary School (LAA) to Rounds Green Library. On review, the Returning Officer proposes no change to the existing polling place.

Old Warley

Local members are not supportive of the proposals and point out that the changes that would involve the reduction of 8 to 5 polling places affecting 41% of the electorate. The reason for the number of proposed changes was in response to the brief of looking to reduce the use of schools and Temporary Huts (four schools and one hut within the ward).

Having looked again at the draft proposals and taken on board a number of comments raised it is proposed by the Returning Officer that the merger of OWB Temporary Hut with OWC St Huberts RC Primary School and using the school as the polling place proceed.

Merger of OWG Perryfield Primary School and OWH Perryfields Maths and Computing College and use the latter as the polling place instead of the primary school. The primary school was used in May 2014, but since then they were not available for the Police and Crime Commissioner election in August and they cannot guarantee that the building works will be complete by May 2015. The college do not close and are happy for us to continue to vote that their venue so we propose voting for polling districts OWG and OWH be at the college going forward. This has the added benefit that the primary school stays open on polling day.

The Returning Officer proposes no change to the existing polling places for polling districts OWA and OWF.

St Pauls

No comments received. However on reflection due to the proposed two mergers of polling districts and the ensuing large electorate to be sent to the proposed new polling places, the Returning Officer proposes no change to the existing seven polling places, thus keeping the two Primary Schools.

Smethwick

A local ward Councillor opposes the loss of the Temporary Hut for polling district SMA. However, since producing the consultation documentation the British Legion building on Londonderry Lane (SMB) that we were proposing accommodate the SMA voters is now closed and as there is currently no suitable local alternative for these voters, the Hut continue to be used but be re-located to a more central location to cover both polling districts on the

car park at Londonderry Lane playing fields. A more permanent solution is looked at for future reviews.

The Returning Officer has some concerns over the long term viability of this site as the Hut is vulnerable due to its isolated nature. There is currently still no alternative in this district but a slight re-positioning be considered from 2015 to increase security at the site.

The merger of SME and SMG polling districts at the Akrill Methodist Church, as supported by the local Ward Councillor, is pursued.

Soho and Victoria

No comments received. However, on review, the merger of two school polling places (SVE and SVF) would create a very large polling place that would in any case require two polling stations, consequently the proposed merger be not pursued.

During the confirmation of polling places for the 2014 elections, Shireland Collegiate Academy – the polling place for polling district SVG - confirmed due to their extensive buildings works they could not accommodate a polling place this year and as a result Hadley Park Stadium (old reception), access off Waterloo Road, was used. This was agreed with the local Ward members. As with other changed venues, the Returning Officer sought comments from the electorate, candidates and polling staff to assess whether the Returning Officer uses this new venue in future or whether we revert to the school. Feedback from the polls was that this site was “satisfactory” but due to the state of repair was not ideal and polling should ideally revert to the school for future polls. However, the school have now confirmed that the room within their site we used to use is no longer available and as a result they cannot now accommodate us. At the time of writing a more suitable permanent building is being sought within the polling place, possibly at the Leisure Centre itself. However, should none come forward the Returning Officer will be seeking for the room to be temporarily tidied/cleaned prior to polling day.

3. West Bromwich East Constituency

Tom Watson MP gave detailed comments to all ward proposals within his Parliamentary Constituency and these are considered with the councillor comments per ward.

Charlemont with Grove Vale Ward

A local Ward Councillor objected to the proposal to lose the two Temporary Huts within this ward.

In response to comments raised, the proposal to lose Huts is in fact to give all voters a consistent voting experience with improved electorate access and at the same time overcome the logistical and health and safety concerns. There is no indication that the turnout would drop by this slight increase in the distance to travel which are still within the recommended maximum.

A further site visit with officers and members took place in February to look again at the Spencer Close Temporary Hut site. Following this visit the Returning Officer acknowledged the incline of Water Lane but re-confirmed his desire to send the electorate to the Connor Education Centre. However the Returning Officer will seek comments from the electorate prior to the poll and offer postal votes and then from polling staff and voters on polling day about this change. Comments will be sought on the possibility of splitting the polling district to send the 400 or so electors from properties on or off Water Lane to the Connor Education Centre and the rest of the electorate to the adjoining polling district of CHB who currently vote at St Mary Madeleine Church on Beacon View Road. Further feedback will be gathered in 2015 for a possible change from publication of the revised register on 1 December 2015.

Friar Park

The Returning Officer agrees with the MP's comments not to merge polling districts FPA and FPC as this would create too large a polling place requiring three polling stations and there is some doubt whether the hall could accommodate this amount of voters.

When the Returning Officer originally contacted the alternative polling place for FPB –the Millennium Centre in place of Priory Primary School they were amenable to us booking this venue, however they no longer wish to accommodate us so our proposal, as supported by the MP, will not now be pursued. Priory Primary School has indicated that they do close and they will use this as a teacher training day.

The Returning Officer does not support the need for an additional polling place within the ward to accommodate voters from the Kent Road Woods estate at the moment as the existing polling place is centrally located and can accommodate the amount of voters, however, this be kept under review and be re-visited at the next statutory review especially if further planned house building takes place within the ward.

In summary – that the existing polling places be supported.

Great Barr with Yew Tree

A local Ward Councillor and the MP oppose the merger of GYG and GYA using Yew Tree and Tamebridge Community Centre for the voters from the Temporary Hut. The voters for GYG have to be split over two Huts as we cannot accommodate the amount of voters or our staff required in one building. Consequently it is strongly recommended that the merger takes place as the Community Centre is big enough to accommodate this amount of voters creating three polling stations at the centre, as supported by the polling staff. Polling staff have also commented that a number of voters turn up to vote at the centre instead of going to the existing Huts. There is sufficient parking at the centre though it will get busy at the peak early evening time on polling day but no more so than other large venues.

A further site visit with officers and members took place in February to look again at the Woodruff Temporary Huts site. It was concluded that the Returning Officer continue to use the Huts for 2014, but seek their views of the electorate during the forthcoming poll and the views of polling staff on election day. The electorate at the polls in May 2014 indicated that they were broadly satisfied with the voting arrangements but did indicate preference for a permanent building. On the basis of further consultation, provided there is no great public outcry, consideration is given to a possible move to either the Community Centre or a possible new venue (Sandwell Project – former Children’s Home) on Ladbury Drive from 2015. However since this was raised, the Returning Officer has been informed that the venue at Ladbury Road is likely to be turned to housing units and will not be available.

A local Ward Councillor and the MP also oppose the merger of GYD and GYE using GYE’s Great Barr Branch Library losing Whitecrest Primary School (GYD). The school have already indicated they are not available this year having already set their teacher training days. The Returning Officer believes the Library is large enough to accommodate the revised number of voters and supports the draft proposal to the move to the Library which have indicated they will close on polling day.

Likewise the adjoining school of St Margeret's (GYC) have indicated they have also already set their teacher training days, however there is the adjoining Great Barr Memorial Hall that could be used and is available and has been visited by electoral staff and this is more than suitable to accommodate our needs. There were no adverse comments from the May polls from using this new venue.

A proposal was also received from a member of the public suggesting the use of Holy Name Church hall in place of the adjoining school that is used for polling district GYF. This was one of the proposals put forward within the consultation document. As the school has indicated that they will close and are not using this as a teacher training day and voters already park at the church hall, the church hall to be proposed as the new polling place. Maximum distances are not affected.

Greets Green and Lyng

Merge GGD and GGE using Lyng Primary School (GGD) as the sole venue thus not having a Temporary Hut is supported in principle by the MP and no comments have been received from the electorate or local members.

The MP also supports the proposed temporary measure of using Guns Village Primary (GGB) to host the electors for GGF due to the current state of disrepair of the Scout Headquarters' roof. There were no adverse comments raised at the polls in 2014.

Polling district GGG – Farley Park Lodge is not within the ward however there is currently no alternative polling place and no proposed change was suggested.

Hateley Heath Ward

A local Ward Councillor and the MP are totally opposed to the proposed loss of Primary Schools within the ward as polling places. The view of the Returning Officer having looked again at the proposals and school sites supports no change to the existing polling places.

Newton

The MP opposes the merger of NEB and NEC polling districts using Ferndale Primary School as the sole venue, thus losing the Temporary Hut.

The Returning Officer does feel that Ferndale Primary School is sufficient to accommodate this amount of voters within its hall – this would accommodate two polling stations which would be used to manage the voters. The school also closes for the day and uses this for teacher training.

Every year the Elections Office receives a number of complaints from local residents of Meadowside Close who do not like to see this temporary polling station near their homes. The complainants have a degree of merit, particularly now that the hut sizes have increased. The maximum distances for these voters to walk would be an extra 300m and would still be within the maximum recommended distance.

However, a further site visit with officers and members took place in February to look again at the Meadowside Close Temporary Hut site. As a result this Temporary Hut be used again in 2014, however, it was concluded that the Returning Officer seek the views of the electorate, candidates and polling staff during this election with a view to sending voters to Ferndale School from 2015, provided there is no great public outcry from the consultation. Local Ward members would also speak to residents of Meadowside Close about the proposals.

Feedback on polling day was in favour of continuing to vote at this venue and no complaints were received from local residents about the siting of this Hut. It is therefore proposed to keep the Hut and not change at this time.

West Bromwich Central

Both the MP and local Councillors are in support of the change of polling place for polling district WBE from the Temporary Hut to the Kuumba Centre. However, since this proposal was put forward, the Kuumba Centre has contacted us to highlight their uncertain future over funding and as a result the Returning Officer has agreed that the most appropriate alternative permanent bookable place would be the African Caribbean Resource Centre on Thomas Street which had previously had been explored, though it is located in Polling District WBF. Facilities are suitable at his Centre and this has been booked for the 2014 polls. Feedback from the May polls was that it was a good venue though parking can be awkward.

Feedback will be sought during the election on the suitability of this venue and the Returning Officer's suggestion in the report to Members in the autumn to possibly merge with the adjoining WBF polling district, who currently vote at St Phillips Church on Beeches Road – to create one polling district to vote at the centrally located venue of the Resource Centre.

4. West Bromwich West Constituency

Great Bridge

No comments received and no proposals made.

Oldbury Ward

No comments were received. The proposed merger involving the loss of one polling place – Meadow Sports College (OLC) to be merged with OLE at the sole venue of Rounds Green Primary School on OLE therefore be supported. However, on review the Returning Officer proposes staying at the existing polling place of Tividale Community Primary School on OLF who have indicated that for 2014 they will have teacher training.

Princes End

Propose merger of PEF Summerhill Primary School with PEG at St John's the Evangelist Church using this church as the sole venue, thus losing this school as a polling place. The church hall is sufficient to accommodate all these voters.

Ocker Hill Infants School (PEC) currently has two different wards attached to it - Princes End and Wednesbury South – WSA. The proposal to move polling district PEC from current venue Ocker Hill Infants School to St Mark's Church Hall, Ocker Hill Road be supported. Electoral staff has visited St Mark's and they would be able to accommodate us and it is considered a suitable venue for polling.

On review, Polling Districts PEB (Wednesday Oak Primary School) and PED (Glebefield Primary School) remain at their existing venues.

Tipton Green

Propose send the electors from TGB Summerhill Primary School that is in Princes End ward to vote at a new polling place of St Pauls Primary School on Robert Road which is within the ward. Electoral staff have visited St Pauls and they are very accommodating and we would use the nursery part of the school so the school would not close. There is sufficient parking and a separate entrance and facilities so separating voters from school children. Consequently polling district TGA will continue to vote at Grace Community Church.

Tividale

Comments received from local councillors concern the loss of the Grace Mary Primary School (TID) which was proposed to be merged with Oakham Primary School (TIA). The proposed merger would require a double polling station at the school and on review the Returning Officer considers that there is no great benefit in merging.

It is proposed that there be no change to the existing polling places.

Wednesbury North Ward

Comments from local members on the proposals.

WNA - Support for the continued use of the Temporary Hut for polling district WNA – as recommended by the Returning Officer, as unfortunately there is currently no alternative venue in the area.

WNB – proposed merger of WNB polling district who currently vote at Albert Pritchard Junior School with WND, using Wood Green Junior School as the sole polling place. This venue would have some 5,000 electors allocated to it and would require a triple polling station. The Returning Officer will not pursue this merger and notes the comment of looking at the Albert Pritchard School allowing access from Crew Road to ease traffic congestion on polling day.

WNC – Proposed merger of WNC (St Bartholomew's Church Hall with WNE (Holyhead Primary School) using St Bartholomew's as the sole venue. This would create a large venue requiring a double polling station at the site and on review the Returning Officer, having taken the comments in to account, will not pursue this merger. However, at the next statutory review, the Returning Officer reconsider this possible merger using the new Wednesbury Leisure Centre as a possible suitable polling place.

In summary - that the existing polling places be supported.

Wednesday South

Comments received from local members are against the proposals.

WSA – proposed merger of WSA (Ocker Hill Infant School with WSB (Leacroft Methodist Church Hall) using the church hall as the sole venue.

WSC – the loss of the Temporary Hut. It is recognised that there is no suitable alternative within the ward, however, it is proposed that electors be sent the Central Methodist Church Hall (new venue will be out just outside the ward) but this venue is suitable in size to accommodate a double polling station and the amount of electors and will give a much better voting experience for our electorate and staff. The distance is still within the recommended maximum distance of SCOPE. The Temporary Hut is a small site and we struggle to accommodate this Hut and due to the Electoral Commission staffing ratios the size is not adequate on health and safety grounds. Also as the next three scheduled elections from 2014 to 2016 are combined polls, the amount of legal notices to be displayed and the necessity for two ballot boxes will not be accommodated within the Hut size for this site. Consequently, the Returning Officer supports the loss of the Hut.

WSF – the loss of the Temporary Hut is opposed. The ARO proposes to merge WSF polling district with electors from WSE who vote at Hill Top Methodist Church Hall – this is a suitable venue and can easily accommodate the increase in allocated electors and as the venue is on the border of both current polling districts this is an ideal location for electors to attend. Consequently, the Returning Officer supports the loss of the Hut.

5. Key Areas of Concern

Temporary Huts

Primarily, for people with disabilities or with age acquired impairments, Huts pose significant issues in terms of access, health & safety and voting in private.

Local residents dislike Huts being located near to their homes as they attract crime and anti-social behaviour when not being used for polling duties. Also when the Huts are in use, the generators emit fumes and noise which affect residents and can be unpleasant for our staff.

The wellbeing of the staff is not particularly well catered for using Huts. The capacity of the generators means that heating can be inadequate, and cannot cope with heating, lighting and a kettle all running at the same time. Logistically, the generators need refuelling during an election day, which does not always happen in good time and it has been known for the lights / heating to go out. Finally, the toilet arrangements for staff are made through the use of un-lit portable toilets. Bearable during daylight hours but requiring torches at night – washing facilities are basic and questionable for 15 hours of use.

A key driver is also the Electoral Commission's performance standards that refer to staffing ratios i.e. we need additional staff in these huts that are already at capacity with two staff. It should also be noted that for the next three years there will be combined polls which all require additional posters to be displayed and two ballot boxes which combined with the additional staff will make using these Huts a very much last resort.

With new housing developments planned across the borough, the capacity of huts to accommodate extra electors and the associated staffing is wholly inadequate. Some sites cannot accommodate larger huts, but those that can, may require road closures and mobile cranes, all at considerable extra cost.

Understandably, Huts generate a disproportionate number of complaints.

Temporary Huts are also per elector extremely expensive compared to a permanent community building – approximately £1,800 for a Hut as opposed to on average £200 for a non-school permanent building. Costs however have not been the main driver to further move away from these temporary buildings.

Moving away from Schools

Moving away from schools does pose questions. Schools are very often well positioned within the community and accessible (from a moral and disability point of view). Similarly, being publically funded buildings, schools are inexpensive at around £35 cost to the Returning Officer. Nevertheless, options have been developed which proposes the reduction in a number of schools down to a level which is considered to be practical and sensible.

The Returning Officer is legally entitled to use schools and this lessens the risk associated with private buildings where they can refuse our booking.

Whilst schools are not required to close on election days, from a logistical and for safeguarding reasons, many do. However, many schools do use election day as a teacher training day and for May 2014 a number of schools had two teacher training days on the last two days of the Spring Term - Thursday 22 May (polling day) and Friday 23 May, so to minimise inconvenience to parents and maximise pupil attendance.

6. Conclusion

This consultation response was widely circulated to all stakeholders, as per the original review, and to other persons/bodies who commented and additional feedback from Members and the electorate from the 2014 polls have been considered.

7. Recommendations

That the proposals be used for the polling places/stations at the elections to be held on 22 May 2014. During the election period, any further comments received by candidates, electorate and polling staff/other electoral officials be included in the report to be presented to the Council's General Purposes and Arbitration Committee in the autumn, prior to formal Council approval in January 2015. Any changes to polling districts will then be made during next year's annual canvass and be reflected in the publication of the revised register on 1 December 2015.

Further publicity will be given to all the proposed changes in the lead up to the elections to draw to the attention of the electorate. This to include a note on poll cards for areas with new polling places; local posters and advertising postal votes for anyone who considers the changed venue would be inconvenient for them.

Jan Britton
Returning Officer and Chief Executive

September 2014