

Council

19 December 2019



Title	Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations		
Purpose of the report	To make a decision		
Report Author	Daniel Mouawad, Returning Officer		
Cabinet Member	Councillor Ian Harvey	Confidential	No
Corporate Priority	Not applicable		
Recommendations	Council resolves to: (a) To note the attached report of the Returning Officer (b) Request the Electoral Services Manager to incorporate the changes in the next revision of the electoral register (c) Authorise the Electoral Services Manager to implement the changes outlined in the report of the Returning Officer with effect from the next election		
Reason for Recommendation	To ensure all voters have equal access to polling places. To identify alternative venues for polling stations other than schools where possible. To ensure all polling stations remain suitable for electors.		

1. Background

- 1.1 This compulsory review has to be started and completed by 31 January 2020.
- (a) A polling district is a geographical area created within the Parliamentary constituency, borough ward, county division and parish/town council boundaries
 - (b) A polling place is the building or area in which polling stations are located
 - (c) A polling station is the room within the polling place where voting takes place
- 1.2 The responsibility for signing off this review rests with Council. The legal position is that Sections 18 and 31 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 allow constituencies and wards to be divided into polling districts. Under the Functions and Responsibilities Regulations issued under section 17 of the Local Government Act 2000, these are functions which cannot be exercised by the Cabinet.

2. Key issues

- 2.1 The review process is based on parliamentary constituencies, in Spelthorne there is just one. The Review involves a number of specified stages: The Council must:
- Publish notice of review – this was done 11 October 2019

- Consult with the Returning Officer(s) for parliamentary constituencies in Council areas – and publish these responses when received (within 30 days of receipt). I am the only Returning Officer for the Spelthorne Parliamentary Constituency. My response is to be found at **Appendix A**.
 - Allow electors to make representations – which may include proposals for specified alternative polling places. See the comments below about the responses received during the consultation.
 - On completion of the review, compile and adopt a revised scheme – which must be published, with reasons given for decisions.
 - The Returning Officer must make representations about the location of polling stations within polling places and allocate electors to polling stations (after review).
- 2.2 This report marks the completion of the review, and recommends revisions to the Council's arrangements for polling districts and polling places to apply until the next review (scheduled for 2023), for the reasons given in this report and its appendices.
- 2.3 In conducting this Review I was mindful that the Council currently uses a number of schools for polling stations and it was my intention to find options to move away from these arrangements to alternative premises so as to cause less disruption to schools, pupils and parents.

3. Consultation responses

- 3.1 I received three consultation responses from councillors, two of whom (Cllr Madams and Cllr Sider) were content with the arrangements in their area. One (Cllr Mrs Doran) asked me to change the arrangements for Stanwell North to relieve Stanwell Fields Primary School. I am grateful for her assistance in identifying alternative locations.
- 3.2 I received thirteen responses from the public in the form of emails. Generally speaking all the comments were directed about the use of schools as Polling Places (see below).
- 3.3 I also received comments on Facebook from a number of parents all of whom were concerned about the use of schools (see below).
- 3.4 I also received four responses from schools about the continued effect on pupils and parents caused by the use of their premises. I would like to thank these schools for writing to me: Ashford Church of England Primary School, Buckland Primary School, Riverbridge Primary School and Springfield Primary School.
- 3.5 The concerns from schools and parents can be summarised as follows:
- (a) **The availability of other premises.** Schools are not the only premises and other community halls, churches etc are better placed to hold an election. These should be used in preference to a school such is the disruption to children and families. Portacabins should also be used.
 - (b) **Cost of childcare.** Covering childcare costs is an expensive business for working families. It has not helped that there have been three elections this year which has brought this issue into sharp focus. The alternative for families is to take time off work, but not all have the ability to do this, it depends on the employer.

- (c) **Inconsistent public policy.** Parents are under pressure from schools to ensure that there is good attendance. Schools are under pressure from OFSTED and the government to make sure that there is good attendance. Parents are not allowed to take children out of school during term-time. If parents do take children out of school, they could be fined. The issue is that all of this is seemingly ignored when an election is called; lots of children have to miss a day's school and this is inconsistent with the general policy aim of getting children into school and preventing unauthorised absence.
- (d) **Parental behaviour.** This was a point made by the schools but not by the parents. When there is an election it is always on a Thursday, and this means that some parents then use the opportunity to take a long weekend and do not bring their children to school on the Friday. Some also, use the opportunity to take a week off because the fine is applicable for five days unauthorised absence, not four.
- (e) **Timing of Election in May.** This was a point made by schools but not by the parents. Schools are busy preparing children for SATs in May. As elections are held on the first Thursday in May, this often coincides with the May Bank Holiday, this means that there is a very inconsistent week of preparation for exams.

4. Observations on consultation responses

- 4.1 I am grateful to parents for their comments by email and on social media about the use of schools as Polling Stations. The Council accepts that this is a matter which causes a lot of concern to parents who often need to organise childcare when elections are called. In particular this year has seen unforeseen elections in December (UK Parliamentary General Election) and May (European Parliamentary Election) which followed the scheduled Borough Elections earlier in the same month.
- 4.2 Polling Stations need to be spread across the Borough to allow electors to vote. Not all electors have access to cars to enable them to travel long distances to the Polling Station. It is therefore necessary to utilise the buildings that we have in the Borough to provide the best spread and mix of Polling Places.
- 4.3 Whilst electors can opt to vote by post, the vast majority of electors still prefer to vote in a Polling Station. There is still a need for the Council to provide a number of Polling Stations spread out across the Borough, and this need is unlikely to diminish. Should the number of electors voting by post increase the likely effect would be on the reduction of multiple Polling Stations but not on the reduction of Polling Places. The Electoral Commission recommends a maximum of 2,000 electors at a Polling Station and so if electors voting in a station diminish this could reduce the number of Polling Stations.
- 4.4 A wide range of buildings are used for Polling Stations, not just schools but also Community Centres, Churches, Halls, Youth Centres etc. The decision on whether to use a school is heavily influenced by the availability of nearby alternatives. In a small Borough like Spelthorne we use 32 buildings of which 11 are schools and 21 are other premises, so 34 % are schools. We divide the borough into 13 wards:
 - (a) Just one of these wards uses schools only because there is no alternative: Ashford Common.

- (b) Four of the wards use no schools at all because there are alternatives: Ashford North & Stanwell South, Ashford Town, Shepperton Town and Sunbury Common.
 - (c) The rest of the wards are mixed between schools and other community buildings.
- 4.5 Whilst this Review sought public comments on the use of particular Polling Places and Stations within particular Polling Districts we cannot adopt a broad policy such as “don’t use schools”. In this Review I have been mindful of the advantages to reduce the use of schools where possible. However this is only possible in a particular Polling District bearing in mind the accessibility and suitability of specific nearby alternative premises. The Council has liaised with the Spelthorne Schools Together Confederation to explain its desire to reduce the use of schools. Schools were encouraged to respond in detail regarding their premises and the alternatives which might be suitable in the neighbourhood.
- 4.6 The law allows the Returning Officer to use school premises because they are public buildings and other premises in the community, churches, halls etc are not obliged to offer their premises for an election. We seek to engage with a wide range of premises owners to find as many premises as possible. There needs to be a willingness on the part of the building owner to provide the spaces when they are required. Bearing in mind that Reviews will usually be every four years there also has to be sufficient certainty that any buildings proposed will be available for the foreseeable future, certainly for the next four years. The alternative would be for the Returning Officer to designate alternative premises each time an election is called. This is not desirable for electors or political parties and it must be remembered that the promotion of a vibrant and engaging democratic process is a legitimate public policy objective as much as schooling.
- 4.7 A suggestion was made online that the Council could use empty office space as polling stations. This is not possible. It is not possible for the Council to know in advance with any certainty if any commercial premise will be empty in a particular polling district. I would also observe that most commercial property agents are interested to secure long term lettings of properties and are generally not interested to hire out premises for short term occasional hires because of the practical difficulties involved in opening and closing premises and ensuring their own legal duties as a premises owner towards the safety of users.
- 4.8 Portacabins have been used before and were found unsuitable for use as polling stations because of the difficulties in providing access for elderly and disabled voters. They may be considered as a last resort, but again they need a suitable (quite large) location for them to be sited, such as a car park or a playground.
- 4.9 The Council gives advance notice to all schools when they will be needed for Polling Stations. Some schools make arrangements for Y6 pupils to be in school for SATs preparations. Some schools use the polling day as an Inset day. Schools are not always able to schedule classes and Inset days when the school is being used as a Polling Station, it very much depends on the layout of the school and that decision always rests with the school in question. Parents of children at schools used as polling stations can also discuss with the individual schools whether it is possible to combine polling days and Inset

days to reduce the number of times when parents need to find alternative care. I appreciate that this observation only applies to scheduled elections.

- 4.10 I accept that it is better for children and parents if we can reduce the impact on schools. I accept that it will be beneficial for working families if we can identify other places so that they do not have the expense of additional childcare costs.
- 4.11 As regards parental behaviour of taking additional unscheduled leave, I accept this as a regrettable consequence of using schools as Polling Places and this is one of the drivers for looking again at schools as part of this process. I note the effect on children's education if parents take more than one day away from school.
- 4.12 As regards the timing of elections in May close to SATs, I am afraid that this is a matter of national policy and not one which I can influence. My obligation as Returning Officer is to make sure that the election is run fairly and that as many people as want to vote, can vote. If the government wants to move elections to after SATs or to a day other than Thursday (Sunday is often used in other countries) then it will have to legislate to do so.

5. Comments on Polling Districts

- 5.1 No comments were made by any party on the possible revision to Polling Districts. There appears to me to be no evidence which suggests that the Polling Districts are not suitable at this time. I am therefore not recommending any changes to the Polling Districts.

6. Comments on Polling Places

- 6.1 After considering the comments on Polling Places and making my own investigations I am proposing the following changes to Polling Places as follows. I am grateful to Jayne McEwan and her team in Electoral Services for their research and visits to many different premises to assess their suitability.
- 6.2 **Ashford Common** – change Meadhurst School for Ashford Common Methodist Church, Saxon Road, Ashford. This is in a central location. The access and nearby parking are acceptable.
- 6.3 **Halliford and Sunbury West** – change Springfield Primary School to Hawkedale Primary School and Halliford Community Centre. Broadly those electors west of the A244 will go to Halliford Community Centre and those east of the A244 will go to Hawkedale. Although this does not reduce the number of schools being used overall it does allow us to meet the request of Springfield Primary School not to be used for future elections. Hawkedale School has confirmed that it is happy to be used for elections. Hawkedale is in a good location for electors. It has good access and parking. Halliford Community Centre is already used for voters in Halliford Village and it can accommodate another polling station.
- 6.4 **Laleham and Shepperton Green** – change Saxon Primary School to St John Fisher Catholic Church, Wood Road Shepperton. This site was previously used as a Polling Place and the Church has confirmed that it is amenable to hosting elections once again. There is good access and parking. This is preferable to Saxon School which keeps part of its site open on Polling Day. This part use of the school premises reduces the access and parking for electors which is not desirable.

- 6.5 **Riverside and Laleham** – there are three polling stations within the Polling Place at Buckland School. Change this Polling Place to Staines and Laleham Sports Association on Worple Road. There is plentiful parking on site. The disabled access is acceptable but I will be working with the premises owners to see if improvements can be made which will make it even better.
- 6.6 **Sunbury East** – change Beauclerc School to Riverside Arts Centre. This removes the need to close one school. There is good parking in the Avenue. The Riverside Arts Centre have confirmed that they are happy to make the premises available free of charge to the Council in recognition of the Council's long support to the Centre. This is a welcome and much appreciated gesture and I am sure it will also be appreciated by parents at Beauclerc School.
- 6.7 **Stanwell North** –change Stanwell Fields Primary School to St David's Church Hall. The Church Hall is in a central location for the Polling District. It has excellent parking and disabled access. The use of the Church Hall is preferable to the school which in any event has poor disabled access. I also considered Lord Knyvets Hall but it has poor disabled access and very poor parking. It is not as central to the district as St David's Church Hall.
- 6.8 **Staines South** – change the one station which is in Buckland Primary School (and actually in Riverside and Laleham ward) for Laleham Methodist Church Hall in Edinburgh Drive. This is in a central location and it is in the Staines South ward. The access and nearby parking are acceptable.
- 6.9 **Sunbury Common** – The Polling Place in Sunbury Common is actually Kenyngton Manor School. For a number of years now the Council has been able to avoid use of the School by using alternatives which were Sunbury Youth Centre and St Saviour's Church. Unfortunately this year St Saviour's Church indicated that it was no longer able to host elections: it has developed a new community lunch on a Thursday. As a result, for the December UK Parliamentary General Election, by way of Urgent Action, I designated The Running Horse Public House as an alternative Polling Place. At the time of writing this review it is not known how this arrangement worked. I therefore wish to keep an open mind about the places to use in Sunbury Common.
- 6.10 During the Review I was able to investigate the Ex Servicemen's Club adjacent to the Sunbury Cross Shopping Centre. This has parking and a large Hall. It is an ideal location for those voters south of the A308 Staines Road West who would otherwise have to go to the Youth Centre.
- 6.11 I am therefore now proposing as follows: I will bring into use the Ex Servicemen's Club and the Running Horse PH – these are two new locations. I will make the Youth Centre an official Polling Place instead of it being an alternative location for Kenyngton Manor School. I will keep Kenyngton Manor School as an alternative Polling Place for Sunbury Common in case these new arrangements are not suitable. At most elections it should be possible to avoid the use of Kenyngton Manor School. I am however mindful that the County Council is reviewing the use of the Youth Centre and this could be problematic if the ability to use that Centre is withdrawn.

7. Comments on Polling Stations

- 7.1 I am not proposing to reduce the number of Polling Stations at this Review. I will keep under review the number of Stations which are provided in any Polling Place. There are two factors at work here. First there is the continued increase in population and the growth in additional housing which is likely as a

result of the local plan, and there is also a strong number of Postal Votes. Where the number of electors voting in person diminishes to a number that can be accommodated within a single station, rather than a multiple station, then I will consider such a change.

7.2 Other than that general observation I am only proposing to make one change as regards Polling Stations:

7.3 **Ashford Common** – I will keep Ashford Church of England Primary School as it currently is as a Polling Place. However, the School has indicated that we could use an alternative room in the school which will allow it to safely operate on Polling Days. This seems like a very reasonable suggestion to me and I am willing to accommodate it. This means that the Polling Stations will change rooms within the Polling Place. There are some necessary minor works to a gate so that access can be altered to make this happen. I am proposing to carry out these works for the school at the cost of the Council as a gesture of goodwill.

7.4 This new arrangement at the school does mean that the Council will not be able to utilise the parking at the school. It also means that a ramp will have to be provided for disabled access. I am content that these arrangements should be trialled for the quieter Police and Crime Commissioner election when the full effect can be seen. If there is a need to revert to the present arrangement because the new facility is not acceptable then I will review this with my Polling Station Inspectors after May 2020. I will of course consult with the School so we can avoid disruption to the school as much as possible.

7.5 **Sunbury East** – Councillors may wish to note that I have authorised some minor works at the Council's cost for Chennestone School and Stanwell Fields School to improve disabled access at the December 2019 UK Parliamentary General Election.

8. Other considerations

8.1 The review has been carried out in accordance with the Electoral Commission Guidance in order to provide suitable voting premises for all voters and staff taking into account Equality and Diversity, and Sustainability. The needs of the electorate must be considered when appointing a Polling Place to ensure there is sufficient space to accommodate them.

9. Timetable for implementation

9.1 The Council has to make a decision by the end of January 2020. This is a non-Executive matter. The changes will come into effect for the next election which is scheduled to be 7 May 2020: Police and Crime Commissioner for Surrey.

Background papers:
There are none.

Appendices:

A - Returning Officer Recommendations

B – Maps of wards with current and proposed polling stations