

# Report to General Purposes and Arbitration Committee

**Thursday 16 December 2021**

<b>Subject:</b>	Review of Polling Places and Polling Stations 2021/22
<b>Director:</b>	Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer, Surjit Tour
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Electoral Services Manager, Tracey Hurst <a href="mailto:tracey_hurst@sandwell.gov.uk">tracey_hurst@sandwell.gov.uk</a>

## 1 Recommendations

That, Council be recommended to:

- 1.1 Approve the proposed changes to specific Polling Places and Polling Stations as set out in Appendix 1 to this report.
- 1.2 Subject to 1.1 above, authorise the Director of Law and Governance & Monitoring Officer to implement the approved changes detailed in Appendix 1.
- 1.3. If any change are required with a Polling Place or Polling Station within the Borough prior to elections in 2022 (and beyond), the Returning Officer (or in their absence/unavailability, the Deputy Returning Officer) is authorised to change any Polling Place(s) and/or Polling Station(s), following consultation with relevant Ward Members and Chairperson of the General Purposes and Arbitration Committee, as considered necessary to enable the efficient and effective running of elections.



## 2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 Owing to the impact of COVID-19 and the consequential enforced closure of the Borough's schools in 2020 and 2021, it is important that any disruption to pupils' education is mitigated as far as reasonably and practicably possible.
- 2.2 One way the council can help achieve this, is by using alternative polling stations in place of using schools on election days, where there is a suitable alternative location in the immediate vicinity.

## 3 How does this deliver objectives of the Corporate Plan?

	<p><b>Strong resilient communities</b></p> <p>The recommendations detailed in this report enable voters to engage in the democratic process by being able to vote, in person, at their appropriate Polling Station, whilst, wherever possible, enabling schools to remain open on the day of polling.</p> <p>Electors will continue to have the right to apply to vote by post or by proxy too, should they wish to do so.</p>
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## 4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 Section 18B of the Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA) states the authority must designate the polling places for the polling districts in its area. Each polling district must have a polling place and it is the duty of the Council to designate polling places and keep them under review. The Council is required, so far as is reasonable and practicable to designate polling places which are accessible to disabled electors.
- 4.2 Paragraph 25 of Schedule 1 to the RPA states that the Returning Officer must provide a sufficient number of polling stations, shall allocate electors to those polling stations, and those polling stations shall be in the polling place for that district.
- 4.3 The proposed course of action relocates a number of Polling Stations away from schools and means that headteachers will not be obliged to close their premises for the day because of the need to conduct elections.



- 4.4 The recommendations contained in this report, are consistent with a request made to Returning Officers, by the Department for Education and the Cabinet Office in February 2021, to minimise any further disruption to pupils' education by avoiding using schools as Polling stations, where it is practically possible to do so.
- 4.5 The recommendations also:
- a) considers the viability of continuing to use a number of temporary huts as Polling Stations and, where possible, recommends the use of other, more permanent venues in the vicinity,
  - b) addresses the need to make other, enforced changes to some Polling Stations in 2022.
  - c) Recognises the on-going need for flexibility in determining the sites of Polling stations, particularly given the uncertainties and challenges that Covid-19 puts on the planning of elections.
- 4.6 Prior to the elections held in May 2021, a total of 47 schools were used as Polling Stations in the borough. If all of the recommendations contained in this report are approved, the number being used as Polling Stations in 2022 will reduce to 27. Work will continue to seek to find alternative locations for this remaining number, so that, in time, the total can reduce further still.
- 4.7 For the May 2021 elections, 16 temporary cabins were used as Polling Stations. If all of the recommendations contained in this report are approved, the number being used as Polling Stations in 2022 will reduce to 12. Work will continue to identify alternative locations for this remaining number, so that the total can reduce further still.
- 4.8 Appendix 1 to this report details proposals to relocate a number of Polling Places to other venues in respective Wards.
- 4.9 The RPA also requires local authorities to, periodically, conduct and complete a review of Polling Districts and Polling Places. The next compulsory review of all polling places must be completed between October 2023 and January 2025.



4.10 The recommendations contained in this report follow a commitment made to General Purposes and Arbitration Committee in June 2021, to undertake a review of school-based polling stations, prior to the local elections being held in May 2022.

## 5 Alternative Options

- 5.1 In making the recommendations outlined in this report, officers have, wherever possible, considered a number of alternative sites in each of the affected Polling districts and concluded that, for reasons based on availability, location, size, ease of access and cost, the locations detailed in Appendix 1 are the most suitable in each case.
- 5.2. Proposals for each ward have been shared with relevant councillors and their comments helped formulate the recommendations contained in the appendix.
- 5.3 It may be possible to continue using the schools previously used as Polling Stations/Places, however that does cause disruption to the education of those children attending those schools. Whilst this can and has been effectively mitigated by school Headteachers and staff taking steps to ensure any disruption does not adversely affect the schooling of their pupils, the preference is to avoid the disruption in the first instance wherever possible.

## 6 Implications

<b>Resources:</b>	Costs associated with making the proposed changes to Polling Places/Stations will be met by the Returning Officer's budget. If all the recommended changes to Polling Places/Stations detailed in this report are approved, it is anticipated that a small overall saving will be achieved as compared with the costs incurred for conducting the poll at the most recent borough-wide elections. These savings will be achieved primarily because of the proposed reduction in the number of temporary huts being used and because of a reduction in the overall number of Polling Stations and the associated staffing costs.
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	<p>The savings created from the above recommendations excludes the “one-off” cost of notifying all households in the affected districts of a change to their Polling Station. Assuming these letters are hand delivered, the cost is estimated to be approximately £5,300. At present there is no budget to support this expenditure however, the service is currently going through a zero-based budgeting exercise as part of their budget setting process where such costs will be taken into account.</p>
<b>Legal and Governance:</b>	Please see Section 4 above
<b>Risk:</b>	<p>As a result of the recommendations contained in this report, by enabling schools to remain open, the risk to pupils’ education will be reduced.</p> <p>As was the situation in the May 2021 elections, the new, proposed venues will be managed and made as safe and Covid-secure as possible.</p> <p>There are a total of 25 changes to existing Polling Places, with 13 new venues being for the first time. To minimise risk of electors going to the incorrect (i.e. “old”) Polling Station, a number of mitigations will be put in place. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each household affected will receive a letter explaining the change and the details of their “new” polling station.</li> <li>• The possibility of changes to Polling Stations is being mentioned in the Winter edition of the Sandwell Herald and, if the recommendations are approved, detailed in the Spring edition.</li> <li>• Poll Cards will specify details of the elector’s new Polling Station and will highlight that there has been a change to the location.</li> <li>• The council’s website will be updated to reflect the changes.</li> <li>• On the day of the next election, temporary signs will be placed at each former location, advising electors of their “new” Polling Station.</li> <li>• Messages being sent through social media on Facebook, Twitter etc in the run up to the election.</li> </ul>



<b>Equality:</b>	<p>Details of the proposed recommendations have been shared, through Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations, with disability groups in the Borough.</p> <p>No objections to the recommendations have been received to date, but if any comments are received after this report has been produced, these observations will be shared verbally with Committee members.</p> <p>The proposed polling stations have been assessed to ensure all requisite accessibility requirements can be met and all relevant equality obligations satisfied.</p>
<b>Health and Wellbeing:</b>	<p>The recommendations contained within this report enable voters, to be able to vote, at a Polling Station, in person in the forthcoming elections, should they wish to do so.</p>
<b>Social Value</b>	<p>Not applicable</p>

## 7. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Recommended Polling Place and Polling Station changes.

## 8. Background Papers

- 8.1. Reviews of polling districts, polling places and polling stations – published by the Electoral Commission.
- 8.3. Letter from the Department for Education and the Cabinet office dated 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021 entitled “Use of school buildings for polls.”

