

Test Valley Borough Council Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places (Acting) Returning Officer's Recommendations 2023

1. Introduction

This sets out the (Acting) Returning Officer's Submission to the above Review. It primarily deals with the suitability of existing polling stations, and where appropriate proposes possible alternatives (which may require further investigation to determine their availability and suitability). It also includes information on the current polling districts, proposals to merge/combine polling districts, and the number of electors per polling district. The submission is ordered by Borough Ward.

2. Polling Stations

Each polling district requires a polling station and, except where special circumstances apply, the polling station must be located within the polling district. Given the number of polling districts, and the rural location of many, it is often difficult to identify suitable premises within each polling district, and so a polling station in another polling district has to be used. If this is not possible, portable buildings are used instead.

Some premises which could be used as polling stations have regular bookings which venue managers are unwilling to cancel. In addition, the Returning Officer is not entitled to require the use of a building as a polling station, save for local authority schools and buildings that are publicly funded.

In general terms, all the buildings proposed to be used as polling stations are considered to be fit for purpose, accessible to the majority of the electorate which the venue serves, and accessible for those with a disability. However, the layout of premises varies considerably. Older premises will have been designed to different standards, unlike modern premises which should have good disabled access. Many venue managers have improved access to their buildings, and temporary access facilities are employed as necessary, where a building is used without permanent access facilities built in.

In preparing for the Review, officers have researched possible alternative venues and taken account of the experience gained in the Borough and Parish elections held in May 2023.

I welcome comments on the suitability and accessibility of existing polling stations, any alternatives proposed in this submission, and any other suitable venues that respondents consider could be used as polling stations. If alternative venues are to be considered, please respond to the consultation as soon as possible, outlining details of the alternative venue and, where possible, an indication of the availability of that venue.

3. Polling Districts

Polling districts are given a reference (e.g. SG1) and a name (e.g. Ampfield No. 3). As polling districts are primarily based on the parish which they are situated in, the name usually is linked to the parish name. Where a parish (or town) area is divided into wards (e.g. Andover or Romsey) the name will be linked to the ward name, for ease of reference.

As a consequence of the reviews of the County Division and Borough Ward boundaries in 2016 and 2017 respectively, additional polling districts had to be created to reflect the changes to boundaries that were implemented by these reviews.

The Borough Council's Community Governance Review of 2018 made adjustments to parish boundaries in the light of these earlier reviews. Some very small polling districts with only a few electors within them (e.g. VW, UL1, etc.) had to be retained following the reviews, to reflect the Parliamentary Constituency boundaries (as Constituency boundaries were based on the previous Borough ward boundaries).

Proposals have now been made for changes to the Parliamentary Constituency boundaries and are due to pass through Parliament during the course of this polling district review. These proposals used the current Borough Ward boundaries as the "building blocks" for the proposed new constituencies. As a consequence, these small polling districts do not need to be retained, and therefore the proposals for polling districts include their removal and merger with adjacent polling districts, simplifying the electoral administration process. These changes have been noted in the submission.

4. Background to Proposals

Most polling districts, polling places and polling stations have been in place for many years. They work well in terms of facilities for both staff and electors and are convenient and accessible for the majority of the people they serve.

Where there are changes to current arrangements being suggested, some background to those changes has been outlined below to provide additional context around those recommendations.

Schools

Although Returning Officers are entitled to require the use of schools as polling stations, over the last few years Returning Officers have been asked by Central Government and the Education Authority to avoid using schools where possible. Otherwise, without a separate room or hall on site allowing pupils and electors to be kept separate, schools may need to close to pupils on polling day for safeguarding reasons, meaning disruption to pupils' education. The (Acting) Returning Officer therefore recommends not using schools where there is an alternative venue available.

A particular example of this is where the polling station for PD WA (Abbey No.2) is Romsey Primary School, with the above concerns being raised by the school for the past few years at election time, and requests being made to not use the School in the future. Previously, electors in this polling district voted at Crosfield Hall which has excellent space and facilities, as well as car parking for staff and electors. They were moved to the School as part of the last statutory Polling District Review. This was done to provide a polling station within the relevant polling district; however, it has only actually been used as a polling station once since that change, due to the challenges mentioned above.

For the May 2023 elections, the electors in this polling district were allocated to the Plaza Theatre, which is already used as a polling station venue for another polling district. Unfortunately, complaints were received from electors and staff at the station alike.

Although the venue is suitable for one station, ease of access for a double station was challenging, difficult for staff to manage and parking is very limited.

For the reasons outlined above, it is recommended by the (Acting) Returning Officer that electors of PD WA (Abbey No.2) are allocated to Crosfield Hall.

Rationalising Polling District Names/References

It is being recommended that some 'tidying up' of polling district references and names takes place, to make them alphabetically and numerically more logical. As a result of various boundary reviews over the years, referenced in Section 3 of this submission, polling districts have been created, amended or deleted, which has led to their descriptions becoming disjointed.

As an example, PD SN is currently described as 'Braishfield No.1', however there are no other Braishfield polling districts. It is therefore proposed to rename this PD 'Braishfield'. This naming convention would then be applied to other polling districts as indicated in the Appendix.

Youth in Romsey Polling Station

As part of the last statutory review, electors in PDs UJ, UJ1, UJ2 and UJ3 were allocated to a new polling station at Youth in Romsey, Southampton Road, a total of just over 500 electors. Following the 2022 Community Governance Review, electors in the UJ polling district were moved to Abbotswood Community Centre, leaving just under 300 electors allocated to Youth in Romsey. Each of these polling districts vote in a different combination of Borough Wards and Romsey Town Council (RTC) Parish Wards, resulting in the need to have three separate polling stations running alongside each other, as the table below demonstrates:

PD	Electorate	Borough Ward	Parish Ward
UJ1	108	Romsey Abbey	Abbey (RTC)
UJ2	74	Chilworth, Nursling & Rownhams	Romsey Extra (RTC)
UJ3	119	Blackwater	Romsey Extra (RTC)

The options available for how to best manage the above scenario are:

- Option 1 - Electors in PDs UJ1, UJ2 and UJ3 continue to vote at Youth in Romsey;
- Option 2 - Electors in PDs UJ1, UJ2 and UJ3 are moved back to Crosfield Hall, where they historically voted prior to the last review;
- Option 3 - Electors in PD UJ1 *only* are moved back Crosfield Hall, as they vote in the same electoral areas as other electors already allocated to that venue, but that PDs UJ2 and UJ3 remain at Youth in Romsey.

Taking into account the administrative challenges of running a venue with multiple polls taking place at the same time, whilst ensuring convenient voting arrangements for electors, Option 2 is the preferred option and therefore the recommendation of the (Acting) Returning Officer.

5. Detailed Proposals

The Appendix to this report sets out the current and proposed reference and name of each polling district, and the polling station that is used. It also shows where a polling station is outside the polling district. The elector numbers for each polling district are given.

Where there is a proposal to change the name of the polling district, the suggested name is shown next to the current name in brackets.

The final column in the table contains my recommendations for polling stations, and any changes to the associated polling district that would be proposed to be made under the Polling District Review.

Abbreviations used:-

PD – Polling District

PS – Polling Station

Andy Ferrier
Chief Executive and (Acting) Returning Officer
Test Valley Borough Council

13 October 2023