

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:	The Cabinet
2.	Date:	24 September 2014
3.	Title:	Review of Polling Places 2013-14 All wards affected
4.	Directorate:	Resources

5. Summary

The report describes the review of parliamentary polling districts and polling places and the final proposals for future polling arrangements.

6. Recommendations

- **That the proposals for future polling arrangements outlined in the report be approved.**

7. Proposals and Details

The Electoral Administration Act 2006 requires that a full review of polling arrangements be completed every four years. The most recent review was completed in December 2011 but The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a change to the timing of the reviews to better align them with parliamentary elections.

The Act required that the next compulsory review must be started and completed between 1 October 2013 and 31 January 2015 (inclusive).

Each existing/proposed venue has been evaluated against issues of accessibility, voter convenience, fairness and availability for polling (including at short notice). The polling place review has taken account of the effect of council budget considerations on the future availability of some RMBC owned community centres and warden/neighbourhood centres.

7.1 The Returning Officer's proposals were reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board on 18 July 2014.

It was agreed at that meeting that Electoral Services would review proposals at Hooton Roberts, East Herringthorpe and Rotherham West in response to issues raised by Members.

The Board resolved that subject to any alterations being made as a consequence, the Returning Officer's proposals be approved¹.

7.2 Following the start of the school year in September, in discussions with the new manager of the Arnold Childrens' Centre about the proposal to relocate polling to the centre, new information came to light which required a second site inspection and a review of the proposal.

Appendix 1 sets out details of all the issues referred to at 7.1 and 7.2 above and the investigations and outcomes.

Appendix 2 sets out the Terms of reference for the review and explains the process and criteria.

Appendix 3 sets out the final outcome of the review in the Returning Officer's Proposed Polling Scheme and details the full scheme of polling arrangements effective from December 2014.

8. Finance

Additional costs are not significant and will be met from the existing election budget.

¹ Overview and Scrutiny Board – 18/07/14 – Minute No. 14 (2)

9. Risks and Uncertainties

Inadequate provision of polling places and polling stations could have a detrimental affect on voter turnout and could be the source of an election challenge.

There must be a sufficient number of suitable polling stations to allow the Returning Officer to allocate a reasonable number of voters to each. The Electoral Commission's report on queues in some areas at the 2010 elections concluded that in part the problems were as a result of a reduction in polling stations so that too many voters were allocated to each.

The combination of polls increases the risk of queues where provision is inadequate and combined polls have become more common in recent years. The next set of elections following this review will be combined UK Parliamentary General, Borough Council and Parish Council elections which will take place on 7 May 2015. This will be the first time ever that all three have been undertaken on the same date and risks of queues are therefore greater.

The polling place review has highlighted an emerging risk to the adequate provision of polling venues. The current financial climate is forcing the council to continually review its property assets and council premises currently used or potentially suitable for polling may become unavailable. There are few suitable privately owned buildings and private premises always carry the risk that use for polling is not guaranteed and may be refused, sometimes at short notice. There may be a change of ownership or policy or an alternative booking may be preferred.

It is likely that more schools will be required as polling places in the future if sufficient provision is to be assured. However, schools are notified of scheduled election dates well in advance which allows them to set one of their statutory in-service training days for the same day instead of requesting an additional school closure.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

Provision of reasonably convenient polling arrangements is a statutory requirement and contributes to delivery of the council's objectives of fairness, equality and community cohesion. Such provision is an essential element of the free and fair elections required under Protocol 1, Article 3 of the Human Rights Act.

11. Background Papers and Consultation

- Electoral Administration Act 2006
- The Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places (Parliamentary Elections) Regulations 2006
- The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013
- Minutes of Overview and Scrutiny Management Board 18/07/14

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