

Additional Investigations re: Report to Cabinet 24 September 2014 (7.1 and 7.2)

7.1 Issues from Overview & Scrutiny Board

Hooton Roberts:

A question was asked about the feasibility of moving the polling station from Thrybergh Parish Hall to Ravenfield Parish Hall which led to a subsequent question about whether a mobile unit could be used.

Investigations and Outcome:

Hooton Roberts is a small village with 171 electors of whom 82 are registered postal voters. It is on the main X78 bus route which runs frequently between Doncaster and Rotherham passing through Hooton Roberts on the way to Thrybergh every 10 minutes. The polling station at Thrybergh parish hall is nearer (3km) than Ravenfield Parish Hall (4km) with better transport links. Buses between Hooton Roberts and Ravenfield are infrequent (one every 2 hours).

The question of a mobile unit was investigated but there is no suitable location in the village where a unit could be deployed and have access to the necessary utilities (water, toilet facilities and electricity for lighting and heating) Polling staff are on duty for over 15 hours on polling day so access to such utilities is essential. Mobile units tend not to be suitable for voters with limited mobility and hirers are unwilling and often unable to supply units for a single day and where this is possible, the units are extremely expensive (around 4-5 times higher than the average hire charge for polling stations). Costs would be prohibitive for the 89 voters who are not registered to vote by post.

Electoral Services Officers visited Hooton Roberts to investigate whether there may be any building in the village which might offer suitable polling facilities. Only two possibilities were identified - St John the Baptist Church and the Earl of Strafford Public House.

The church has no disabled access and would require voters to access the entrance via a grass pathway through the churchyard. The pathway would be problematic for voters with limited mobility and there is limited exterior lighting. There does not appear to be a suitable room available for hire within the church.

The Earl of Strafford, has level access at the main entrance but the inside is open plan with no separate room – any area used for polling would be within the pub/bar areas and it would not be possible to ensure the secrecy of the ballot.

Although not ideal, the Returning Officer believes that Thrybergh Parish Hall continues to be the most practicable location available for the 89 electors who are not registered as postal voters.

The Returning Officer's proposals for this area, therefore, remain unchanged.

East Herringthorpe:

A question was asked about the suitability of the working environment for polling staff in the polling station at High Greave Junior School (Sports Hall). It was also mentioned that this polling station serves a large number of voters and a suggestion was made that an additional polling station be provided at High Greave Place Community Centre.

Investigations and Outcome:

Electoral Services Officers visited the Junior School to examine the working environment. The polling station is located in the Sports Hall to minimise disruption to the school. Using the hall allows the school to remain open on polling day without compromising the security of the children as separate access can be maintained. The foyer to the hall provides adequate toilet and refreshment facilities and is available to staff throughout the day. The windows in the hall itself are high but the room has adequate lighting and no complaints have ever been received from polling staff about working conditions at this venue. Polling Station Inspectors are required to complete an assessment for each polling station every polling day. The reports for this station have been reviewed and reveal no concerns about its suitability for staff or for voters.

Electoral Services Officers visited High Greave Place Community Room to assess its suitability should an additional polling station be required. The Centre is at the top of a cul-de-sac with a slight incline and with 6 steps or a sloped path. Kitchen facilities are available and there is a room which would be of sufficient size for a small polling station.

The number of electors allocated would have to be kept to the minimum because there is no car parking except on-street which could cause disruption to the residents in the neighbouring bungalows.

The polling place review highlighted an emerging risk to the future availability of council owned premises such as community centres.

The polling station at the Junior School is easily able to accommodate the number of voters allocated to it which is well within the Electoral Commission's guidance as to the number of voters per polling station and there is very little risk that this polling station will not continue to be available for polling. No complaints have been received from voters in the area as to the convenience of their polling station and there seems to be no requirement or justification for an additional polling station.

The Returning Officer's proposals for this area, therefore, remain unchanged.

Rotherham West:

A question was asked about electors in the MH polling district having to travel to St John's Church and a suggestion made that they be allocated to the polling station at St Bede's RC School instead.

A further question was asked as to whether the allocation of four polling stations in a relatively small geographical area in the Rotherham West Ward is disproportionate.

Investigations and Outcome:

Electoral Services Officers investigated the possibility of allocating electors in the MH polling district to St Bede's RC School instead of St John's Church.

The church is currently used because the location is more accessible for the majority of the electors either on foot or by public transport.

Allocating these electors to St Bede's RC School would result in some of those travelling on foot having to cross the busy A629 road. Those electors in the north of the polling district without transport would have to catch two buses to get to the polling station.

The polling station at St John's Church is easily able to accommodate the electors allocated and the future availability of the venue seems secure. No complaints have been received from voters in the area as to the convenience of their polling station and the Returning Officer believes that St John's Church continues to be the most practicable location available to electors in the MH polling district.

On the question of the four polling stations in an area of the Rotherham West Ward, the table below is a comparison with other wards containing mostly urban areas and with similar levels of population and housing density.

Ward	Electorate	No of Polling stations
Boston Castle	9572	10
Rawmarsh	9700	9
Silverwood	9600	10
Rotherham East	9193	9
Rotherham West	9600	9
Valley	9437	10

The table indicates similar levels of polling provision across similar wards.

However, to gain a clearer picture of the situation, Electoral Services Officers visited the area and noted that the allocation of polling stations takes into account availability of buildings and factors such as transport links and accessibility on foot.

The provision of polling places in the area meets the criteria outlined in the terms of reference for this review at Appendix 2 and "seeks to ensure that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in all the circumstances"

Given that future elections are more likely to be combined and that in 2015 there will be combined polls for the UK Parliamentary General Elections, Borough Council and Parish Council elections, and the increased potential for queues and congestion at polling stations the Returning Officer believes it would be unwise to reduce provision at this time.

The Returning Officer's proposals for this area, therefore, remain unchanged.

7.2 Review of the proposal to relocate to Arnold Children's Centre – Rotherham East Ward

At the start of the school year in September, a new manager took up her post at the Arnold Children's Centre. She had not been involved in previous discussions about the proposal to move polling from Badsley Moor Primary School to the Children's Centre and raised concerns about a potential road safety risk.

Investigations and Outcome:

During a follow-up site visit, Electoral Services Officers were shown examples of traffic congestion and poorly parked cars.

It appears that there are ongoing issues with parking and congestion when parents deliver / collect children at the school and the centre. The manager reported previous incidents of near-misses and was concerned that any increase in the number of vehicles around the centre due to a relocation of the polling station would increase the risk of an accident.

In addition to the road-safety issue, congested traffic could impede voter access to the polling station.

Having taken the new information into account, the Returning Officer's proposal to relocate polling from Badsley Moor Primary School to the Arnold Children's Centre is withdrawn.

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10 September 2014