

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**ELECTORAL REVIEW WORKING GROUP**

**18 March 2014**

**Report of the Chief Executive**

**Non Delegated**

**1 REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES**

**To note the responses to the recent public consultation regarding the review of Polling Districts and Polling Places in the Borough, and to agree to the final proposals to be submitted to Council via the General Purposes Committee.**

**1.1 Introduction**

- 1.1.1 Members will recall that, at the meeting of 23 October 2013, the draft proposals for the review of Polling Districts and Polling Places were agreed. These were published immediately following that meeting, signifying the start of the public consultation.
- 1.1.2 Invitations to contribute to the consultation, including a link to the full consultation materials, were sent to Borough Councillors, parish councils, County Councillors, the local Members of Parliament, local political parties, and groups with expertise in advising on accessibility issues for people with disabilities. In addition, the booking clerks for all polling place venues were advised of the review and our initial proposals.
- 1.1.3 The final date by which representations were to have been received in relation to this review was 24 January 2014. The responses, from which personal information has been redacted, are included at **Annex 1**.

**1.2 Responses**

- 1.2.1 During the consultation, a total of 31 formal responses were received, including by email or direct to the consultation webpage. In addition, correspondence was received from most polling place venues confirming their continued acceptance of being used as a polling place from 2015. No negative responses were received from any proposed polling place venues.

- 1.2.2 During the consultation, an informal approach was made by one local political party. They have previously shared the view that **Trench Ward** should be served by two polling places. They had been invited to respond to the consultation, but were contacting us to check their understanding of the process. In that correspondence, they stated:

*[NAME REDACTED] asked me to take up the case we were making for a second polling station in the Trench Ward. We were arguing that voters at the South end of the ward - many of them elderly - had a long uphill walk to the Six in One Club to vote and we suggested that a second polling station - ideally at the Baptist Church - would be of considerable assistance.*

- 1.2.3 In our initial consultation, we stated:

*Trench Ward*

*Consideration has been given to splitting Trench ward into two polling districts, such that Tonbridge Baptist Church becomes a polling place for the southern part of the ward. We have previously been asked to consider this, on the grounds that voters living near to the Baptist Church have to travel uphill to the existing polling place in order to vote in person.*

*Tonbridge Baptist Church has step-free access to good-sized accommodation for polling day, with access to car parking facilities and close to the homes it will serve. Unfortunately, the layout of properties in Trench Ward, and the obvious reluctance to allocate residents living adjacent to one polling station a different place in which to vote, or different to their neighbours across the road but in the same ward (residents in Trench Road and Northwood Road, for example) there are limited numbers of electors who can be allocated to this polling station.*

*Therefore, no changes to the polling place are proposed, given the small number of electors that could be relocated to an alternative venue and the confusion such a change could make, in addition to the difficulties of securing a multi-use venue in the private sector. In addition, any such change would require a substantial proportion of the electors to walk down the hill to vote and then back up; this would be no benefit over requiring other electors to walk up the hill as at present. In addition, postal voting on demand is available to all electors.*

- 1.2.4 In support of these initial proposals, the local Borough Councillors submitted:

*We are writing to you with regard to the suggestion of a second polling station at the Tonbridge Baptist Church (referred to as TBC).*

*Firstly, I have been working with TBC for 7 years now and they have always stated that they wish to remain non-political.*

*Secondly, TBC lies on the southern boundary of Trench with Castle Ward. From TBC there stretches half a mile of a very steep hill, most properties are in the north of the ward, and very few would gain from this proposal as they would then have to walk back up the hill.*

*We have Lesley [sic] Tew Court for the elderly sharing the car park with TBC, where all residents have been offered or have postal votes, plus if they wish to visit the Polling Station in person, we provide a car.*

*The current Polling Station at The North Tonbridge Community Centre (Six In One Club) in Northwood Road is large and perfectly adequate for the number of electors in the Ward.*

*For these reasons we do not agree that a second Polling Station at TBC is necessary, or for that matter helpful to our Residents.*

And:

*I am very relieved that we are having just the one Polling Station, my comments initially that we would not gain anything as either way my residents would still have to walk the hill.*

- 1.2.5 In order to ensure transparency in our deliberations, I have contacted Tonbridge Baptist Church for their views. Although open to considering working with TMBC in this regard in future (following a review and reconfiguration of their premises and use thereof), they have stated:

*I have now had time to consult with colleagues. Unfortunately this proposal falls at the first hurdle since we have long-standing priority commitments to groups that use both the rooms you have identified on Thursdays. One is a Day Centre for elderly people which is not able to be cancelled – especially at just a few weeks' notice in the case of a by-election.*

- 1.2.6 Within Trench Ward as a whole, 10.6% of registered local government electors have a postal vote. Within Leslie Tew Court, a greater proportion (33.3%) do so.
- 1.2.7 I am therefore minded that there is no net advantage to electors to creating a second polling station in Trench ward. There is also no suitable available venue. I therefore recommend that the polling place remain as set out in our initial proposals.
- 1.2.8 During the consultation, in addition to the broadly positive responses, we received two comments regarding **Larkfield North**;
- One stated an objection to the new warding arrangement. However, the wards were set by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and cannot be changed. This is therefore outside of the scope of this consultation.

- The other advocated merging the polling places for Larkfield North and Larkfield South into one venue. However the number of electors from these two wards would preclude that on practicality grounds. At present both venues house two polling stations to serve their respective wards. It would not be possible to house four stations in one venue due to the size of the venue and the resulting confusion to electors.

1.2.9 We have also received a response from the MP for Chatham & Aylesford, asking that consideration be given to voters moving into Peter's Village (part of the new **Burham & Wouldham** ward). Given the relatively early stages of occupation in that development, I am minded to recommend we make no changes at the current time but keep that parish under consideration as the electorate grows in the coming years.

1.2.10 One response has been received from the owners of the current polling place for **Cage Green** south. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Tonbridge (Parish Church) Scout Group have submitted:

*We are most disappointed that our building [Scout Hall, The Ridgeway, Tonbridge] will no longer be used as a Polling Station after 2014. We are surprised that the main reason given is the limited car parking space. [NAME REDACTED] informed the Group Executive Committee that on various occasions when he has visited our building during polling the car park has never been full.*

*Whilst we appreciate that boundaries have to be changed from time to time we are surprised that the critical issue appears to be car parking space.*

*As you will be aware the Scout Movement emphasises the importance of Civic Duty and it is good for our members to see our building being used for civic purposes.*

*We would therefore ask you to reconsider your proposal not to use our building as a polling station.*

1.2.11 However, Members are asked to note that from 2015 the geographical area that is to be served by a polling station in the southern part of Cage Green ward is expanding and the electorate expected to attend that station is increasing by around 40%. Whilst the car park at the Scout Hall is not often filled by voters, they do often park on The Ridgeway instead. With an increase of 40% of voters, and some very high turnout elections likely in 2015, we do have to consider the implications of that many more vehicles parking at the polling station or on the road itself. The proposed new venue is also more centrally located, making it easier for more electors to walk to and access more readily.

1.2.12 I therefore propose that no changes are made to the recommendations in light of these comments.

### **1.3 Proposals**

- 1.3.1 In light of these responses, no substantive changes are recommended from the initial proposals.
- 1.3.2 I therefore recommend that the final proposals, as set out at **Annex 2**, be agreed and submitted to the General Purposes Committee on 23 June 2014. Following agreement from that Committee, the final proposals will be presented to Council on 15 July 2014 and the appropriate changes made to the Register effective 1 December 2014.

### **1.4 Legal Implications**

- 1.4.1 The Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended) requires borough councils to undertake reviews of polling districts and polling places at least every four years. The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a change to the timing of compulsory reviews of UK Parliamentary polling districts and polling places. The next compulsory review must now be started and completed between 1 October 2013 and 31 January 2015 (inclusive).

### **1.5 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

- 1.5.1 The cost of this review will be met from existing budgets. Failure to correctly undertake this review could impose considerable financial penalties on the (Acting) Returning Officers due to problems at elections; this would trigger a series of events bringing cost and embarrassment to the Council.

### **1.6 Risk Assessment**

- 1.6.1 The requirements of our electors are essential, and a failure to correctly undertake this review could result in disenfranchising electors, or making it more difficult for them to vote.
- 1.6.2 Any failure in the process or consideration of comments made during the consultation stage could result in the Electoral Commission over-ruling the decisions of the Council.

### **1.7 Equality Assessment**

- 1.7.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

- 1.7.2 The selection of polling places takes into account the needs of electors with disabilities and, as far as is reasonably practicable, efforts are made to ensure all eligible electors are able to access polling stations. Risk assessments of all polling places have been undertaken, and this includes a series of access questions. Presiding Officers at polling stations also provide feed-back on accessibility of polling stations at elections. The review of polling places has identified some changes that will help improve accessibility to venues (by using better-located venues) and into polling stations (by using venues with better accessibility).

## **1.8 Recommendations**

- 1.8.1 It is recommended that Members approve the final proposals set out in this paper for agreement by the General Purposes Committee.

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