

Crawley Borough Council

Report to Governance Committee

Tuesday 26 January 2021

Polling Arrangements May 2021

Report of the Chief Executive – *CEX/54*

1. Purpose

- 1.1 To consider temporary amendments to the scheme of polling places for the May 2021 elections.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Governance Committee recommends to Full Council that the temporary changes to the Polling Scheme set out in paragraphs 5.7 and 5.9 be made for the May 2021 elections.
- 2.2 That authority be delegated to the Returning Officer, in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governance Committee, to make temporary changes to the Polling Scheme whilst the Covid-19 pandemic response is in effect.

3. Reason for the Recommendation

- 3.1 To ensure that participants in the May 2021 elections can be assured that in-person voting will take place in a Covid secure manner, while complying with legislative requirements and avoiding disruption. To give flexibility, ensuring that the Polling Scheme for the May 2021 elections can be adjusted to respond to changing events at short notice.

4. Background

- 4.1 Due to the Covid pandemic all elections scheduled to be held on 7th May 2020 were postponed until 6th May 2021. The postponed elections will be combined with elections already scheduled to be held in 2021. In Crawley this means that elections for one third of Borough Councillors will be combined with elections for Councillors for West Sussex County Council and the Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC).
- 4.2 The Returning Officer for Brighton and Hove City Council has been appointed as the Sussex Police Area Returning Officer and has overall responsibility for the conduct of the elections for the PCC. The Returning Officer at West Sussex County Council has overall responsibility for the election for West Sussex County Councillors and the Crawley Borough Council Returning Officer has overall responsibility for the Borough Council elections along with the practical administration of all three elections in Crawley.

- 4.3 The preparation for, and administration of, triple combination elections during the pandemic will produce significant challenges. Ensuring adequate and safe facilities for voters and staff at polling places has been a key part of the preparations. The Returning Officer has conducted an initial assessment of existing polling places and has concluded that some temporary changes are necessary for polling during the pandemic. The recommendations for these changes have been developed to ensure that:
- polling can take place safely;
 - there are enough staff to administer polling;
 - the administration of the election process is as effective and resilient as possible.
- 4.4 The availability of experienced polling station staff to work in May is a concern. A survey of Crawley's experienced polling station and count staff was carried out at the end of 2020 and showed that there will be a shortage of experienced presiding officers to supervise polling stations at these elections. It is important to ensure that each polling station is supervised by staff with an appropriate level of experience especially given the difficulties with providing face-to-face training during the pandemic. As well as ensuring the safety of staff and voters the Returning Officer's recommendations will enable flexibility to combine some polling stations to ensure the adequate distribution of experienced staff.

5. Polling Places

- 5.1 As reported to the Committee at its meeting held on 17th November 2020 officers have been investigating whether any temporary changes to the Council's adopted Polling Scheme are necessary to ensure that in-person polling can be administered effectively and safely at the May 2021 elections.
- 5.2 The Council has a duty to divide the Borough into polling districts, and to designate suitable polling places to meet the reasonable requirements of electors taking account of the accessibility of disabled persons.
- 5.3 New polling arrangements were adopted by the Council in January 2019 following the ward boundary changes arising from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England electoral review of Crawley Borough Council. Polling districts were created which reflected the new boundaries and West Sussex County Council Division boundaries. The new Polling Scheme worked well at the May 2019 Borough Council elections, the European Parliamentary elections and the General Election. The current Scheme is set out at Appendix A.

Polling Station requirements

- 5.4 To ensure compliance with government guidance for operating safely during the pandemic, a minimum set of standards for operating polling stations across Sussex at the Police and Crime Commissioner elections is being developed by the Sussex Police Area Returning Officer in consultation with the Borough/District Returning Officers. The standards are based on the Government's 'Working Safely during COVID-19 in Offices and Contact Centres Guidance'. Some of the standards relating to polling places will include:
- deep cleaning prior to polling day and after polling day
 - queueing to be outdoors

- staff must have access to a toilet, and hand-washing facilities, and access to an area to take breaks that allows them to remove their face covering and have refreshments
- either a separate entrance or exit or managed entrance/exit (all Crawley polling places will have a managed entrance/exit)
- space for staff to remain 2 metres apart
- visor and face masks for staff
- provision of notices and floor markings to remind people to social distance.

5.5 A survey of existing polling station staff has indicated that there will be a shortage of experienced Senior Presiding Officers applying to work at the election; new staff will be recruited, but there will be a need to amalgamate some polling stations to deal with the shortage of experienced staff.

5.6 The Council's Health and Safety Officer has been undertaking an audit of the buildings used, these visits have been taking longer to arrange than originally envisaged due to the Covid restrictions currently in place. However, following an initial assessment by the Returning Officer it is considered that most polling places can be used at the May 2021 election and those where a temporary change is recommended are set out at 5.7 and 5.9, and a schedule showing the recommended temporary Polling Scheme is included at Appendix B. A comparison between the actual polling place turnout at the 2019 General Election and an estimated polling place turnout based on previous Borough and PCC elections is included at Appendix C.

5.7 Recommended changes in Polling Places

Polling District	Ward	Polling Place	Recommended temporary Polling Place
LAB	Bewbush & North Broadfield Ward	Broadfield Scout Hut	Broadfield Community Centre
LBB	Broadfield Ward	Creasys Drive Adventure Playground	Broadfield Community Centre
LEB	Gossops Green & North East Broadfield Ward	Broadfield Scout Hut	Broadfield Community Centre
<p>Returning Officer's comments: The only space available for outside queuing at the Scout Hut is an unmade surface with limited space that would be difficult to administer. The Broadfield Community Centre offers better space for managing outside queuing and separate rooms for all polling stations. The Creasys Drive Adventure Playground is due to close and it is proposed that the Broadfield Community Centre would make the best replacement as a polling place.</p>			
LJA	Pound Hill North & Forge Wood Ward	The Grattons Indoors Bowls Club	Milton Mount Community Centre
<p>Returning Officer's comments: The room used for polling is the Bowls Club café which is accessed via a long corridor which would make managing social distancing difficult. The requirement for a deep clean before polling day and after polling day would mean the club would need to agree to close for three days. The club is currently closed in compliance with Covid restrictions, however that may not be the case in May. The Milton Mount Community Centre offers good space for outdoor queuing, internal flow and the ability to provide the necessary deep cleaning. The Community Centre operated satisfactorily as a polling place for the polling district at the 2019 General Election.</p>			

Use of Schools as Polling Stations

- 5.8 There are three primary schools used as polling stations in the current Polling Scheme. Two of these schools, The Mill Primary Academy, Ifield and Forge Wood Primary School are normally able to remain open for teaching when polling takes place. Although it is not possible to predict the conditions that will prevail in May, as things stand both schools would need to close when polling takes place. Given the deep cleaning requirements, before and after polling, it is also likely that the closure would need to be for more than one day.
- 5.9 In the light of the severe disruption that schools have already faced and will continue to face during the pandemic, the Returning Officer recommends further disruption should be avoided by the following temporary changes to the Polling Scheme for these elections:

Polling District	Ward	Polling Place	Recommended temporary Polling Place
LFB	Ifield Ward	The Mill Primary School	Ifield Community Centre
LFD	Ifield Ward	The Mill Primary School	Ifield West Community Centre
<p>Returning Officer's comments: The Mill Primary has two polling districts that serve different County Divisions. It is therefore recommended that for the LFD polling district (Bewbush and Ifield West Division), polling takes place at the Ifield West Community Centre and for LFB (Langley Green and Ifield East Division), polling takes places at the Ifield Community Centre.</p>			
LHB	Maidenbower Ward	The Brook School	Maidenbower Community Centre
<p>Returning Officer's comments: Due to the design of the building, the Brook School cannot operate while polling takes place. At the 2019 European Elections polling operated from a portable building which was installed for the purpose in the school car park. The total cost of the operation was £5756.40. This did allow the school to open in a limited form but did generate some security concerns for the Headteacher, and operation would be not be possible under Covid restrictions. As a temporary solution for the May 2021 elections it is proposed that polling for Maidenbower is amalgamated at the Maidenbower Community Centre. There are few alternative buildings in the ward, the Community Centre has a room large enough to accommodate polling for the ward and is considered a suitable solution under the current circumstances.</p>			
LJC	Pound Hill North & Forge Wood Ward	Forge Wood Primary School	Wakehams Green Community Centre
<p>Returning Officer's comments: Although outside of the polling district the Wakehams Green Community Centre is less than one mile from the majority of the Forge Wood development and offers a practical alternative to the closure of the Primary School with sufficient accommodation for LJC and LJB at the May 2021 election, having acted as the polling place for the remainder of LJC prior to the development of Forge Wood.</p>			

Communicating the proposed changes and potential need for further changes

- 5.10 The proposed changes will be communicated to voters with messages on poll cards, e-poll cards, Crawley Live, the Council's website and social media. There will also be posters at the polling places that are not being used this year.
- 5.11 There may become a need for very late changes to be made to the Polling Scheme if buildings become unavailable due to the pandemic. In order to be prepared for this situation it is recommended that the Returning Officer be delegated authority to change polling places in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governance Committee. If a need for a late change is found to be necessary after poll cards have been issued the details will be communicated to electors by letter.

6. Implications

- 6.1 The creation or removal of polling districts and provision of additional polling places has financial implications in terms of the cost of staffing polling places, the delivery and collection of equipment and the hire of premises.
- 6.2 The Council has a statutory duty under the Representation of the People Act 1983 to divide the Borough into polling districts, to designate a polling place for each district and to keep both polling districts and polling places under review, providing reasonable access to polling stations for all including those with disabilities.

7. Background Papers

[Local Government Boundary Commission for England Final Recommendations for Crawley Borough Council](#)

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