

Note from the Returning Officer following the request by the Governance Committee to investigate the viability as to whether alternative accommodation could be arranged for Polling Places on, or near to, the three existing schools which were currently named as Polling Places.

As instructed by the Governance Committee, the Returning Officer has investigated whether alternative accommodation can be arranged for polling places on, or near to, the school premises of the existing polling places of The Mill Primary (Ifield Ward), The Brook School (Maidenbower Ward), and Forge Wood Primary School (Pound Hill North and Forge Wood Ward).

The Mill Primary School

At The Mill Primary School there is insufficient space on site to place an alternative structure that could guarantee the school being able to remain open while polling takes place, and no alternative space could provide for secure accommodation in the vicinity.

The Brook School

The area to the rear of The Brook School is large enough to accommodate a temporary structure, but the Headteacher advises that due to the layout of the site it would not be possible for the school to be open if polling took place there. The only on-site alternative is at the front of the school car park. This is a confined space that was used to accommodate a portacabin at the European elections in 2019. The size of building used at that time would be unsatisfactory for maintaining social distancing requirements for staff and voters and it would not be possible to fit a larger building in the space. The Headteacher also advises that this location for polling was very challenging to operate for the school in 2019. Even if there were a repeat of this arrangement, she is not able to guarantee that the school would be able to remain open during polling.

There is no alternative space that could provide adequate accommodation in the vicinity.

Forge Wood Primary School

There is an area of the school playing field with independent access where a marquee could be installed and fenced off from the rest of the school. This could potentially enable the school to remain open while polling takes place. However, this option has several significant disadvantages and is not recommended by the Returning Officer for the following reasons:

1. The facilities that this solution would offer voters would be vulnerable to poor weather or a prolonged period of rain; the entrance to the playing field and the floor of the marquee would need to be lined, but wet weather could lead to a poor experience for voters, especially access for those with disabilities and those requiring the use of wheelchairs. The polling station staff would be supplied with a portable toilet and heaters, and a water supply, but there would also be a requirement for a separate place for staff to be able to take breaks in an area where they could remove PPE. Over the whole polling day, with staff onsite from 6am to 10.30pm, staff welfare would be compromised.

2. There would be no on-site car parking, giving poorer access for voters with disabilities; all cars would need to be parked at the site allocated for the neighbourhood parade, which would involve voters having to cross a road.
3. The challenges and complexities of creating a separate site using portable buildings, lining of the entrance, installation of fencing, furniture and polling equipment, security of the site, and any maintenance on polling day would add an additional administrative burden to the Facilities and Elections Teams already operating at capacity, and could impact on contingency arrangements in place to deal with the event of unavailability of core staff.
4. There is a known shortage of experienced Presiding Officers available to work at this election. Combining polling at Wakehams Green Community Centre will give flexibility to share polling station staff at a venue that is accessible from Forge Wood.

Voter information and postal voting

The Returning Officer recommends that electors who are allocated a different polling place for the May 2021 elections will receive a letter explaining the changes and enclosing a postal vote application form for those voters who would prefer to arrange an absent vote.