

Meeting: COUNCIL

Agenda Item:

Date: 5 December 2007

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**THE REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES (PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS) REGULATIONS 2006. REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACT 1983 - SECTIONS 18A, 18B, 18C, 18D AND 18E AND SCHEDULE 1A**

Lead Officer - Peter Ollis Ext No. 2225

**1 PURPOSE**

To advise on the outcome of a review of the Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations in the Borough of Stevenage and to make recommendations on appropriate or necessary changes or amendments to the existing Polling Districts and Polling Places Order.

**2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

That a new Polling Districts and Polling Places Order be made, to come into operation on 2nd January 2008, based on the existing Order, and to include;

1. The relocation of the Polling Station in the Martins Wood Ward, (which presently serves electors in Polling District CEC), from the rear of the car park at Fairlands Way, adjacent to Chells Community Centre, to within the Chells Community Centre; (formalising the present arrangement);
2. The relocation of the Polling Station for CGA (Chauncy Meeting Room - Pin Green Ward) to the Methodist Church Hall (Sish Lane), to operate beside the CBC (Old Town Ward) Polling Station; and
3. Amendments to apply the change of name details specified in the notes contained in the Appendix to this Report relating to both Polling Places and Polling Stations.

**3 BACKGROUND**

A major review of this nature was last carried out in 1999/2000, leading to significant changes to Wards and Polling Districts and resulting in whole Council elections at that time.

The Electoral Administration Act 2006, which came into operation in September 2006, has now introduced a requirement for Councils to carry out such reviews every 4 years, with the first review to be completed by the end of 2007. The procedure set out included guidance as to the consultation period and the stakeholders and bodies to be consulted prior to the report being submitted to Council.

## **Details**

Appendix A to this report lists the existing Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations as contained in the relevant order. The notes attached to that Appendix advise as to details, such as a change of name of the building used as a Polling Station, for clarification.

In accordance with the procedures, the Council's Returning Officer has been invited to comment only on the proposals relating to Polling Station changes or amendments. He has indicated his support for the recommendations set out in this Report.

## **Polling Districts**

Since the last review, there have been no major housing developments necessitating a further review of the actual polling districts and there seems no need at this time to change any of the polling districts as presently set up.

## **Polling Places**

Generally, the existing Polling Places are considered to be suitable and there are no specific plans to change their locations or details, other than to amend them in cases where there has been a change of name.

## **Polling Stations**

Members will be aware of the large percentage of the Stevenage Electorate who are registered as postal voters and who therefore do not vote in person at polling stations.

As a result, the turnout levels for the electors who do vote in person at polling stations is very low. At the last election, the turnout at polling stations averaged just under 18%.

Issues arising from Polling Stations' Review

### **(1) Martins Wood Ward - Polling Station CEC**

Up to 2005 inclusive, the Polling Station for CEC (Martins Wood Ward), was a portakabin hired for the purpose, including a generator, which was located on the rear of the car park at Fairlands Way, on car park spaces adjacent to the rear of residential properties. Following complaints from some of those residents about the overlooking aspect of the portakabin and the loud noise emanating from the generator throughout polling day, and also as a result of the theft of the generator from that unit, a decision was taken to re-locate the CEC Polling Station. Notice of the arrangement to move the Polling Station to inside the Chells Community Centre was published on the Council's Notice Board, along with a statement that the amendment would be made to the Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations Order at the next review. The significance of this was that a Polling Station for CEC (Martins Wood Ward) was then operating within the Manor Ward, in the Chells Community Centre building beside the Polling Station for the CFA Polling Station (Manor Ward).

In reality, although the CEC Polling Station (Martins Wood Ward) was therefore situated in the Manor Ward, it was only about 50 metres across the boundary between these two Wards, and a similar distance in the other direction from the previous, unsuitable portakabin

arrangements.

The Regulations allow this to occur where no other suitable alternative location is available and where the proposed location, albeit in a different Ward/Polling District, is reasonable. One of the review recommendations will be to formalise that existing arrangement.

### **(2) Pin Green Ward - Polling Station CGA - Meeting/Coffee Room at Chauncy House, Chauncy Road**

Major refurbishment/redevelopment works have started and will be on-going for some time in the Chauncy Road area of Polling District CGA (Pin Green Ward). As a result, the Polling Station used for that Polling District, namely the Meeting Room at Chauncy House will no longer exist. There are no other suitable locations for a Polling Station in that area and it is unlikely that a Community Centre proposal for that refurbished area, (which might be a suitable building for a Polling Station), will be built and available for about 3 years. Therefore, the proposal is to re-locate the polling station to share the accommodation at the Methodist Church Hall (Sish Lane), with the CBC Polling Station and within the Old Town Ward. At the May 2007 local elections only 57 of the eligible 377 voters turned out to vote at the CGA Chauncy Meeting Room Polling Station.

Whilst, for example, these electors will be inconvenienced by having to travel an extra distance (approximately ½ mile), to get to the Methodist Church Hall, there are no suitable alternatives nearer the Chauncy Road development area. This arrangement will be kept under review.

### **(3) Chells Ward - Polling Station CHB - Phoenix Nursery Building, Fry Road**

During the last few years, since the last Ward Boundary review, very few complaints have been submitted by the electorate about the location of, or issues at, the polling stations in Stevenage.

Concern was expressed recently by a resident of Ferrier Road that many elderly people have difficulty accessing the polling station in Fry Road (Chells Ward) – The Phoenix Nursery Building – referring particularly to the ‘long steep hill’ leading to the polling station. The elector raised this matter directly with Barbara Follett, M.P. who referred it, for consideration, to the Council’s Electoral Services Office.

Although no such complaints have been made by the electors in that area to the Electoral Services Office, or to staff at the polling station, the situation was noted and given particular consideration under this review. It appears that those electors affected were aware of the availability of postal voting, but had expressed ‘little faith’ in that voting method. Additional security has now been applied to the postal voting procedures and this will in due course be further explained to the relevant electors.

With regard to the Polling Station, the recommendation will be to maintain the use of the existing Phoenix Nursery building, mainly because there is no suitable alternative location within the relevant Polling District and because the building itself is ideal for use as a Polling Station in all other respects.

Consultees who are dissatisfied with the above proposals, or the siting of any of the Borough’s other polling stations, were invited to comment. However, advice contained in Circular EC28/2007 from the Electoral Commission, stated that ‘persons or bodies making representations should, if possible, give alternative places that may be used as polling places’.

### **Use of Schools**

Over the last few years, the number of schools used as polling stations has decreased and this review has included consideration as to whether any further relocation of polling stations away from schools was possible.

At present, there are 7 schools in which polling stations operate on polling day. The arrangements work well at all seven although, in one case, Martins Wood Primary School, the Head Teacher has repeatedly requested that his school be removed from the 'polling station list'. He has suggested an alternative location, namely a pavilion at the end of Epsom Close, but this proposal has been carefully assessed and discounted for several reasons, particularly that it was physically unsuitable for such use and also because the owners indicated that they would not permit polling station use of this building. The proposal is therefore to retain the use of all 7 schools as polling stations on election days for the time being.

### **Representation of the People Act 1983 – Section 18B**

The above Section of the RPA 1983 states that 'Relevant authorities must:-

1. Seek to ensure that all the electors in the Constituency have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.
2. Seek to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable, the polling places they are responsible for are accessible to all electors, including those who are disabled, and when considering the designation of a polling place, must have regard to the accessibility needs of disabled persons'.

The majority of existing polling stations satisfy accessibility requirements. In a few cases, where entrances to buildings used as polling stations have not been modified to make them accessible, or rooms are being used where access is gained other than via the main front entrance, appropriate ramps are made available for use on election days to overcome accessibility problems.

The Polling Stations where metal access ramps are provided are:-

- Woolenwick Junior School, Bridge Road
- Stanmore Hall, Basils Road
- Stevenage Sports Club, North Road
- Hampson Park Pavilion, Webb Rise
- Stevenage Education Support Centre, Chells Way
- Roebuck Primary School, St. Margarets.

Comments arising from the consultation

There were no comments received on this review during the consultation period.

## **4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTIONS AND OTHER OPTIONS**

The reasons for the courses of action recommended are explained in the background details to this Report.

These details were set out in a Consultation Report made available to the main Political Parties and were placed on deposit at the Council's Reception at Daneshill House for public inspection.

There were no comments received during the consultation period.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications.

### **5.2 Legal Implications**

There are no legal implications.

## **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

The Consultation Document and associated papers that were made available for public inspection.

## **APPENDICES**

Details of the existing Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations in the Borough of Stevenage as set out in the existing Polling Districts and Polling Places Order.

- [Schedule of Polling Districts and Polling Places](#)
- [Notes on the Schedule of Polling Districts and Polling Places](#)