

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Community Governance and

Electoral Issues Committee

held on Monday 15 February 2021 at 7.00 pm

as a virtual meeting



Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Ron Batstone (Chair), Sarah Medley (Vice-Chair), Paul Barrow, Alison Jenner and Mike Pighills

Officers: Susan Baker, Steven Corrigan and Margaret Reed

9. Apologies for absence

None.

10. Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 22 October 2019 as a correct record and agree that the chair signs them as such.

11. Declarations of interest

None.

12. Public participation

No members of the public had registered to address the committee.

13. Urgent business and chair's announcements

The chair provided general guidance on the procedure for virtual meetings and advised there were no items of urgent business.

14. Temporary changes to polling stations due to Covid 19

The committee considered the report of the head of legal and democratic on proposed changes to polling places for the May 2021 elections to provide a more Covid secure environment.

The committee was advised that officers have been working on measures to provide for safe elections in May 2021. An element of this work involved reviewing the suitability of the designated polling places, in light of the current circumstances, to establish whether venues are large and spacious enough to enable social distancing to be maintained, whether there are multiple entrances to provide for a way in and out and whether there are opportunities to maintain air flow within buildings. Paragraph 5 of the report set out proposed temporary changes to address issues identified with a number of polling places. The committee was advised that since the publication of the report Peachcroft Christian Centre was no longer available as an additional venue. Officers would seek an alternative additional venue and work to put measures in place to ensure the North East Abingdon Community Association venue could safely accommodate two polling stations if one was unavailable.

In response to questions, officers confirmed that officers are risk assessing all polling places and measures would be implemented to ensure that polling stations would be safe venues for voting including appropriate signage to ensure social distancing, one way routes where possible, face coverings and shields for election staff, the provision of hand sanitiser and additional pencils and additional staff to manage the flow of electors into the larger and busier polling places. Electors would, via national and local campaigns, be requested to wear face coverings when in a polling station and encouraged to bring their own writing implement. National guidance would be provided to political parties and candidates on safety measures for tellers and this would be highlighted in the forthcoming briefings for candidates and agents. Whilst the council would not be undertaking a campaign to encourage postal vote applications it would provide clear instructions on how to make such an application.

The committee agreed to make the proposed changes, to authorise the returning officer to make any later changes required to address safety concerns and to note the changes agreed under delegated powers.

RESOLVED: to

1. approve the temporary proposed changes to polling places set out in paragraph 5 of the report of the head of legal and democratic for the forthcoming elections to be held on 6 May 2021 subject to the deletion of the proposed change to Abingdon (Peachcroft);
2. note the temporary polling place changes agreed by the returning officer under delegated powers set out in paragraphs 6 and 7 of the report for the forthcoming elections to be held on 6 May 2021;
3. authorise the returning officer, in consultation with committee members and the ward councillors, to allocate appropriate polling places where the need arises for the elections on 6 May 2021;
4. authorise the returning officer, in consultation with committee members and the ward councillors, to allocate appropriate polling places where the need arises for any other elections, by-elections, referendums and polls during 2021.

15. District wide community governance review

The committee considered a proposal, set out on the agenda, to defer the consideration of a timetable for a district wide community governance review until there is greater clarity on the government's proposals for local government reform, including unitary authorities. The committee noted that if the Devolution and Local Recovery White paper was not published in the Autumn of 2021 it would be necessary to proceed with a review to ensure any changes agreed could be implemented for the elections in May 2023.

In response to questions officers confirmed that the review could not consider district council boundaries. In respect of the proposal to create a new parish of Harwell East, comprising that part of Harwell that lies east of the A34, the committee was advised that Council, at its meeting in July 2014, had agreed to create the new parish. Council further agreed that the timing of the creation should be a matter for this committee to decide. At its meeting in June 2018 this committee agreed to delay the creation of the new parish until the district wide review of parish arrangements following the 2019 elections. The necessary steps for creation of the new parish would therefore be taken forward alongside the proposed community governance review.

The meeting closed at 7:32pm