

# Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee



Report of head of legal and democratic

Author: Susan Baker

Telephone: 01235 422528

E-mail: susan.baker@southandvale.gov.uk

To: Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee

DATE: 13 November 2024

## Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places

### Recommendation

That the Committee approves the schedule of proposed changes to polling districts and polling places set out in paragraph 23 of this report.

Implications (further detail within the report)	Financial	Legal	Climate and Ecological	Equality and diversity
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Signing off officer	Emma Creed	Vivien Williams	Kim Hall	Lorne Grove

### Purpose of Report

1. This report sets out proposals for polling districts and polling places to be actioned prior to the scheduled Oxfordshire County Council elections in May 2025, to ensure electors continue to have reasonable and accessible facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances.

### Corporate Objectives

2. The report does not specifically relate to any of the council's corporate objectives, but agreement of the recommendations (amended if the committee sees fit) will ensure compliance with the law.

## Background

3. Under sections 18A to 18E of the Representation of the People Act 1983 as amended by the Electoral Administration Act 2006 and the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, local authorities are required to conduct a compulsory review of their polling districts and polling places for UK parliamentary constituencies at least once every five years.
4. The last such review in Vale of White Horse was undertaken in 2019. The results of the polling districts and polling places review were agreed by this committee at its meeting on [22 October 2019](#). It is a requirement that the current statutory review of polling districts and polling places is completed between 1 October 2023 and 31 January 2025.
5. The current polling arrangements within the Vale are predominantly satisfactory and have been shown at elections conducted in recent years (Police and Crime Commissioner and Oxfordshire County Council elections in 2021, District and Parish elections in 2023 and the Police and Crime Commissioner and Parliamentary elections in 2024) to be practicable.
6. The Elections Act 2022 provides an additional duty for Returning Officers to provide each polling station with such equipment as it is reasonable to provide for the purposes of enabling, or making it easier for, voters with a disability to vote independently and in secret. The review should therefore include consideration of whether a polling place can either provide or accommodate accessibility equipment, such as level access or a built-in ramp, disabled car parking spaces, sufficient space to manoeuvre within the building and adequate lighting both inside and outside the venue.

## Terminology

7. **Polling District:** a geographical area created by the sub-division of a UK Parliamentary constituency or ward into smaller parts within which a polling place can be located which is convenient to electors. By and large each parish is a polling district in its own right and has its own polling place or places. Exceptions are where parishes are sub-divided into electoral wards or split between district wards which necessitates the creation of additional polling districts.
8. **Polling place:** the building(s) within each polling district that will house polling stations.
9. **Polling stations:** the room or area within the polling place where voting takes place. The number of polling stations within each polling place is a matter for the returning officer and is not covered in this report.

## The review

10. Council gave notice of the review in September 2024. Notice of the review was published on the council's website and given to the Acting Returning Officer (ARO), parish councils and district councillors. The closing date for consultation

responses was 21 October 2024. Consultation responses, including the ARO's comments, are set out in the appendix to this report (Appendices A, B, D, and E).

## Key issues

11. Issues have been reported regarding the booking and availability of St Blaise C of E School in the Milton Heights (SJD) polling district. The Headteacher has previously raised concerns regarding the disruption to students when the building is kept open for polling and considers it a safeguarding risk, so the school now closes to accommodate usage as a polling station. It is noted that this council has endeavoured not to use school buildings unless the head teacher confirms that s/he is happy for the school to remain open on election day. An alternative location, Milton Hill Bowls Club, has been successfully used for previous elections (Police and Crime Commissioner 2024) when St Blaise was unavailable to book, and Officers have visited the proposed alternative location to confirm that it is a suitable venue and meets accessibility requirements.
12. Shellingford Community Hall was included in this review to determine whether there was an alternative suitable venue within the polling district, in order to avoid closure of the connected school to accommodate polling. Officers visited the area and determined that there are currently no other suitable locations available within the polling district. Further, representations received by email and via the public consultation survey oppose the change (see Appendices A and B). Although it is against the approach this council has previously taken to avoid using school buildings unless the head teacher confirms that s/he is happy for the school to remain open on election day, it is proposed that there be no change to Shellingford Community Hall until a more suitable venue within the polling district is identified.
13. Merestones is no longer available for hire as a polling place, and has also been deemed an unsuitable location due to having accessibility concerns (a very small venue with poor lighting). Thomas Hughes Memorial Hall has been identified as a suitable alternative location, and has been used successfully as a temporary polling place for polling district SOF Woolstone for the District and Parish elections in 2023, and both the Police and Crime Commissioner and UK Parliamentary elections in 2024.
14. The Beacon in Wantage is the designated polling place for polling districts SSB1 and SSB2 (Wantage Segsbury ward) and SSC1 (Wantage Charlton ward). To reduce the risk of ballot box cross-contamination between parish and district wards when elections are held, and reduce the amount of electors going to a single polling place, it is deemed preferable to move SSC1 to a different location. Wantage Methodist Church has been successfully used for elections since 2021, and despite some negative feedback received in the public survey (see Appendix B) officers visited the location and confirmed that the venue meets accessibility requirements. It is therefore proposed that polling district SSC1 (Wantage Charlton ward) is re-designated to the Wantage Methodist Church, which is located within the polling district.
15. The Corn Exchange in Faringdon is not suitable for continued use as a singular polling place for the entire TGA polling district, as there is a lack of space in the venue compared to the size of the electorate (<7100). Officers identified two

potentially suitable locations that could be designated alongside The Corn Exchange, which were consequently included in the proposals for the consultation – Faringdon Bowling Club and Faringdon United Church. It was noted that out of the two locations, respondents in the public survey identified Faringdon United Church as the preferred venue, but multiple comments also indicated that Faringdon Leisure Centre should be considered for electors in the southern part of the town (see Appendix B). It is therefore proposed that Faringdon Leisure Centre and Faringdon United Church are designated as polling places alongside The Corn Exchange, and that TGA Faringdon is split into three polling districts corresponding to the designated polling places (see Appendix C).

16. The mobile unit at the White Hart was included in this review as it does not meet accessibility requirements, due to a lack of space within the unit alongside poor lighting and a general lack of facilities for polling station staff. Officers visited the area and confirmed that there are no other suitable locations available within the polling district at present. It is noted that residents in the local area may also have difficulty travelling to a neighbouring town or village in order to cast their vote (see Appendix A). It is therefore proposed that there is no change to this polling place, despite the acknowledgement of its unsuitability.
17. Longcot Methodist Chapel is no longer available for hire as a polling place. St Mary the Virgin (Longcot) Community Hub has been identified as a suitable alternative location, and has also been used successfully as a temporary polling place for polling districts TTG Fernham and TTJ Longcot for both the 2024 Police and Crime Commissioner and UK Parliamentary elections.
18. St Johns Ambulance is no longer available for hire as a polling place. Abingdon Carousel Family Centre has been identified as a suitable alternative location and has also been used successfully as a temporary polling place for polling district XAA2 Abingdon No.2 (Caldecott ward) for both the 2024 Police and Crime Commissioner and UK Parliamentary elections.
19. Stonewater is no longer accepting bookings for use as a polling place. Both Preston Road Community Centre and Abingdon Carousel Family Centre were identified as suitable alternative locations for electors in polling district XAB1 (Abingdon No.4 Fitzharris Ock). Responses from the public consultation did not indicate a preference between the two proposed alternative venues, but an email response did indicate that Abingdon Carousel may be more local for electors in this polling district. Officers have visited this venue to confirm its suitability, and whilst it is suitable as a polling place there are concerns about a lack of space and a lack of parking if too many polling stations are based here (see paragraph 18). It is therefore recommended that Preston Road Community Centre is re-designated as the polling place for polling district XAB1, as this venue is large enough to accommodate another polling district voting there due to having multiple large rooms, and the venue also has more parking available compared to Abingdon Carousel.
20. St Peter and St Paul's Church in Botley was included in this review to determine whether it remains the most suitable location within Botley and North Hinksey parish and should remain as a single polling place for the entire polling district, or whether one or two alternative venues need to be considered due to the size of the electorate in this polling district (<4200) to alleviate the traffic to a single

venue. The consultation for this review included reference to Seacourt Hall, Oxford Rugby Football Club and Botley Women's Institute Hall as potential alternative locations to be considered. Officers visited the area and noted that whereas the facilities offered at St Peter and St Paul's Church are suitable, the venue has very limited parking. Both Seacourt Hall and Botley Baptist Church (part of the same building) were identified as potentially suitable replacement venues as the building has a significantly larger car park, and also meets accessibility requirements for use as a polling place. Botley Women's Institute Hall was also identified as a potentially suitable location, as it benefits from closer public transport links compared to Oxford Rugby Football Club for residents in the local area. Public consultation and councillor responses also supported this conclusion (see Appendices A and B). Due to the size of the electorate in this polling district and the location of the A34 in the parish, it is recommended that the polling district is subdivided into two smaller polling districts – one west of the A34 and the other east of the A34. It is proposed that the western polling district has the building containing both Seacourt Hall and Botley Baptist Church designated as its polling place (with preference given to booking Seacourt Hall), with Botley Women's Institute Hall designated as the polling place for the eastern polling district.

21. The Site Office at Pebble Hill Mobile Home Park is not considered a suitable location for continued use as a polling place, due to a lack of facilities for staff and poor accessibility, as it is a small venue with a narrow doorway. Officers visited the area and determined that the only other suitable location for polling district XDB at present is the Radley Church Room, despite this being outside of the polling district and there being accessibility concerns as the venue has limited external lighting, as the sales office at Redrow does not appear to be available for hire (despite being a suitable location). Radley Church Room has been successfully used as a polling place for polling district XDB since 2021, so it is proposed that this change is made permanent until a more suitable venue becomes available within this polling district. It is noted that a new community building within the polling district was granted planning permission on 29 September 2023 (P23/V0307/FUL) – as such, the existing polling place arrangements will be reviewed once this building is available for use.
22. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) Electoral Review of Oxfordshire has confirmed final recommendations to create or amend certain parish wards and county division boundaries, to ensure electoral equality across the district. Alongside this, the LGBCE Vale of White Horse Boundary Review is due to publish final recommendations regarding changes to district wards on 3 December 2024. It may therefore be necessary to create further polling districts to accommodate the aforementioned changes, until a further comprehensive review of polling districts and polling places is conducted. The Returning Officer has delegated authority to make changes to polling districts and polling places where circumstances dictate that this is desirable, having first consulted with members of the committee and local councillor(s). It may be the case that the Returning Officer must rely on this delegation to avoid calling a further meeting of the committee.
23. The issues and officer proposals are set out below.

<b>Polling district / Parish</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Proposal</b>
SJD – Milton (Heights)	St Blaise C of E school has been unavailable to book for scheduled elections and safeguarding concerns have been raised regarding its usage as a polling place.	Re-designate the polling place for SJD to Milton Hill Bowls Club.
SOC - Shellingford	Shellingford Community Hall requires closure of the attached school in order to be used as a polling place.	No change.
SOF - Woolstone	Merestones is unsuitable in terms of accessibility, and is no longer available to hire as the designated polling place for this polling district.	Re-designate the polling place for SOF to Thomas Hughes Memorial Hall.
SSC1 - Wantage No.3 (Charlton)	The Beacon is currently the designated polling place for polling districts SSB1 and SSB2 (Wantage Segsbury parish ward) as well as SSC1 (Wantage Charlton ward), which creates a risk of cross-contamination between ballot boxes for the different district and parish wards.	Re-designate the polling place for SSC1 to Wantage Methodist Church.
TGA - Faringdon	The Corn Exchange is no longer suitable as the only designated polling place for the entirety of the Great Faringdon (TGA) polling district, and the polling district would benefit from subdivision due to the size of the electorate in the current polling district (<7100).	<p>Split TGA Faringdon geographically into three separate polling districts – TGA, TGB, and TGC.</p> <p>Designate The Corn Exchange as the polling place for polling district TGC.</p> <p>Designate Faringdon United Church as the polling place for TGB.</p> <p>Designate Faringdon Leisure Centre as the polling place for TGA.</p>

TRB - Fyfield and Tubney	The mobile unit at the White Hart is not a suitable venue for staff, and there are accessibility concerns within the mobile unit.	No change.
TTG - Fernham	Longcot Methodist Chapel is no longer available to hire as the designated polling place for this polling district.	Re-designate the polling place for TTG to St Mary the Virgin (Longcot) Community Hub.
TTJ - Longcot	Longcot Methodist Chapel is no longer available to hire as the designated polling place for this polling district.	Re-designate the polling place for TTJ to St Mary the Virgin (Longcot) Community Hub.
XAA2 - Abingdon No.2 (Caldecott)	St Johns Ambulance is no longer available to hire as the designated polling place for this polling district.	Re-designate the polling place for XAA2 to Abingdon Carousel Family Centre.
XAB1 - Abingdon No.4 (Fitzharris Ock)	Stonewater is no longer available to hire as the designated polling place for this polling district.	Re-designate the polling place for XAB1 to Preston Road Community Centre.
XBA - Botley and North Hinksey	St Peter and St Paul's Church is no longer the most suitable location in this polling district, due to issues around lack of parking, and the polling district would benefit from subdivision due to the size of the electorate in the polling district (<4200).	<p>Split XBA Botley and North Hinksey geographically (using the A34) into two polling districts – XBA1 and XBA2.</p> <p>Re-designate the polling place to the building containing Seacourt Hall and Botley Baptist Church for properties west of the A34 (XBA1), with preference to booking Seacourt Hall.</p> <p>Designate Botley Women's Institute Hall for properties east of the A34 (XBA2).</p>

XDB - Radley No.1	The Site Office at Pebble Hill is not a suitable venue due to accessibility concerns and poor facilities for staff.	Re-designate the polling place for XDB to Radley Church Room.
-------------------	---	---

## Financial Implications

24. There is a modest cost associated with running a polling place. Often this cost is shared amongst a number of parties because the polling place hosts multiple elections at the same time. Cost, however, should not be a prime consideration in determining how many polling places to designate and costs for hire of polling places can be met from existing budgets.

## Legal Implications

25. In accordance with sections 18A to 18E of the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended by the Electoral Administration Act 2006 and the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, a compulsory review of the polling districts and polling places for UK parliamentary constituencies must be conducted at least once every five years. This review satisfies the aforementioned requirement.
26. However, it is noted that The Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended) (Section 18C (5) and Section 31) allows a local authority to conduct an interim review of any polling district, polling place or polling station within its area, outside of the timescales for a compulsory review, should this be required.

## Climate and ecological impact implications

27. As agreed with the climate team, the use of the Climate Impact Assessment Tool is not appropriate for this report. There are no negative climate or ecological impact implications with the proposals set out as the changes proposed do not have any impact beyond the existing arrangements, which is to have a designated polling place per polling district. However, the proposals resulting in an increase in the number of polling places/polling districts would have slightly positive climate and ecological impact implications owing to reducing the need for travel by car or the need to travel as far to reach the designated polling place, as the venues would be located closer geographically to the electorate in that new polling district.

## Equalities implications

28. An Equality Screening Assessment was carried out prior to the public consultation for this report, and no negative implications were identified as a result of this review (see Appendix F). This report seeks to ensure that the council and Returning Officer comply with both the Elections Act provisions to assist voters with a disability in addition to the duties under the Equality Act 2010.



## **Risks**

29. There are no discernable risks associated with the proposals set out in this report. By undertaking the review the council is meeting its statutory duty.

## **Conclusion**

30. To meet its statutory obligation to conduct a review by 31 January 2025, and make sure suitable and convenient polling arrangements are provided for local electors before the next scheduled elections in May 2025, a review of polling districts and polling places has been undertaken. The committee is invited to agree the proposals set out in paragraph 23 of this report and note that the Returning Officer may use delegated authority to address issues that could arise which require future changes.