

Statutory Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2024



Report to: Full Council

Date: 7 November 2024

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Executive Summary

A This report proposes new polling places, polling district boundaries and further divisions of polling districts following a public consultation.

Recommended that:

A The following changes, as detailed in appendix C and E to the report, take place with effect from 7 January 2025 (the publication date of the revised electoral register).

- i) **Bush Fair** ward to be divided into 3 polling districts – BF1a, BF1b, BF2. Polling Places will not change.
- ii) **Great Parndon** ward to be divided into 3 polling districts – GP1, GP2, GP3. The polling places will be:
 - GP1 Church of Pentecost
 - GP2 Great Parndon Community Association
 - GP3 Katherines Hatch Common Room
- iii) **Latton Bush & Stewards** ward – polling district boundaries to be moved so that it aligns with the new county divisions. Polling places will not change.
- iv) **Netteswell** ward – changes to the polling places will be:
 - N2 Gateway Hub
 - N3 Gateway Hub
- v) **Passmores** ward – changes to the polling places will be:
 - P2 Church of Pentecost.

Reason for decision

- A** To ensure that the polling district boundaries are aligned with the new county divisions and that voters have suitable polling places.

Other Options

- A** Do nothing - Not carrying out a review is not an option as there is a statutory requirement to do so within a set timeframe.
- B** Not make recommendations – where change is required to ensure all electors have reasonable facilities for voting those changes must be recommended for implementation.
- C** Continue with use of schools as polling places - another option for the Netteswell ward is to use Freshwaters School as this location was used in May and July however a reduction in use of schools as polling station so as not to disrupt the education of the children, following UK Government advice received in 2021.
- D** Reduce numbers of polling stations – an option for Latton Bush and Stewards ward is to remove LBS2 and have the voters in that polling district vote at The Royal British Legion. However, this would increase the electorate in the polling district and polling place and voters in the west would have further to travel to their polling station.

Background

1. The Electoral Administration Act 2006 introduced a statutory requirement for councils to conduct a review of polling places at least every four years. Reviews can also be carried out at any other time if a building becomes unavailable or if changes are identified following an election.
2. The council is required by law to divide its area into polling districts for the purpose of Parliamentary Elections and to designate polling places for those districts. The current list of polling districts and places is attached as Appendix A to the report.
3. A polling district is the geographical area created by sub-dividing a constituency or ward.
4. A polling place is the building or area in which a polling station is located.
5. A polling station is the actual room or area where voting takes place. Unlike polling districts and polling places which are fixed by the local authority, polling stations are chosen by the relevant Returning Officer for the election.
6. Consideration must be given to the law and the Electoral Commission's Guidance. This means that the council must:

- a) Seek to ensure that all electors in the constituency have such reasonable facilities for voting as practicable in the circumstances;
 - b) 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;
 - c) The polling place must be within the polling district (and therefore ward) unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly outside the district (for example, if no accessible parking can be identified in the district).
7. The last statutory review of polling places took place in October – December 2019. To comply with legislation the next review must be completed by 31 January 2025.

Issues/Proposals

8. The council undertook an interim review in 2023 following ward boundary changes.
9. The council began the current statutory review on 17 May 2024, and due to UK Parliamentary election on 4 July 2024 the public consultation period was extended to 31 August 2024.
10. The notice of review was published on the council's website. It was publicised to all local Councillors, local groups, organisations and social media. The list of local organisations and all responses are attached as Appendix D to the report, and are summarised below:
- a) Do not continue use of schools as a polling place.
 - b) Add another polling station within the Bush Fair Ward.
 - c) No longer using Greenhills Common Room.
 - d) Concerns over parking at the Gateway Hub.
11. The (Acting) Returning Officer has considered the following factors, in addition to those set out in paragraph 6 above:
- a) **Location:** Is it reasonably accessible within the polling district? Does it avoid barriers for the voter such as steep hills, major roads, rivers, etc.? Are there any convenient transport links?
 - b) **Size:** Can it accommodate more than one polling station if required? If multiple polling stations are required, is the polling place capable of accommodating all voters and the number of staff required to provide a good service to voters? Is the size sufficient to provide necessary private areas or privacy screens for photographic identification checks? Is the size big enough to ensure the flow of voters and reduce the risk of congestion and queues going into and out of the polling stations, even where there is a high turnout?

- c) **Availability:** Is the building readily available in the event of any unscheduled elections? Is there any possibility that the building may be demolished as part of a new development?
 - d) **Accessibility:** Is the building accessible to all those entitled to attend the polling place? Can the building accommodate equipment provided to support disabled voters?
12. The (Acting) Returning Officer's representation was published in August 2024 and is attached as Appendix C to the report.
13. A total of 7 responses to the consultation were received.
14. The (Acting) Returning Officer's comments on representations received and any subsequent recommendations are below:
- a) It is not considered necessary at this time to create another polling district and polling place in the Bush Fair Ward for the small amount of electorate in Westfield, Bushey Croft etc (810 including postal voters). This would increase the election costs further (in terms of hiring another venue and employing more staff) for only a small electorate. It would also mean we have to use St Marks School again and we are trying not to use schools unless we have to. However, if voter turnout increases considerably and causes issues for voters in the future this can be reviewed.
 - b) The council will encourage postal voting as much as possible and the new elections act regulations on online postal applications should help in this matter.
 - c) The Gateway hub has 10 parking spaces at the back which is more than the previous polling station for this area, and I think it is better to use this location rather than the school.
 - d) The boundary for Latton Bush & Stewards has been altered slightly so that Hawthorns and Hilly Field are now included in LBS1 and will vote at the Royal British Legion as this is considered easier for them to access.
15. The Returning Officer has considered all comments and considers that the proposed changes set out in Appendix C remain appropriate, except for the small change to Latton Bush & Stewards polling district boundaries.
16. Following the Elections Act 2022 there is a legal requirement for Returning Officers to take all reasonable steps to provide support for those with a disability in polling stations. The arrangements proposed in the review enable the council to fulfil this requirement and designate the most appropriate polling places and polling stations for voters that provide suitable access, space and facilities for voting.

17. This review concentrates on a number of changes to locations of polling stations and discussion during the equality impact assessment process gave assurances of physical access to all proposed sites. People who are unable to vote at a polling station have alternative means of voting available to them by applying for a postal or proxy vote. See Appendix F.

Changes to a Polling Place or Station Before the Next Statutory Review

18. If a polling station becomes unavailable the Returning Officer will first consider whether it is feasible to use a different room or area within a designated polling place.
19. If a polling place is or will become unavailable and sufficient time permits, a review will take place and a decision on a replacement polling place will be made by Full Council.
20. However, in an urgent situation where it is not feasible to make alternative arrangements within a designated polling place, such as the building was destroyed by fire or unsafe, the council's Scheme of Delegation to Officers would apply whereby the designated Returning Officer would identify and designate an alternative polling place considering paragraph 12 above.

Implications

Equalities and Diversity

An Equality Impact Decision Tree has been completed and an Equality Impact Assessment was required and completed – see Appendix F.

Climate Change

None.

Finance

There may be some additional costs incurred where buildings other than schools are used. These costs can be met from within existing budgets.

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Governance

As contained within the report.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Current list of Polling Districts and Polling Places

Appendix B – Map of new County Electoral Divisions in Harlow

Appendix C – (Acting) Returning Officer's Representation

Appendix D – List of Organisations contacted and all responses to the Consultation

Appendix E – Electoral areas with the proposed polling districts and polling places and Map of proposed Polling Districts.

Appendix F - Equality Impact Assessment

Background Papers

None

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

None