

### **PETITION: Polling Station for Holmlands Estate, Oxton and Supporting Information REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Petition asks the Licensing and General Purposes Committee to review the position and distribution of Polling Stations in the Oxton Ward and includes supporting information for reference when considering the petition.

The supporting information focuses on two areas:

- 1) The boundaries for the DB Polling District include over 35% of the electorate of Oxton Ward.
- 2) The location of the Polling Station at St Saviours school does not reflect the geographical distribution of the electorate.

#### **1) The boundaries for the DB Polling District include over 35% of the electorate of Oxton Ward.**

The table below demonstrates the current distribution of the electorate for Oxton Ward across the four polling districts.

<b>Polling District</b>	<b>DA (McAllester)</b>	<b>DB (St Saviours)</b>	<b>DC (St Josephs)</b>	<b>DD (Christchurch)</b>
Electorate	1633	3820	2748	2616
%	15.10%	35.30%	25.40%	24.20%

The petition states that this clearly demonstrates an inequality between polling districts DA and DB and considers a grossly disproportionate number of electors are directed to the polling place for DB [Oxton St Saviour's C or E Primary School]. The petition also states that this creates an unnecessary workload for Officers and congestion outside the premises and on the adjacent road.

The petition has proposed that the polling district boundary between DA and DB be revised by moving properties between Shavington Avenue and Talbot Road (approximately 870 voters) into polling district DA resulting in a more even electorate respectively.

Whilst Electoral Services agrees that the electorate for polling district DB is disproportionate to the other three polling districts, in particularly polling district DA, local authorities have a statutory responsibility for reviewing all polling districts and polling places every five years and the last compulsory review was undertaken in 2013. The next one is scheduled for this year commencing directly after the elections in May and will include a review of the boundary between polling districts DA and DB.

#### **2) The location of the Polling Station at St Saviours school does not reflect the geographical distribution of the electorate**

The petition states that the distribution of housing in polling district DB is heavily weighted towards the Holmlands Estate, with properties included that are over a mile from the designated polling place. The petition proposes an alternative polling place/station be identified in a location appropriate to the distribution of housing. Possible venues include Townfield Lane Primary School, [Townfield Lane] and Bethany Chapel Evangelical Church [Holmlands Drive].

St Saviours C of E Primary School, [Holm Lane] is the current designated polling place/station for polling district DB. It is an established polling place with two polling stations and is situated at the top of Holm Lane on the boundary with polling district DC. At the local elections in 2018, 26% of the electorate voted at the polling place and 48% of those voters resided in the Holmlands Estate area. There have been no complaints received by Electoral Services about the location of the polling place or problems due to congestion outside or in adjacent roads. Likewise in respect to the workload of Officers, again, there have been no complaints from any staff employed for election polling duties. This includes during 2016 and 2017 when there were two very high profile polls. Other than costs for heating and lighting, the Returning Officer is entitled to use, free of charge, any school that is deemed suitable for the purpose of being a polling place.

An inspection of the possible alternative venues has been undertaken by Electoral Services with the following findings:

- Townfield Lane Primary School, [Townfield Lane]

The school is located at the opposite extreme boundary to that of the location of the current polling place with the entrance being situated on a sharp double bend. Access by car into the school grounds is via a barrier that is controlled by the reception office and there is sufficient parking within the school car park albeit on different levels and some voters may be required to climb a steep incline.

Level access into the school is from the top car park and the room to be used as the polling station would be the school hall which is accessed from the reception office. There is no other suitable room that could be used as the polling station, therefore, the school would have to close on polling day. There would be a cost for heating and lighting only as the Returning Officer is entitled to use schools free of charge.

The school can be accessed by voters living in the surrounding Holmlands Drive area but only via a footpath, however, this could result in voters parking their cars in adjacent roads causing possible congestion and complaints from residents.

- Bethany Chapel Evangelical Church [Holmlands Drive]

The Chapel is located within the Holmlands estate and is situated on a sharp bend. There is a small car park available, full disabled access, a foyer area to accommodate tellers and good facilities for both staff and voters. Although there is other parking outside a row of shops, this would only benefit voters if they are empty throughout the day. There is potential for congestion occurring throughout polling day both immediately outside the premises and in adjacent roads which could result in complaints from residents.

Access into the building is level and the room to be used as the polling station would be the small hall situated at the back of the premises. There is a small slope into the hall, however, the church representative stated there had never been any problems with access for wheelchair users.

There would be a hire charge but this has not yet been determined. Hire costs can vary from between £250 to £700.

When designating polling places, ideally, there would be the choice of a range of fully accessible buildings, conveniently located for electors in the relevant area. Unfortunately, in practice, the choice of polling places is often very limited. The two proposals are located at the opposite end of the polling district and do not present a better voting experience for the whole polling district, indeed both have the potential to cause more traffic congestion than the

current polling place, however, should a change in polling place be considered then Bethany Chapel would provide a more suitable experience for voters.

Ward Councillors have been consulted. Councillors Stuart Kelly and Alan Brame have raised some concerns regarding these proposals which are attached.

**Recommendations:**

- 1) That the petition be considered
- 2) That the boundary between polling district DA and DB be reviewed as part of the statutory Polling District and Polling Place Review being undertaken after the May 2019 elections.
- 3) That the status quo remain in relation to the designated polling place for polling district DB which is Oxton St Saviours C of E Primary School [Holm Lane].