



REGULATORY AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

20 JANUARY 2022

REPORT TITLE:	POLLING PLACES REVIEW: SCHOOLS
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF LAW AND GOVERNANCE

REPORT SUMMARY

This report sets out the findings following a review undertaken in respect to the use of Schools which are currently used as polling places within Wirral for the purposes of Local Authority, Parliamentary and other elections.

The report details guidance on selecting polling places, the number of Schools currently used in the borough and outlines alternative polling places which have been identified by the Returning Officer. Local ward members have been consulted in respect to options and costs associated with the hire of alternative venues are detailed in the exempt appendix 2 to the report.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Regulatory and General Purposes Committee is recommended to Consider and comment on the report; and determine which polling places (if any) should be moved to an alternative venue to enable implementation for the May 2022 Local Authority Elections.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 A full review of those schools within Wirral which are used as Polling Places has been undertaken by the Returning Officer. It is good practice to regularly review polling places and following the elections held in May 2021, the Returning Officer has carried out a comprehensive programme of area inspections and visits. Options, associated costs, and member consultation responses are presented for consideration as detailed in appendix 1 of the report.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 An option would be to continue to use all those Schools which are currently used as Polling Places. Alternative options are presented to the Committee for consideration and discussion. Where no alternative or viable options for alternatives to the use of Schools, this has been clearly identified in the report.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 All Local Authorities in Great Britain must review their polling districts and places every four years. Wirral completed a statutory review of all polling districts and places in 2019. This review has been requested by the Returning Officer and is in addition to the statutory review.

When considering the overall suitability of a polling place or polling station the following criteria are considered:

External areas access and facilities:

Location:

- Is it reasonably accessible within the polling district?
- Is the building clearly identifiable?
- Does it avoid barriers for the voter such as steep hills, major roads, rivers, etc.?
- Does the building have level access or an alternative disabled route?
- Are the doors wide enough, and light enough, to be opened by someone using a motorised scooter / wheelchair?
- Are there convenient transport links?
- Are there adequate parking facilities for disabled people and polling station staff?

Internal areas access and facilities:

Entrance doors & Corridors:

- Are all external and internal doors easy to open?
- Are there any internal steps or hazards?
- Is the floor covering nonslip?
- Is there adequate heating and lighting?
- Are there toilet facilities for staff?
- Are there kitchen facilities for staff?

Size:

- Is there sufficient space inside to comfortably accommodate staff, voters, polling agents and observers?
- Is there suitable furniture available for staff and voters, where required?
- 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 going into and out of the polling stations, even where there is a high turnout?

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?

Accessibility:

- Is the building accessible to all those entitled to attend the polling place?

- 3.2 Wirral has 103 polling places of which 41 are schools. Of those 41 schools, 28 utilise an In-Service Training (INSET) day for the poll. The use of an INSET day is agreed well in advance with Head teachers. The remaining 13 schools can stay open to pupils.
- 3.3 The Returning Officer has a statutory right to use, free of charge, schools maintained or assisted by the Council as well as those schools that receive grants made out of moneys provided by Parliament. The decision to close a school, due to use of the school or part thereof as a polling place, falls on the headteacher and this will usually depend upon whether arrangements can be made for voting to take place separately from the rest of the school premises. Where possible, the Returning Officer and the school will make such arrangements for the school to remain open, however, pupil safety must always be considered as paramount and if the school decides to close on the day of the poll and it is not reasonably practicable to arrange an alternative day to try and make up the lost education, the school will be treated as if it had met the requisite 190 days for the purposes of the school year regulations.
- 3.4 Clear guidance is provided to schools on this matter so there should be no misunderstanding about the legal position and the need for schools to co-operate in making rooms available as a polling place. Any reluctance to use schools as polling places despite the statutory position would lead to an increase in the use of private buildings or mobile units even where the most reasonable facilities could be provided within a school which would then incur additional costs.
- 3.5 Ideally, there would be the choice of a range of fully accessible buildings, conveniently located for electors in the area. In practice, however, the choice of polling place will often be very limited, and a school deemed the only suitable venue that complies with the Returning Officer's obligations.
- 3.6 The Government's; guidance is set out in the document "The Government's approach to elections and referendums during COVID-19: additional information for electoral administrators, candidates, campaigners and voters". This states as follows

"Use of schools as elections venues

The Government is working with partners to help to ensure that any disruption to children's education is kept to an absolute minimum whilst allowing Returning Officers to run polls effectively. Given the importance of avoiding any further disruption to education, schools should not be used where alternative venues are available. The use of schools is particularly discouraged where it would result in closure, and the Government has asked that Returning Officers work together with Head Teachers to explore all possibilities that would allow the school to remain open, such as by using only part of the premises, and taking adequate COVID-secure and safeguarding measures to allow pupils to remain on-site.

The Government is providing support to Returning Officers to explore the use of other community or commercial facilities, and to minimise disruption to schools where they are the only available option.

The Government appreciates however that in some cases the use of schools as polling stations is unavoidable.”

- 3.7 At the request of the Returning Officer a full review has been undertaken to see if there are any opportunities to reduce the number of schools used as polling stations. The Returning Officer has undertaken this review by initially contacting all the schools, that currently utilise an INSET day, to ascertain if there were any suitable venues within the vicinity of the schools. Relevant Ward Councillors have been consulted and offered suggestions for venues. Ward maps and google maps have been used to plan visits to polling districts to assess the suitability of venues. 26 potential alternative buildings have been identified. There were no suitable alternative buildings identified in 5 of the polling districts.
- 3.8 Further visits have been made to polling districts by election officers to investigate if any other buildings, such as parish centres, public houses, or commercial halls could be identified. Site visits have been conducted at the 26 alternative venues. Of the 26 visits it was determined that 7 venues could be suitable alternatives. The other 19 venues were either unsuitable as polling places, outside of the specific polling district / ward, the owners did not want to be used as a polling place or were the subject of objections by Ward Councillors.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The annual budget set for Elections is £341,400 (2021/2022).
- 4.2 Polling stations costs in 2021 were £27,000. The cost of polling stations increased from £21,000 to £27,000 in May 2021 due to changing 8 venues: 6 schools and 2 council venues (no longer in use) to private venues. Although an element of the increase can be attributed to Covid costs this must remain as a consideration for future elections. Covid cleaning may continue to form part of the hire charge. The hire cost for a school is between £0- £100. The hire charge for a private venue can be anywhere between £200- £1000.
- 4.3 If all proposals are implemented the anticipated additional cost will be an additional £3299.08, taking the cost of polling stations up to £30,299.08. Savings will have to

be made from other elements of the election budget. No external grants or Covid grants are expected from Central government for 2022 elections.

- 4.4 See appendix 2 for costs of additional hire charges. Appendix 2 is exempt information under Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 In accordance with the Representation of the People Act 1983 Wirral Borough is divided into Polling Districts and it has designated Polling Places for each Polling District. The term 'Polling District' refers to the area created by the division of a constituency, ward, or division into smaller parts, within which a polling place can be determined which is convenient to electors. The term 'Polling Place' refers to the building or area in which polling stations will be selected by the Returning Officer. The term 'Polling Station' refers to the room or building where the poll takes place for each election
- 5.2 In relation to using schools as polling places, the rules that govern the conduct of elections (Representation of the People Act 1983, Chapter 2, Schedule 1, Part III, paragraph 22) give the Returning Officer a statutory right to use, free of charge, schools maintained or assisted by a Council as well as those schools that receive grants made out of moneys provided by Parliament. This includes academies and free schools. Currently, forty-five of the one hundred and three designated polling places are schools. Therefore, schools must comply with any request for use of a school or part thereof for the purpose of a polling station.
- 5.3 Planned elections do not have an impact on the 190 statutory days of education (189 days for –2022) as the 28 schools that do not open to pupils set a planned INSET day. Education (School Day and School Year) (England) Regulations 1999.
- 5.4 In the exception of an unexpected school closure due to unscheduled elections, a school can mitigate by a move to online virtual learning where an INSET day has not been planned.
- 5.5 Polling stations must be accessible to all. The Returning Officer has a duty, under Section 20 (4) of the Equality Act 2010 to make adjustments where a physical feature puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage in relation to a relevant matter in comparison with persons who are not disabled, to take such steps as it is reasonable to have to take to avoid the disadvantage. Under Section 29 (1) of the Equality Act 2010 -The provision of a service to the public or a section of the public (for payment or not) must not discriminate against a person requiring the service by not providing the person with the service.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 If a certain school or room is deemed to be the most suitable venue by the Returning Officer, then the school cannot refuse to allow it to be used. The benefit to the Returning Officer of designating a school (or part thereof) as a polling station ensures that the venue can be used, free of charge, for scheduled and unscheduled elections. All schools have appropriate disabled access. Schools can allocate an INSET day if they choose to close on polling day. Unscheduled elections, for schools that close, may cause disruption to staff, parents, and pupils.
- 7.2 There are several risks associated with moving from schools to private venues. Private venues have no legal responsibility for allowing electoral services to require the use of the venue for scheduled or unscheduled elections. Private venues can refuse the use of the room without explanation. Any access requirements that electoral services identify must be paid for by the Council. Buildings can be sold, renovated, or demolished without any prior notice being given to electoral services. The general upkeep and suitability of the building is only checked once a year by the elections team. Private venues dictate the hire charge and can increase the charge as they see fit.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 Schools are not used as polling stations in the Hoylake & Meols, Liscard, or Moreton West & Saughall Massie wards. The ward Councillors representing these wards have not been consulted on the proposals within this report.
- 8.2 All ward councillors for the remaining 19 wards have been consulted by email and asked for comments, their comments are summarised within this report along with an officer response.
- 8.3 The Director, and the Assistant Director of Education have been consulted. They fully support the recommendations of this report.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has an ongoing responsibility under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty (S149) to take equality implications into consideration in policy decision, implementation, and day to day activities. The impact on those with protected characteristics under the Act were taken into consideration during this exercise when assessing the overall suitability of a venue. Any changes to venues and or arrangements will be assessed with equality impacts in mind and other voting practices such as proxy and postal voting remains in place for those who wish to use it.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no significant environmental or climate implications arising from this report.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The use of privately owned venues benefits local businesses financially, but it also promotes and enhances the social network in the local area. Furthermore, it redirects wealth back into the local community.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Summary findings doc

Appendix 2 – Cost implications (contains exempt financial information) Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972- Access to Information: Exempt information

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Representation of the People Act 1983

Equality Act 2010

The Local Elections (Principal Areas) (England and Wales) Rules 2006.

Education Act 1996

Polling Place visit reports

The Government’s approach to elections and referendums during COVID-19: additional information for electoral administrators, candidates, campaigners and voters”.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Licensing Health and Safety and General Purposes Committee	23 January 2019
Licensing Health and Safety and General Purposes Committee	20 November 2019

Appendix 1 – Summary Findings

Proposed Polling Stations to be moved from schools				
Ward	Polling District	School	Alternative Venue	Recommendation
Bidston & St James	AB	Bidston Village C of E Primary School Ballantyne Drive, Bidston, Wirral, CH43 7XG	St. Oswald Parish Church	Suitable alternative venue. All ward Councillors support. Recommend St Oswald's as most suitable venue for polling district AB.
Bromborough	HB	Church Drive Primary School, Church Drive, Port Sunlight, CH62 5EF	Hulme Hall	Suitable alternative venue. One ward Councillor supports. No comments received from other ward Councillors. Recommend Hulme Hall as polling place for HB.
Clatterbridge	KC	Brookhurst Primary School Brookhurst Road, Clatterbridge , Wirral, CH63 0EH	Chapel of Saint Peters Brookhurst Close.	Suitable alternative venue. Two ward Councillor's support. Recommend Chapel of Saint Peter as polling place for KC.
Greasby	PD	Irby Primary School, Coombe Road, Irby, CH61 4UR	St Chads Church Hall	Suitable alternative venue. All ward Councillors support. Recommend St Chad's as polling place for PD.

Seacombe	SA	Riverside Primary School Brighton Street, Seacombe, Wirral, CH44 6QW	Royal Naval Association (RNA)	<p>Suitable alternative.</p> <p>One ward Councillor supports the recommendation. No comments received from other ward Councillors.</p> <p>Recommend RNA as polling place for SA.</p>
Seacombe	SC	St Joseph's Catholic Primary School Wheatland Lane, Seacombe, Wirral, CH44 7ED	St Joseph's Parish Centre. Wheatland Lane.	<p>Suitable alternative.</p> <p>One ward Councillor supports the recommendation. No comments received from other ward Councillors.</p> <p>Recommend St Joseph's parish centre as polling place for SC</p>
Wallasey	VE	Greenleas Primary School Green Lane, Wallasey, Wirral, CH45 8LZ	<p>St Nicholas Church</p> <p>Harrison Hall</p>	<p>The school is a superior venue to the church however, the church is suitable as a polling place. Ward Councillors support.</p> <p>Suitable alternative but it is in polling district VC. Ward Councillor comments: Access, by car, to Harrison Hall for residents in polling district VE, is complicated by the one way</p>

				<p>system in the vicinity of Harrison Hall (Groveland Road), which would require residents to take alternative, longer trips. St Nicholas Church is an easier location to reach</p> <p>Recommend St Nicholas Church as polling place for VE. Ward Councillors support.</p>
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Polling Stations to remain in schools

Ward	Polling District	School	Alternative Venue	Recommendation
Birkenhead & Tranmere	BF	Mersey Park Primary School Elm Road, Tranmere, Wirral, CH42 0PH	Beehive Public House	<p>No separate entrance/exit to pub. Pub would remain open during poll so unsuitable as a venue.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors emailed 15.12.2021. I have not received any comments from ward councillors.</p>
Cloughton	CA	St Peter's Catholic Primary School St Peters Way, Cloughton,	Church Hall, St Peters Way	Very small car park that is shared with the school. No elector or disabled parking if school remains open

		Wirral, CH43 9QR		<p>to pupils. No on-site toilet facilities for staff.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors support my recommendation.</p>
Cloughton	CC	Bidston Avenue Primary School, Bidston Avenue, Cloughton, CH41 0DQ	St Beads, Cloughton Village	<p>The church is situated on a busy main road. There is very limited timed street parking, and no venue carpark. There is no dropped kerb to the venue, and no disabled parking. Poor disabled access.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors support my recommendation.</p>
Oxton	DB	Oxton St Saviours C of E Primary School Holm Lane, Oxton, Wirral, CH43 2HT	Old Parkonians Rugby Club	<p>Pedestrian access is poor. Venue has a very long uneven and steep path. There is no handrail along the path, and no external lighting. Works are being carried out February 2022.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors have been consulted by email on</p>

				17.12.2021. I have not received any comments from ward councillors
Oxton	DC	St Joseph's Catholic Primary School Fairview Road, Oxton, Wirral, CH43 5UT	St Joseph's Parish Centre, Greenbank Road. Tixall Bowling Club	<p>The venue is outside of polling district (LD) and in the Prenton ward.</p> <p>This venue has a very steep pedestrian access, and the area is poorly lit at night.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors have been consulted by email on 17.12.2021. I have not received any comments from ward councillors.</p>
Rock Ferry	EA	Bedford Drive Primary School Bedford Drive, Rock Ferry, Wirral, CH42 6RT	HealthWorks Occupational Health Building	<p>The car park is quite far from the venue and the road outside is very busy. Internally all available rooms are too small and there is no separate access for electors and patients.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Two ward</p>

				Councillors support my recommendation.
Pensby & Thingwall	FA	Thingwall Primary School Pensby Road, Thingwall, Wirral, CH61 7UG	Warren Medical Centre	<p>The car park is extremely busy. Parking for electors and polling staff could not be guaranteed. The venue would remain open to patients attending medical centre. Internally, the rooms are not big enough to accommodate a polling station. It would not be possible to display election notices clearly.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors have been consulted by email on 17.12.2021.</p> <p>I have not received any comments from ward councillors.</p>
Bebington	GC	St Andrews C of E Primary School Townfield Lane, Bebington, Wirral, CH63 7NL	No potential alternatives identified within polling district	<p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place.</p> <p>One ward supports the recommendation . I have not received any comments from two ward Councillors</p>

	GD	Brackenwood Junior School Norbury Avenue, Bebington, Wirral, CH63 2HH	United Reform Church Higher Bebington Road	<p>The church did not wish to hire the venue as a polling station.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place.</p> <p>Ward Councillors have been consulted by email on 17.12.2021. One ward Councillor supports the recommendation . I have not received any comments from two ward Councillors.</p>
Eastham	JC	Heygarth Primary School Heygarth Road, Eastham, Wirral, CH62 8AG	Argyle Public House, Plymyard Avenue CH62 8EH	<p>Unsuitable alternative. There is no separate entrance for the function room. The pub would remain open during 11am – 10pm. The disabled access is poor.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place.</p> <p>One ward Councillor has expressed disappointment that no suitable alternative could be identified.</p>

				Two ward Councillors have not commented.
Prenton	LB	Prenton Primary School Bramwell Avenue, Prenton, Wirral, CH43 0RQ	Saddle Club - Roman Road	Internally the venue floor is uneven. Parking space is limited. The venue is located on a busy dangerous road on a bend. The owner was unable to guarantee availability for scheduled or unscheduled elections. Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors have been consulted by email on 17.12.2021. Ward Councillors have not submitted any comments.
	LD	Devonshire Park Primary School Temple Road, Prenton, Wirral, CH42 9JX	No suitable alternatives within the polling district.	Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors have been consulted by email on 17.12.2021. Ward Councillors have not submitted any comments.
Upton	MC	Gilbrook School Off Glebe Hey Road, Woodchurch, Wirral, CH49 8HE	No suitable alternatives within the polling district.	Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors have been consulted by email on 13.12.2021. Ward Councillors have not submitted any comments.

	MD	Fender Primary School New Hey Road, Woodchurch, Wirral, CH49 8HB	<p>Woodchurch public house.</p> <p>Hoole Road Hub</p> <p>Gannev Meadow Nursery</p>	<p>Woodchurch PH was considered as suitable by electoral services, and all ward councillors opposed the move.</p> <p>Hoole Road Hub inspected. It is unsuitable as a polling station due to the lack of parking outside of the venue, and only limited parking available at opposite side of the road. It is located on a busy cut through route. The space available within the venue would not be adequate to accommodate a polling station set up.</p> <p>This is a private nursery provider. It is situated in the building attached to Fender Primary School. The nursery is not interested in hiring the venue to elections.</p> <p>Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward</p>
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				Councillors support the recommendation .
Greasby	PA	Greasby Infant School Hall Drive, Greasby, Wirral, CH49 3NX	No suitable alternatives within polling district.	Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors support the recommendation .
West Kirby & Thurstaston	QD	Dawpool C of E Primary School, School Lane, Thurstaston, Wirral, CH61 0HH	No suitable alternatives within polling district.	Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. One ward Councillor supports the recommendation . No comments received two ward Councillors
Heswall	RA	Barnston Primary School Sandham Grove, Heswall, Wirral, CH60 1XW	Heswall Spaces	Unable to make contact to confirm appointment for site visit. Emailed and called several times. Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors emailed 21.12.2021. Ward Councillors have

				not submitted any comments.
	RB	Gayton Primary School Gayton Road, Heswall, Wirral, CH60 8PZ	Heswall Golf Club -	Unable to make contact to confirm appointment for site visit. Emailed and called several times. Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors emailed 21.12.2021. Ward Councillors have not submitted any comments.
	SB	Somerville Primary School Northbrook Road, Seacombe, Wirral, CH44 9AR	Young Peoples Home Poulton Road.	Unable to make contact to conduct site visit. Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. One ward Councillor supports the recommendation. No comments received from two ward Councillors
Leasowe & Moreton East	TC	Eastway Family Centre (within Eastway Primary) Eastway,	No suitable alternatives within polling district.	Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. Ward Councillors

		Moreton, Wirral CH46		informed by email 21.12.2021. Ward Councillors have not submitted any comments.
New Brighton	UA	SS Peter & Paul Catholic Primary School Atherton Street, New Brighton, Wirral, CH45 9JD	St Peter & Pauls Church.	St Peter & Pauls Church will not act as a polling place as they have daily worship. There are no other suitable venues in polling district. Recommend that the school remains as most suitable polling place. One ward Councillor supports recommendation . No comments received from two ward Councillors
	UD	Liscard Primary School Withens Lane, Wallasey, Wirral, CH45 7NQ	Saddle Inn Withens Lane	Unsuitable venue. The function room has a separate entrance from car park but also has a door to / from the main pub which would stay open during the poll. Recommend that the school remains as the most suitable polling place. One ward Councillor

				supports recommendation . No comments received from two ward Councillors
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