

**REGULATORY AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE****16 NOVEMBER 2022**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>POLLING PLACES REVIEW</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC &amp; MEMBER SERVICES</b>

**REPORT SUMMARY**

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

The report details guidance on selecting polling places and an outline of 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.

The recommendations contained within this report meet the objectives in the Wirral Plan 2021 – 26 in respect to the safe and pleasant communities and inclusive economy.

The recommendations in this report do not constitute a key decision.

**RECOMMENDATION/S**

The Regulatory and General Purposes Committee is recommended to

- a) Consider and comment on the report; and
- b) Agree to the relocating of the three polling places as detailed in section 3 of the report, in readiness for the May 2023 Local Authority Elections.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1.1 A review of three venues which were used as Polling Places in May 2022 was commissioned by the Returning Officer, as a result of the previous venues being unsuitable and/or a school that has requested we no longer use them. Options, associated costs, and member views are presented for consideration in appendix 1 of the report.

### **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 An alternative option would be to continue to use the existing venues which are currently used as Polling Places. However, this would not address the concerns raised which prompted the review being undertaken. Alternative options are therefore presented to the Committee for consideration and discussion.

### **3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 3.1 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 **Rock Ferry Ward - Bedford Drive Primary School** is currently used for the Polling District EA. The headteacher has requested a review as he contends that the use of the school is disruptive to pupils during term-time. In addition, the Elections Office have received complaints from electors attending the polling station as only one entrance (Hesketh Avenue) is open and those electors trying to access the polling station from Bedford Drive have an approximate 7-minute walk to access the polling station from the correct entrance. Byrne Avenue Baths have been recently refurbished and are keen to be used as a polling station to encourage residents from the local community to visit the establishment.

3.3 **Bebington Ward - The Headteacher of Brackenwood Junior School**, which is currently used for Polling District GD, has requested that the school is no longer used as a polling station as they are required to close on Election Day due to safeguarding issues which they explain can be disruptive for pupils preparing for their SAT's exams. Members should note that the Returning Officer has the power to require a school to act as a polling place, free of charge, where no suitable alternative accommodation is available. However, it is always the ambition to work with schools that are used at polling places to avoid as much disruption as possible. Brackenwood Infants School are keen to be used as a polling station to encourage residents from the community to visit the school, they have already set the date of the next election as an inset day in the school calendar.

3.4 **Eastham Ward - The Scout Hut** currently used for Polling District JB is an old building, it has poor lighting and is difficult to heat. It has also suffered loss of electricity during Election Day. The Youth Space at St Anselmians Rugby club has recently been refurbished, it is not currently used by any other groups on Election Day and they are keen to be used as a polling station to encourage residents from the local community to visit the establishment.

3.5 In summary, it is recommended that the Polling Station for Polling District:

- a) EA is moved from Bedford Drive Primary School to Byrne Avenue Baths
- b) GD is moved from Brackenwood Junior School to Brackenwood Infants School
- c) JB is moved from the Scout Hut to the Youth Space, St Anselmians Rugby Club

as detailed in Appendix 1.

## 4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The annual budget set for Elections is £341,400. (2021/2022). This will be reduced in future years due to the move to Whole Council elections from May 2023.

4.2 Polling stations costs in 2022 were £30,300. The cost of polling stations increased from £27,000 to £30,300 in May 2022 due to changing 7 venues from schools to private venues.

- 4.3 The total hire cost for the three polling stations that were used in 2022 is £538.80, the individual costs are detailed in Appendix 2.
- 4.4 The total hire cost for the proposed venues will be £650.00 and the individual costs are detailed in Appendix 2.
- 4.5 If all proposals are implemented the anticipated increased costs will be £111.20, however, this is subject to a potential increase in costs for all polling stations due to the rise in energy costs across the UK.
- 4.6 All costs will be met from existing budgets. There may be external grants provided from central government to cover additional requirements associated with the implementation of the Elections Act 2022, however, the level of grants is yet to be confirmed.

## **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 There is a legal duty on the local authority to provide accommodation for polling stations with the Representation of the People Act 1983, Chapter 2, Schedule 1, Part III, paragraph 22.
- 5.2 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.
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 Polling stations must be accessible to all -Section 20, 29 and 31, Equality Act 2010.
- 5.5 Use of schools and public rooms- Rule 20(1)(a), The Local Elections (Principal Areas) (England and Wales) Rules 2006.
- 5.6 Provision of polling stations Rule 23(1-4), The Local Elections (Principal Areas) (England and Wales) Rules 2006.

## **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 There is a legal duty on the local authority to provide accommodation for polling stations with the Representation of the People Act 1983, Chapter 2, Schedule 1, Part III, paragraph 22.
- 7.2 If a certain school or room is deemed to be the most suitable venue, then the school cannot refuse to allow it to be used. The benefit of designating a school 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.

## **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

8.1 Ward councillors for the three affected wards of Rock Ferry, Bebington and Eastham have been consulted on the proposed moves and there have been no objections to the proposals.

## **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 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)

## **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

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

This report is presented to Committee in accordance with section 8.2(i) of the Committees terms of reference

## **SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Regulatory &amp; General Purposes Committee</b>	<b>Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> Jan 2022</b>

## Appendix 1 – Summary Findings

Proposed Polling Stations to be moved from schools				
Ward	Polling District	Current venue	Alternative Venue	Recommendation
Rock Ferry	EA	Bedford Drive Primary School	Byrne Avenue Baths	<p>Suitable alternative venue. All ward Councillors support proposal.</p> <p>Recommend Byrne Avenue Baths as most suitable venue for polling district EA.</p>
Bebington	GD	Brackenwood Junior School	Brackenwood Infant School	<p>Suitable alternative venue. All ward Councillors support proposal.</p> <p>Recommend Brackenwood Infant School as most suitable venue for polling district GD.</p>
Eastham	JB	Scout Hut, Ferry Road	Youth Space, Anselmians RUFC, Eastham Village Road	<p>Suitable alternative venue. All ward Councillors support proposal.</p> <p>Recommend Youth Space as most suitable venue for polling district JB.</p>

## Appendix 2 - Cost implications (contains exempt financial information)

Ward	PD	Current Location	Current Cost	Alternative	Cost
Rock Ferry	EA	Bedford Drive Primary School	£63.80	Byrne Avenue Baths	£350.00
Bebington	GD	Brackenwood Junior School	£100.00	Brackenwood Infant School	£100.00
Eastham	JB	Scout Hut, Ferry Road	£375.00	Youth Space, Anselmians RUFC	£200.00

Current hire charge for the venues listed above is £538.80 (based on 2022 election costs)

Proposed cost to implement change £650.00

Potential increase of £111.20

Please note that signage will be required at each polling station to advise electors that the polling station has moved. The banners are approximately £50.00 - £100.00 each

Total for banners and hire costs £150.00 - £300.00