

Council

Date: 22 November 2017

Agenda Item

Wards: Figges Marsh, Longthornton, Dundonald, Cannon Hill

Subject: Review of Polling Places

Lead officer: Caroline Holland, Director of Corporate Services

Lead member: Councillor Mark Allison

Contact officer: Andrew Robertson, Head of Electoral Services

Recommendations:

- A. That the council agrees the designation of the Acacia Adventure Playground building as the polling place for polling district HD in Figges Marsh Ward, and retains the use of the Acacia Centre for polling district IE in Longthornton Ward.
 - B. That the council agrees that Dundonald Recreation Ground Pavilion replaces Dundonald Primary School as a polling place for polling district PA in Dundonald Ward.
 - C. That the council agrees that Joseph Hood Primary School replaces Merton Adult College as a polling place for polling district SA in Cannon Hill Ward.
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 A new polling place is required in Figges Marsh ward due to the loss of the Acacia Centre as a double polling station for polling district HD in Figges Marsh Ward and polling district IE in Longthornton Ward.
- 1.2 In Dundonald Ward, the construction of the Dundonald Recreation Pavilion has now been completed and the building is available to be used as a polling place instead of the Dundonald Primary School for polling district PA.
- 1.3 In Cannon Hill Ward, a new polling place is required because the current site at Merton Adult Education will be undergoing redevelopment to turn it into a temporary secondary school.

2 DETAILS

Figges Marsh Ward and Longthornton Ward;

- 2.1 In 2016, the polling place for polling district HD in Figges Marsh Ward and polling district IE in Longthornton Ward was the Acacia Centre, 230 Grove Road. The Majestic Hall inside the centre was used for both polling stations. However, from 2017 the hall has been rented out for office space. There is an alternative room at the Acacia Centre (the Exchange Room) that can be used instead of the Majestic Hall, but it is only large enough to accommodate one polling station.

- 2.2 Following a site visit in February 2017, the Acacia Adventure Playground building, which is adjacent to the Acacia Centre, was assessed as meeting the requirements of a polling place, benefitting from step free access and external lighting. However, it only had sufficient space for one polling station. Therefore it was proposed to the Figges Marsh and Longthornton ward Cllrs that the Adventure Playground Building became the polling station for polling district HD in Figges Marsh ward and the Acacia Centre remained as the polling station for polling district IE in Longthornton Ward.
- 2.3 This proposal was given provisional approval, however, before it could be brought to council the government announced that a general election would be held on 8 June 2017. Therefore after approval from ward Cllrs and group leaders, it was decided that this proposal would be carried out on polling day.
- 2.4 In practice the idea worked well. The proposal was decided upon in order to minimise the amount of disruption to electors. With the Adventure Playground as the polling station for polling district HD, access lent itself easily to Figges Marsh residents. Despite being linked to the Acacia Centre, the Adventure Playground has its own independent access off Acacia Road, which is where most Figges Marsh residents approach the Adventure Playground on foot. Figges Marsh residents driving to the polling station also no longer have to navigate the roundabout/level crossing at Mitcham Eastfields station, as they did when visiting the Acacia Centre.
- 2.5 Electors living in IE polling district were not impacted by this change, as they were required to visit the Acacia Centre as usual. Whilst the building is located in polling district HD, the location of the Acacia Centre means that it is more easily accessed by electors from polling district IE, who mainly approach from Grove Road.
- 2.6 A number of Figges Marsh residents did go to the Acacia Centre by mistake on polling day, but they were re-directed to the Adventure Playground by polling station staff with very little inconvenience, with access being through the rear of the Acacia Centre. In future elections the Figges Marsh residents will be more familiar with the new location and this confusion will reduce.

Dundonald Ward:

- 2.7 In 2016, the polling place for polling district PA was the Dundonald Primary School. The polling station was located in the nursery building meaning that the school did not have to fully close. However, the development of the school in late 2016 meant that this option was no longer possible for future elections, meaning that the school would have to close if used as a polling station.
- 2.8 Therefore when the government announced that a general election would be held on 8 June 2017, to avoid closing the school, it was proposed that the polling station be moved to the newly built Dundonald Pavilion. This building was visited and was assessed as meeting the requirements of a polling station. The polling station itself is located on the first floor, however the

building has a lift, step free access, external lighting, and is located adjacent to the school.

- 2.9 Councillors and group leaders accepted the proposal and the building was used as a polling station for the general election on 8 June 2017. Unfortunately on polling day there was an issue with the lift, which was out of order for about an hour. An engineer was called and the problem was solved relatively quickly, and in the meantime staff brought the ballot box down to those electors who were unable to walk up the stairs. However the fact that the polling station was located on the first floor did result in some complaints from electors.
- 2.10 It is not possible to use the ground floor of the pavilion as a polling station as this space is taken up by changing rooms. Therefore if the pavilion continues to be used as a polling station for future elections, contingency plans will be made to have an engineer on standby on polling day to try and offset any problems with the lift. Presiding Officers will also be instructed to keep a member of staff downstairs for the duration of the day, so they can take electors upstairs in the lift, or inform Presiding Officers when an elector needs the ballot box brought down to them in the case of the lift being out of order.

Cannon Hill Ward

- 2.12 In 2016, the polling place for polling district SA in Cannon Hill ward was the Merton Adult College in Whatley Avenue. However, in late 2016 this building was mothballed pending future development, meaning that on health and safety grounds it was unsafe to use as a polling station for the General election on 8 June 2017.
- 2.13 Therefore due the lack of any other real options, it was proposed that the adjacent St Joseph's Primary School was used as an alternative venue. This proposal was accepted by councillors and group leaders. Regrettably the school was required to close for the day to accommodate polling, however no complaints were received from parents or residents. Staff at the school are amenable to the school being used as a polling station for future elections.
- 2.14 The Merton Adult College will soon be undergoing redevelopment to turn the building into a temporary secondary school, so it will be unavailable to use as a polling station for the 2018 elections and 2020 elections. Therefore it is proposed that the St Joseph's Primary School be used as a polling station until further notice until the permanent future of the Merton Adult College building is determined.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

FIGGES MARSH WARD AND LONGTHORNTON WARD

- 3.1 Located in polling district IE, the Lonesome Primary School is the obvious alternative to the Acacia Centre. Following a site visit, the school office staff were helpful and were cautiously positive about the school making itself

available as a polling station. The school hall is large enough to accommodate two polling stations, and the school has step free access. However, during the site visit it was judged that to be used as a polling station the school would have to close. Schools are only generally used as polling stations if there are no alternative options within the polling district. Therefore to avoid the closure of the school, the preferred option is to use the Adventure Playground building for polling district HD and to continue using the Acacia Centre for polling district IE.

Dundonald Ward

- 3.2 The obvious alternative to using the Dundonald Pavilion as a polling station is to use the Dundonald Primary School. However, because of the recent redevelopment, the room used for polling would no longer be able to be kept separate from the rest of the school, meaning that the entire school would have to close. As stated above, the Council generally only uses schools as polling stations when there are no other suitable alternatives in the polling district or local area. Despite it's limitations as a venue for polling, the Dundonald Pavilion still represents a viable alternative to closing the school.
- 3.3 Wimbledon Congregational Church is located inside the polling district and has a hall that would be a suitable alternative to both the school and the pavilion, however the people that administer the church refuse to hire the hall for use as a polling station as they would have to cancel their regular bookings.

Cannon Hill Ward

- 3.4 There are not any viable alternatives within polling district SA to using the St Joseph's Primary School as a polling station. The Endeavour Club, located on Martin Lane, which is currently used as a polling station for polling district SB, could possibly accommodate another polling station, however electors would be required to walk significantly further than they currently do so in order to reach their polling station. This change in polling station could also cause confusion for electors in polling district SA attempting to cast their vote on polling day.
- 3.5 The St Joseph's Primary School is located adjacent to the previous longstanding polling station for polling district SA, and worked well as a polling station for the General election in 2017. Whilst acknowledging that it is regrettable that the school has to close, it would seem to be the option that will cause the least disruption to the majority of electors in polling district SA.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN AND OUTCOMES

FIGGES MARSH WARD AND LONGTHORNTON WARD

- 4.1 All councillors for both Wards have been consulted and are in agreement with the proposal to designate the Acacia Adventure Playground Building as the polling station for polling district HD in Figges Marsh ward and maintaining the Acacia Centre as the polling station for polling district IE in Longthornton Ward.

- 4.2 In support of the proposal, Cllr Stanford pointed out that the Adventure Playground was actually built on the site of the Eastfields Youth Centre, which was used as a polling station for many years until it was demolished to make way for the Acacia Centre and the Adventure Playground.
- 4.3 It is the view of the Returning Officer that the council agrees the designation of The Acacia Adventure Playground for polling district HD in Figges Marsh Ward and retains the Acacia Centre as the polling station for polling district IE in Longthornton Ward.

Dundonald Ward

- 4.2 All ward councillors have been consulted along with the Conservative group leader. The Conservative group do not support closing the Dundonald Primary School to use as a polling station due to the disruption that would be caused to staff and pupils. With the Wimbledon Congregational Church Hall not being an option at this time, the consensus is to continue to use the Dundonald Pavilion as a polling station, but to make sure that contingency plans are in place to guard against any issues, such as the lift not working again.
- 4.3 It is the view of the Returning Officer that the council agrees the designation of the Dundonald Pavilion for polling district PA in Dundonald ward.

Cannon Hill Ward

- 4.4 All ward councillors have been consulted and it is their view that the St Joseph's Primary school should continue to be used as a polling station for polling district SA for future elections, due to the lack of any viable alternatives. Whilst acknowledging that it is regrettable that the school has to close, using the premises would seem to be the least disruptive option for the majority of electors residing in the polling district.
- 4.5 It is the view of the Returning Officer that the council agrees the designation of the St Joseph's Primary School for polling district SA in Cannon Hill ward until further notice.

5 TIMETABLE

- 5.1 The Council meeting on 22 November 2017 should make the decision on these proposals so that all polling districts have a designated polling place for the elections on 3 May 2018.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Provision for the hire of buildings for use as polling places is included within the budget for the elections to be held on 3 May 2018.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The Council has a duty under the Representation of the People Act 1983

(RPA 1983) to divide its area into polling districts for parliamentary and local government elections, to designate a polling place for each polling district, and to keep these under review. The Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000¹ list section 18 of the RPA1983 as one of the functions that are not to be the responsibility of an authority's executive. This function has not been specifically delegated by the Council.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 it is the duty of a public authority in the exercise of its functions to have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not;
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Having due regard for advancing equality involves:

- Removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics;
- Taking steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people;
- Encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low.

8.2 In providing services and access to them the Council is required by law to make reasonable adjustments in order to avoid discriminating against disabled persons. When considering what adjustments should be considered as reasonable the council is required to have regard to the relevant code of practice. The following are some of the factors to be taken into account when considering what is reasonable:

- Whether taking any particular steps would be effective in overcoming the substantial disadvantage that disabled people face in accessing the services in question;
- The extent to which it is practicable for the service provider to take the steps;
- The financial and other costs of making the adjustment;
- The extent of any disruption which taking the steps would cause;
- The extent of the service provider's financial and other resources;
- The amount of any resources already spent on making adjustments; and
- The availability of financial and other assistance.

¹ SI 2000/2853

- 8.3 The right to free elections forms part of Article 3 of Protocol 1 of the Human Rights Act 1998. Any resident is entitled to vote, if qualified by age and nationality, and if not subject to any other legal incapacity.
- 8.4 As indicated above, the principles have been followed of seeking to ensure that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances, and seeking to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place is accessible to electors who are disabled. There is a commitment to ensure that all polling places are accessible.
- 8.5 The aim of enhancing community cohesion and engagement would be expected to be achieved by the principles in 8.1 and 8.2 through promoting democratic engagement by seeking to make voting in person as easy as possible for residents of all communities.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Integrity plans are maintained for elections. These involve working closely with Merton Police on operational matters, together with liaising with the Metropolitan Police Service officer specifically delegated with responsibility for potential election offences.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 In reviewing polling places, the reasonable facilities for staff at polling stations during elections have been considered. The physical fabric of possible polling places has also been considered to reflect the need for members of the public to visit their polling station.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- a) Maps of Figges Marsh Ward with location of Acacia Centre and Acacia Adventure Playground.
- b) Map of Dundonald Ward with location of Dundonald Primary School and Dundonald Recreation Ground Pavilion.
- c) Photographs of Dundonald Recreation Ground Pavilion.
- d) Map of Cannon Hill Ward with location of St Joseph's Primary School, Merton Adult College and the Endeavour Club.

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Reports on polling stations made by Electoral Services staff, by presiding officers and polling station inspectors at past elections.

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