

## **Committee: Standards and General Purposes Committee**

**Date: 5 March 2024**

Agenda Item

Wards: Lower Morden, Wimbledon Town and Dundonald

### **Subject: Review of Polling Places**

Lead officer: Polly Cziok, Director of Innovation and Change

Lead member: Councillor Billy Christie

Contact officer: Andrew Robertson, Head of Electoral Services

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#### **Recommendations:**

- A. That the Standards and General Purposes Committee agrees that the Morden Park Baptist Church replaces Morden Assembly Hall as a polling place for polling district AB in Lower Morden ward.
  - B. That the Standards and General Purposes Committee agrees that the Wimbledon College of Art replaces St Marys Church Hall as a polling place for polling district PE in Wimbledon Town and Dundonald ward.
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#### **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 In Lower Morden Ward, a new polling place is required because the immediate future of the Morden Assembly Hall has become unclear, having been earmarked as a saving by the council during the budget setting process. Therefore, Electoral Services believes it is prudent to change the polling place ahead of the May 2024 GLA elections.
- 1.2 In Wimbledon Town and Dundonald ward, the Wimbledon College of Art has recently volunteered its premises for use as a polling station, as an alternative to the St Marys Church Hall.

#### **2 DETAILS**

##### **LOWER MORDEN WARD**

- 2.1 In Lower Morden ward, the current polling station for polling district AB is the Morden Assembly Hall. This building has put up as a saving during the budget setting process, meaning that it may not be available to use as a polling station for the upcoming May elections.
- 2.2 Fortunately, there is a viable alternative polling place located next door to the Morden Assembly Hall. The Morden Park Baptist Church was used as a replacement polling station for the 2021 GLA elections, when the Morden Assembly Hall was being utilised as a Covid vaccination hub and pharmacy. The Church worked well as a polling station on this occasion, with no significant issues. The Church has ample space inside the building to house the 2 polling stations required for this polling district, and benefits from step free access and parking.

- 2.3 Being located next door to the Morden Assembly Hall, it is expected that the switch to the Morden Park Baptist Church will minimise any disruption for electors located in AB polling district. Voters who usually visit the Assembly Hall in order to vote will even be able to use the same car park if they are driving to the polling station.
- 2.4 In a further measure to allay any confusion that may be experienced by electors, signage will be displayed on the Morden Assembly Hall directing voters to the Morden Park Baptist Church.

## **WIMBLEDON TOWN AND DUNDONALD WARD**

- 2.5 In 2021, when the Local Government Boundary Commission conducted a review of Merton's wards, the boundary lines between Merton Park ward and Dundonald ward (since renamed Wimbledon Town and Dundonald ward) were altered. This meant that those properties in the roads to the north of Kingston Road (Chatsworth Avenue, Merton Hall Road, Quinton Avenue, Richmond Avenue, Rothesay Avenue, and Sandringham Avenue) were moved from Merton Park ward to Wimbledon Town and Dundonald ward. Electoral Services allocated these properties to the newly created polling district PE. These changes took effect at the May 2022 Local elections.
- 2.6 Prior to the 2022 elections, Electoral Services attempted to find an alternative polling station venue for the residents of polling district PE to prevent these electors travelling out of ward to vote. Unfortunately, this attempt was unsuccessful. At the elections PE electors voted at the St Marys Church Hall, in Merton Park ward, as they had previously.
- 2.7 In 2023 Electoral Services conducted another statutory review of polling places and again tried to find an alternative polling station for the residents of polling district PE. The Wimbledon College of Art was highlighted as a possible alternative venue and was also suggested by the Liberal Democrat group and Wimbledon Town and Dundonald ward Councillors. Unfortunately, the Wimbledon College of Art did not respond to enquiries in time for the end of the review, so at the November 2023 SGP meeting, Electoral Services agreed to revisit this issue in the near future.
- 2.8 The Wimbledon College of Art responded to Electoral Services in December 2023. Electoral Services visited the venue shortly afterwards and have adjudged it as being a suitable for use as a polling station. The venue is located in Wimbledon Town and Dundonald ward, on Merton Hall Road, and sits slightly outside of polling district PE in polling district PA. The venue is a shorter distance to travel for electors residing in polling district PE than the St Marys Church Hall. The Wimbledon College of Art should also be relatively well known to local residents.
- 2.9 The college have offered the use of a room which is adjacent to their main reception area. The venue has step free access but does not have parking.

### **3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

#### **LOWER MORDEN WARD**

- 3.1 The main alternative to using the Morden Park Baptist Hall would be to keep the polling station at the Morden Assembly Hall, however, this carries the risk that the hall may not be available for the May 2024 elections.
- 3.2 The Morden Brook pub is located opposite the Morden Assembly Hall and Morden Park Baptist Church, but does not benefit from a function room that could be used as a polling station. Aragon Primary School and Hatfeild Primary School are also located within polling district AB, but it would not be preferable to close a school for polling with there being alternative options available such as the Morden Park Baptist Church.

#### **WIMBLEDON TOWN AND DUNDONALD WARD**

- 3.3 There are no prospective polling station venues within polling district PE, so the only real alternative to using the Wimbledon College of Art as a polling station is the St Marys Church Hall. Electors in polling district PE have visited the St Marys Church Hall at previous elections, but it is a longer distance to travel for electors than the Wimbledon College of Art, and it is located in a different ward.
- 3.4 Other alternative venues in the vicinity include the Wimbledon Chase Primary School, the Dundonald church, and the Cricket Pavilion at John Inness Recreation Ground. The Wimbledon Chase Primary School is located behind the Wimbledon College of Art on Merton Hall Road but would likely be required to close on polling day. The Dundonald Church on Kingston road has recently volunteered it's services as a polling station and would be convenient for PE electors to visit, however, it is located out of ward in Raynes Park, and has already been allocated as a double polling station for polling district LE. The Cricket Pavilion is also located nearby to polling district PE but is already in use as a polling station for the residents of polling district RA in Merton Park ward. The Cricket Pavilion is only large enough to house one polling station.

### **4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN AND OUTCOMES**

#### **LOWER MORDEN WARD**

- 4.1 All councillors for Lower Morden ward and on this Committee have already been consulted and are in agreement with the proposal to designate the Morden Park Baptist Church Hall as the polling station for polling district AB.
- 4.2 It is the view of the Returning Officer that the Standards and General Purposes Committee agrees the designation of the Morden Park Baptist Church Hall for polling district AB in Lower Morden ward.

## **WIMBLEDON TOWN AND DUNDONALD WARD**

- 4.3 All councillors for Wimbledon Town and Dundonald ward and on this Committee have been consulted and are in agreement with the proposal to designate the Wimbledon College of Art as the polling station for polling district PE.
- 4.4 It is the view of the Returning Officer that the Standards and General Purposes Committee recommends that the council agrees the designation of the Wimbledon College of Art for polling district PE in Wimbledon Town and Dundonald ward.

### **5 TIMETABLE**

- 5.1 The Standards and General Purposes meeting on 5 March 2024 should make the decision on these proposals so that polling districts AB and PE have the preferred designated polling places for the elections on 2 May 2024.

### **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 GLA elections to be held on 2 May 2024.

### **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 2000<sup>1</sup> 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:

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<sup>1</sup> SI 2000/2853

- 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.

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) Map of Lower Morden ward with location of Morden Assembly Hall, and Morden Park Baptist Church.
- b) Photographs of the Morden Park Baptist Church.
- c) Map of Wimbledon Town and Dundonald Ward with location of St Marys Church Hall and the Wimbledon College of Art.
- d) Photographs of Wimbledon College of Art.

## **12 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

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