

Report of	Meeting	Date
Chief Executive	Council	17 September 2019

POLLING PLACE REVIEW 2019 - RESULTS OF CONSULTATION

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. To report the findings of the Polling Place Review 2019 and propose alternative options for polling station for members consideration.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

2. That there be no changes to existing polling district, polling place and polling station arrangements for the current wards. The rationale for this recommendation is too allow voters to attend their usual polling station should an anticipated parliamentary election be announced. Implementing changes at this stage, would result in a significant number of voters having to attend different polling stations than they would normally, which would cause confusion amongst residents. In some cases, voters may decide not to vote on this occasion citing the change of polling station as the reason.
3. That the issues raised during the consultation are considered by officers at greater length alongside the new warding arrangements that have been implemented following an electoral review of Chorley Council. Proposed changes to be presented at a future council meeting for approval prior to implementation at the local authority election scheduled for 7 May 2020.

Confidential report Please bold as appropriate	Yes	No

CORPORATE PRIORITIES

4. This report relates to the following Strategic Objectives:

Involving residents in improving their local area and equality of access for all	X	A strong local economy	
Clean, safe and healthy homes and communities		An ambitious council that does more to meet the needs of residents and the local area	X

BACKGROUND

5. Local authorities have a legal requirement to undertake a review of their polling districts, polling places and polling stations every 5 years. Although the duration of the actual review is not stipulated, the review must be completed by January 2020.

6. A condition of the review is that it must be conducted on current ward boundaries. Therefore, the recommendations and issues highlighted in this report are only concerned with the current warding arrangements. However, paragraph 18 of this report, does consider the implications relating to the new ward boundaries which will come into force at the next local borough election on 7 May 2020.

REVIEW PROCESS

7. A preliminary review of polling stations was conducted with elected members earlier this year, when views were sought on the suitability of existing polling stations.
8. In total three members responded to this review, two of which expressed their satisfaction on the current polling stations within their ward. The third member raised issues with their ward's current polling station and suggested potential premises that could be used as an alternative polling place.
9. The full review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations began on 26 July 2019 with the launch of a public consultation lasting six weeks. Interested residents and groups in the parliamentary constituencies of Chorley and South Ribble were invited to complete an online survey, email in suggestions, or send their written response through the post to the Elections Team by Friday, 6 September 2019.

RAISING AWARENESS

10. To increase public awareness of the review and consultation, a dedicated webpage was developed on the council's website providing more information and a link to the online survey. In addition to this, a public notice about the review has been displayed on the noticeboards of the -
 - town hall
 - market
 - council run community centres
11. Social media has been utilised to promote the review and consultation, with a series of posts and tweets being released throughout the consultation period encouraging responses. In addition, articles have also been published in the council ezines *intheknow* and *intheboro*.
12. The authority has also consulted extensively on the review seeking the views of interested individuals or groups as well as other elected representatives including:
 - elected representatives for Chorley
 - MP's for the parliamentary constituency of Chorley and South Ribble
 - political parties in both Chorley and South Ribble Parliamentary Constituencies
 - Acting Returning Officer for South Ribble Borough Council
 - Lancashire County Councillors
 - North West MEP's
 - Parish and town councils (which included the request to display the notice of review on their noticeboards)
 - Equality Forum membership
 - Chorley VCFS Network (which included the request that they circulate the information to their members)
 - Age Concern
13. Although the timing of the review, which has taken place over the summer holiday period was not ideal, it was unavoidable due to the unscheduled European Parliamentary election,

the Ecclestone and Mawdesley by election, and to fall in line with the council meeting's timetable.

RESULTS OF THE CONSULTATION

14. In total 170 responses were submitted; 156 of those responded to the online survey. The response to the consultation can be viewed in appendix a.
15. The main issues highlighted during the consultation included –
 - closure of schools for polling stations;
 - lack of (suitable) parking;
 - housing estates that have been split into different polling districts, resulting in residents from the same estate having to attend different polling stations. This is mainly due to the borough wards, county divisions and parish/parish wards boundaries not aligning;
 - the suitability of existing polling stations accommodating new/growing housing developments (eg Buckshaw Village and Euxton);
 - lack of polling stations in some wards, particularly rural areas.
16. Through the consultation, it has become clear, that the closure of schools to allow the premise to be used as a polling station has become deeply unpopular amongst respondents. This could, in part, be due to the number of unscheduled elections and referenda which had taken place during the last three years. This has resulted in some schools having to close at relatively short notice which impacts on the school's curriculum. It has also resulted in parents having to make childcare arrangements, at a cost to the parent in some cases. A few respondents have also raised criticism about the fairness in schools being closed whenever there is an election, while parents are being fined for their child's unauthorised absences.
17. Nevertheless, using public funded buildings, such as schools are important to the polling premise stock, as it provides a certain amount of reassurance that these premises will be available to the Returning Officer to use should an unscheduled election or referendum be announced. This is distinct from privately run premises, where there is no obligation towards the Returning Officer to make them available. This could result in a shortage of polling places with very little time to make alternative arrangements; and inform voters of any changes.

NEW WARD BOUNDARY IMPLICATIONS

18. Following the results of electoral review of Chorley Council which was undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England to rectify voter equality across the borough, a whole of council election will take place at the next scheduled local elections on 7 May 2020. Due to a reduction in the number of wards (from 20 to 14), each ward contains a greater number of electors. The suitability in size and location of polling stations need to be considered in greater detail.
19. Where possible, voters will attend the polling station nearest to them (this may be different to the one they are attending at present). However, it is inevitable that new polling stations will be introduced in some areas due to changes in polling districts.
20. A report will be presented to a future council meeting detailing proposed change for members approval prior to implementation for the 7 May 2020 local elections.

IMPLICATIONS OF REPORT

21. This report has implications in the following areas and the relevant Directors' comments are included:

Finance		Customer Services	
Human Resources		Equality and Diversity	X
Legal		Integrated Impact Assessment required?	
No significant implications in this area		Policy and Communications	

22. Due to the present political climate, there is an expectation that a parliamentary election will be announced imminently. Changing voters polling stations for this election may prove unpopular for a variety of reasons, including voters –
- presenting themselves at the wrong polling station
 - not knowing where their new polling station is

Ultimately, changes to polling stations may result in some voters choosing not to vote, and citing the premise change as the reason, for which council may be subject to criticism. Although the council would endeavour to publicise any changes to polling stations, there would not be enough time to mount a full publicity campaign.

23. By not implementing any changes to polling stations until the scheduled local election on 7 May 2020, those groups and individuals who took part in the consultation may consider that their views have been ignored, and that the consultation was a 'tick box' exercise to satisfy the council's legislation requirements.

COMMENTS OF THE STATUTORY FINANCE OFFICER

24. No comment

COMMENTS OF THE MONITORING OFFICER

25. The proposal on deferring any changes to polling places until the implementation of the boundary review is reasonable given the possibility of a general election taking place in the near future. It would be better to avoid any risk of confusion in the minds of members of the public caused by changing their usual polling station, particularly as there is a risk of further changes when the changes to ward boundaries are implemented following the review.

GARY HALL
CHIEF EXECUTIVE & RETURNING OFFICER

Report Author	Ext	Date
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