

TITLE	Re-designation of Polling Places
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Council on 18 February 2021
WARD	Coronation, Hurst, Norreys, Remenham, Wargrave and Ruscombe, Shinfield South
LEAD OFFICER	Andrew Moulton, Assistant Director Governance

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

To ensure that polling places are available to enable applicable residents to cast their votes at elections to be held during 2021.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council agree for any elections held in 2021 that:

- 1) The Baptist Church Hall, Fairmead Road, Shinfield be designated as the polling place for polling district SCW in Shinfield South Ward instead of Shinfield Parish Hall;
- 2) Wargrave Pavilion be designated as the polling place for polling district RBM in Remenham, Wargrave and Ruscombe Ward instead of Hare Hatch Village Hall;
- 3) St John's Church, Woodley be designated as the polling place for polling district KCM in Coronation Ward instead of St John's Ambulance, HQ, Woodley;
- 4) Hurst Village Hall be designated as the polling place for Polling District HAM in Hurst Ward instead of the Mobile Unit at Warren Public House, Hurst;
- 5) The Cornerstone, Norreys Avenue Wokingham be designated as the polling place for polling districts WFW and WGW1 in Norreys Ward instead of Norreys Evangelical Church;
- 6) The Assistant Director Governance be delegated authority, in consultation with the relevant Ward Member(s), to re-designate any polling place in the Borough which becomes unavailable because of issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

For the following reasons alternative venues are required to be designated as polling places in order that residents in those areas can cast their votes at the forthcoming elections:

- Due to ongoing building works Shinfield Parish Hall will not be available to be used as a polling place for polling district SCW.
- Because of health and safety concerns related to Covid-19 the Trustees of Hare Hatch Village Hall are not taking any further bookings therefore that venue will also not be available to be used as a polling place for polling district RBM.

- All St John's Ambulance buildings have been closed nationally therefore the St John's Ambulance HQ in Woodley is unlikely to be available for the May elections as a polling place for polling district KCM.
- The mobile unit used in the car park at the Warren Public House in Hurst does not meet current Covid guidance therefore is not a suitable polling place for polling district HAM.
- Norreys Evangelical Church is currently being used as the storage and collection point for the distribution of food parcels therefore it is unlikely to be available as a polling place for polling districts WFW and WGW1.

Background

Section 18 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 places a duty on each Borough Council to divide its area into 'Polling Districts' and to designate a 'Polling Place' for each Polling District.

All the Borough's polling places, which were previously designated by Council, have been contacted to ascertain their availability for elections in May 2021. Please find below those polling places who have stated that they will be unavailable and the reasons why. It is therefore necessary for alternative venues to be designated as polling places in order that residents in those areas can cast their votes.

Shinfield Parish Hall

Shinfield Parish Hall has been the polling place for the SCW polling district of Shinfield South Ward for several years. The Parish Council has confirmed that, due to ongoing building works, the Parish Hall is unavailable for the May elections.

The Baptist Church Hall, Fairmead Road, Shinfield has been viewed and found to be the most suitable alternative venue. It is a well-known venue that has good facilities, ample parking, and is on a bus route. It is therefore proposed to designate the Baptist Church Hall as the polling place for any elections to be held in 2021.

The Ward Members have been consulted on the change of venue and have not raised any objections to the alternative proposed.

Hare Hatch Village Hall

Hare Hatch Village Hall has been the polling place for the RBM polling district of Remenham, Wargrave and Ruscombe Ward for several years. Due to health and safety concerns related to Covid-19, the Trustees of the Village Hall are not taking any further bookings at present. Therefore, that venue will also not be available to be used as a Polling Place for 2021 elections.

Unfortunately, there are very few alternative venues within the RBM polling district and, although it is some distance away, Wargrave Pavilion, which is already used as a polling place for RDM polling district of the Ward, is being proposed as the alternative venue.

The Ward Members have been consulted on the change of venue and have not raised any objections to the alternative proposed.

St John's Ambulance HQ, Woodley

St John's Ambulance HQ has been the polling place for the KCM polling district of Coronation Ward for several years. Due to all St John's Ambulance buildings being closed nationally because of the Covid-19 pandemic it is unlikely to be available for the forthcoming elections. In order to provide electors with certainty and as much advance warning as possible of where they will be able to vote, there is a need to identify an alternative venue for the elections.

St John's Church, which is situated next door to St John's Ambulance HQ, is proposed as the alternative venue. It has good facilities, ample parking and has provision for disabled access.

The Ward Members have been consulted on the change of venue and have not raised any objections to the alternative proposed.

Mobile Unit, Warren Public House

A mobile unit, set up in the car park of the Warren Public House, has been the polling place for the HAM polling district of Hurst Ward for a number of years. Unfortunately, the mobile unit does not meet current Covid guidance and therefore an alternative venue is required.

There are no suitable alternative venues within the HAM polling district and therefore Hurst Village Hall, which is the polling place for HBM, HCM and TBM polling districts, is the only suitable alternative venue for the forthcoming elections.

The Ward Member has been consulted on the change of venue and has not raised any objections to the alternative proposed.

Norreys Evangelical Church

Norreys Evangelical Church, which has been the polling place for polling districts WFW and WGW1 in Norreys Ward for a number of years, has recently advised that as Share Wokingham is currently using the premises to prepare food parcels, they are no longer able to guarantee the Council's booking for the May elections. In order to provide electors with certainty and as much advance warning as possible of where they will be able to vote there is a need to identify an alternative venue for the elections.

In order to minimise the disruption to electors, The Cornerstone, Norreys Avenue is being proposed as the alternative venue. It is close to Norreys Church so electors in the Ward are already used to travelling to this general location for polling.

Parking had been raised as a possible concern, however, it has been established that cars may be parked in the shared car park on the far side of Norreys Avenue. One disabled space is available at The Cornerstone and other vehicles may be brought on site to set down or pick-up users.

The Ward Members have been consulted on the change of venue and have not raised any objections to the alternative proposed.

Re-Designation of Polling Places during Covid-19 Pandemic

Due to the elections being delivered against the backdrop of evolving public health restrictions, it is possible that there may be a need to re-designate other polling places at short notice. Currently, either a Council or a Special Council Executive Committee meeting would need to be convened to make such a decision, however, the delay caused in setting up such a meeting could cause uncertainty for the affected electors. It is therefore proposed that for any elections held in 2021 the Assistant Director Governance, Andrew Moulton, be given authority, in consultation with the relevant Ward Member(s), to re-designate a polling place if it becomes unavailable due to the Covid-19

pandemic. This would also cover any by-elections that may need to be held during 2021.

This would enable the Elections Team to notify affected residents about the change of polling place as quickly as possible.

Analysis of Issues

In designating Polling Places, certain rules have to be followed by the Council under the 1983 Act. These include that:

- (i) all electors must be given 'such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances'
- (ii) so far as is reasonable and practicable, only places which are accessible to electors who are disabled should be designated, and ...
- (iii) the Polling Place should be within the Polling District except where special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area wholly or partly outside the Polling District.

Consideration of the above rules have been taken into account when considering alternative venues.

There is a risk to the Council if it chooses not to designate the best venue as a polling place.

These changes will be advertised as required by legislation.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

Cross-Council Implications

None

Public Sector Equality Duty
A completed Equality Impact Assessment is attached as Appendix A.

List of Background Papers
Representation of the People Act 1983

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