

Designation of Polling Station for Chelsham & Farleigh

Strategy & Resources Committee Thursday, 2 December 2021

Report of: Chief Executive (Returning Officer)

Purpose: For decision

Publication status: Open

Wards affected: Warlingham, Chelsham and Farleigh

Executive summary:

Chelsham and Farleigh is a rural area with very limited appropriate venues to be assigned as a polling place within the polling districts.

The current polling place is at Warlingham Park School. The only area the school can provide to accommodate a polling station is within a small corridor with very little facilities. In the May 2021 elections the school could not accommodate the polling place due to covid-19 and an alternative venue was sought.

The Bull Inn was designated as the polling place for May 2021 and polling station staff and voters were satisfied with it as the polling place. The Bull Inn are willing to allow use of the venue for a polling station for future polls and it is deemed to be a suitable alternative for future polls which can provide better facilities for polling station staff and voters.

This report supports the Council's priority of:

Building a better Council

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Recommendation to Committee:

That it be recommended to Council that The Bull Inn is assigned as the polling place for the Chelsham and Farleigh polling district.

Reason for recommendation:

To ensure a suitable venue is designated as the polling place for voters in the Chelsham and Farleigh polling districts in future elections.

Introduction and background

- 1 A polling district is a geographical area within a ward within which a polling place can be determined. A polling place is defined as a building or place within which voting takes place. The polling station is the room or area in which the voting takes place. The polling station must be within the polling place.
- 2 Electoral Commission guidance states that polling places should be designated so that polling stations are within easy reach of all electors from across the polling district.
- 3 The designation of a polling place is a matter for the Council, whereas decisions about polling stations are for the Returning Officer. Under section 18B of the Representation of the Peoples Act 1983, it is the duty of the council of each district to designate such polling places and keep them under review.
- 4 Chelsham and Farleigh are separate polling districts within the Warlingham East, Chelsham and Farleigh Ward. The Parish Council, Chelsham and Farleigh Parish Council, is separate from Warlingham Parish Council and is coterminous with the polling district boundaries.
- 5 Both Chelsham and Farleigh are largely rural and have a small electorate in comparison with other polling districts in Tandridge.
- 6 The current polling place assigned to Chelsham and Farleigh is Warlingham Park School. This school is an independent school and does not fall into the legislation allowing Returning Officers to use a room in a school as a polling station (Para 22, Part 3, Schedule 1 of the Representation of the People Act 1983)

- 7 A Polling District Review was conducted in 2019 and no significant concerns about the Warlingham Park School's suitability as a polling place during the consultation period. However, concerns have been raised from polling station staff, voters and tellers during recent polls. These included a lack of outdoor lighting and heating during elections in colder months, insufficient power sources to enable charging of devices throughout the day, no sheltered area for tellers and small which may restrict the secrecy of the vote. Accessibility questionnaires completed by Polling Station Inspectors have highlighted accessibility issues.
- 8 As a result of the concerns raised, alternative venues were investigated and two venues within the polling districts were identified. Namely St Christopher's Church in Chelsham and St Mary's Church in Farleigh. They were not considered to be appropriate as they are both on the outskirts of the polling districts and there are poor transport links to them which would have implications on accessibility to voters in the polling district.
- 9 Due to the covid-19 pandemic, the school could not accommodate the polling place in May 2021 and a risk assessment identified that the room used as the polling station would not be suitable as social distancing could not be maintained due to the size of the room.
- 10 The Bull Inn was designated as the polling place for the elections held on 6 May 2021. Officers conducted a risk assessment and it was deemed to be suitable and met all requirements for a polling station including covid-19 mitigations.
- 11 Feedback from voters, polling station staff and ward members on the on the suitability of the Bull Inn as a polling station for the 2021 elections was positive and no negative feedback was received. However, covid-19 restrictions meant that the pub could only serve customers outdoors at the time of the election meaning that the polling station had sole use of the indoor space. This enabled staff to social distance and operate a one-way system.
- 12 Staff at the Bull Inn have confirmed that they are willing to accommodate a polling station for future elections. However, an alternative area will need to be found as the pub would operate alongside the poll during its opening hours (12 – 10pm).

Other options considered

A polling place must be designated for Chelsham and Farleigh polling districts. The following options have been considered:

	Option	Potential advantages	Potential disadvantages
1	Move polling place to St Christopher's Church	Within Farleigh polling district Good sized hall available	On outskirts of polling district Poor transport links
2	Move Polling place to St Mary's Church	Within Chelsham polling district	On outskirts of polling district Poor transport links & not accessible to all on foot due to long driveway
3	Move Polling place to Warlingham Methodist Church	No additional cost Hall meets accessibility requirements with no need for further work to be undertaken	May lead to capacity problems at busier polls Voter confusion as there would be 3 polling stations Not within either polling district
4	Keep polling place at Warlingham Park School	Maintains the status quo and voters familiar with it	Outlined in paragraph 7 above

Consultation

Ward members, polling station staff and the Returning Officer have been asked to provide feedback on the suitability of the polling place and any other options available.

Key implications

Comments of the Chief Finance Officer

The average cost of for the polling place is c£250. The recommended polling place is just below this average. So even though it is a commercial setting the costs are aligned.

Funding for elections comes from a number of sources depending on the election. All reasonable costs for national elections can be reclaimed from the central government as well as County Council and Police & Crime Commissioner elections can be reclaimed from the relevant stakeholder.

Whereas costs incurred for district elections are payable by the local authority. It is the responsibility of the Returning Officer to ensure that all expenditure incurred for the purpose of conducting elections is necessary for the efficient and effective running of the poll. There is currently an election budget for all the related staff expenses, equipment and hire costs to conduct an election within the Democratic Service budget. This is currently set at £95,000 in 21/22.

Comments of the Head of Legal Services

Under Representation of the People Act 1983, Returning Officers have the right to use certain public buildings for use as polling stations at elections which can include public houses.

Officers in Democratic Services have concluded that it is necessary for The Bull Inn to be assigned as the polling place for the Chelsham and Farleigh polling district. It is required to improve health and safety measures within Polling Stations, which is more of a challenge than ever in a post Covid19 world. The implications of this may be that some electors will have to travel further to cast their vote. All will be able to apply for a postal vote if they do not wish to visit their new polling station.

If Members agree to the changes set out in this report, the change will take effect for the Local elections which will be held in May 2022 and all elections thereafter.

Equality

The access facilities of any alternative polling places would need to be inspected and adjustments made to remedy any significant impediments. Furthermore, Presiding Officers and Polling Station Inspectors complete a comprehensive accessibility survey of their polling 10 places/stations at each election in order to alert the RO to any difficulties which could be remedied in the future.

The Council must seek to ensure that, so far as is reasonable and practical, every polling place for which it is responsible is accessible to all voters. Any decision to re-designate a polling place would need to take the accessibility of alternative locations into account.

Climate change

There are no significant environmental / sustainability implications associated with this report.

Appendices

None

Background papers

None

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