

APPENDIX 3: Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places

Why schools are used as polling places/stations

- The Returning Officer has the **right by law** (under the Representation of the People Act 1983, Chapter 2, Schedule 1, Part III, paragraph 22) to request to use a room within a school as a polling station (free of charge – save for a reasonable amount for heating, lighting and caretaking).
- Schools cannot refuse such a request (unlike private premises where there is always the risk that use for polling may be refused, possibly at short notice).
- This right applies to all mainstream schools liable for use by the Returning Officer of the local authority irrespective of how they were procured, and includes academies, foundation schools and voluntary aided schools.
- Generally it is considered a sensible way of maximizing Government funds and a recognition that school premises are funded, in part at least, by the Government. In the current challenging financial times and reduced budgets, the Cabinet Office encourages schools to be used to save moneys on elections! The Department for Education also recognises that one day a year it is legitimate for the democratic process to be given priority over education where schools are used as polling stations.
- Schools continue to provide the most suitable locations in many polling districts because they lie at the centre of the communities they serve, are conveniently located for voters in the area, and are usually more able than other premises to provide all the necessary facilities (e.g. safe storage, appropriate working conditions for election staff) and are generally easily accessible to voters with disabilities. Unfortunately there is a lack of suitable alternatives in many areas.
- The Returning Officer/Council choose the schools that they want to use for polling stations, but the authority to close the school still rests with the Head teacher and not the Returning Officer.
- The Returning Officer has the responsibility to ensure that the building is accessible to voters and there are no hindrances or obstacles to them casting their vote. The Returning Officer also has the power to remove people from the building if he feels that they are preventing access to voting. Taken together, the Returning Officer does have the power to insist that a building is empty if he feels that access to the voting is being restricted.
- Schools are contacted as far ahead as possible to ensure they are aware of scheduled election dates to enable them to have plenty of time to plan early on and minimize disruption to their schools. Election dates are in most cases set several years in advance. Head teachers are regularly reminded of these dates so that they co-ordinate with the days outside term time when the Head teacher has a discretion to close the school for e.g. training purposes. It also enables parents to be made aware of the situation well in advance, so that they can put in place appropriate child care arrangements, if required and will not lead to additional childcare pressures.
- The Returning Officer is happy to work with Head teachers to see if it is possible for a school to remain open and only use a part of it for the polling station Generally this

needs to be self-contained, with its own entrance and toilets. Ideally the accommodation should be school hall sized for a double polling station and about half the size for a single, (adult) tables and chairs are required (numbers depend on how many polling stations) and access to kitchen facilities and adult toilets.

- A school can also look at the possibility of avoiding loss of educational days through making up the lost day at the beginning or end of term, or, as many schools do, using the scheduled election days for staff training days.
- Some Head teachers have expressed concerns around drop of attendance levels on the Friday following election day. However whilst some information has been recently provided this is inadequate to allow an evidence based evaluation to be made.
- Currently, the Returning Officer uses a total of thirty nine (39) schools in the Borough – the vast majority of these (37) are primary schools (out of Bromley's 74 primary schools. Of these schools, most are shut to facilitate the election.