

## APPENDIX 3: Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places 2019

### 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 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.
- The fact that a school is used as a polling station does not necessarily mean that it must close – it is for the Head teacher (not the Returning Officer) to decide whether or not to close the school (or part only) for polling purposes. The Returning Officer is always more than willing to work with Head teachers to reduce the disruption to their school including looking at alternative (class) rooms in the school so that they do not have to close the school on polling day.
- Notification of the upcoming (scheduled) elections for the next 10 years or so are provided regularly to all schools used as polling stations in the Borough – this gives Head teachers plenty of time to plan well in advance and minimize disruption to the school for most elections. 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. Unfortunately this is not possible in regard to ‘snap’ elections as the Returning Officer is not given any advance notice.

- Some Head teachers look at the possibility of avoiding the loss of an educational day through making up the lost day at the beginning or end of term, or using the scheduled election day as a staff training (INSET) day.
- Some Head teachers have expressed concerns around drop of attendance levels on the Friday following election day. However whilst some information has been 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 (32) are primary schools.