

Committee: Standards and General Purposes Committee

Date: 15 March 2018

Agenda Item

Wards: Abbey, Cannon Hill

Subject: Review of Polling Places

Lead officer: Caroline Holland, Director of Corporate Services

Lead member: Councillor Mark Allison

Contact officer: Andrew Robertson, Head of Electoral Services

Recommendations:

- A. That the Standards and General Purposes Committee recommends that the council agrees that the Salvation Army Hall replaces Merton Hall as a polling place for polling district QC in Abbey Ward.
 - B. That the General Purposes Committee recommends that the council agrees that Merton Park Baptist Church replaces Joseph Hood Primary School as a polling place for polling district SA in Cannon Hill Ward.
-

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 In Abbey Ward, a new polling place is required because the Merton Hall will soon be mothballed, pending redevelopment works, making this polling place unavailable for the May 2018 elections.
- 1.2 In Cannon Hill ward, the Merton Park Baptist Church has recently volunteered its premises for use as a polling station, as an alternative to the Joseph Hood Primary School.

2 DETAILS

Abbey ward;

- 2.1 In Abbey ward the long standing polling station for polling district QC has been the Merton Hall. This building is now going to be mothballed, pending re-development works and will be unavailable for the local elections on 3 May. Once the redevelopment is complete the building will retain a community hall, and it is hoped that this hall will be available to hire for the next scheduled elections in 2020.
- 2.2 For the May elections the most viable alternative venue for residents in QC polling district is the Salvation Army Hall, 109 Kingston Road, which is located approximately opposite Merton Hall. The Hall is already used as a double polling station for polling district QA but is comfortably large enough to accommodate another polling station.
- 2.3 Being located nearby, it is expected that the switch to the Salvation Army Hall will minimise any disruption for electors located in QC polling district. Voters

who usually visit the Merton Hall in order to vote will simply have to cross the road at the zebra crossing directly outside the Merton Hall and walk 50 metres in order to reach their new polling station.

- 2.4 In a further measure to allay any confusion that may be experienced by electors, signage will be displayed on the Merton Hall directing voters to the Salvation Army Hall. Once inside the hall, the QA and QC polling stations can then be easily separated by using polling booths or chairs as a partition.

Cannon Hill Ward

- 2.5 In 2016, the longstanding polling place for polling district SA in Cannon Hill ward was the Merton Adult College in Whatley Avenue. However, in late 2016 this building was mothballed pending future development, meaning that on health and safety grounds it was unsafe to use as a polling station for the General election on 8 June 2017.
- 2.6 Therefore it was proposed that the adjacent St Joseph's Primary School was used as an alternative venue. This proposal was accepted by councillors and group leaders. Regrettably the school was required to close for the day to accommodate polling.
- 2.7 In November 2017 the council agreed that St Joseph's Primary School be used as a polling station until further notice until the permanent future of the Merton Adult College building is determined.
- 2.8 In a recent development, the proprietors of the Merton Park Baptist Church, Bushey Road, SW20 8TE, have volunteered their premises for use as a polling station, to prevent the closure of the school. Electoral Services have visited the church and have adjudged it as being suitable for use as a polling station. The church has a large hall, disabled access, kitchen, toilets and parking, and is located about 200 metres from the school.
- 2.9 To allay any confusion that may be experienced by electors, signage will also be displayed on the Primary School directing voters to the Merton Baptist Church.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

ABBAY WARD

- 3.1 Unfortunately there are not any known alternative options to the Merton Hall within polling district QC. It was hoped that the St John's Ambulance Hall, 122-124 Kingston Road, would be available to hire, however the building is undergoing renovation after Easter and the owners cannot guarantee that the works will be finished in time for the elections on 3 May. The White Hart pub and Merton Manor Club, both on Kingston Road, are closed until further notice.

- 3.2 Further afield, alternative options have also been considered in polling districts QA and QD. In polling district QA, the YMCA John Innes Youth Centre, 61 Kingston Road, and the ATC Hall, 192 Merton Road, were both approached regarding their availability to hire, but both have a daily booking which they were unable or unwilling to cancel on account of the election. Pelham Primary School is also located in polling district QA, but would have to close if it was used as a polling station. This was the reason why in 2014 the polling place for polling district QA was changed to the Salvation Army Hall. Located in polling district QD, The St John the Divine Church, High Path, was also considered, but was judged as being too far away from those electors living to the west of polling district QC. Electors would also have to cross Morden Road to reach the Church, which is a busier road than Kingston Road.

Cannon Hill Ward

- 3.3 The main alternative to using the Merton Baptist Church is the St Joseph's Primary School. The school is located adjacent to the previous longstanding polling station for polling district SA, and worked well as a polling station for the General election in 2017. However, as already established, the school is required to close for the day when used as a polling station.
- 3.4 The Council generally only uses schools as polling stations when there are no other suitable alternatives in the polling district or local area. The Merton Park Baptist Church is a suitable alternative to the school, benefitting from all the required facilities, and is located only 200 metres away.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN AND OUTCOMES

ABBHEY WARD

- 4.1 All councillors for Abbey ward have been consulted and are in agreement with the proposal to designate the Salvation Army Hall as the polling station for polling district QC. The Conservative group have also been consulted and are in agreement that the Salvation Army Hall is the best option for QC residents. The group endorses the proposal to make this change.
- 4.2 It is the view of the Returning Officer that the Standards and General Purposes Committee recommends that the council agrees the designation of the Salvation Army Hall for polling district QC in Abbey ward.

Cannon Hill Ward

- 4.3 All councillors for Cannon Hill ward have been consulted and are in agreement with the proposal to designate the Merton Park Baptist Church as the polling station for polling district SA. The Conservative group have also been consulted and are in agreement that the Merton Baptist Church hall is

the best option for SA residents. The group endorses the proposal to make this change.

- 4.4 It is the view of the Returning Officer that the General Purposes Committee recommends that the council agrees the designation of the Merton Park Baptist Church for polling district SA in Cannon Hill ward until further notice.

5 TIMETABLE

- 5.1 The Standards and General Purposes meeting on 15 March 2018 should make the decision on these proposals so that all polling districts have a designated polling place for the elections on 3 May 2018.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Provision for the hire of buildings for use as polling places is included within the budget for the elections to be held on 3 May 2018.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The Council has a duty under the Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA 1983) to divide its area into polling districts for parliamentary and local government elections, to designate a polling place for each polling district, and to keep these under review. The Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000¹ list section 18 of the RPA1983 as one of the functions that are not to be the responsibility of an authority's executive. This function has not been specifically delegated by the Council.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 it is the duty of a public authority in the exercise of its functions to have due regard to the need to:
- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act;
 - Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not;
 - Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Having due regard for advancing equality involves:

- Removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics;
- Taking steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these are different from the needs of other people;
- Encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or

¹ SI 2000/2853

in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low.

8.2 In providing services and access to them the Council is required by law to make reasonable adjustments in order to avoid discriminating against disabled persons. When considering what adjustments should be considered as reasonable the council is required to have regard to the relevant code of practice. The following are some of the factors to be taken into account when considering what is reasonable:

- Whether taking any particular steps would be effective in overcoming the substantial disadvantage that disabled people face in accessing the services in question;
- The extent to which it is practicable for the service provider to take the steps;
- The financial and other costs of making the adjustment;
- The extent of any disruption which taking the steps would cause;
- The extent of the service provider's financial and other resources;
- The amount of any resources already spent on making adjustments; and
- The availability of financial and other assistance.

8.3 The right to free elections forms part of Article 3 of Protocol 1 of the Human Rights Act 1998. Any resident is entitled to vote, if qualified by age and nationality, and if not subject to any other legal incapacity.

8.4 As indicated above, the principles have been followed of seeking to ensure that all electors have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances, and seeking to ensure that so far as is reasonable and practicable every polling place is accessible to electors who are disabled. There is a commitment to ensure that all polling places are accessible.

8.5 The aim of enhancing community cohesion and engagement would be expected to be achieved by the principles in 8.1 and 8.2 through promoting democratic engagement by seeking to make voting in person as easy as possible for residents of all communities.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Integrity plans are maintained for elections. These involve working closely with Merton Police on operational matters, together with liaising with the Metropolitan Police Service officer specifically delegated with responsibility for potential election offences.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1 In reviewing polling places, the reasonable facilities for staff at polling stations during elections have been considered. The physical fabric of possible polling places has also been considered to reflect the need for members of the public to visit their polling station.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- a) Map of Abbey ward with location of Salvation Army Hall, and Merton Hall.
- b) Photographs of the Salvation Army Hall.
- c) Map of Cannon Hill Ward with location of Merton Park Baptist Church and St Joseph's Primary School.
- d) Photographs of Merton Park Baptist Church.

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Reports on polling stations made by Electoral Services staff, by presiding officers and polling station inspectors at past elections.