

Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations 2023
Acting Returning Officer's recommendations for that part of the Brentwood & Ongar Parliamentary Constituency that falls within the Borough of Brentwood

Introduction

This review is being undertaken in advance of the implementation of the new ward arrangements in May 2024. The all-out Borough Council elections on 2 May 2024 will be the first held under the revised schedule of polling districts, polling places and polling stations.

As Brentwood Borough Council seats are normally elected by thirds, the all-out elections in May 2024 present challenges on a number of levels. Not only is there a change from 15 wards to 13 wards, three seats will be contested in each ward. This will affect the total number of candidates, the length of the ballot paper and the voting process for electors.

The May 2024 local elections will be combined with the election of a Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex, under the direction of the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO). A UK Parliamentary election is required to be held by January 2025 and there is the possibility that this could be combined with the local government elections in May 2024.

With the challenges ahead, it is important to ensure that the proposals adopted provide a stable basis for conducting the forthcoming elections. A few issues have been identified at polling stations used in May 2023 and this is an opportunity for them to be addressed or mitigated as part of the review. Wherever feasible, electors should continue to vote at their existing polling station and disruption should be kept to a minimum.

It is also important that electors are given advance notice of any changes to their polling station, so that they can make an informed decision about whether to apply for a postal vote or appoint a proxy. This could be combined with the Household Notification Letter that is due to be circulated to all households in January 2024. The timetable for a decision on the revised schedule at the Ordinary Council meeting on 13 December 2023 is therefore critical to the smooth delivery of next year's polls.

Recent elections have provided a robust test of the electoral arrangements within the Brentwood Borough. The Elections Act 2022 introduced new requirements and duties in 2023 which affect how polling stations function. The most notable change was the introduction of Voter ID requirements, necessitating new checking processes at the polling station and completion of statistical returns to central government. Arrangements were also made at polling stations for privacy

areas and female staff should face coverings need to be removed. In addition, the Elections Act 2022 introduced new duties relating to disabled access. There is a requirement for Returning Officers to take all reasonable steps to provide equipment to support disabled voters to vote independently and in secret at the polling station, and in doing so to have regard to any relevant guidance issued by the Electoral Commission.

Polling Station Inspectors and Presiding Officers gave feedback following the local election on 4 May 2023 and this information, combined with subsequent visits by officers, has allowed a thorough assessment of the existing premises.

In the main, the electoral arrangements have worked well within the Brentwood area and very little adjustment to the existing schedule of polling districts and polling places is needed, other than where they are affected by ward boundary changes. Where availability or suitability issues at polling stations have been identified, proposals for alternative arrangements have been set out.

On average, elector turn-out for Borough and County Council elections is 37-38% and for UK Parliamentary elections it is 71%.

In assessing the capacity of polling stations, account has been taken of known residential development projects, increased electorate from ward boundary changes, and the potential for single polling stations to be split into double stations within the same building.

There needs to be confidence that the polling station venue will be available at short notice for a UK Parliamentary election, which could be called at any time since the repeal in 2022 of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

When designating polling districts, the council has a duty to seek to ensure that all the electors in the constituency have such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances. In addition, and unless there are special circumstances that lead the council to determine otherwise, each parish must be in a separate polling district.

The polling place for a polling district must be within the area of the district unless special circumstances make it desirable to designate an area either wholly or partly outside of the polling district. The polling place must also be small enough to indicate to electors in different parts of the polling district how they will be able to reach their designated polling station.

It is the statutory responsibility of the Returning Officer for the particular election to provide a sufficient number of polling stations and allot the electors to those polling stations in such manner as he or she thinks the most convenient.

Comments on the Proposals under the 2023 review

Blackmore and Doddinghurst

This new ward is formed from existing polling districts based on parish council boundaries. No changes to the polling districts and polling stations proposed. No adverse comments.

Brentwood North

There is a reduction in geographical area due to the ward boundary changes. However, the division between the three polling districts and continued use of the three venues is supported.

A query had been raised regarding level access at Bardswell Social Club, but this has been investigated and the polling station meets requirements.

No changes to the polling districts and polling stations proposed.

Brentwood South

This new ward has been formed from parts of three existing wards and the resultant electorate distribution poses some challenges.

In particular, the capacity of the polling station at the Cathedral Small Hall is insufficient for the increased number of potential electors. This can be mitigated by diverting some electors towards the polling station at Hogarth Primary School, which is under-utilised at present. The proposed alterations to the Hogarth polling district would achieve this.

However, the size of electorate in the proposed Queens Road polling district would still be of concern for major elections and combined polls. Therefore, it is recommended that the polling station be relocated to the Cathedral Large Hall which has the capacity to accommodate a double station. Discussions should take place to secure this change at the earliest opportunity.

One particular concern is the lack of suitable premises within the Warley Mount polling district. Electors previously voted at the Brentwood Methodist Church. The location presented some difficulties, particularly relating to parking and disabled access, but proved to be the best available building within this polling district. Once it closed, electors were transferred to The Nightingale Centre on a temporary basis until the previous venue was reopened as the Brentwood Mosque Community Hall.

Unfortunately, recent subdivision of the hall has reduced the capacity of the room provide for polling, which was reported at the May 2023 election. Health and safety concerns raised at that time have been investigated further, resulting in a decision that the Brentwood Mosque Community Hall is no longer suitable for use as a polling station, in line with Electoral Commission guidance, on combined factors of health and safety, disabled access and capacity.

It has not been possible to identify a suitable alternative venue within the polling district. Although the nearby Essex Arms has a function room, it is too small for the electorate, access is poor with steep external steps and there is inadequate disabled access through the bar.

The proposal to change the location of the polling station to The Nightingale Centre would address these concerns and the building has the advantage of parking provision. It has previously been used as a venue for this electorate and the proposed change is supported.

Brentwood West

The geographical area of the ward has been reduced due to the ward boundary changes. There are no capacity issues at the three polling stations and no adverse comments were made at the May 2023 election. No changes to the polling districts and polling stations proposed.

Brizes, Stondon Massey and South Weald

This new ward is formed from existing polling districts based on parish council boundaries, plus the previous ward of South Weald.

A query had been raised regarding level access at Stondon Massey Village Hall, but this has been investigated and the polling station meets requirements.

At present, a very small electorate votes at The Belli Centre, at the rear of St Peter's Church, South Weald. This polling station is under-utilised and the electorate could easily be accommodated at South Weald Parish Hall, by combining the two existing polling districts of Weald Park and Brook Street.

This arrangement would provide savings and efficiency in the conduct of the election with minimal impact on voters. The ward as a whole would have a total of six polling stations, as Kelvedon Hatch operates as a double station. The proposals for this ward are supported.

Herongate, Ingrave and West Horndon

This ward is formed from polling districts based on parish council boundaries, plus an area transferred from the existing Warley ward.

It would be beneficial to create one additional polling district for the properties that have been added to the ward and to retain Little Warley and Childerditch Village Hall as the polling station. The increase in elector numbers can easily be accommodated at this venue.

A previous issue regarding disabled access at Ingrave Church Hall was overcome by temporary provision of a ramp at the May 2023 election. It is recommended that a suitable ramp be purchased by the Council for use at future polls. This would ensure compliance with the new access duties under the Elections Act 2022.

The proposals are therefore supported.

Hutton East

This ward has been modified by the transfer of some properties to Hutton North ward and additions from the previous Hutton Central ward.

It is recommended that a St Martins polling district be retained, with electors continuing to vote at Hutton Free Church. Due to the reduced electorate, this would operate as a single station.

The Haverings Grove polling station was relocated to the Adagio School of Dance for the May 2023 election. This building proved to be successful and has the added advantage of greater visibility on the main road. It is recommended that its use be continued.

The proposal for the electorate in Hutton Park polling district to continue to vote at Hutton Community Centre is supported. Although the venue is just outside the ward boundary, it has operated very successfully as a double polling station since 2015 and voters are familiar with it. There is a lack of any other suitable building within the polling district to serve this group of electors.

Hutton North

This ward has been enlarged by the addition of properties from Hutton East ward and a large proportion of the previous Hutton Central ward.

The existing polling stations within the ward do not have sufficient capacity to cope with the increased numbers and therefore it was necessary to examine alternatives. In addition, there have been issues with the use of Long Ridings Primary School relating to securing appropriate disabled access. This review provided an opportunity to move away from the venue.

The potential use of Bishops Hill ACL as a polling station has been explored. The location is central to the proposed new Poplar polling district and the main hall has sufficient capacity to operate as a double station. Disabled parking and access are also readily available.

The remainder of the ward would fall into the proposed Hutton St Peter polling district, with electors voting at St Peter's Church. As this would continue to operate as a double polling station, many electors would see no change to their voting arrangements.

The proposals are therefore supported.

Hutton South

The size of this ward has been increased by the transfer of two polling districts. However, for the majority of the electorate the existing polling station arrangements can be satisfactorily retained.

Concerns have been raised about disabled access at St Stephen's Church, which is the polling station venue for Thrift Park. An initial inspection of the exterior has identified issues that might be overcome by redirecting wheelchair users to a different approach. Additional directional signage should be provided to assist. The property will need to be monitored to ensure that it continues to be suitable for use as a polling station.

The polling station for the Three Arches polling district is currently at Maple Hall (Three Arch Bridge Community Hall). The site is planned for redevelopment but this is currently on hold. There remain concerns that the property is deteriorating due to lack of use and would not be available at short notice for a snap General Election. Therefore, a switch to another location is recommended.

An alternative venue has been identified at The Knights Way Centre. This is a modern building with good level access and disabled parking, two suitable halls and the necessary facilities. Although it is just outside the polling district boundary, it is in a prominent and convenient location. It also has the capacity to operate as a double station should St Stephen's Church become unavailable.

The proposed polling place description allows for a return to Maple Hall at a later date following redevelopment or if the circumstances there change.

Ingatestone, Fryerning and Mountnessing

The size of this ward has not been affected by the review of ward boundaries. However, the polling station in the Heybridge polling district has been unavailable for several years and electors from this area have been voting at the Ingatestone and Fryerning Community Centre on a temporary basis.

The previous polling station at the Catholic Church Parish Rooms is a very small building which does not meet modern access requirements. An alternative suggestion to use Ingatestone Library was therefore explored. Although the building itself could be made suitable, there is concern about its location immediately adjacent to a pedestrian crossing, the lack of disabled parking and limited space outside for queuing or tellers.

This polling district review provides an ideal opportunity to regularise the voter arrangements in Ingatestone. The proposals create an enlarged High Street polling district, incorporating Heybridge and properties in Tor Bryan. The Ingatestone and Fryerning Community Centre has demonstrated the capacity for two polling stations and, by merging the two unequal registers, the double station could be run more efficiently. The proposal is therefore supported.

It has also been suggested that the polling station for Mountnessing be moved from St John's Church Hall to Mountnessing Village Hall. This would overcome parking issues currently experienced and provide better disabled access. Mountnessing Village Hall provided good, modern facilities and would make an excellent polling station.

The proposed polling districts and polling stations are supported.

Pilgrims Hatch

This ward has seen a small increase in area and additional electorate from developments in Ashwells Road.

It is proposed to create a new Ashwells polling district in the north of the ward to address the increase in electorate and relieve the pressure on the double polling station at Larchwood Primary School. The Bentley Village Club has been identified as a suitable venue for a polling station, in a convenient location for this electorate, with good facilities, capacity, ample parking and disabled access.

The creation of the new Ashwells polling district, as outlined on the ward map, and use of the Bentley Village Club as its polling station is therefore recommended.

Shenfield

There are no changes proposed for this ward. The electorate currently votes at Shenfield Parish Hall, which operates well as a triple station. A view will be formed regarding a possible return to Shenfield Library once that development is complete.

No adverse comments.

Warley

This ward has been modified by the addition of the Clements Park polling district, the removal of the Warley Mount polling district and the loss of the southern part of the existing ward. It has also seen significant residential development.

The proposals seek to retain three polling districts and the existing polling stations. All have sufficient capacity for their projected electorates. There were no adverse comments following the May 2023 election.

The proposed polling districts and polling stations are supported.

Conclusion

Overall, the Proposed Schedule of Polling Districts and Polling Places (September 2023) is supported for the reasons given above.

The proposals would provide for 38 venues with a total of 50 polling stations within the Brentwood Borough, all having electorates within Electoral Commission guidelines.

Wherever feasible, it is recommended that electors continue to vote at their existing polling stations. This is important for ensuring that changes are minimised, allowing staff attention to be focused on new arrangements. This will contribute to the smooth running and delivery of the forthcoming elections.

It is also important to build in resilience, and the opportunity to make amendments that reflect changing circumstances should be grasped. In particular, it is recommended that additional ramps are purchased so that these can be deployed at short notice, to ensure disabled access at polling stations.

Communication of new voting arrangements to electors in advance of the elections, and increased signage on polling day in those areas affected by changes, will support the delivery of successful elections.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan Stephenson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Jonathan Stephenson
Acting Returning Officer
20 October 2023