

Electoral Matters Committee

Tuesday, 9th August, 2022

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Peter Fleming (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Joanna Kane and Nyear Nazir

Officers:

Claire Beaumont, Gavin Day, Sue Hanley and Darren Whitney

Principal Democratic Services Officer:

Jess Bayley-Hill

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Joe Baker, Tom Baker-Price, Matthew Dormer and David Thain. The Committee was advised that Councillors Joanna Kane and Nyear Nazir were attending as Councillors Baker and Dormer's substitutes respectively.

In the absence of the Chair, the Vice Chair, Councillor Peter Fleming, chaired the meeting.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The Chair commented that, whilst he had not been a member of the Electoral Matters Committee in the 2021/22 municipal year, he had been in attendance at the previous meeting of the Committee. This had not been noted in the minutes and it was suggested that this should have been recorded.

RESOLVED that

subject to the amendment detailed in the preamble above, the minutes of the meeting of the Electoral Matters Committee held on Tuesday 21st February 2022 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

Chair

4. POLLING PLACE CHANGES REVIEW - WINYATES WARD

The Electoral Services Manager presented a report on the subject of a polling places changes review for Winyates ward.

The report outlined two available options in terms of the location of polling stations in the WIA and WIB polling districts. These options, 'The Space' for WIA polling district and 'The Link' office for WIB polling district, had been discussed at the previous meeting of the Committee, when a decision had been made to make temporary changes to the locations of the polling stations for those two polling districts. In both cases, these buildings were located in Winyates district centre.

When agreeing to this temporary change, the Committee had requested that a survey should be undertaken with electors inviting them to comment on the suitability of 'The Space' and 'The Link' to be used as polling stations again in the future. In the feedback provided by residents who had participated in the survey, a number of electors had commented that they liked 'The Space' and would be happy to use it again. The feedback received in respect of 'The Link' had been more mixed. Concerns had been raised by both electors and polling station staff about the space available and residents had also highlighted concerns about the restricted access for people with physical disabilities. The Committee was asked to note that, since 2019, there had been an increase in the number of electors living in WIB polling district and therefore an additional Poll Clerk would need to be employed to work in the polling station for a general election. Under these circumstances, the Council would struggle to accommodate a polling station in the space available in the 'The Link'.

Suggestions had been made by a Councillor representing Winyates ward regarding alternative locations in which polling stations could be sited in both polling districts. This included the potential use of the community room in Ibstock House, Retirement Housing on Ibstock Close for WIA polling district. Members were asked to note that whilst this could potentially be used as a polling station, it was located in the far north of the polling district. The potential to set up portable buildings on Edgmond Close, Badger Close and Dinmore Close, in WIB polling district, had also been suggested. However, when Officers had visited Badger Close and Dinmore Close, they had discovered that these locations would be too small to host a portable building. Whilst space was available at Edgmond Close, this could only occur with the permission of the landowner, Worcestershire County Council. The option for a portable building to be installed on Colt's Lane had also been suggested and there was a large grassy space that could potentially be used for this purpose. However, this area was surrounded by a number of trees

and the Council would therefore need to consult with external contractors about the potential to install a portable building in that space.

In preparing the report, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling had been consulted as the relevant lead Portfolio Holder for governance. In the feedback received from the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling, she had noted that she would be supportive of the Committee opting to retain the current arrangements for siting polling stations in Tenacres Children's Centre and Arrow Valley First School respectively. In commenting on this, the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling had raised concerns about the financial costs involved in hiring a portable building, which Members were asked to note had increased from the figure quoted in the report to £2,073 per portable building. In addition, generators needed to be used for portable buildings and the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling had raised concerns that this would result both in carbon emissions and in noise pollution, to the detriment of the local environment.

The Committee was asked to note that there were likely to be additional issues with use of portable buildings as polling stations moving forward. Provisions in the Elections Act 2022 required Councils to provide private spaces in polling stations where voters' credentials could be checked. Given the limited space available in portable buildings, it was possible that a number of existing polling station arrangements would need to be reviewed further by the Electoral Matters Committee in due course to ensure compliance with legislative requirements moving forward.

There were some issues with using schools as polling stations. This could cause disruption for both children and their parents, although some schools were able to remain open whilst also accommodating polling stations. The positive aspects involved in using schools as polling stations included that they were often located in the centre of the polling district and the financial costs involved in using schools tended to be relatively low. Schools were legally required to provide space for polling when requested to do so by a local authority.

The Committee was asked to note that there was ongoing work with respect to the boundary review for the Borough and this would subsequently be followed by a statutory polling districts and places review. Work in respect of the boundary review would be completed between January and November 2023, although Officers were not anticipating significant changes with respect to polling districts WIA and WIB. The statutory review would be completed between 2023 and 2025.

During consideration of this item, Members were asked to note that the Returning Officer had also reviewed the feedback provided in the survey as well as information about the two temporary polling stations and the other alternatives that had been suggested. The preference of the Returning Officer would be to base the WIA and WIB polling stations in Tenacres Children's Centre and Arrow Valley First School, as these were centrally located within the polling districts and both premises could accommodate more polling station staff than 'The Space' and 'The Link'. The financial costs arising from using schools as polling stations were also lower than for hiring portable buildings. However, it was recognised that the decision in respect of this matter needed to be taken by Members.

Once the report had been presented, Members discussed the subject in detail and in doing so commented on the following points:

- The turnout in Winyates ward in the local elections held in May 2022, which had been lower than in recent years.
- The extent to which the lower turnout in the local elections in May 2022 had been due to the change to the location of the polling stations in WIA and WIB polling districts.
- The location of 'The Space' and 'The Link' in Winyates district centre and the fact that many residents were likely to drive to access a polling station in that location. This was contrasted with the central location of the schools in WIA and WIB polling districts, which could be more easily accessed by a greater number of residents in those polling districts on foot.
- The issues that had been reported with flooding in 'The Space' in previous years. Officers explained that it was understood that these issues had subsequently been resolved, although this could be clarified further.
- The potential for significant changes to occur in Winyates district centre in due course as part of plans for redevelopment of the area.
- The limited space available in 'The Link' and the impact that this had had on concerns amongst some residents about privacy in the polling station.
- The potential for further consultation to be undertaken with the public in respect of the option to keep using 'The Space' as a polling station.
- The further work that would be required from the Electoral Matters Committee in due course to review polling districts and the locations of polling stations as part of the boundary review for the Borough.
- The potential for a more enhanced survey of electors to be conducted in Winyates ward as part of the boundary review, taking into account the exploration of alternative venues for polling stations that had already been considered by the Committee.

Electoral Matters

Committee

Tuesday, 9th August, 2022

RESOLVED that

the Committee keeps the current arrangements for polling using Tenacres Children's Centre for WIA and Arrow Valley First School for WIB.

The Meeting commenced at 6.30 pm
and closed at 6.56 pm