

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL  
REPORT BY RETURNING OFFICER

TO:	COUNCIL		
DATE:	22 MARCH 2016	AGENDA ITEM:	10
TITLE:	POLLING PLACES IN MAPLEDURHAM AND REDLANDS WARDS		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR LOVELOCK	PORTFOLIO:	LEADERSHIP
SERVICE:	ELECTIONS	WARDS:	MAPLEDURHAM AND REDLANDS
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**1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT**

- 1.1 Further to Minute 30 of Council on 21 October 2014, to report a change of polling place for Mapledurham ward; and a temporary arrangement for the polling station in polling district RC in Redlands ward (Museum of Rural Life). These will have effect for the Borough and Police & Crime Commissioner elections to be held on 5 May 2016, and the national referendum on membership of the European Union to be held on 23 June 2016. The change of polling place for Mapledurham ward (polling district Y) will be indefinite.

**2. RECOMMENDED ACTION**

- 2.1 That with regard to Mapledurham ward, Caversham Heights Methodist Church, Highmoor Road, Caversham, be designated as the polling place for Mapledurham ward (polling district Y) in place of the Mapledurham Playing Fields Pavilion;
- 2.2 That with regard to polling district RC in Redlands ward, it be noted that the designated polling station location in the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) will not be available this year due to the Museum being closed for building works, and therefore a temporary polling station will be set up in the car park in front of the Museum, operating from for Council's Emergency Planning vehicle.

**3. POLICY CONTEXT**

- 3.1 It is the Council's policy to encourage electors to exercise their right to vote and to locate polling places and polling stations in buildings which are suitable for the areas concerned and which assist voters in that area who wish to vote in person to reach

their polling station and gain access in a manner which will encourage them to exercise their right to vote.

- 3.2 The Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a requirement for reviews of polling districts to be undertaken every five years, during each Parliament. The Council's last review was undertaken in 2014, and reported to full Council on 21 October 2014 (Minute 30 refers).

#### 4. THE PROPOSAL

##### 4.1 Mapledurham Ward

- 4.1.1 The polling place for Mapledurham ward is the Mapledurham Pavilion, in the Mapledurham Playing Fields. This has been the arrangement for many years, and was as reported in the 2014 review of polling districts.

- 4.1.2 The Director of Environment and Neighbourhood Services reported to Policy Committee on 14 March 2016 that the Pavilion had been closed to public use on 21 January 2016, on safety grounds, following a structural inspection. Therefore the Pavilion is no longer available for use as a polling station for this year's elections and referendum.

- 4.1.3 Mapledurham ward has a local electorate of 2,420, of whom 463 have postal votes. Traditionally it is the ward in Reading which has the highest turnout (87% in the 2015 General Election), and therefore attendance at the polling station is brisk throughout the day, and particularly so in the early evening. Therefore I do not consider it would be helpful in this ward to look to set up a temporary polling station at the Playing Fields.

- 4.1.4 I have arranged to move the polling station to Caversham Heights Methodist Church, which is located at the junction of Woodcote Road and Highmoor Roads. The polling place will be within the church. There is disabled access to the main (west) door to the church.

##### 4.2 Redlands Ward - Polling District RC

- 4.2.1 The polling place for polling district RC in Redlands ward is the Museum for English Rural Life (MERL) in Upper Redlands Road. This is part of the University of Reading.

- 4.2.2 The University is currently undertaking substantial building works at MERL, to improve the Museum. As a result, the Museum is now closed to the public, and will not be available for use as a polling station this year.

- 4.2.3 This is a small polling district, with 562 registered electors of whom 128 have postal votes. Therefore even with a 50% turnout, the number of electors attending the polling station to vote will be in the order of 200-220 - an average of 14 an hour.

- 4.2.4 In this context, and following consultation with the Redlands ward Councillors, for this year's arrangements the polling place will remain at MERL, and I have arranged for the Council's emergency planning vehicle to be brought into use as a temporary

polling station, based in the car park in the front of MERL and what was previously St Andrew's Hall in Redlands Road. A portaloo will also be provided for the use of the polling station staff.

- 4.2.5 The vehicle is the Berkshire Mobile Instant Support Unit. It is a converted DAF coach, 8.8 metres long, 7.7 metres wide and 3.7 metres high, with a (single) wheelchair lift, and a sink and hot water for use by the polling station staff. It is part of the Election Service's contingency plan, and the closure of MERL this year will give us the opportunity to put it to bring it into use as a temporary polling station.

## 5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 The Council seeks to achieve its strategic aims through promoting the participation of Reading people in local democracy.

## 6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 6.1 The changes set out in this report have been made following consultation with the local ward Councillors.
- 6.2 The poll cards for both polling districts will show the new polling station. That for Redlands RC will show a coach in front of MERL. That for Mapledurham will show Caversham Heights Methodist Church with the additional words, "Replacement polling station".

## 7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
  - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
  - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 7.2 In this regard you **must** consider whether the decision will or could have a differential impact on: racial groups; gender; people with disabilities; people of a particular sexual orientation; people due to their age; people due to their religious belief.
- 7.3 The principal equality consideration for polling stations is access, in particular for electors with mobility or sight difficulties. For Mapledurham ward, Caversham Heights Methodist Church is well lit and fully disability compliant, with ramped access to the main (west) door. For Redlands RC, as mentioned above the Berkshire Mobile Instant Support Unit has been converted for disabled access and includes a wheelchair lift.

## 8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1983 require that every Parliamentary Constituency must be divided into polling districts and that each District Council must divide its area into polling districts for that part of the Constituency within its area. Reading falls within the area of two Parliamentary Constituencies - Reading East and Reading West.
- 8.2 In exercising its powers, the Council is required to give all electors "such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances". In addition, in choosing polling places, only places which are accessible to electors who are disabled must be chosen so far as is reasonably and practicable.
- 8.3 Unless there are special circumstances, the polling place for any polling district should be located in the district itself. In this regard, Caversham Heights Methodist Church on the other side of Woodcote Road from Mapledurham ward (the ward boundary runs along/across Woodcote Road at that point) and is located conveniently for all parts of the ward, by foot, car or public transport.
- 8.4 A polling place is usually the building to which people go to vote and polling station is the location within the building at which electors obtain their voting papers.
- 8.5 The Returning Officer is required to provide a sufficient number of polling stations in each polling place and to allocate electors to the polling stations in such manner as he or she thinks most convenient.
- 8.6 As mentioned in para. 3.2 above, the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 introduced a requirement for reviews of polling districts to be undertaken every five years, during each Parliament. The Council's last review was undertaken in 2014.

## **9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 The Electoral Registration service has a budget of £7,000 for the hire of polling places.

## **10. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Report to Policy Committee, March 2016, on Mapledurham Pavilion.