

<b>Report of:</b>	Returning Officer – Tony Parkinson
<b>Submitted to:</b>	Corporate Affairs and Audit Committee – 4 March 2021
<b>Subject</b>	Update on polling stations and other election processes for 6 May 2021 elections

**Summary**

<b>Proposed decision(s)</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That members note the government's May 2021 Elections Delivery Plan, including guidance on proxy voting, campaigning, door knocking and leafleting during the current lockdown.</li> <li>2. That members note possible changes to polling station locations as listed at Paragraph 4.6</li> </ol>

<b>Report for:</b>	<b>Key decision:</b>	<b>Confidential:</b>	<b>Can be called-in:</b>
Noting	No	No	No

<b>Contribution to delivery of the 2018-22 Strategic Plan</b>		
<b>Business</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>People</b>
Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable

<b>Ward(s) affected</b>
All Wards

**What is the purpose of this report?**

1. To update Members on recent government guidance and delivery plans for May 2021 Elections (Appendix 1) and to advise of possible changes to the location of a number of polling stations as listed at Paragraph 4.6, in response to further guidance that was recently issued to schools in respect of use of a school as a polling station.

**Why is this report necessary?**

2. In light of the unprecedented global pandemic, the government last year postponed for one year the scheduled local polls that were due to take place in May 2020. The coronavirus pandemic and the phased exit from the lockdown will present particular challenges for Returning Officers (ROs), Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) and the Elections team in preparing for and

delivering the 2021 polls. This report highlights some key considerations from the government and some mitigating actions in preparing for those upcoming polls that Members should be aware of.

## **Background**

3. The UK Government published their policy paper on the May 2021 polls delivery plan on 5 February 2021. A copy of a summary of the guidance is attached at Appendix A.
- 3.1 The vast majority of electoral rules and procedures will remain as they were at the previous local, mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections, and other local elections and referendums, which took place between 2016 and March 2020.
- 3.2 The UK Government does not support all-postal voting and it does not propose to introduce early voting or change the hours of polling.
- 3.3 However, running elections during a pandemic poses a number procedural and operational issues for a Returning Officer and the Elections team.

## **Polling Stations**

4. The Government policy paper on the May 2021 polls delivery plan states that given the importance of avoiding any further disruption to education, schools should not be used as polling stations, where alternative venues are available.
- 4.1 The guidance states that the UK Government particularly discourages the use of schools where it would result in closure and will provide support to Returning Officers to explore the use of other community or commercial facilities, to minimise disruption to schools where they are the only available option. Middlesbrough has 28 schools which are currently used as polling stations.
- 4.2 In preparation for the elections due to take place on 6 May 2021, the premises previously agreed by committee as polling stations were contacted.
- 4.3 At present a number of schools have indicated that if their premises were to be used as a polling station, the school would need to be closed.
- 4.4 In addition to there being issues with the use of schools, some of the community venues that are used as polling stations have vulnerable people accessing the premises and have therefore also expressed their reticence/refusal for use.
- 4.5 As a consequence of the pandemic and the above guidance the Returning Officer using emergency delegated powers has requested that the Elections Team find temporary alternative venues to be used for this election only. This includes use of community or private venues and/ or Mobile stations. Although mobile station availability will also be an ongoing concern as all other local authorities will be undertaking the same reviews.
- 4.6 A list of premises that the Council are unable to use for these elections, and the proposed alternative venue for each polling station is included below. However, situations change daily and therefore current and alternative polling station venues may still be subject to change.

<b>Name of current Polling Station requiring temporary alternative locations</b>	<b>Alternative Venue to be used for the 6 May 2021 elections</b>
St Edwards RC Primary School	Aapna House (old Library site) <b>TBC following site visit</b>
Waiting Room, Berwick Hills Primary School,	Berwick Hills Baptist Church <b>TBC</b>
Pallister Park Primary School,	Old Middlebeck Social Club Homerton Road <b>TBC following site visit</b>
Kader Academy,	<b>WEST ACKLAM CENTRE, TBC</b>
Newham Bridge Primary School	Replace with Mobile Station <b>TBC</b>
Captain Cook Primary School	Marlon Library <b>TBC following site visit</b>
Hemlington Hall Academy	Replace with Mobile Station in car park <b>TBC</b>
Otterhill Court Community Centre	Replace with Mobile Station in car park at the Oaks <b>TBC</b>
Viewley Hill Academy,	Hemlington Children's Centre <b>TBC following site visit</b>
Lingfield Primary School	Replace with Mobile Station in car park <b>TBC</b>
Glastonbury House	Replace with Mobile Station in car park <b>TBC following site visit</b>
Lingfield Ash Meeting Hall	Replace with Mobile Station in car park <b>TBC following site visit</b>
Bellamy Courts Residents Lounge	Replace with Mobile Station in car park <b>TBC following site visit</b>

4.7 Where it is not possible to find alternative venues the Returning Officer may consider still need to consider utilizing schools.

4.8 In order to mitigate some of the concerns for the public social distancing and other safety measures will be in operation in polling stations, as in all public spaces. Marshalls will be placed at each station and voters and staff will be asked to wear a face covering whilst in polling stations.

4.9 Hand sanitiser will be available and, where appropriate, screens and distance markings will be in use. Polling stations will be set up to maximise ventilation, and frequent touch points cleaned at regular intervals.

4.10 Voters will be encouraged to bring their own pen or pencil with which to mark their ballot paper.

### **Nominations and information on campaigning**

5. For potential candidates, the Government aims to reduce the travel and contact involved in completing their nomination form by reducing the number of subscribers that are required. Further detail on the change will be provided in secondary legislation laid on 8 February, followed by further guidance in late February.

5.1 Further information on permitted face-to-face campaigning and organising, including the delivery of leaflets by party volunteers, or independent candidates

and their supporters, will be published before the beginning of the regulated election period dependent on the phased release from lockdown.

### **Alterations to proxy arrangements**

6. Local authorities are able to contact all Clinically Extremely Vulnerable people in their areas to make them aware of the options to use a proxy or postal vote. Absent vote deadlines are unchanged.
- 6.1 The UK Government is amending secondary legislation to further support proxy voting for people affected by coronavirus close to the polls.
- 6.2 Changes will allow those self-isolating because of coronavirus exposure, testing or symptoms to apply for a proxy vote until 5pm on polling day, without having to find someone to attest their application. This will also be available to those who test positive for the virus. If a person already has a proxy appointed to vote for them, but the proxy is then affected by COVID-19, there will also be the ability to make an alternative proxy arrangement.
- 6.3 Agents and candidates will continue to be able to be provided with the list of people who have been granted a proxy vote, as a check against fraudulent behaviour.
- 6.4 Royal Mail have agreed to prioritise the delivery of elections mail.

### **Postal Voting**

7. Those wishing to use a postal vote should apply early and Returning Officers should encourage them to do so.
- 7.1 All existing security measures will remain in place to ensure the integrity of the postal vote process.
- 7.2 The Council is conducting a social media campaign to try and encourage more electors to register for a postal vote. A leaflet advising on how to register for a postal vote will also be delivered to every household at the same time as the poll cards for 6 May election are delivered.

### **The Count**

8. Stockton Council are the lead authority for the direction and co-ordination of these regional elections and the compilation of the regional results. Due to social distancing requirements each authority will be conducting the verification and the Count for both elections in their own venues and submitting results electronically to Stockton who will announce the results.
- 8.1 Verification for both elections will take place after the close of Poll on Thursday 6 May and the Count for both elections will take place on Friday 7 May all at Middlesbrough Sports Village. As the primary election The Police and Crime Commissioner Count will take place first starting at 10:00am, followed by the Tees Valley Combined Authority Mayoral election at approximately 2:00pm.
- 8.2 Social distancing and other safety measures such as floor marshalls will be in operation in the Count venue. With everyone wearing a face covering.

8.3 Hand sanitiser will be available and, where appropriate, screens and distance markings will be in use. The venue will be set up to maximise ventilation, and frequent touch points cleaned at regular intervals.

### **Impact(s) of recommended decision(s)**

#### ***Legal***

9. The UK Government is providing an indemnity to Returning Officers for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections.

9.1 In view of the exceptional circumstances, they will also provide an indemnity for local elections in respect of COVID-19 risks. This will prevent any gaps in coverage where existing local authority insurance does not include risks resulting from coronavirus

#### ***Financial***

10 An estimated £92 million of government grant funding will be provided to local authorities for the elections; of this, £31 million is an uplift to directly address costs associated with making the elections COVID-19 secure. It is unclear at this time, what proportion of this funding Middlesbrough Council will receive

10.1 This funding is for reasonable additional costs. It might be used to fund the hiring of alternative venues; to procure additional PPE; to hire stewarding staff; or for cleaning to minimise disruption to schools.

10.2 Increased costs of the Police and Crime Commissioner elections will be met by the UK Government. This will include the necessary additional costs of running these polls, such as protective equipment, the hiring of larger or more expensive venues to enable distancing or where usual venues are unavailable, or additional cleaning requirements.

10.3 Additional costs in relation to the Tees Valley Combined Authority Mayoral election will be recharged to the TVCA.

#### ***Policy Framework***

11 The report does not impact on the overall budget and policy framework.

#### ***Wards***

12 The report impacts on all wards.

#### ***Equality and Diversity***

13 The report impacts on all groups equally.

#### ***Risk***

14 Risk assessments have been developed for each aspect of an election and project teams are reviewing and amending procedures to ensure appropriate measures are in place and ensure the plans remain flexible to ensure delivery of a safe election.

**Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)**

**Appendices**

**Appendix A** – Summary of May 2021 polls delivery plan

**Background papers**

May 2021 polls delivery plan