Electoral Services

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Mr R Curtis

Head of Electoral Services

Room 206, Town Hall

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

160 Whitechapel Road

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Dear Mr Curtis,

# Polling Districts and Polling Places Review 2023 – Acting Returning Officer Response

Following the request from the Council for a response to the 2023 review of polling places and polling districts, as the Acting Returning Officer for the two Parliamentary Constituencies of Bethnal Green & Stepney and Poplar & Limehouse I have looked at the provision of premises in recent years and reviews endorsed by the council.

When considering whether polling places satisfy the requirements of the electorate it is important that the comprehensive advice provided by the Electoral Commission is heeded and also the additional requirements of the Elections Act 2022 which the Returning Officer is obliged to follow.

I have used this guidance to steer the comments made below.

Tower Hamlets has in recent years held several polls, some national and others locally within Tower Hamlets, these a variation of scheduled dates and those called with little notice.

Since 2015 the following elections have been held in the Borough with the GLA scheduled to be held on Thursday 2 May 2024 and a General Election that must be held before January 2025

* 2015 - Rerun of the Mayoral election in Tower Hamlets
* 2015 - Parliamentary elections
* 2016 - European Union Referendum
* 2016 - London GLA
* 2016 - Whitechapel Ward by Election
* 2017 - Extraordinary General Election
* 2018 - Tower Hamlets Mayoral election
* 2018 - Tower Hamlets Council elections
* 2019 - By elections in Shadwell Ward and Lansbury Ward
* 2019 - European Parliamentary Elections
* 2019 - Extraordinary General Election (December)
* 2021 - GLA
* 2021 - Tower Hamlets Council Governance Referendum
* 2021 - Neighbourhood Planning Referendum – Isle of Dogs
* 2021 - Weavers Ward by Election
* 2022 - Tower Hamlets Mayor and Council Elections
* 2022 - Roman Road Neighbourhood Planning Referendum

Through this period there have been many changes to polling places, with temporary arrangements having to be made with little notice, and the maintenance of permanent arrangements with established premises that we have used on every occasion.

In recent years changes have had to be made because of the precautionary measures put in place because of Covid and a number of premises no longer available as redevelopment continues throughout the Borough. This has necessitated our finding new premises to ensure that voters have been able to continue to exercise their right to vote transparently and safely.

Undoubtedly, during the pandemic the challenges were and continue to be significant but the stability of the locations of polling places is especially important not only for the electorate, political parties, and candidates but also to those who provide the facilities and those administering the polls.

It is a positive reflection of the collaborative arrangements that there has been little adverse comment from the electorate relating to the facilities provided.

In addition, the ratio of electors to polling stations do not at present exceed the Electoral Commissions recommended numbers for Parliamentary Elections (1) with very few observations expressing dissatisfaction relating to accessibility for the disabled. In fact, at the recent local elections held in May 2022 no concerns were received but now have to consider the implications of the Elections Act 2022 as this legislation is incrementally introduced.

We will ensure that the requirements of the Act are carefully considered and where practicable implemented.

We also acknowledge that the borough is undergoing significant development. This will undoubtedly have an impact on the electoral register with the numbers of electorate eligible to attend polling places steadily rising. These increases are being scrutinised very carefully in my capacity as the Electoral Registration Officer as the revised electoral register is updated monthly and when the full revised register is published in December each year.

We will continue to review the numbers and how this will impact on the polling premises being used. If necessary, we will undertake regular reviews beyond the statutory requirements as the electorate increases either for the whole Borough or where specific growth is identified.

Based on the current figures and the necessity for temporary and permanent places to be arranged or not used at all, it will be for the council to agree any changes that it feels are necessary and any alternative arrangements suggested should be considered, provided the recommendations fall within the remit of the review.

That said, I am open to consider changes suggested provided the review is fair and transparent and welcome comments from all those entitled to respond.

In the interim it appears, given the recent successes of national and local polls that the permanent and temporary arrangements that have had to be made have provided facilities as expected by the electorate, but the challenges introduced by the Elections Act 2022 means we will have to assess all our premises to ensure we comply with the requirements of that Act.

Finally, it is important to clarify one area often raised and that is the use of schools.

This can be an emotive subject particularly with schools having to potentially close on polling day.

We sympathise of course, and we usually give at least 12 months' notice of a scheduled poll which is usually the first Thursday of every May, but there are occasions when the notice given can be noticeably short indeed.

However, it is important to raise this because the use of a school as a polling station is not commandeering or requisitioning but is a legal duty placed on funded schools to provide the facilities required if asked so (2).

I hope this is useful

Yours faithfully,



Stephen Halsey

Acting Returning Officer

(1) <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/UKPE-Part-B-Planning-and-organisation.pdf> (Page 12)

(2) The Representation of the People Act, 1983, Chapter 2, Schedule 1, Part III, paragraph 22